

Longing for God in a Culture of Secularism & Materialism

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

Our Old Testament lesson for today is a reading from the Psalms. Hi, my name is Brian. I am a member of the Alameda Community Group. Psalm 42.

For the director of music, a mascal of the sons of Korah. As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night.

[1 : 05] While people say to me all day long, where is your God? These things I remember as I pour out my soul. How I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the mighty one, with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

My soul is downcast within me. Therefore, I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls. All your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day, the Lord directs his love.

At night, his song is with me. A prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

[2 : 14] My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, where is your God? Why, my soul, are you downcast?

Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.

Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. You are God, my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

Send me your light and your faithful care. Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then I will go to the altar of God.

To God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with a liar, O God, my God. Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?

[3 : 18] Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. The grass withers and the flowers fail. But the word of our God stands forever.

Good morning, Christ Church. If you're new with us, my name is Jonathan. I'm one of the pastors here. And we are now on our third Sunday as we've begun this new sermon series.

Just looking at the book of Psalms and just meditating on this hymn book of the people of God. This hymn book of Israel. These sacred songs of King David.

And as you read here, the sons of Korah and others. And really these powerful prayers of Jesus and the apostles and the church throughout the past 2,000 years.

And it might feel kind of strange. It might feel a little bit provocative to be focusing on this book given everything that we're reading on a daily basis in the headlines. Both nationally and internationally.

[4 : 18] You all are informed citizens. You don't need me to enumerate all the things that are going on. All the chaos and craziness that are going on in our world. But given those things, I want to think about a little bit closer to home.

I know some of us are in a prolonged season of singleness. You know, where we'd like to be married. And that season just goes on and on.

And it's increasingly hard to bear. Others of us, I know, are in a prolonged season of marriage. And perhaps you would like to be single again. Some of us have long-term struggles with infertility.

Some of us have had the blessing of having kids. And now sleep is incredibly hard to come by. You feel like you're just in this valley of the shadow of diapers. And it's never going to end.

Some of you have made it through those times. You got through that veil of tears with young kids. And now you're this family of five with one bathroom at home.

[5 : 24] And three adolescents. And they're just bleeding you of all of your cash. I know at least two of us can relate to that in the room today. More seriously, we carry some pretty heavy burdens.

Things that really are too heavy even to name with words. Burdens about our health. About our finances. About our housing. Our school. Our work.

Our losses and our griefs. And so what can the book of Psalms say to us? How can this book help us? It's difficult enough to survive life with those challenges and many more that I haven't named that are in this room.

But there's also this cultural dynamic in North America that makes all of this much, much harder. And that is this subtle voice, this pervasive voice that says you have to face all of this alone.

You have to face all of this alone and there is no God to help you. There's a philosopher named Charles Taylor. He was a professor at McGill University.

[6 : 31] And he published a book in 2007 called *A Secular Age*. And the thesis of this book, *A Secular Age*, is that we're living in this cultural moment that has this dominant paradigm that there's nothing transcendent.

There's nothing divine. There's nothing eternal or enchanted or spiritual within or above the natural order.

And that we must simply just account for our lives and account for our meaning and our significance purely in human terms without any appeal to God. That I am the master of my fate.

I am the captain of my soul. And that is really all I have to rely on. And yet I found over 19 years of being a pastor here in Berkeley that most people in the secular age have within themselves, that they're honest with themselves, they find within this indefinable thirst.

This indefinable thirst where they say, I know, I know that I was made for more. And I'm longing somewhere deep within for these deep, hidden spiritual springs of living and refreshing water that I can drink to the full.

[7 : 44] And so what I'd like to suggest is that this book of Psalms is actually for secular age people that feel dry, that feel thirsty, that feel dehydrated and starved for water.

Psalms 42 and Psalm 43 was originally written as one psalm. And basically the psalm gives us a map. It's a map for how to find these bubbling streams and these fresh springs in this secular age, this dry and weary land where there seems to be no water.

