

Longing in the Old Testament

1. Praying Psalm 42



¹As the deer longs for running streams,
so my whole being longs for you, my God.

²With all the yearning of my soul
I thirst for God, the living God.

When will I come and see the face of God?

³My tears have been my food by day and by night,
as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?'

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd into the house of God,
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, the throng wild with joy.

⁵*Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?*

Hope in God. I will continue to praise you, my Saviour and my God.

⁶My soul is cast down within me as I think of you, from the region of the Jordan and Mount Hermon, from the hill of Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep in the roaring of the waters.

All your waves and your billows crash over me.

⁸By day GOD sends forth such gracious love.

By night I keep singing, pleading to the living God.

⁹I say to God, my rock: *‘Why have you forgotten me?’*

Why must I go mourning, oppressed by the foe?’

¹⁰With cries that pierce me to the heart my enemies revile me,

saying to me all the day long: ‘Where is your God?’

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The psalmist has experienced God's presence. Now he is exiled from the sanctuary and his priestly ministry and misses the experience of closeness (verse 4). He experiences God as absent, but he is like a timid female deer, alert to the scent of the life-giving water for which she longs.

5/II Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?

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The psalmist questions his sadness. God is called 'Saviour'. God does not prevent us from having hurtful experiences (often brought about by us and others refusing to obey God), but God does come to us with God's saving help, sustaining us to go through the difficulties, and maintaining for us the divine communion in which life consists.

The psalmist gives expression to the sadness that comes over him as he describes being overwhelmed with forces of chaos, made all the more painful by the taunts slung at him for believing. In his pain, he prays: 'My soul is cast down within me as I think of you' (verse 6).

The sound of the cataracts bursting out from the mountain where the Jordan rises symbolises for the psalmist the destructive and chaotic forces that threaten to overwhelm him (verse 7).

The pagan neighbours have their idols. The psalmist has nothing to show. They challenge him: 'Where is your God?' (verses 3 and 10).

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2. Praying Psalm 63



¹O God, you are my God, for you I rise at dawn.
I thirst for you. My body ['flesh'] pines for you,
like a dry, weary, waterless land.

²I gaze on you in the sanctuary,
to behold your power and your glory.

³Your love is worth more than life.
My lips will sing your praise.

⁴I will praise you as long as I live.
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵I am filled as with a banquet.
I praise you with joy.

⁶I think of you as I lie awake,
meditating on you throughout the night.

⁷You have been my help.

In the shade of your wings I sing for joy.

⁸I cling to you with all my heart.

Your right hand holds me fast.

The psalmist thinks of God as he lies on his bed at night (verse 6), and he rises in the morning to praise God in the temple (verse 2). Psalm 63 is a prayer of longing and trust. Longing for communion with God is a recurring theme in the psalms:

‘O God*, all my longing is known to you;
my sighing is not hidden from you’ (Psalm 38:9).

‘I am longing, indeed I am fainting, for the courts of GOD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God’ (Psalm 84:2).

‘Let the hearts of those who seek GOD rejoice.
Seek GOD and his strength;
seek his presence continually’ (Psalm 105:3-4).

‘I stretch out my hands to you;
I am thirsting for you like a parched land’ (Psalm 143:6).

‘They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you slake their thirst from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fount of life’ (Psalm 36:8-9).

We are encouraged by the words of Jeremiah, which tell us of
God’s response to our longing: ‘When you search for me, you
will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you
find me’ (Jeremiah 29:13).

²I gaze on you in the sanctuary,
to behold your power and your glory.

We remember the advice of Saint John of the Cross: ‘God does not give grace and love except according to the soul’s desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives’ (Spiritual Canticle 13,12).

Gregory of Nyssa (d.395) writes:

‘God wants the delay in pleasure to set afire the desire of the soul so that, together with this ardour, joy may also increase ... To find God means to seek Him continually ... This is truly seeing God, when one is not sated in desiring Him ... God is eternally sought ... The teaching which Scripture gives us is, I think, the following: the person who wants to see God will do so in the very fact of always following Him. The contemplation of His face is an endless walking towards Him ... There is only one way to grasp the power that transcends all intelligence: not to stop, but to keep always searching beyond what has already been grasped’ (Homily 2 on the Canticle of Canticles, 801).

The theme of longing recurs often in the writings of Augustine (d.431):

‘I call upon you, God my Mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you to come into my soul, for by inspiring it to long for you you prepare it to receive you’ (Confessions 13.1).

In a conversation between his soul and God, Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury (d.1109) writes:

‘Come now, fly for a moment from your affairs, escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God and rest for a little in Him. Enter into the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything save God and what can be of help in your quest for Him and, having locked the door, seek Him out. Speak now my whole heart, speak now to God: ‘I seek your face, O Lord, your face I seek.’ ... What shall I do, most high God, what shall this exile do, tormented by love of you and yet cast off far from your face? I yearn to see you, I desire to come close to you, I long to find you, I am eager to seek you out and I do not see your face ...

