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When I was ten years old, my family drove across the Mojave Desert in an old Plymouth without air conditioning. We were heading to the Grand Canyon to go camping. My mom and dad were up front, Dad driving, and my three brothers and I were crammed in the back seat. Our German Shepherd Bruno was in the back end panting, and his fur was coming out and floating around in the car and sticking to my skin. About 9:30 at night we pulled into Yuma, Arizona, where it was about 100 degrees. We sighted an "A and W Root Beer" sign, and turned into the parking lot to get something to drink. I've never tasted anything as good as that ice-cold mug of root beer.

I want to talk today about thirsting for God. It's the great theme of today's psalm.

Psalm 42 is a part of a group of psalms (42-49) written by the descendants of Korah who served God in the Temple as choir leaders and musicians. Psalm 42 and Psalm 43 were probably written as one psalm:

- They're together in Hebrew manuscripts;
- Psalm 43 doesn't have a title; and
- the refrain's repeated three times, in Psalm 42:5; in Psalm 42:11; and in Psalm 43:5,

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

The writer is grieving the fact that he can't be at the temple in Jerusalem, where he experienced God most powerfully. Why is he cut off from his spiritual home?

Maybe he was writing from exile, cut off in Babylon from the place where he found God to be most powerfully present. Now his past life was just a painful memory. If the Levite was in exile, the words of Psalm 137 would have made sense to him, where they say,

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

There on the willows
we hung our harps,

for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)

Maybe this Levite had a sickness that kept him from going to Jerusalem and joining in the Temple worship.

Does it sound strange to think of God as inhabiting a Temple? After all, Solomon himself, the one who built the Temple, prayed at the dedication,

But will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! (2 Chronicles 6:18)

But for Israel, God was where the Ark of the Covenant was, and the ark was there. The ark was set in the Holy of Holies in the middle of the sanctuary, where the people came to worship and the priests served in the presence of the Lord. The Temple was where God was present like no other place. It was a place of security and beauty, where you came to meet the one Living God: the huge walls, the great courts, the massive cedar beams, the floor of cypress, the doors carved with ornate designs, the walls overlaid with gold.

In that place, the Levite was secure in the knowledge that God was there. It showed that God stoops down to meet his people in a tangible way. In fact, when the musicians came in leading the people in procession, they would shout aloud, "Here he comes! Here he comes!" God was coming into the midst of his people as he entered the temple.

As we think about the Levite's experience in the Temple, I'd like to make five observations about the text.

1. Our deepest longing for is a longing for God.

It's far from home and from Temple worship, far from everything that defined him and gave him strength, far from the grandeur and the beauty that was his spiritual home since birth, that the Levite cries out,

"As the deer pants for the running streams, so my soul pants for you, O God."

Have you ever had an experience in worship, an experience of God that was so intense, you hunger and thirst for him again in that way? Do you long for him today?

All of us have things we long for—for peace, for a fulfilling job, for a loving home, for security. I think even deeper we have a thirst for a chance to make a difference in people's lives, a thirst freedom from stress, from meaninglessness, from loneliness, from fear. I think we have a thirst to be free from boredom.

I think the question is what's the driving force, the main motivation, the greatest ambition going to be in your life? Where are you going to get your strength? How can you have joy and peace even when life's hard? And the deepest thirst of all is thirst for God. The Levite thirsts for God like a thirsty animal pants for water in a dry place. When he says "the face," "the presence," of God, he's saying he wants God himself.

God is to the soul what water is to the body, and your spiritual thirst is an indicator of how much you need God. And I think if you ever get to a quiet space, you realize how tired you are of our self-obsessed culture, and you cry out for God. When you say, I haven't got what it takes to meet my very deepest needs, and when God seems far away, and all I can do is cry out. When the thirst is so intense, you're not aware of anything else.

Ann Weems is a writer whose son's death got her to thinking about her hunger for God and for his healing. In her book, *Psalms of Lament*, she writes,

"In the quiet times this image comes to me: Jesus weeping.

Jesus wept, and in his weeping, he joined himself forever to those who mourn.

He stands now throughout all time, this Jesus weeping, with his arms about the weeping ones:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

He stands with the mourners, for his name is God-with-us...

"Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted." Someday. Someday God will wipe the tears from Rachel's eyes.

In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life, there is a deafening alleluia rising from the souls of those who weep,

And of those who weep with those who weep.