And what we find in the psalm is we find a soul. And this soul I want to suggest is a desperate soul. It's a dialoguing soul.

And it's ultimately a defiant soul. And I want to just look at all three of those. A desperate soul, a dialoguing soul, and a defiant soul. Look at verse 1 as we talk about a desperate soul.

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?

[8 : 57] Now, what does it mean to see yourself as a deer as opposed to like a bear or a lion? A deer is vulnerable.

A deer is likely to be prey to a powerful carnivore that's hunting him or her in swift pursuit. And what does it mean to see yourself not only as a deer, but to see yourself as a deer who's panting and who's dying of thirst?

Right? That you've come to this stream bed in the middle of the desert in the heat of the day. You've come to assuage your thirst with these cool waters, but you find it dry because there's a drought.

What does that mean? To be this dazed and dying creature just wandering desperately across this withered landscape, straining upward in agony to catch the scent of running water that could give you life.

The psalmist says, that describes me and my relationship with God. And I don't know if you've ever experienced the intense demand of dehydrating, unslaked thirst.

[10 : 08] Anybody ever had that experience? Of just feeling this sense of desperate desire? It's a powerful image for longing for God. And the psalmist says, Like my physical body cannot survive without water, my spiritual soul cannot survive without God.

Verse 2, he says, He says, My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? Literally, he says there, When can I see the face of God?

He's longing for God's life-giving presence. He's panting to be revived by this experience of God's face, his gracious smile, his loving eyes.

But you see, there's this gap. There's this gap that he has between his expectations of God and his experience of God. Right? He's, on the one hand, he's expecting God's presence.

But on the other hand, he's experiencing God's absence. And that hurts. It hurts to be panting for living water, the living water of God's presence, but to find that that stream bed is completely dried up.

[11 : 19] It's disappointing. It's discouraging when God seems like he's absent and that he's hiding his face, or when God feels like he's keeping his distance and withholding his love.

I know some of you feel this way. And what I want to tell you is that you don't have to have a PhD in spirituality to begin talking to God about it.

All you have to do, Psalm 42 says, is to say to God, I'm so thirsty for you. God, when are you going to show up?

God, what is it going to take for me to see your face? He says in verse 3, My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, where is your God?

Have any of you ever eaten tears for breakfast, lunch, and dinner? You ever been in a season where that's just the way it is? The psalmist says, God, I miss you so much that all I can eat is a steady diet of salty tears.

[12 : 24] My heart is breaking because I've been made by you, and I've been made for you, and yet I feel so very far away from you. And this question in verse 2 is so poignant.

He says, When can I go and meet with God? Which tells us that this spiritual drought has been going on for a while. He's been living for far too long in this sense of dryness.

And this question in verse 3, Where is your God? Indicates that he's living in a social context where he's surrounded by people who ignore God, who neglect God, who could not give a flying flip about God.

And it's making him that much more thirsty, and dehydrated, and desperate for God. And what does he do with this terrible, terrible thirst?

He says in verse 4, You see what he's doing here is he's contrasting his present with his past.

[13 : 36] And he's saying, I haven't always been this dry spiritually. There have actually been times in the past where God felt so real, and so near, and so powerful.

It's as if he were personally escorting me into his presence. And then I would get there, and I would join in with all the people of God, and their shouts of joy, and their songs of praise, and they were raising their hands, and stomping their feet, and saying amen.

And by the way, this is just a little bit of an aside. Verse 4 is instructive for us in our worship at Christ Church. Right? We could probably loosen up a little bit. Just a little, just a skosh.

But you see, the psalmist has not lost his belief in God, but what's happened is his experience of meeting with the living God has been disrupted, and his sense of the reality of God, the nearness of God, the presence of God, and the love of God has dried up.

And I wonder if you know what that's about. If you've ever felt the agony of spiritual drought, of living in this withered spiritual landscape, of being this dazed creature that's just dying for cool streams that simply cannot be found.

[14 : 52] Do you ever feel like your soul without God is downcast? Do you ever feel like your soul is experiencing the absence of God, and therefore it's disturbed within you?