‘Look upon us, Lord; hear us, enlighten us, show yourself to us. Give yourself to us that it may be well with us, for without you it goes so ill for us. Have pity on our efforts and our strivings towards you, for we can avail nothing without you. Teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I seek, because I can neither seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find you unless you reveal yourself. Let me seek you in desiring you; let me desire you in seeking you; let me find you in loving you; let me love you in finding you’ (Proslogion chapter 1).

Mechthild of Magdeburg (13th century) writes:

‘I delight in loving him who loves me, and I long to love him to death, boundlessly, and without ceasing. Be happy, my soul, for your Life has died for love of you. Love him so fiercely that you could die for him. Thus you burn ever more without ever being extinguished as a living flame in the vast fire of high majesty. Thus you become full of the fire of love. This makes you here utterly happy.

You can no longer teach me anything. I cannot turn away from love. I must be its captive. Otherwise, I cannot go on living. Where it dwells, there I must remain, both in death and in life. This is the folly of fools who live free of anguish’ (Book 1, 28, The Flowering Light of the Godhead).

We must trust this longing. Like the deer longing for flowing streams we may not know what direction to take, or we may not have the energy to run. Let us be gentle with ourselves. It is God who has placed the longing in our heart, and, provided we attend to it, we will continue to find ourselves drawn.

We do not have to go anywhere to be with God. God is within us. We are simply to say Yes to God as God draws us inwards into our own heart where God longs to be in communion with us. Give in to the longing. Create times of stillness. Learn to 'waste time' in prayer, listening to the murmuring of the longing as it washes over the rocks of uncertainty and doubt. The experience of the psalmist can help persuade us that in experiencing this longing we are not alone.

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3. Praying Psalm 77



¹I cry aloud to God, cry aloud that God might hear me.

²In my anguish, I search for you, my God*.

My hands are raised at night without ceasing;
my soul refuses to be comforted.

³I remember God, and I moan;

I reflect, and my spirit faints.

⁴You withhold sleep from my eyes.

I am troubled and cannot speak.

⁵I consider the days of old,
remembering years long gone.

⁶All night memories fill my heart,

I ponder and my spirit keeps on questioning.

⁷Perhaps God* will always reject me,

and will never again turn and grace me?

⁸Perhaps God's covenant love to me is exhausted,
God's promises have come to an end?

⁹Has God forgotten to be gracious?
Can anger block God's mercy?

¹⁰I find myself saying: 'Woe is me!
The power of the Most High has altered!'

¹¹I remember your deeds, O GOD;
yes, I recall your wonders of old.

¹²I reflect on all that you have done,
and muse on your mighty deeds.

¹³Your way, my God, is holy. What god is great like you?

¹⁴You are God who works wonders;
you display your might among the peoples.

¹⁵With your strong arm you redeem your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

The psalmist tries to sustain his spirit by recalling the wonderful ways in which GOD showed his care at the time of the Exodus from Egypt.

¹⁶Seeing you the waters churned,
shuddering, writhing, convulsed to the depths.

¹⁷Clouds poured down rain.
Thunder shook the heavens,
Lightning darted like arrows.

¹⁸Your thunder rolled round the sky,
your lightning lit up the world.
The earth trembled and shook.

¹⁹Your way led through the sea,
your path through the mighty waters;
yet no one saw your footprints.

²⁰You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

¹⁹Your way led through the sea,
your path through the mighty waters;
yet no one saw your footprints.

This calls to mind the Gospel scene of Jesus walking on the sea: ‘When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and Jesus was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased’ (Mark 6:47-51).

We think, too, of Jesus passing through death to the risen life and opening the way for us to follow.

The psalmist is desperate. He lies awake at night worrying about his situation which is such that he wonders whether God no longer cares for him. God seems absent, but the psalmist cries out, trusting to be heard. He does not stop seeking this apparently absent God. He cannot see, nor can he touch, but he keeps stretching out, hoping for contact. It is God who keeps the heart of the psalmist alert and his eyes open, longing to see, even though he cannot find words and his experience of God is tenuous and uncertain. The psalmist struggles to make sense of what is happening.

The psalmist's problem is that God seems to be acting contrary to how God has revealed God's Self to be. After all, God did proclaim to Moses: "GOD, GOD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in covenant love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The psalmist is asking where is this covenant love, graciousness, and tender compassion now? All he experiences is silence.

The psalmist is experiencing a profound, even desperate, longing for communion with God, who seems not to be listening. He is searching for God (verses 1-6), but God seems to be absent (verses 7-9): ‘Perhaps God will never again turn to me and be gracious to me’ (verse 7). When we reflect on the transcendence of God, and the necessarily mysterious dimension of God’s presence and action in our lives, it should not surprise us that this experience of God as absent is a significant element in everyone’s religious experience. In the Hebrew Scriptures it is expressed beautifully and poignantly in the Song of Songs.

