

The Deer, the Water and the Life

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[0 : 00] This psalm, which sometimes we might take as perhaps being a continuance that goes on into Psalm 43, when in the past we've looked at Psalm 43, we've said are the two almost one together, and you might believe that perhaps they were just two parts of one greater psalm that's been sort of chopped.

But we can only look at the psalm as we've got it here. And the first thing that we see in it is that in its title, we are told, and it's to the chief musician, a mass chill.

Now, mass chill is a type that you find various times throughout the psaltery. You've found it so far, if you were to look in the psalms, either two up until number 42, you find it at 32, you find it again at 44, and so on.

And the word mass chill, a Hebrew term, means instruction. And it is therefore a psalm that is intended as an instruction, and if it is to the chief musician, it is intended to be sung by instruction. Now, of course, this is a perfectly standard way of teaching people, is that they are enabled to learn things by singing a song about it. You know, as you teach children at school, but you put something into rhyme, you make a wee tune with it, and as they sing the song, as they remember it, so it sticks in their minds.

[1 : 16] So, likewise, when we have memory verses for the children, or ways to remember particular aspects of scripture, this is to the chief musician, in other words, it's intended to be sung, and it is for instruction.

Now, what is the instruction? What is the thing that is meant to be learned, particularly with this special psalm? I would suggest to you that, overall, it is the need of the soul to be supplied by the Lord.

By the Lord himself, not just by the outward things of the Lord. This is a recurring theme, not only at the outset, as we mentioned previously, with the children, as the heart, as the deer is panting for the water, brook, so panted my soul after thee, O God.

And then there's reference throughout the psalm, almost like in kind of rolling waves, about how the downcast nature of the sinner, David, of course, writing of his own situation and context, and how they feel everything is sweeping over him, like waves rolling over him.

And yet, once everybody says, where's your God now? Where's your God now? That he trusts and believes that the Lord has not forsaken him, that he will sustain him.

[2 : 32] He will return to him, he will uphold him, and he will keep, he, David, will keep his faith in the Lord. Because this is the thing, that the trust, the faith, is to be in the living God, who fills the heavens and the earth, not just in the outward things of the Lord.

Why am I saying that in particular? Well, the context of this psalm is almost certainly David's exile, his temporary exile, during the rebellion of Absalom.

You'll find the details of that in 2 Samuel, chapters 15 to 18. And that's the time when Absalom rebels against his father, and almost all of Israel goes with him, and only a comparatively small number stay loyal to David.

And they have to flee from Jerusalem. They have to go up the Mount of Olives and down across the Jordan, and over to the very borders of the Holy Land, east of the Jordan, and make their base in Machinim, which is to the east of Jordan there.

So they have to really go into exile. And David feels himself cut off, separated from the things which had been precious to him. He longs for the courts of the Lord's house, the tabernacle.

[3 : 45] He longs for the visible expressions of the presence of the Lord. The tabernacle, the ark, the temple, and the building courts at this point. But he's longing for these things.

He's feeling the separation keenly. But the Lord himself is not separated from him. And of course, there is also a recognition that what happens in these chapters of David's exile, if we look at 2 Samuel, chapters 15 to 18, we see all the trouble that he is exposed to and how much danger he is exposed to.

But that this, whilst not, you could say, not directly of David's own making, it nevertheless can be traced back to David in its origin. Because the origin of the trouble David is facing is his sin with Bathsheba.

And after Nathan the prophet confronts him in 2 Samuel chapter 12, he says that although the Lord has put away his sin, he says, As we know, of course, subsequently, David's eldest son, Amnon, takes a fancy to his half-sister, Tamar, and he forces his attentions on her.

And we might think, why doesn't David do anything about that? Why doesn't he punish Amnon? Why doesn't he bring everyone into lying and exert his authority? After all, he's still king. Yes, he's king, but he's king whose moral authority has been hollowed out.

[5 : 40] But he has no moral authority in his own family now, or perhaps in his wider kingdom, because of his own sin. He can't exactly haul Amnon over the coals for having his wicked way with a woman he took a shine to, because that's exactly what David had done.

That's exactly what he himself had done with another man's wife, and he had arranged the death of the woman's husband. And then he married her. Now, Amnon, of course, had forced himself on Tamar.

