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Psalm 43: To the choirmaster: A Maskil of the Sons of Korah.

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Psalm 43

To the choirmaster: A Maskil of the Sons of Korah.

(RSV) (LBW Lectionary)

It seems quite likely that Psalm 43 was once a part of Psalm 42, and that the two of them once read continuously. The theme and contemplations of Psalm 42 are continued in Psalm 43, and you will notice that Psalm 42:5 and 11, and Psalm 43:5 are all identical verses, leading to the very plausible conjecture that Psalm 42 and 43 were at one time a single psalm of three strophes, each strophe ending with the same refrain. Further, Psalms 42 and 43 are one psalm in many Hebrew manuscripts. There is no satisfactory theory as to why it should have become divided into two separate psalms.

Psalm 42:1-2 reveal the Psalmist to have had an intense longing for God, akin to the thirst a deer might have after having successfully outrun those who chased him in the hunt, or the terrible thirst of someone who is parched from travel in the desert. His already intense longing for God is even further intensified in 42:4 as he remembers a happier past which now seems so irrecoverable. He laments: **"These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival."** In 42:6 he speaks from the land of Hermon and Mizar, which is north of Israel and outside its territory. He feels as though God has forgotten him (Ps, 42:9), as he experiences the cruel taunts of his enemies. In 42:10 he complains: **"As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?""** For that reason he knows himself to be among an ungodly people (43:1). So we here have a Psalm of one who is suffering the pain of an exile. Exactly when this exile might have taken place we cannot say; but it seems to be a personal exile, perhaps not a national one as in 586 B.C., when the nation was taken into the Babylonian Exile.

V. 1

**¹ Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause
against an ungodly people;
from those who are deceitful and unjust
deliver me!**

"Ungodly people" are literally a people who are not-godly, not-righteous. The word "people" is a collective noun, so that we must think not of a loose collection of individuals, but of a people, a corporate body. This people, moreover, is outside of the People of God; they are the goyim, the Gentiles who do not know the God of Israel. The agony our exile suffers seems to be a religious one. Psalm 42:3 and 42:10 show how he suffers the taunts of those who mock him with the question, "Where is your God?" In a time when every nation had its own god, the competition among the gods was often resolved on the field of battle; the stronger god won the battle, the losers had to suffer the shame of adhering to a losing god. The Psalmist's pain derives from the fact that he is apparently a loser in exile; that he continues to trust in his "losing" God, while there seems to be no historical or empirical verification of the trustworthiness and power of his God. So here the Psalmist begs God to vindicate his trust in Him, to show his enemies that He is indeed God, and to put to silence the taunts of his enemies.

Why are his tormenters deceitful and unjust? A people that does not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a people who does not acknowledge the Creator God who rescued

Israel from Egypt and entered into Covenant with them, such a people is both deceiver and deceived when they oppose that God and champion another god. And when they promote the cause of another god, that god can only be an idol. An idol-worship can be neither just nor right. From such a situation the Psalmist begs God for deliverance.

V. 2

**² For thou art the God in whom I take refuge;
why hast thou cast me off?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because of the oppression of the enemy?**

For *Thou*, the God with whom I am so fervently pleading, art my God, and no other. *Thou* art the God for whom my soul longs and thirsts (42:1-2). *Thou* art the *living* God and no mere idol (42:2). *Thou* art the God who is the Rock (for a foundation and for a defense) on which I build (42:9). *Thou* art the God in whom I take my refuge (recall the blessing at the end of Psalm 2). And all this is so because the Psalmist knows himself to be dealing with Yahweh, the LORD (42:8), who is the Covenant God, who is the God who commands steadfast love, who is therefore the God of my very life.

That God commands steadfast love will mean two things: 1) When God speaks, He speaks fundamentally in terms of His own steadfast love, and He orders and arranges His activity under that command; that is why the Psalmist can rely upon God's steadfast love; and 2) God commands His People to abandon their fickle love and to display the same steadfast love toward Him and toward all others.

That, however, only increases the Psalmist's perplexity, his pain. Why does *this* God cast him off? And *why* does this God cast him off? *Why* abandon, discard, and reject me? "*Why* hast Thou forgotten me" (42:9)? The plight is mournful. Psalm 35:14 paints a picture of similar deep and sorrowful mourning. It is the painful bereavement in which I mourn "**as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; I go about as one who laments his mother, bowed down and in mourning.**" That is the sense of loss which the Psalmist feels when God seems to have deserted him.

But as we continue to pray with the Psalmist, we will be led through such despair into rejoicing. For we know that the truth is that the God in whom we hope is trustworthy. We address the God of steadfast love, and the Psalmist teaches us not to despair ultimately.

V. 3

**³ Oh send out thy light and thy truth;
let them lead me (back),
let them bring me (back) to thy holy hill
and to thy dwelling!**

From the darkness of his melancholy thoughts he asks for the Light of God; surrounded by the falsehood of idolatry he prays for the Truth of God. He recalls how he once used to take part in the worship of God in the Temple (Psalm 42:4). And now he desires to be able to go back again to the House of God, the Temple on the holy hill on Mt. Zion (recall Psalm 2:6), from which he is so painfully separated.