If you watch, you will see the hand of God putting the stars back in their skies—one by one.

Her thirst is so profound that nobody but God can satisfy it. That's the desire of so many people in the Bible—of Abraham, Jacob, Hannah, David, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul. They mourned for God, they were desperate for God, they wrestled with God, and they sought him day and night, in season and out. Like Paul says,

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Philippians 3:10).

It's like a runner straining with every muscle in his body to hit the tape. Paul says,

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14)

Doesn't that happen when you see a Christ-saturated life; you say "God, I want that, too. I want that kind of peace and power and love you've given them."

That's from God. Don't settle for anything less, because there's more of God than you've experienced so far. There's more of God than we've experienced as a church so far.

A lot of the church in America today is cold and hard, and it shows a lack of holy desire. You have to desire God, or he won't pour out himself on his people. He doesn't overwhelm us, but he waits until we want him, and we want only him. Where we don't want the gift, but the giver. Just a desire for him, and that's why Jesus said,

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Look for Jesus in his fullness, and he will amaze you. Because our very deepest longing is, in fact, a longing for God.

2. Desire from God is itself from God.

The Bible teaches that when you long for God, it's an indication he's already working on your heart. Jesus said,

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. (John 6:44)

The desire for God, the thirst we feel, comes from him. When we want to know God and enter into his presence, it's because God put that longing there, like he put it into the heart of the grieving Levite. It wasn't just homesickness, there's a void in our heart that only God can fill. God makes us restless, until we find our peace in him, and the Levite is saying, I have that profound longing for you, O God.

That happens to us, to, when God breaks into our lives, and reminds us how we need to be filled by him. Maybe in our morning devotions, or maybe with a follower of Jesus who seems to have something we don't, and we see their life filled with God, and it makes me see how shallow I am, and I want to go deeper. A lot of times it happens in our pain, when we say, "Where can I go except to God?"

3. Focus on your longing.

So how do we get in touch with our desire for God? I think it's like God says in another place,

Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth. (Psalm 46:10)

Is your soul thirsty today? Be still. Are you tired and pushed beyond your limits? Be still. Be still. That's how we focus our longing. Start your day in quiet meditation on God's word and in prayer. I'd suggest starting the day with a psalm; pray that God will meet you in that time, and then read and reflect and pray. God told Jeremiah,

You shall seek me, and find me, when you shall search for me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)

4. God can satisfy our thirst.

The LORD promises the prophet Zechariah that he's coming to save his people. He says,

On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter. (Zechariah 14:8)

Jesus picks up on that image when he says,

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

Later, John's Gospel tells us,

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. (John 7:37-39)

He's saying, Jesus gives us what we hunger and thirst for at the deepest place in us. What is that? It's himself. And it's what he gives us when we trust in him, because he pours out his Spirit on us. It's why he says if we delight in him, "he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

5. God restores us when we choose to remember.

After the first lament, when the Levite says, "Why are you downcast, O my soul," he decides to remember better times. He says, "My soul is downcast; therefore I remember you." He thinks about times when he went to Jerusalem with crowds for the great festivals of worship.

But sometimes that's not enough. And after the second lament, when he says again "Why are you downcast, O my soul," this time he goes deeper. He thinks about God. When God seems absent, think of the times when you experienced him.

We can ask God today for a good memory. Of what faith used to be, of what intense desire used to be, of what the thirst used to be, and to cause us to long for God like we never have before. When life presses in around you, when you're in pain, go to him in worship. Look at how that's resolved. Psalm 43,

Then will I go to the altar of God,
to God, my joy and my delight.
I will praise you with the harp,
O God, my God. (Psalm 43:4)

In the midst of our thirst for God, we need to remember. In the book, *The Last Battle*, Narnia's enemies have conquered the whole kingdom and captured the good King Tirian. He's tied to a tree, alone in the dark, and he longs for Aslan, the great lion, who is the figure of Christ.

Tirian now remembered. "Aslan—and children from another world," thought Tirian. "They have always come in when things were at their worst. Oh, if only they could now."

And he called out "Aslan! Aslan! Aslan! Come and help us now."

And from that exact moment, help was on its way. When we remember our thirst, and God's promise, it's the beginning of an in-breaking of God's power and presence.

Our hearts confirm it: we were made to be satisfied with the Living Water:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. (Matthew 5:6)