

# *A Breach in the Wall*

Psalm 42

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The name of their church is *Breccia di Roma*, which means the breach of Rome. They chose that name because that name, *breccia*, has a specific cultural meaning for the citizens of Rome. Because this week in 1870, there was a battle that was being waged throughout the peninsula of Italy. It was the battle for the unification of Italy. There was a war taking place between the crown of Italy and the papal state, headed by Pope Pius IX. Pope Pius had successfully retained Rome as his sovereign state, but the crown knew and understood that the only way they were going to be able to achieve unification of all of Italy under the crown would be to conquer Rome and to gain it back from the papacy. And so on September 20, 1870, the desire was it could be done so peacefully, but Pope Pius IX would not have it. And so he sent his armies to fight. And over a long, very long day, cannons fired over and over and over again. And you can go to that place today in Rome where there was a breach created within the wall that surrounded Rome. And the breach was opened wide enough where the armies of Italy came in and conquered Rome, and Italy was unified.

As I began to think about that image, I began to think about the reality that, oftentimes, the Gospel works like a cannon. It often needs to breach a wall—not a wall that we think of in brick and mortar, but the wall of our hearts. Because our hearts are very, very good at creating avenues and ways that we try to bring sense into our lives, ways in which we can provide our own way of salvation. We turn to things that are common to us—practices, habits, hopes—that we turn to, to sustain normalcy and peace and reason—and peace. But oftentimes, what is required for the Gospel to save us from self-dependence and from putting anything in place of dependence on Christ—the Gospel comes in like a cannon, and it breaks open the walls of our hearts, and a breach is created wherein we can finally hear that our only trust is to be in God alone.

And oftentimes, what does that is the power of suffering and of turmoil. And it is in the midst of this turmoil that we also can experience the greatest hope. But it is a hope that is foreign to us as human beings, because what the Gospel does is not only save us from sin—it saves us from ourselves and our own self-dependence, and draws us to dependence on God. And for us, in the post-resurrection of Christ, is a dependence on Christ himself. I go to this Psalm, because it is a psalm that speaks of how suffering can breach a hole in our hearts and forces us to the end of ourselves. It is a psalm of turmoil and a psalm of hope. Hear now God's Word, and may it serve as a breach in the walls of our hearts, drawing us to greater dependence on him. Psalm 42:

As a deer pants for flowing streams,  
so pants my soul for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and appear before God?  
My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while they say to me all the day long,  
“Where is your God?”  
These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I would go with the throng  
and lead them in procession to the house of God

with glad shouts and songs of praise,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you in turmoil within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my salvation and my God.  
My soul is cast down within me;  
therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.  
Deep calls to deep  
at the roar of your waterfalls;  
all your breakers and your waves  
have gone over me.  
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,  
and 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 do I go mourning  
because of the oppression of the enemy?”  
As with a deadly wound in my bones,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me all the day long,  
“Where is your God?”  
Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you in turmoil within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my salvation and my God. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

By the Hound of heaven, the Holy Spirit, may you pursue us to the end of ourselves, if necessary, that you might breach the stone walls of our hearts that resist dependence on you, O Lord. But may you, as you breach our hearts through the power of your Spirit, bring with it the word of hope, that we might be comforted, that we might be changed, that we might experience a newfound dependence on God alone, in Christ alone, in your Word alone. Now, O Lord, may you feed us. And as you have called me as a part of a team to shepherd your people, Father, I pray through my words may you feed your people and direct them to you, the only wise God. And I ask you in Jesus' name, help the teacher, and feed me as well. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

You will see in the outline a rather simple way of looking at this psalm: there is turmoil, and there is hope. Turmoil and hope. Before we even know why it is that the psalmist is experiencing this turmoil, what we hear is the “what” of the turmoil; that is, he's living life in a cave in the mountains. So this turmoil, we hear the “what” of it—what he's experiencing, his emotional spectrum. I want you to hear in all of its detail, as much as you can, the reality, the brutal reality of this psalm. And I want you to in some way be able to remember that song which is entitled, you know, “As a Deer Pants for Water, so My Soul Longs After You.” And we've sung that song. Perhaps, young people, you've learned that song. Those of you who are adults—I remember I learned that song in vacation Bible school, in Sunday School. We've sung it before in church. And it's a good song. It gains its name from this psalm.