David didn't do anything. So it was left to Tamar's brother, Absalom, to take correct vengeance upon Amnon, and he subsequently killed him.

And then he had to flee, because he committed murder in killing a fellow prince of Israel. And then he had to be brought back from Exa. And then eventually he began murmuring away and plotting against his father, and more and more people came to support Absalom, and David had to flee into exile.

Now, all of this, all these side effects, you might say, from the original problem, are the outworkings of David's own particular sin.

[6 : 52] And they all grew arms and legs. It's like, you know, if you've got a particular addiction, and sin is an addiction, you may not be going down a particular road with it, but there are side effects.

Just like, for example, if somebody has an addiction, saying that with alcohol or something, and you take that final route that puts you over the limit, and then you have a car crash or something on the way home, and maybe somebody gets injured, and so they're in hospital for ages, and that has a knock-on effect.

All these things you didn't plan. You didn't intend these things. David didn't intend Amnon and Tamar to happen. He didn't intend Absalom to kill his brother. He didn't intend the rebellion.

These are side effects. These are the outworkings of the original sin. And the original sin itself may seem comparatively contained, compared to all these great outworkings of it.

Just as, you know, if you drop a stone in a pond, it's a single place where the stone drops, but the ripples go all the way out to the edge of the pond. And that's what sin is like. And that's what sin is like with David here.

[8 : 03] His own particular sin has all these outward ramifications, so much so that he is now in the position of being driven from the holy city of the Lord by his own son, and by the rebellion against his own kingship.

And yet, although he is now reaping the bitter fruit, the bitter consequences of his own sin, the Lord has not forsaken him.

He's being chastised, but the Lord has not forsaken him. He may not be explicitly to blame for what is happening with these things, but it can be traced back to other sins of which he's guilty.

And sometimes, you know, we are inclined to say, Lord, why is this happening to me? Why is this happening? Because I haven't done anything to deserve this, and I haven't done anything to do this, I haven't done that.

You know, I've tried to be doing good lately, and then the Lord might show us ways in which, well, maybe you're not guilty of this, this, and this, but what about that from way back?

[9 : 10] What about these things that you were guilty of? What about those things? I protected you then, I looked after you then, yes, these other things are happening to you. But you can't say, oh, I don't deserve it, I shouldn't be getting this.

David is now reaping the consequences of sins long ago, but they have consequences. Sin is a disease for which there is only one cure, and that cure is the sacrifice the Lord has provided in his son Jesus Christ.

And David senses and knows, and as he is himself, as it were, a hunted man, like the deer has been hunted by a hunter, as the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee. O God, this time of rebellion which has its roots in David's own sin, he is now thirsting, longing like a hunted deer. He is longing, desperate for water.

David has this homesickness of the soul for the Lord and for his courts. He wants to be back right with God.

[10 : 24] So panteth my soul after thee, O God. He senses the separation. He senses the feeling of being hunted. He senses the feeling of being driven, as it were, into the wilderness.

My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? Now, the terms in which this is expressed is, you know, come and appear before the Lord.

This is the terms of the required, the terms of command of the required personal appearances of adult male Israelites before the Lord.

You know, in Exodus 23, verse 17, the Lord says to Moses, three times in the year, all thy males shall appear before the Lord God. They were to come to the tabernacle, the Passover, and the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Ingathering, and so on.

There was all these different feasts when they were to appear, and when they were to present themselves before the Lord. And this is the terms of David, he longs to appear before the Lord.

[11 : 27] He longs to be with them. And to appear before God is as much the desire of the upright. And David is essentially upright in heart.

He is essentially God's man. He did sin with Bathsheba. He did transgress. There's no doubt about it, but that is the one that is, it's almost like the exception that proves the rule.

The very fact that this one is so glaring indicates that, yeah, the rest of the time, he was pretty faithful to the Lord. He was God's man. His soul is thirsting for God.

To appear before God is as much the desire of the upright as it is the dread of the hypocrite. Mindful that we will all, at the last, appear before the Lord.

We shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. We have to consider our own hearts. Now, how does that make us feel? The fact that we will behold the Lord at the last day. We will see the Lord Jesus on his throne.