It is worth noting that the Psalmist can confidently pray to God in a foreign land, because after all, God is everywhere. Yet he longs not simply for the generalized presence of an omnipresent

deity, but he longs to see the localized "face" of God. In the Old Testament era after Solomon (ca. 960-922 B.C.) that place is the Temple. (In this connection you should read 1 Kings 8:22-30, the prayer King Solomon spoke when he dedicated the beautiful temple which he, as the Son of David, had begun building for Yahweh about 954 B.C.)

V. 4

**⁴ Then I will go to the altar of God,
to God my exceeding joy;
and I will praise thee with the lyre,
O God, my God.**

The anticipation of the return to the holy hill is the anticipation of coming back to the altar of God, the place where God is to be worshipped. God is not merely to be thought about in the abstract, but to be worshipped at his altar with the strings of one's harp and/or one's vocal cords. To come to the altar of God is to come to God; and God alone is my greatest joy. A parallel thought occurs in Psalm 73:25-26. Only so will his exile finally be over.

V. 5

**⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help (salvation) and my God.**

The Psalmist converses with himself. Though he feels cast down and troubled, he knows he need not be, for God is the God of *hope*. His God is Yahweh, the LORD, the God of steadfast covenanted love (Psalm 42:8), and that means that the trustworthy God will fulfill his promises. Therefore, he says, I shall again praise Him. And because I *shall* certainly one day again praise Him to His face, I can therefore praise Him *now* already, even if I do not yet see His face.

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalms 42:

Lord God, never-failing fountain of life, through the saving waters of baptism you called us from the depth of sin to the depths of mercy. Do not forget the trials of our exile, but from the wellspring of the Word satisfy our thirst for you, so that we may come rejoicing to your holy mountain, where you live and reign now and forever. Amen.

The LBW prayer to accompany Psalm 43:

Almighty Father, source of everlasting light, send forth your truth into our hearts and pour over us the brightness of your light to bring us, through our joyful participation at your altar, to your eternal dwelling on high, where you live and reign now and forever. Amen.

These prayers are all right, but I am not enthusiastic about them. While they pick up a few phrases from these Psalms, they do not capture their heart. In the first place, these prayers do not voice the agony of the God-forsakenness that the Psalmist feels; and that, it seems to me, is an essential element

of the Psalm-prayer. Secondly, while it is true that the overwhelming emphasis in these Psalms is on God generically and not on Yahweh specifically, I still find it annoying that neither of these prayers prays explicitly in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ. And thirdly, although there is a reference to the trials of our exile, I think that there ought to be more emphasis on our wrestling with God in our struggle with the false gods.

Guide for further reflection:

1. Whoever prays this Psalm is in a situation where his/her social and political environment does not nourish, indeed even militates against, single-minded devotion to Yahweh God. This creates a struggle for our soul. Will our life be determined, as the Psalmist fervently hopes and prays, by Yahweh God? Or will the influences of an unfriendly environment and its flesh-and-blood representatives, prove to be decisive in the end? That is the issue raised in this Psalm.
2. We Christians are, says St. Peter 2:11, in a certain sense aliens and exiles in this present life. St. Peter tells us that we are the new People of God (1 Peter 2:9-10), and that distinction carries with it the risks and the hazards of old Israel. While we are quite obviously in this world, we are not of this world. Among the risks that St. Peter especially stresses are the new behavioral standards that are incumbent upon us, standards that go contrary to the social and political environment that surrounds us, because they are standards drawn from the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. You might want to read the entire Epistle; is it only five short chapters.
3. The struggle for the soul of the exile can become so severe that it will seem as if God has abandoned us. Other vicissitudes may also conduce to overwhelm us with the same feeling, namely, that God has forsaken us. That is the terrifying feeling which the Psalmist voices in this Psalm.
4. Nothing will be more necessary under such circumstances than to get back into God's House, the place where God is pleased to dwell and to show His face. That is where the People of God are gathered, both for the worship of God and for offering that support which we so desperately need.
5. The worship of God in the House of God (in the Church service, the *Gottesdienst*) is essentially the preview of the worship we shall be offering to God and to the Lamb as we all are finally gathered together around the great throne in spotless robes of white. We shall there be praising God forever. Therefore now already we sing the praises of Yahweh God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the unity given by the Spirit.
6. Christians have this sure word made even surer when they recall that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, also felt utterly abandoned by his heavenly Father. Read Matthew 27:45-46, where Jesus quotes the parallel Psalm 22. And like the Psalmist, and undoubtedly inspired by him, Jesus in his abandonment did not lose his confidence in "My God!" Such faith in the faithfulness of God received its vindication in Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That is also the basis for our hope in, and vindication from, God.

Nugget

Both the Jewish and the Christian traditions speak of the Word of God as the living water whereby the spirit is cleansed and refreshed. A quick sip – an occasional prayer snatched from the jaws of a relentlessly busy world – is better than no water at all, but roots that grow into the water and draw from it deeply by frequent prayer produce a healthy tree that gives fruit to all who come.

For all that we know of Thee, O God, we give Thee thanks,
and for all Thou art which is beyond our knowing.
Stretch forth the right hand of Thy mighty power
against everything that stands in the way of Thy will,
against us, if it must be.
And redeem us
out of our fears and failures
into what Thou wouldst have us be in Christ Jesus.
Amen.

Walter E. Keller

March 14, 1999 – The **Fourth Sunday in Lent**