But by no criticism to the song, it doesn't ring emotionally true to the psalm from which it is written. Because what you hear in this are things like this. The psalmist finds himself in a place where God feels utterly far from him. His heart and his spirit are as dry as you can imagine. His soul is parched, in need of water. His heart and soul are longing for God's presence. He is desiring God's help. There is such a depth to his emotional anguish, you can hear it in the tension as he says, "My soul thirsts for God, for the Living God. When shall I come and appear before him? My tears have been my food day and night." And you know the taste of tears is not fresh water; it's salty. It doesn't satisfy your thirst. In fact, as you are in anguish and as you cry, you're giving up water. And his soul is increasingly become parched. Where what is his food, as others would write years and centuries later—he's experiencing a dark night of the soul, a place where, in the middle of the night, far from home, in a place that he has heard of, in a place that he couldn't imagine he would find himself, he is saying, "Lord, where are you?"

He goes on as he says, "My soul is downcast." And he says, "And why are you in turmoil within me?" And in verse five, the end of five, he says, "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." And he says, "My soul is downcast within me. Therefore, I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon and from Mount Mizar." So just a bit of geography—so while he's talking about the anguish of his soul, the torment that he is experiencing, he then paints for us a geographical picture. The place where he finds himself is almost literally as far away from Jerusalem that you can be and still be within the border confines of Israel. So the anguish that he is experiencing emotionally is mirrored by his geographical distance from God, for as it was taught and is true, God resided in the temple in Jerusalem. And so he felt emotionally distant, spiritually distant, and physically distant. He is at the end of himself.

So that's the "what" of his turmoil. But the "why"—why is he experiencing it? We don't know all the details. We don't even know specifically who the psalmist might be. It might be David, but generally that would have had David's name in the title. We don't know. And we don't know exactly what enemies he's referring to. If it was David, it could have been Saul. It could have been Saul's armies. But that's not the particular point. He says to us that what's happening, in verse nine, he says, "I say to God my rock, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemy? As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me while they say to me all day long, where is your God?'"

So he's in such anguish because now the enemies of God, his enemies, are pursuing him. And not only are they pursuing to take his life—they also recognize that he is far from God. It's almost as if they know that their pursuit of him physically is also a pursuit of him spiritually. They're wanting to deconstruct in some ways, to leverage his suffering against his faith in God. They want to undermine his faith. They want to squash it out. And they taunt him, "Where is your God?" And then in this powerful metaphor, he likens it to a deep wound in the bones.

I remember my first broken bone. My father thought it was a sprain. My mother didn't. My father said, "He'll be okay." And then the next morning, I woke up. And there is, if you've experienced a broken bone, a throbbing and a deep pain at the place of the fracture that is unlike a surface wound; it's very deep. And I can only liken it to what it feels like—something to be hollowed out, and it just feels exposed. But it's in you, and you can't undo it. You can't fix it. And that's what this felt like for his enemies to pursue him, and their taunting of, "Where is your God?" Have you ever felt that way? Do you feel that way?

Friends and family, I want to tell you that the Bible and the psalms are full of real-life suffering. The psalms do not allow us to escape the full spectrum of human emotion and human experience. The psalmist here, and the Bible particularly, is not under threat by the actual question, "Lord, where are you?" Maybe you've asked that question. I've certainly experienced that. But I want to tell you, nothing brings home this turmoil to me—aside from, perhaps, something I've experienced—than to be sitting at a table with someone who barely knows my language, and I certainly do not know his, and we share a story through Google translate.

This time last week, I was en route to an Iranian refugee church. As is typical with a lot of places in Europe, August is generally not a time for high church attendance, and certainly not on a Sunday night. So we got on a train and headed to this small part of Athens. We met the church planter there, who's been serving the Iranian refugee community in various ways for going on fifteen-plus years. He met us, and we had Iranian tea, and he explained what it was we were getting ready to experience. And he kept apologizing. He said, "Not many people are going to show up." And we were in the room. The room is smaller than most of our classrooms in this building. And so I was, at 7:00, I was amazed to see that—I was expecting maybe ten, but it became almost standing room only. There were seventy people who showed up, men and women and young people. And we had an entire worship service in Persian. And at the beginning of that service, this psalm was read to me in Persian, and I followed along in English.

And after dinner—rather, after the service, we had dinner. And we were—they were eager to serve their guests. And we sat at a table, and I sat at a long table with other—these other Iranians. And I was sitting across the table from another one of the guests that evening who is the Mission to the World European coordinator, Ken Matlack. And we began striking up a conversation as best we could with small English words. They understood small English words. And we also tried to ask the question, "Why did you leave Iran?" And we had trouble synching that up. The pastor had a free moment; he came over and translated the question for us.

And I had noticed in his church, this one gentleman was wearing a silver cross. But he then opened up his shirt, and he pointed to the cross. And he had to flee Iran because he had converted to Christianity. And because he had converted to Christianity, he was considered apostate, and he escaped with his life. And then as we sat there a little bit longer, we tried to figure out a way to communicate. And so he took out his smartphone, and he got in Google translate. We saw him typing something up. We weren't sure what he was typing. And then he hit the translate button, and he then showed me and Anthony and Ken what he had translated. And it said the words: "They're destroying my family." So because of his conversion back in Iran, the religious powers that be were destroying his family. And that story would be repeated across the room that evening.