[12 : 33] Does that make us think, ooh, terrifying. Oh, what am I going to say? What am I going to do? Oh, no. I want somewhere to hide. Or, oh, dear, the Lord's going to see how empty and hopeless my life is.

Or, he's going to say, well, I know you can see everything I've done, but to be able to see the Lord Jesus, to be able to look on him, to be able to look, as it were, into his eyes, even though they will bore through mine.

And his eyes, there's a flame of fire revelation, tells us there'll be no hiding of anything in the heart. There's nowhere for me to hide. Oh, but I will see the Lord. I will be in his presence, even if it were only as a judge.

And even if it were to be, that I were to be judged and condemned and sent to a lost eternity, to live, as it were, for eternity on those few moments of the Lord's presence.

Now, of course, those sentiments are incompatible. If we're loving the Lord and wanting to be in his presence, then it's highly unlikely that we're going to be so far separated from him, that we're going to be in hell because the love of the Lord and the blood of Christ washeth us from all sin.

[13 : 45] That's who we're looking to. If that's who we love, that's who we desire, we're putting our faith in him. But to behold Christ will be the delight, the pleasure, the joy of the believer, just as it will be the dread of the hypocrite and the unbeliever.

So likewise, as David thirsts, longs for the living God, for us, this cry represents a longer-term cry.

You know, it's at the end of the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. You know, John cries out, well, even so, come, Lord Jesus. Can't come quick enough. We know his timing will be perfect, but the soul longs to see Jesus, longs to be with him, longs to be in his presence.

And how we are in relation to Jesus Christ is, as it were, a litmus paper test by how our relationship is with him. Do we long to see him?

Or do we dread to see him? Because sooner or later he will be before, we shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. So, is meeting with Christ something that you anticipate with a desire, with a joy, with a longing?

[15 : 05] Or is it something that is a bit of a dread, knowing that he knows everything about you? Well, friend, if it is the latter, then all I can urge upon you is you have to get right with the Lord.

And the only way to do that is to come to him by faith and to repent of all our sins and to trust in him for the forgiveness of those sins. Because it's never going to be our righteousness.

It's never going to be anything that we have done that will make us right with God. It is only the blood of Christ that cleanseth us from all sin. And when we let go of our own false ideas, of our own righteousness, and trust wholly in the righteousness of Christ, we will know that freedom, that joy, that grace which only he can give.

And such will be the gratitude, such will be the love, such will be the thankfulness in such a born-again heart that to see Jesus, to behold him as he is, will be the fulfillment of all our desires. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. It's not just when shall I come and appear before God in the sense of when will I get back to the tabernacle, it's when will the Lord come?

[16 : 23] When will we see him as he is? My tears shall be my meat day and night while they continually say unto me, where is thy God?

It's the same thing that they threw at the Lord Jesus and that's prophesied in Psalm 22 at verse 8, he trusted in the Lord that he would deliver him. Let him deliver him seeing he delighted in him.

That's what they said to Jesus when he was on the cross. It's what they will always say to the believer, where is your God? Show us him, point to him. God is not such as you can point. He's not an idol made of wood or stone or silver or gold.

He fills the heavens and the earth and you can't see the evidence of God all around you. Nothing that anybody points to is going to convince you. Jesus appeared as God in the flesh.

He only did good. He did miracles that nobody but God could do and they still didn't believe him. So what hope do the rest of us have of being able to point to something and convince the unbeliever?

[17 : 26] Where is now your God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me. I had gone with the multitude and went with them to the house of God with the voice of joy and praise with a multitude that kept holy day.

Now, in the original, this verse 4, it's meant to be, all the verbs are actually meant to be in a future tense. When I remember, when I will remember these things, I will pour out my soul in me for I will go, I desire to go.

It's a future tense. I want to go to the house of God with a voice of joy and a multitude that will keep holy day. It's meant to be a future tense. It's an anticipation.

This is his great joy. This is his desire. He wants to be in a multitude. Yes, the company is strength. You know, if you're with a, you may be tempted by the evil one when you're on your own, but if you're in a company of fellow Christians or fellow believers, it's much easier to stay strong.