If that's you, the psalms is your book. The psalms are for you. Many people, as Melisa said, they think they can only come to God when they have it all together, when they're feeling great, when they're full of praise.

But this, and so many of the psalms, two-thirds of the psalms, about disorientation and the sense of desperation, tell us that that's simply not true. Friends, we must pray who we are and not who we think we should be.

I'll say that again. We must pray who we are and not who we think we should be. The psalmist says, I'm feeling the absence of God, but I'm talking to God about my desire for his presence.

He says, I'm not feeling connected from God, but I'm talking to God about my disconnection from him. He says, I'm asking questions of God.

[15 : 57] I'm telling God how much his presence is killing me, how much it hurts to feel cut off from God, to no longer be experiencing the joy of feeling close to God.

See, in the coming weeks, we're talking about, this series is all about holy habits of grace, and we're gonna be talking about these classic and ancient spiritual practices, these spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, but one of the starting points before we get into all those things is just to admit that I'm not okay.

I'm not okay, and I'm not okay on my own. My soul is thirsty, and my soul is dry, and unless the living God gives me something other than his absence, and other than these salty tears to drink, then I'm in deep, deep trouble.

See, desperation is the starting point of the Christian life, that this is the prerequisite for knowing and experiencing God.

And so I'd like to just encourage you by way of application, maybe the beginning point of your day, when you start your mornings this whole week, maybe you just start there with verse one. Right?

[17 : 07] Verse one, and just say to God, as the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. Try that.

Okay? This is a desperate soul, but it's also a dialoguing soul. We find in this psalm a dialoguing soul, and I'll just read verse five to you.

We've heard it several times, but it's, verse five says this, why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Three times we hear this repeated refrain with strong Hebrew language. This word downcast means my soul is collapsed.

My soul is crumpled. And this word disturbed, it means my soul is churning with extreme sorrow. My soul is despondent and despairing in the darkness.

[18 : 12] I'm not just a little blue. I'm done. I'm dissolved. I'm decimated. I'm deeply unsatisfied. How refreshingly honest is that language?

He says, I need God spiritually as much as I need water physically, and if I don't have God, I'm never going to be satisfied. I'm always going to be downcast and disturbed.

But notice that he doesn't just lay down and die. He begins to pour out his soul to God, even when he doesn't feel like it. And that is so key. He begins pouring out his soul to God, even when he doesn't feel like it.

And part of pouring out his soul to God involves dialoguing with his soul about God. And it means urging his soul not to give up on God.

And basically what he says is, when I listen to my heart, it tells me, yeah, you're dry and you're thirsty. When I listen to my heart, it tells me, yeah, you know, you're down and you're disturbed.

[19 : 15] But if that's all I do, if all I do is listen to my heart and I stop there, I'm in trouble. He says, I'm not just going to listen to my struggling heart, which is so, so important.

But I'm going to talk to my struggling heart. And I'm going to actively exercise my faith by taking my soul in hand, as it were, and saying, soul, examine your hopes.

Soul, reorder your hopes. And when he does that, he's not denying his feelings. He's not suppressing his emotions in some unhealthy way.

What he's doing is he's talking to himself about his feelings that are rooted in and arising from his hopes. And our hopes are simply what we rest upon for our happiness.

Our hopes are what we were relying upon for our sense of significance and security and self-worth. And he says, listen, self, what are you hoping in other than God?

[20 : 15] Self, self, why is that thing so important to you? Hey, self, why do you feel like you can't experience life fully without that thing?

And self, why do you think God is not going to be enough for you? You see, you've got to tell your soul how foolish it is to hope in lesser hopes than God.

And you've got to reassure your soul that this spiritual dryness, it's not going to last, that your thirst will be quenched. And that's why he says, I will yet praise him, my savior and my God.

And what happens when he tells his soul to hope in God? Well, he begins to get more personal and more direct and more honest with God. Look at verse six. He says, my soul is downcast within me.