And then to have families who barely spoke English ask me, a pathetic person that they've never met before, ask me to pray for them—to pray for them. And when you hear the question of "why is God allowing this to happen?"—We trust in Jesus, but why are we here? Why are they in this small room on the third floor of a building in north Athens and not at home? And they don't know where they're headed to next. Some hope to make it to the United States because of family. Some hope to find a place to work in other parts of Europe. But as we read that Psalm 42, and as I looked out at the faces, and the pastor had prepared me, "What they need to hear is that in the midst of their turmoil, in the midst of their suffering, is that there is hope." And that's why he had chosen Psalm 42 to be read—because Psalm 42 brings about the anguish of their turmoil, but it also has within it hope.

So as I'm talking with them, what message do I have to say? What should I pray? How can I pray for them? As my heart bled and wept for them. Because I get to get on a plane and go back home. I can freely proclaim the name of Christ. I'm reminded of this reality, because what I had to say to them is what I have to say to you. It's because it's what the Scriptures say to us. Some theologians would have us believe that God is somehow one who is distant from emotion. They call it the impassibility of God—that somehow God doesn't experience emotions. However, it would be to rob the Scriptures of their plain meaning when we hear that God is grieved over the sin of man, as we are reminded of Jesus—at hearing of the death of Lazarus, Jesus was angry at death, and he wept tears of anger and tears of mourning.

And I will tell you that before we can talk about hope, we must talk about that God is real and present in the midst of our turmoil and our anguish. God does not greet our suffering and our difficulty with pat answers or quick solutions. But do you know, friends, what he does point us to? He points us to himself, for God gave up his glory in his Son, Jesus being the very image of God, and Jesus took on human flesh, and he suffered in our midst. He wept with us. He has walked in our shoes. He has experienced the

deep night of turmoil in the garden of Gethsemane: “Take this cup from me.” But before we leapfrog to seeing how Jesus conquers suffering, you must hear, friends, that Jesus is present in the suffering.

And the only thing I could pray with this man or these families, and the only thing that really begins to feed my soul, is to say, “Lord, while you may feel far from me, your Word of truth tells me you are not far from me.” The 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Octavius Winslow, puts it this way when he writes of Jesus’s closeness, of God’s closeness to our suffering, when he writes these words:

Here was bereavement, and the affection that soothed it. Here was death, and the Essential Life that conquered it. Here was the grave, and the Resurrection that emptied it. Here was the melting, weeping sensibility of man, in the closest alliance with the Divine majesty and commanding power of God. What a study! The Creator of all worlds, the Author of all beings, the Upholder of the universe, raining tears of human woe and sympathy upon a grave!

And so, my friends, I tell you, before we look at hope, I want to tell you if you are experiencing tears of turmoil, our faith has at the center God made man, who has wept and weeps with you. And there begins, we see, the light to dawn on our hope.

Because, you see, this hope is embedded exactly within the same words that the psalmist uses to explain his turmoil. What do I mean? That when he talks about his turmoil, we also see the dawning of the light of hope, because a man without everything that he could normally depend upon—his geography, his zip code (which in this case is not where he wanted to be), his bank accounts had been emptied, his networks had been destroyed, his enemies are trying to conquer him and are trying to go after the last thing that he has, a faith in God. And the breach in the wall of our self-dependence is the hope of the Gospel, because a person who is without will come to a place when he or she has nowhere to turn. And it is there where God and his glory can give us hope.

What do I mean? We hear it in the truth that he gives us in the midst of his turmoil. Consider these words. These are just direct quotes. “My soul thirsts for God.” In the midst of his anguish, his soul turns, and he pants, he longs, he’s thirsty for God. He also says that despite his turmoil, his hope—when he says in verse five, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me?” Well, he says to himself—he’s not just speaking to God, he’s also talking to himself. How real is that? And he’s saying, “Hope in God.” It’s almost like he’s saying to himself, “Remember. Remember. Remember. Hope in God.” He also says, “My soul is downcast within me. Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” And even though he finds himself geographically distanced, he says, “I will remember you.” So even the geographical distance will not overwhelm his being drawn to remember, remember, remember.

And he says this, “My song”—he says, “By day, the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night, his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.” So, again, this is so contemporary, is it not? And it gives to us the power of song. Because remember, the psalms are songs that were sung in the midst of God’s people at worship. We know the power of song, do we not? Have you ever found yourself going to bed, and oftentimes the last song you heard that day—whether it be a commercial or the radio, whatever the case may be—you remember it, and it replays in your head and echoes in the chamber of your head at night, and you just want to get rid of it? Well, for him, the last song that he would have are the songs that he sang as he remembers being at Jerusalem. And it’s a song of steadfast love. And at night, his song is with him, “a prayer to the God of my life.”