It's easier to stay strong if you've got support, if you've got people there to uphold you, people there to be part of your strength with a multitude together. Yes, company is strength in the midst of temptations or difficulties.

[18 : 41] It can also be, of course, company, if it's leading you away to do evil, can be a source of temptation. It's not in the multitude that we have our ultimate strength.

It's in the Lord that we can strengthen one another in the things of the Lord. Why art thou cast down for my soul? Why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God, not in the tabernacle, not in the ark of the covenant, but in God himself.

I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance. Oh my God, my soul is cast down with me. And you see this contrast in verse 5 and 6. He is explaining how, you know, he's going to trust in God.

I shall yet praise him. And yet the present tense, my soul is cast down. Although things are bad just now, I'm putting my trust, my hope, my faith in God whose deliverance I have not yet seen.

But I trust and believe that I shall see. Now, is this not the case of the believer here and now in this present time? Because we do not see God with the eyes of flesh.

[19 : 46] We may be in a case where we're in the midst of trouble or difficulty and we do not yet see his deliverance. And because we do not see it right now, this moment, we may be inclined to think, oh, God's forgotten me.

He has just departed from me. Now, this is the mistake that the world makes as well. You know, the world tends to think in terms of always that the present day, the present moment is how history is, you know, concluding.

You know, every generation thinks they are the most modern. They are the most up-to-date. All history has been leading up to this moment and now, how things are now, this is the proof that because we're maybe on top just now, this is how history has fulfilled itself.

This is how it's come to an end. History doesn't end full stop with where we are in our present generation. I remember when the 80s seemed like so modern and so cool and hip and up-to-date and it's 30 years ago now.

It seems really ancient history and really uncool and untrendy and every generation thinks they're the most modern as if it's all going to sort of end with themselves. But the world keeps turning and time keeps passing and generations keep rising and passing away and so it is with the Lord.

[21 : 00] This day in which we live is not the end of it all unless the Lord comes back and if he does, then of course he's going to deliver his people there and then in that day. But just because we may not see deliverance now, this moment does not mean God is not going to do it.

Just as the world will turn and the generations will pass and come and go, so the Lord's deliverance likewise will come through for his people.

That is what we trust in because God has done it so often in the past. We trust that he, the God who does not change, will keep on delivering his people.

Therefore, verse 6, will I remember thee from the land of Jordan and of the Hermonites. The fact that David is across the Jordan, he's on the other side of the river, he's in exile.

And of the Hermonites from the hill Mizar contrasting with the holy month of Jerusalem. Deep calleth unto deep but the noise of thy water spouts, all thy waves and thy billows have gone over me.

[22 : 02] Now this is sort of likening, this sort of deluge in which he's lived, the flood of sorrow in which he feels like he's drowning. It's being likened to the flood at the time of Noah.

But at the same time by David saying, all thy waves and thy billows have gone over me. It's exactly the same in the original Hebrew, it's exactly the same terms that Jonah uses from his prayer in the whale's belly in chapter 2, verse 5.

It says, thy waters come past me about even to the soul. The depth closed me round about. The weeds were wrapped round about my head. Well, apart from the bit of it, the weeds being wrapped round about his head, it's exactly the same Hebrew word for word between this psalm and that in Jonah.

The sense of thy billows, thy waves, the knowledge that this judgment is coming from God and David has to endure it. Deep call of unto deep and the noise of thy water spout.

It is the Lord's waves, the Lord's billows which are testing him, trying him, yet the Lord will command his loving kindness in the daytime and in the night his song shall be with me and my prayer unto the God of my life.

[23 : 16] Now, it thinks this is faith in the midst of trial and difficulty and trouble. And, of course, if you don't have faith, then what use is it? Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

It's precisely because we do not yet see the deliverance for which we pray, precisely because we do not yet see the fulfillment for which we long, that we have to have faith.

You know, as it says in Romans, for we are saved by hope, but what a man seeth, why does he yet hope for? Ah, but if we do hope for that, we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

So, likewise, the Lord will command his loving kindness in the daytime, in the night, his song shall be with me, my prayer, unto the God of my life. I will trust that he will deliver me.

The Lord will command his loving kindness, just like the commanded blessing that we read of in Psalm 133. For there, the blessing God commands, life that shall never end.

