

God's Great Ballad | The Flow of the Psalms

Invitation to Fullness

Psalm 42 and 43 (Communication)

6.21.20

42 *For the choir director. A Maskil of the sons of Korah. As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; When shall I come and appear before God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ⁴ These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival. ⁵ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him For the help of His presence.*

⁶ *O my God, my soul is in despair within me; Therefore I remember You from the land of the Jordan And the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep at the sound of Your waterfalls; All Your breakers and Your waves have rolled over me. ⁸ The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life.*

⁹ *I will say to God my rock, "Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?" ¹⁰ As a shattering of my bones, my adversaries revile me, While they say to me all day long, "Where is your God?" ¹¹ Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.*

43 *Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! ² For You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?*

³ *O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your dwelling places. ⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And upon the lyre I shall praise You, O God, my God.*

⁵ *Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.*

We're looking God's Great Ballad – the POSSIBILITY that the Book of Psalms tells a story?

We're going with a friend and scholar, Palmer Robertson as he analyzes the Five Books that make up the whole collection, two introductory psalms from the start of each book that represent the theme of the separate books and together tell a cohesive story.

Today and next week we look at the Second Book (42-72) which Dr. Robertson labels "Communication." The first book is CONFRONTATION and now the writers speak out about this conflict at the center of human history.

And here at the start of Book Two, a 2-part poem or song written by the Sons of Korah, a song about DESIRE! What do you want? For what are you working, hoping, craving? Have your desires changed from what they used to be? What will graduation do to your desires (we could ask our grads)?

Desire is sometimes so deep and profound that it pushes out everything else. This Psalm USES the language of thirst or desire... "As the deer pants ...thirsts...seeks...yearns...longs..." So, today, we consider this whole category of human life, desire.

Is it a problem? Are YOU, in fact, fixated on some desire or drive or yearning that has become a preoccupation or even an obsession or addiction? OR do you know someone for whom desire is too much...or misdirected...or uncontrollable? Or insufficient (no appetite)? Let's think about the difficulty of desire, the direction of desire and then practical steps for dealing with desire.

I think almost everyone listening to this today (maybe Middle Schoolers and above) has known someone for whom desire has been a problem.

The publisher's description of Gerald May's book called *Addiction and Grace* uses these words, "a compassionate and wise treatment of a topic of major concern in these most addictive of times..."

Yeah! A "major concern"...and "these most addictive of times": all kinds of addictions claiming all kinds of people in these times. Food addictions, drugs, alcohol, adrenaline, gaming, gambling, people (co-dependency – people addicted to addicts), sex, information, phones, shopping. The movie *Fight Club* is about someone who became addicted to recovery groups – that was his only addiction. Addiction is among other things, a desire disorder.

Boredom (sloth; acedia) is another desire disorder. It's a kind of despair or withdrawal from life, a disengagement from life and a loss of desire.

AND there's any number of moral and religious and spiritual approaches to "desire disorders". In Buddhism, for instance, the real problem with the world is suffering and the real cause of suffering is desire. People suffer because they desire pleasure; pleasure is fleeting. Pursuit of one's desires can only lead to frustration. So, to manage desire OR better yet to achieve "Nirvana" which means the extinguishing of all desire IS the highest good.

For some people, the role of religion or morality is to sort of curb desire, to promote the way of moderation. I think of the movie *Babette's Feast*, a community of Danish Christians...very holy and disciplined and self-controlled because they've eradicated desire (or at least buried it) and along with it all imagination and joy and love. Or the character Uriah Heep from *David Copperfield*; he's always talking about his Spartan lifestyle which he calls "umble" as if this were

the truly godly and good way to live – keeping desires in check is the main thing! It’s often seen or at least portrayed as the Christian way.

And of course, Jesus Christ did speak of self-denial. So...IS that the Christian way? Is moderation and even abstinence the Christian answer to desire? Is self-mastery...self-denial...self-renunciation...the goal of Christianity?

Well if it IS then why does Jesus Christ say, "For whoever wishes to SAVE his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall FIND it." (Mat 16.25)? He speaks as if FINDING LIFE is the goal.

In Jesus Christ’s teaching and in His example, self-renunciation, self-denial and moderation are not the goal but instead a means to an end. And the difficulty of desire for the Christian is NOT solved by doing away with desire, not even by moderating it or somehow toning it down... but actually by cultivating desire and redirecting it. The goal is LIFE and the satisfaction of desire!

Listen, once again to the Psalms, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God...thirsts for God...WHEN will I be with You?” Those are NOT weak desires... those are raging desires. The greatest possible intensity... “deep calls to deep”. (42.7)

Psalm 63: “I will seek you earnestly” (literal trans, “early”, as if to say, “I can’t wait to get up and get to it!”) “My soul THIRSTS for You...my flesh yearns for You in a dry and weary land without water...Your love is better than life itself...I meditate on You in the night watches”. That’s a way of saying, “I can’t fall asleep at night because I’m thinking about YOU.” These are the words of someone in love!

Then the intense words of Psalm 84 “My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the LORD.” Not tepid/tidy desire... but red-hot/wild desire!

BUT they are... redirected desires.

The great OT scholar Walter Brueggemann said that all the Psalms are basically in one of three categories: Psalms of Orientation, Disorientation or Reorientation. And here you see these writers going through the re-orientation or redirection of desire.

And in the redirection process, they wrestle with themselves, their circumstances, their enemies and even with God. They’re bold and uncomfortably open and honest with God, “I pour out my soul within me... Why have You forgotten me?” (42.4,9)

He questions his own emotional state, “Why are you in despair, O my soul?” and he counsels himself, “Hope in God!” They preach to themselves and persuade themselves that God is indeed trustworthy because they’ve seen it, “These things I remember and I pour out my soul within me.