And then he finally says that not only the truth of these things—he says of him, “I say to God, ‘My rock.’” So the turmoil of his circumstances and of our circumstances would have us to believe—to a degree, and it’s true—that our circumstances are like water. They’re constantly shifting, which is why our hope cannot be in our circumstances. The psalmist knows this. And so he says, “God is my rock.” So my life, my hope, is not based or built upon my expectations, upon my circumstances, upon my geography,

upon my family, or upon my networks, or my history, or my tradition. It is on the truth that God is the Rock, and he will not be moved. You see, the hope in the midst of the turmoil is not a magic formula of positive self-talk. It is the repetition of the truth that God is with us. He is our rock, and he will not be moved. Our circumstances will change day to day, and our future is absolutely—and I can say this unequivocally—your future, my future, is absolutely unknown to us. That is, our circumstances we do not know. But God who is our rock, who is the alpha and the omega, with whom there is no shadow of turning—he will not change. And our salvation is sure, though our arriving at the finality of the recognition of knowing God and seeing him beautifully and perfectly and wholly when Jesus returns—our journey to that place is very much unknown, and will be full of great difficulty. But our God and his truth is our hope forever.

But finally, our hope is not just the truth of God in the midst of our turmoil—it is also the redemption from tears. Verse eleven, “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” So the psalm ends, in a similar yet decidedly different way than it began. The psalm begins by asking where is God, acknowledging the turmoil and the dark night of the soul of longing for God, his tears his food day and night. But the psalm ends with a declaration not only to himself—because we forget, he forgets—it was a declaration to himself, and it is an eternal declaration to us who will hear it, and it is the only hope that I can offer to you, and it is the only hope that I can offer to anyone, including these beautiful and wonderful people with whom we worshipped last Sunday night.

And it is this: it is only in God that we find redemption and salvation. And what was announced here, “Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God”—could the psalmist fully recognize what would come as the perfect fruition, the blessing, the fulfillment of that cry and of that statement of truth? Who knows. But we, those who are benefactors and those who have been made new again through Jesus Christ, recognize that what is being pointed to here is the work of Jesus Christ alone. And as I referred to earlier, I say again, that the reason why we are able to find hope in the midst of our turmoil is because Jesus didn’t just weep over the death of Lazarus; he would die in Lazarus’s place on the cross, and in our place.

And his weeping was the most unjust. His weeping was not due to him. His weeping would be because he would be separated from the Father, to follow the Lord’s will, to glorify his Father, and to spread the love of God abroad through the giving of his body and his blood, that in Jesus’s tears, we find redemption in the midst of ours. That when we cry and when we are in turmoil, we have a Savior who we know weeps with us and wept over us and has wept because of us, and died on the cross and was raised to life on the third day. And on that day when he returns, he promises though this life may be full of tears, that day will be a day marked by the removal of them, and will be a day unending of praise. And therein lies the hope.

The end of the story, though the story is full of turmoil, the end of it is one of hope. And so instead of ending with that song “As the Deer Pants for the Water,” I cannot think of a better song to end with this morning than the song we will end with this morning, “And Can It Be that I Should Gain?” And as I finish, and before we sing—and I’m going to ask the musicians to come on forward, and I’m going to ask you to stand. I’m going to read the third and fourth stanza, because sometimes, frankly, it’s just easier to hear the words read. And from this song, hear these words:

He left his Father's throne above  
(so free, so infinite his grace!),  
humbled himself, so great his love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.  
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
for O my God, it found out me!  
Amazing love, how can it be;

That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
thine eye diffused a quickening ray;  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
my chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

Amazing love, how can it be;  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

The breach of the wall of our hearts is the Lord Jesus Christ, who promises to take from us our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. May he be the one who ministers to us in our anguish and tears, and may he be the one who is our hope through them. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for meeting us this morning through the truth of your Word. Now I pray for the flock that is here at Columbia Presbyterian Church, may you fill them with the blessed joy of the Holy Spirit. May you apply to them the grace and truth of your Word. May you strength them and may you minister to those who are in anguish. May you give them the truth that Jesus weeps with and for them, and has wept in their place. May their turmoil be met with a quickening ray of light, of the beautiful and powerful resurrected Christ. And for us all, may we be a people moved to empathy for those who are suffering. And may our answers be not answers that can be found in any book written for self-positive talk, but may our words be words that point them to Christ alone, our hope and our salvation, the Rock, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.