

# Longing for God

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] I was a country pastor during some very severe years of drought in the early 1990s and I learnt a lot coming out of the city.

I learnt to appreciate rain. I learnt not to stick my head out the window on another cold, cloudy, overcast, rainy day and say, lousy weather.

I lived among people whose faces lit up when it was wet. People would come into town, they'd have time for a talk and a cuppa. They would compare their rain gauge readings with joy, excitement, competitiveness and sometimes with great thankfulness to God.

Drought brings deathly despair. Day after day of endless blue sky. Crops come out of the ground and they wither and die.

Animals expire in the paddock. A lamb is not worth much but cattle are. And you see their carcasses withered and dead in the paddock and you know that something terrible is quietly going on.

[ 1 : 1 3 ] Hope dies. Hope dies. Uncertainty prevails. And despair grows.

Now as the drought grew longer I called a prayer meeting out towards Walcott in the community of Burren Junction and I advertised it as praying for people in drought.

And nearly a hundred people came in from farms out around the community and I wanted them to hear one another's stories and to pray for one another. Clearly everybody wanted it to rain but I thought it was important to support one another through the despair.

The meeting began. We heard some pretty torrid stories from people about how the drought was impacting them. And then a very prominent man in the community, a shire counsellor who wasn't a Christian man, rose to his feet and aggressively and impatiently said, So when are we going to pray for rain?

That's what we've come for. Now unbeknown to me, he got on ABC radio that morning and told people that we were going to pray for rain.

[ 2 : 2 7 ] And I said we have come to pray for people and we will ask God for rain. My vision was to support people and to urge them to trust in God even if it never rained.

Run to God, not run from God. The shire counsellor wanted God to fix the mess, to meet his needs.

God, get me out of this time so that I can get on with my life without you. A lot of people are really happy to look to God in a difficult time.

They want him to fix things. Somebody dies. Something terrible happens. Everybody says I'm praying for you. We want stuff from God but we don't want him. True people of faith are different.

We want God. We want him much more than we want the things that he gives to us. And Psalm 42, this wonderful psalm, is a song which is written by a person who is hungry for God.

[ 3 : 42 ] And I discovered that as I prepared that you can't preach this psalm properly without preaching Psalm 43 as well. The two go together and in some of the ancient Hebrew manuscripts they are one song.

And you'll see as I speak what it is that links them. And so it begins. So this psalmist, this songwriter, he longs to be in God's presence.

He wants to meet with him. Some of my favourite verses in all the Bible are verses which express a longing for God. So you go into Philippians 3, verses 10 and 11.

The sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus said, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

The invitational language of Jesus, Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Pascal famously said, There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator made known through Jesus Christ.

[ 5 : 23 ] And he's saying something that I think we all know, that people long for something or someone who is bigger than us. And as life goes on, we realise that life is not all that it's cracked up to be.

We're told that we're the centre of our world and we learn from a tsunami or an earthquake or a death or a job loss or an illness that we actually control very little.

What makes you feel a long way from God and lonely for him?

Sin does it for me. The guilt, the unworthy feelings, sometimes even self-loathing. Personal criticism does it as well.

Somebody points out your failures and they'll always qualify it by saying they're just trying to be constructive. But oftentimes it's given or it's received in a way that is destructive of self-image and eroding of confidence.

[ 6 : 33 ] Personal failure can be a terrifying moment as well. The moment when you've done something at work that's going to cost a lot of money or time to fix.

You've made a mistake. There's no hiding it. It will be seen. I am the engineer who designed a water pumping station down the south coast.

And I got a call when I was on my next job while it was being built saying, who's the idiot engineer who specified rising spindles on the valves under the car park?

They were putting them in and they realised that they were going to have steel rods projecting through the car park for everyone to trip on and drive over. It wasn't my most glorious moment.

And all I could say was, it was me. Which was a really good thing to say.

[ 7 : 41 ] But I would still have liked a very big rock to hide under. The songwriter's oppression and his feelings of loneliness from God is not coming from his own failures.

It's coming from external oppression. His enemies see his circumstances, whatever they are, and we're not really sure what they are. They know about his faith, but they're putting the boot in.

And they taunt him. And you see it in verse 3 and you see it again in verse 10. Where's your God? Where's your God? You're the preacher.

Where's your God? Now we've preached this series of messages from the book of Job over the last few weeks and we saw that when Job suffered at God's hand, his friends were the ones who became his oppressors.

People who claimed faith in God made it even harder for their brother. But in Psalm 42 and 43, the oppressors are unbelievers, people who are outside the faith.

[ 8 : 51 ] They don't believe in God at all. And they're taunting the psalmist and he is hurting. And he's saying things like, My tears have been my food day and night, while people are saying to me all day long, Where is your God?

Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taught me, saying to me all day long, Where is your God?

And so his experience, life for him, is tears and mourning and suffering to the very bone. And the enemies look at his situation and they effectively say, So much for your faith in God.

Seems to be absent. Doesn't seem to be listening. Because for them it's a world where God doesn't seem to make his presence known.

He doesn't seem to have anything to say. Our world. Christian believers and what we stand for, more and more marginalised.

[ 10 : 05 ] Pushed to the edges of society. We are not even listened to in, sometimes for good reason, but other times for poor reason. We're not even listened to in some of the big picture public debates about marriage.

As soon as you open your mouth and you say that you are a Christian, it is enough for people to ridicule you without a word being heard. So when people say, where is your God?

It's an expression of unbelief. How stupid to say that there is a God who is both creator and redeemer. How foolish to think that a God exists who is intricately involved in our lives.

How ridiculous that God superintends the events of our world. These people think that they are accountable to no one. They mock, where is your God? The world can be a lonely place for a believer and Jesus knows it.