For I used to go along with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With the voice of joy and thanksgiving” He becomes confident that God will give him what he DESIRES and longs to have – He will give Himself! These Psalms end with, “the help of my countenance and my God” – literally, “the yeshua pannim” – the salvation of my presence/face.

And we see it even more clearly: when these OT believers are screaming, “When will I come and appear before God?” It’s as if God is answering, “I will come and I will appear before you...and I will be the Yeshua Pannim – the salvation of your presence. I will take on your panim, your face, your presence and I will give Myself that completely to you!”

Even in their worst moments, when disoriented and opposed by people who hated and mocked them, these believers knew that God would not forget His agreement, His promise, His “hesed” (“lovingkindness” v.8), His Gospel and He would give them their desires... not moderately but lavishly... But could they ever have known how fully He meant to come through for them? That in the fullness of time, God would take on the face of Man and save them... fulfill their desires, OUR desires beyond what anyone imagined.

And God even traded places with us to the point of absorbing our thirst when in Jesus Christ, His desires were frustrated so ours could be met...He cries out in that part of “cosmic thirst” – “I am dried up...I am depleted...I THIRST... and a jar full of sour wine was standing there; so they put a sponge full of the sour wine upon a branch of hyssop and brought it up to His mouth. Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.” (John 19.29-30)

C.S. Lewis said that our desires are not too strong and unmanageable for God but way too weak. “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” (The Weight of Glory)

When you consider these Psalm writers... with the little they knew about the world to come... the shadowy promises they had (at least in comparison to what we now know of what Jesus Christ accomplished) and when you see how far God surpassed what they were hoping for...it just spurs you on to trust more completely than they did.

They desired and trusted pretty intensely... but we have more reason to trust. It’s like we’re given a sum to invest in the stock market and we’ve already been given next year’s newspaper so we KNOW how those investments pay out... why would we want to hold anything back? Why not wager it all?

So how DO we go about it...how do we deal with desire if it's not just "desire management" or "toning it down"? Let me look at 5 practices:

Well, for one thing we follow the Psalmist's examples. We will have to wrestle with "wars without and fears within". We will have to be sometimes audacious in our open and honest wrestlings with God. "Lord, I need You but I have no sense that You're there for me..." AND will have to wrestle with ourselves...to preach to and persuade ourselves, to question our emotional state, "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" and then come back to redirected desire...reorientation: "Hope in God...the yeshua pannim i.e. the salvation of my face...the One who wore our face and saved our humanity...Yeshua, Jesus Christ, the God-Man"

We say it a lot here at Park Road, "we have to learn to preach the Gospel to ourselves everyday" and we definitely have the example in the Psalms!

Secondly, what do we do with desires for food and beer and sex and shopping and fun and television? If it's not moderation or abstinence... then is it... addiction and obsession? Is there a Christian way of dealing with desire? Well, food and beer and sex and shopping are ... wonderful and dangerous. In the world to come they'll only be wonderful... not addictive. In the meantime, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (1Co 10.31)

If you can't eat chocolate or use a credit card in communion with the Lover of your soul... then those pleasures may not be for you in the here and now. You may have to wait for that day when they are only wonderful and not addictive and dangerous.

If, however you can use gaming and money and wine moderately and IN relationship with God... then do ...but don't lie to yourself and don't hurt others who don't have that kind of freedom. Moderation IS a Christian virtue... but it's not the whole story.

Sometimes powerful pleasures (like some of the things I've mentioned), these can be like a taste of heaven AND can also enslave and addict and become idols, which stand between us and the Lover of our soul. In that case, we need not moderation...but mortification ... to crucify anything that dulls our desire for the One who IS Pleasure Himself... idols never make good on their promises.

Third, beware of filling up on junk food. A feast awaits and technology, entertainment, fantasy, the applause of people: all these things can be used and enjoyed but can also be counterfeit forms of transcendence (Eph 5.18). You'll know they're filling you with emptiness if your hunger for God is waning... They CAN be the mud pies in the slum that keeps us from imagining the Other Shore. (On the other hand, some desires/pleasures can actually suggest transcendence... art...music...people and thus stir up a bigger desire for God and His presence).

Fourth, what IF you are NOT hungry and thirsty for God? Is there anything you can do about it?

Why, yes there is! You can pray and God may answer your prayer the way He answered David... and Job... and Mary. He may bring you into the wilderness.

David was often fleeing for his life...and it made him desperately clear-minded and thirsty for God. Sometimes...well... often (it seems from the Psalms) the way God answers the prayers of His children for their happiness is to make them thirst for the one thing that can really make them happy which is NOT so much God's gifts as GOD HIMSELF. And the way God engenders that clarified, voracious thirst is through opposition and difficulty. Still it's worthwhile to pray for happiness. Redemptive pain always ends well.

Last, maybe you're not connected to God at all and aren't really even thirsty for Him. To you I would say, "do you want to be thirsty...I mean for real happiness... happiness like you've never imagined?" Because even if you have a little thirst... to be thirsty... in fact if you don't really want to be thirsty...but maybe want to want to be thirsty... even that is from God.

Every person who really comes to know Him by grace says with David, in that wonderful paradox from Psalm 63.8, "My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me."

It's a huge comfort to know that while I think I'm desiring God and clinging to Him...God is holding me.

God uses His stronger hand, His right hand, to hold me up. I'm only clinging to Him because He enables it... If you're thirsty at all...even thirsty to be thirsty, then start responding...pray! Begin to acknowledge and thank God. Hang around thirsty people. "(go with the) procession to the house of God, with the voice of joy and thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival." (42.4) Celebrate with others the astounding truth that in the Good News of Jesus Christ the important thing is NOT so much YOUR desire for God but HIS DESIRE FOR YOU!