Therefore, I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls, all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

[21 : 22] Now, just for some context, somehow the person who's praying this has been exiled from their home in southern Israel, and Jerusalem. And now they're here on the northern border of Israel.

They're at the headwaters of the Jordan River. They're here in enemy territory, which is why two times in the psalm, we hear him talking about this enemy that's oppressing him, right?

This unfaithful nation, this wicked and deceitful king, these people who are taunting him with this question, where is your God? Where is your God? And basically here he says, you know, in this place of exile, in the pain of my exile, I will remember you.

He's starting to talk not just about God, but to God. In the second person, I will remember you. Verse seven, he says, deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls, all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

You see, in the exile, he sees these waters of the Jordan River, and he sees them, they're rushing among the boulders and over these falls, and he can hear these waters booming and hissing and roaring, and he says, that is the picture of all that's overwhelming my soul.

[22 : 41] You know, I feel like my footing is gone. I've lost my foothold. Wave after wave is submerging me. These waters of death are drowning me, and he says, God, that is how I'm feeling in my relationship with you.

On the one hand, I thirst for you like I'm dying for water, and yet on the other hand, your painful absence feels to me like your waterfalls, and your waves, and your breakers that are relentlessly crushing me.

And this is the holy habit I want us to grab hold of today. It's just this real, raw, authentic, vulnerable honesty with God.

How many of us would dare to be so honest with God? God, the psalms tell us that God is not interested in our pious BS. Right?

He doesn't want us to come with him with a mask on. And pretend. He wants us to pay attention to our thirst and our desperation.

[23 : 50] He wants us to be honest with him, that we're feeling hurt by his absence. He wants us to open up that vault of our heart, and all the things that we've been hiding, maybe even from ourselves, and just to pour out our pain about your waterfalls, and your waves, and your breakers that are sweeping over me.

God can handle that. God is God. And look where that kind of honesty leads the psalmist spiritually. He says in verse 8, he says, By day the Lord directs his love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

He says, Oh God, remember how those tears have been my food day and night? Well, here's something I'd rather have day and night instead. He says, By day, Lord, direct your love to me, and at night, Lord, give your song to me.

This is amazing, because this is the first time in this prayer that this word, Lord, has showed up. Lord is God's covenant name. It's the name that he revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

I am who I am. I will be who I will be. And he says, Lord, send your love. Send your stubbornly loyal, self-giving love that delivers people who cannot help themselves.

[25 : 08] Lord, let your covenant love, let your committed love be directed to me during the day, so that even in the darkness of night, I can sing your song.

You see, there is no easing of the psalmist's downcast and disturbed soul at this point. All the difficult circumstances, all the difficult emotions give no sign of abating.

But there is this growing reliance on these strong and unshakable convictions about who God is and about what God does. That he's pouring out his soul to God.

He's telling his heart to hope in God. He's talking directly to God. He's clinging to this real, personal, honest relationship with God. And he's refusing to act like God doesn't care.

And he's refusing to act like God cannot save. He says, God, I know that even in this terrible experience of exile and enemies, even in this horrible experience of drought and dryness, that you are somehow with me.

[26 : 21] And I know you can hear me. And I know that you can direct your love to me. And that you can give your song to me. And so that's the application is that just to have a dialoguing soul with yourself and with God.

And maybe that means for you this week, just pausing at your lunch break and engaging with verse five and saying, soul, what's going on? Why are you downcast?

Why are you disturbed? What are you hoping in right now? Or maybe it's that transition between leading work and going home. And you just engage with verse eight.

And you say, Lord, by day, would you direct your love to me? So that tonight I can sing your song. As I said, this is a desperate soul and this is a dialoguing soul.

But finally, it's a defiant soul. And we'll close, we'll close here. Three times, the psalmist dialogues with his soul, which tells us like, don't try to pray once and then say that didn't work.

[27 : 32] Right? Three times he dialogues with his soul. He asks questions of his soul. He examines the hopes of his soul. He tells his soul to hope in God. He reminds his soul that his savior is nothing and nobody other than God.