And he says in John 15, if the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. I was talking to a minister the other day who was in South Sudan earlier this year and he was taken to a bombed out building where 19 Arab men were studying the scriptures.

[ 11 : 29 ] They'd come to Christ and they were encouraging each other as pastors and they were preparing to go back into the Arab North and covertly plant churches they were passionate for Jesus even though it would cost them, it could cost them their lives.

They treasure Jesus even though their world taunts them with where is your God? I don't think the songwriter's looking for everything to be right with the world but he is hungry for God.

He wants God present in his life. He wants to be in submission to God's purposes. As the deer pants for streams of water so my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. Where can I go and meet with God? So his experience is loneliness, God seems silent, his enemies are delighting that there is no God.

And verse 6 tells us that he is a long way from home. My soul is downcast within me, therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon from Mount Mizar.

[ 12 : 56 ] He's up north in the mountains near the source of the Jordan River. He's a long way from Jerusalem, the place of God's presence. He can't get to church to worship with God's people. When I'm away from church, I miss it.

I don't miss the building, it's inconsequential. I miss you, the people of God. I miss our believing staff team and the fellowship that we have with one another.

I miss my community groups and the place of belonging and stability that they bring to my life. I miss our church because you remind me that God is near and that he is real.

I experience Christ with you. And so he engages in a sort of self-talk. Verse 5 and verse 11.

Why are you downcast, my soul? Why so disturbed within me? He's low, he's discouraged. He tries to lift his eyes up to God. Put your hope in God.

[ 14 : 04 ] I'll praise him, my saviour, my God. It's sort of like self-effort to get out of this low. And he tries to use memory to take him to another place. So in verse 4, I remember as I pour out my soul how I used to go with the multitude leading the procession to the house of God with songs of joy and thanksgiving amongst the festive throng.

And verse 6, my soul is downcast, but I will remember you. He remembers great services at church in the past and what a joy and a delight they were.

I can remember gathering with 90,000 believers at Randwick Racecourse in April 1979. And we heard Billy Graham preach Acts 17, Paul at the Areopagus, and he was saying, for God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed and he has given proof of this to all people by raising him from the dead.

So for me, memory takes me back to a place of joy and delight and wonder. Memory is particularly important for believers.

When Jesus came, Jews celebrated the Passover festival with a memorial meal. It was a once-a-year meal. It took them back nearly 1,400 years to the moment when God rescued them from their enemies and saved them out of Egypt.

[ 15 : 38 ] It was an annual reminder of the centre of their faith. And so Jesus, on the night before he died, he celebrated the meal with his disciples.

It was the last thing that he would do with them before he died. And he gave it a new meaning. This bread is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you. So this ancient memorial meal, this great tradition of the previous 1,400 years, this annual reminder, is completely reinterpreted by the Lord Jesus Christ.

His body broken, his blood shed would become the great act of God's salvation that Christ achieved. And belief in it, it defines us as the people of God.

We remember him and what he's done. So when we come to the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, which we aren't doing this morning, it's not a magic ritual. It's a memorial meal which continually takes us to the centre of our faith.

[ 16 : 48 ] And through memory, we draw near to Christ our God. We remember his perfect life. We remember his wicked death. We remember how God powerfully raised him from the dead.

And we remember how God saved us by overcoming both our sin and death forever. So memory is one tool in the songwriter's kit.

The other is in Psalm 43 and it's prayer. There's a huge shift. He moves from self-talk to God-talk.

He stops talking to himself and he starts talking to God. Verse 1. Vindicate me, O God. Plead my cause against an ungodly nation.

Rescue me from deceitful and wicked men. Verse 3. Send forth your light and your truth. Let them guide me. Let them bring me to your holy mountain to the place where you dwell.

[ 17 : 55 ] Can you see what happens when he prays? He moves from this place of feeling distant from God and as though God is a long way off. A really lonely place.

And prayer is what actually brings him into the presence of God. So it doesn't matter how far he is from Jerusalem or from church.

Prayer allows him to come right into the throne room of the king and get an immediate audience. The psalm's great because we really don't know the details of his circumstances but we know that he feels oppressed.

He does have mocking enemies. He feels a long way from the immediate presence of God. And the remarkable thing is that as soon as he prays the distance is gone.

Many times I have felt lonely. I've felt oppressed. I've felt like I was doing it tough. I've experienced hope dying.

[ 18 : 59 ] Everything seems dark and hopeless and God does not seem to be all that close. and finally I think to open my mouth to pray.

And I bring my loaded heart or diary or plans to God and suddenly they are not mine anymore they are his. and many times God changes my mood and my sense of hopelessness when I bow my knee and ask him to take hold of and intervene in my circumstances.

That's faith. wonderful verse in 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 7 which we taught all our kids from a very early age and when you teach your kids a verse you learn it yourself.

It's 1 Peter 5 verse 7 casting all our cares on Jesus because he cares for you. Casting all our cares on Jesus because he cares for you.

And we take God's wonderful invitation we step into his throne room we open our mouths and we pour out our hearts to our heavenly father and he restores hope he rules he knows he cares he is trustworthy.

[ 20 : 41 ] See the taunt? Where is your God? And the answer he is as near as a bended knee and a humble heart.

I don't know what sort of a heart you have brought to church this morning but maybe you have come here with a very heavy heart lonely oppressed a long way from God and maybe God does not feel that real in your life.

But the psalmist is saying he is as near as your bended knee and your humbled heart. And he finishes his song in chapter 43 verse 5 with the same chorus that he sang twice in Psalm 42 42 but I think even though it's the same words this time it sounds different.

It's full of hope. It's not a response to self talk. It's a response to having stood in the presence of God and walked out again full of hope.

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

[ 22 : 08 ] Amen. Amen.