Bernard of Clairvaux in his Sermon 79 on the Song of Songs writes: 'Who is it whom your soul loves, for whom you inquire? Has he no name? Who are you and who is he? ... In this marriage song it is affections, not words, that are to be considered. Why is this, except that the holy love which is the subject of the entire song cannot be expressed by words, but only 'in deed and in truth'. Here love speaks everywhere. If you desire to grasp these writings, you must love. For anyone who does not love, it is useless to listen to this song of love, for a cold heart cannot catch fire from its eloquence.'

The Song of Songs makes a unique contribution to the Hebrew Bible in that it is a celebration of sexual love. The reader is left in no doubt that the yearning, the joy of discovery, the delight of consummation, are part, and a significant part, of the creation which God looks upon and sees to be 'very good' (Genesis 1:31).

We are reminded of the statement in the Book of Genesis that it is as male and female that human beings are created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 27), and we hear the delight in Adam's voice when, at last, God gives him Eve as his companion (Genesis 2:23).

Though this delight in the erotic dimension of human sexual love is apparent in the text, commentators over the centuries, both Jewish and Christian, have passed quickly (perhaps too quickly) to see in the Song a mystical account of the love between God and his chosen People, between Christ and the Church.

It was Origen's masterly ten volume commentary on the Song of Songs (only parts of which are extant), composed between 240 and 245AD, that set the pattern for subsequent Christian reflection which focused on Christ's love for the Church, but also on the mystical love-encounter with God that God offers to each and every person. The long tradition of interpretation calls us to see in human love a sacrament of God's love for us personally and for us as a community.

The Song of Songs helps us avoid the danger of treating God's love for us and our response of love in too abstract a way. We are helped to reflect on God's yearning to love, and our profound need for divine communion. We recall the famous words of Saint Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our heart is restless till we rest in you' (Confessions 1.1).

Like the psalmist, the lover is searching for the Beloved, who appears to be absent.

‘Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer. “I will rise and seek him whom my soul loves.” I sought him, but did not find him’ (Song 3:1-2).

‘I opened to my lover, but my lover had turned away, gone! My soul fainted within me. I sought him, but did not find him. I called him, but he gave no answer’ (Song 5:5-6).

We find the same theme in The Spiritual Canticle of John of the Cross.

‘Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?
You fled like the stag after wounding me;
I went out calling you, and you were gone.

Seeking my Love, I will go off to the mountains and to the waterside ...
Who has the power to heal me?
How do you endure, O life, not living where you live,
and being brought near death by the arrows you receive
from that which you conceive of your Beloved?
Why, since you wounded this heart, do you not heal it?
And why, since you stole it from me,
do you leave it so, and fail to carry off what you have stolen?
May my eyes behold you, because you are their light,
and I would open them to you alone.
Reveal your presence, and may the vision of your beauty be my death.
For the sickness of love is not cured except by your presence and image.

O crystal spring!

If only, on your silvered-over face, you would suddenly form
the eyes I desire, which I bear sketched deep within my heart.

We will go on to the high caverns in the rock
which are so well concealed ...

There You will show me what my soul has been seeking,
And then You will give me yourself.

In his commentary on the poem John of the Cross states:

‘The sublime communication and the feeling of God being near is
not a sure sign of the presence and grace of God, nor is dryness and
the lack of a feeling of God’s closeness a sign of God’s absence’ (1.3).

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle (continued)

‘What more do you want? And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess your riches, delights, satisfactions, fullness and kingdom - your Beloved whom you desire and seek? Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection with him, for you have him so close to you. Desire him there. Adore him there. Do not go in pursuit of him outside yourself. You will only become distracted and weary, and you will not find him or enjoy him more securely or sooner or more intimately than by seeking him within you. There is but one difficulty: even though he does abide within you, he is hidden. Nevertheless, it is vital for you to know the place of his hiding that you may search for him there with assuredness. And this is also what you ask, when with the affection of love you question: ‘Where have you hidden, Beloved?’ (I.8).

‘It brings special happiness to a person to understand that God is never absent, not even from a person in mortal sin’ (1.8).

‘Since you know that the Beloved whom you desire lives hidden within your heart, strive to be yourself truly hidden with him, and you will embrace him within and experience him with loving affection’ (1.10).

‘This is what it means to seek Him in faith. However confident you may be that you find, experience, and understand God, you must, because God is inaccessible and concealed, always regard Him as hidden and serve Him who is hidden in a secret way. Do not be like those foolish people whose understanding of God is so poor that they think that God is absent just because they do not understand, taste or experience Him’ (1.12).

‘You suffer so intently for God at this time, because you are drawing nearer to God, and so you have greater experience within yourself of the void of God, of very heavy darkness, and of spiritual fire which dries up and purges you, so that, thus purified, you may be united with God’ (13.1).