He reassures his soul that a time is coming when he will yet praise God again. And what we see in the psalm is that his soul is beginning to open up. His soul is transforming. His faith is rising.

And his hope is increasing. And I think it's important to say here that we don't know how long it took for that change to happen. We don't know how much time elapsed for him to get to this point.

Maybe it was days or weeks or months or years before he was able to write the entirety of this psalm. But by the end, he's basically exploding with this fervent, resilient, resolute plea to God.

He's got this growing confidence that kind of climaxes in the shout of joy. Listen to it in verse 1 of chapter 43. He says, Vindicate me, my God, and plead my cause against an unfaithful nation.

- [28 : 40] Rescue me from those who are deceitful and wicked. For you, God, are my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? Send me your light and your faithful care.
- Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. You see, he's had this terrible ordeal of darkness and insecurity.
- But in the midst of that, he says, God, let your light come and penetrate my darkness. Send out your faithful care to come and dispel all of my insecurities.
- Lead me out of this place of exile, back home with you. Give me such a homecoming back in your very presence where I can sense your nearness again.
- And he says in verse 4, Outwardly, nothing has changed.
- [29 : 48] But inwardly and spiritually, he's won through. He's praising God, my joy and my delight. Or in the Hebrew, it says, God, my exceeding joy. God, of my joyful rejoicing.
- His desperation has been transformed into hope in God. And yours can too. His darkness has been filled with the light of God.
- And yours can too. Right? By the end of the psalm, he's praying not in the minor key. He's praying in the major key. I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.
- That's a defiant faith. And how do we experience this defiant faith? Well, to close, we've just got to learn how to pray these psalms.
- We've got to learn how to pray like this. And we've got to learn how to pray with the one to whom these psalms are pointing. You know, in God the Father's Purpose, he did direct his love and his song to us.
- [30 : 50] But he directed his love and his song to us in his son, Jesus. Right? He did send his light and his faithful care to us.
- But he did it by embodying it in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. The living God who feels so absent in this psalm, he became present to us in the flesh through Jesus, our Savior and our God.
- And it was in God's purpose that it was necessary not only for our Lord to come, but for Jesus to become like this deer who's dying of thirst and crying out for water.
- It was God's purpose for Jesus to come and be like this one who feels battered by the waterfalls and waves and breakers of death. And we know that in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before Jesus' cross, he said this, he said, My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.
- And at the end of the Gospel of John, we read this, Knowing that everything had now been finished and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said on the cross, I am thirsty.
- [32 : 06] He said as he was hanging on that cross, he said, I am thirsty. This is the one who said, Whoever drinks the water that I give them will never thirst.
- And he's hanging there, utterly humiliated, saying, I am thirsty. And we know, of course that's physical thirst, but it's way more than that.
- Jesus has come and he's taken our place. He's taken all that horrible, cosmic, existential thirst for God that we feel into himself, and he became in that place, utterly cut off from God, the fountain of living water.
- And why did he do it? Why did Jesus, who was the highest and the happiest person in the universe, why did he allow himself to become the most downcast and the most disturbed person that's ever walked on this planet?
- Why did he do that? He did it so that he, after he was resurrected from the dead, he could lead us home. He could lead us to that place where God dwells.

[33 : 16] He could lead us into the very presence of God, our joy and our delight. God, the joy of my rejoicing. Friends, this is the only place where your thirst will be quenched.

And Jesus is the only person who can take you there. He is God's love and his song.

He is God's light and his faithful care. And he has been sent to bring you to that place. In verse 3, Send me your light and your faithful care.

Let them lead me. Let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my joy and my delight. And I will praise you with the lyre.

Oh God, my God. I guess my simple question is, as we launch into this series on learning these holy habits of drinking from the well of living water, is that what you want?

[34 : 20] Is that what you want to be able to say? And if so, God the Father, having sent his Son, he can pour out his Holy Spirit on you and let you drink deeply and to the full.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.