[24 : 21] It doesn't just sort of happen, oh, there's a good time coming, here comes the blessing, oh, isn't that nice? As if it sort of happens, as it were, by accident. God commands the blessing, God brings the blessing, and it's God who makes it happen, just like the waves did not still up on Galilee, just because the squall had passed, and the wind had died down, and that was just the natural way, the way the meteorology worked itself out.

No, Jesus commanded it. Jesus commanded the wind and the waves and the mooster. Yet the Lord will command his loving kindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me in my prayer unto the God of my life.

I will say unto God, my Lord, why hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning? Because of the oppression of the enemy, as with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me while they say daily unto me, where is thy God?

They are behaving as though God has forgotten, as though he is not really there, as though he does not really care. That is the voice, the sound, the taunt of the unbeliever.

And David demonstrates himself to be the opposite of that, the believer, who despite the sword in his bones and the reproach of the enemy, he will say to God, here is rock.

[25 : 42] Why hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning? And yet God is his rock. The Lord says to his people, if we go to Isaiah 54, verses 7 and 8, for a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee.

In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment, and with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord, thy Redeemer. For this is as the waters of Noah unto thee.

For as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so have I sworn that I will not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains shall depart, the hills shall be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from thee.

Neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord, that hath mercy on thee. Yes, the Lord may cause our faith to be tested.

It would not be tested if it was not put under pressure. You don't simply test or try or train somebody up with doing easy things that don't cause them any kind of strain or any kind of ability.

[26 : 56] You don't get a child to slot up for higher mathematics and then just test it with primary one arithmetic. It has to be tested. It has to be examined.

If somebody's going to be going to be put through the paces of, say, military training, they don't just go for a wee wander in the park in the afternoon. It's going to be testing. It's going to be trial. And the Lord sometimes puts his people's faith under pressure, not so that they will crack, not so that they will be destroyed, but partly so that he will distinguish and cause them to distinguish between that which is true and that which is false, that which is true faith in him and that which was just outward conformity, but also because he knows that his children are strengthened by victory.

Now you think, okay, that's great. Victories are wonderful. Okay, tell me a victory. They're thinking military terms. Tell me a victory. You might say, well, Waterloo, the victory. Okay, great.

Waterloo's a victory. But what kind of casualties? Well, at Waterloo, tens of thousands of casualties. The cost was huge. It was, as the Duke of Wellington said, no, a near one thing, such that soldiers who do part in it, who normally said to each other after a battle, well, who's been killed in this one? Said to each other after Waterloo, who's left alive? Yes, a fearful cost. But, wow, what a victory. And you could name other great victories down through history, like Bannockburn or other things like that.

[28 : 38] And you think, yes, oh, wonderful victories. But that's the end result. To be in the midst of the carnage of the battle itself would have been terrifying. But the Lord knows that his people, when they have the midst of these terrifying battles, when they come out the other side, they are strengthened by victories.

But if you're going to have the victory, you have to go through the battle. And if you're going to be winning on the other side, then first you have to be tested. First you have to fight.

And there's always going to be a cost in every battle. There is always going to be struggle and suffering, and there's going to be loss of blood, and there's going to be injury.

As with a sword in my bones, my enemies reproach me. David is going through hardship here.

There are battles to be fought. In the real terms of history, there's battles to be fought with Absalom. Battles where David hopes he can win the battle, but still keep the rebellious prince safe. And his general, Joab, probably has the right political idea over David's sentiment.

[29 : 52] The head of the rebellion has to be cut off. You have to cut off the head of the snake. Absalom, the rebellious prince, would never rest, would never stop till he had taken David's kingdom.

And probably Joab was right to have killed him. But David wanted to be able to preserve it all. Somehow, you can't win the victory without there being cause.

Why art thou cast down on my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance and my God.

The health of my countenance represents David's experience of God. His experience of God is that God is the health of his countenance.

Yes, he may require his child to be under pressure. To be put through the battle. And his faith to be tested and tried.

[30 : 54] But that is only because the Lord desires his children to be strengthened. Strengthened through victories. When people take themselves off to the gym to get themselves fit.

Or when they start running on treadmills to try and lose weight or whatever. It's not a fun experience. It's not fun sweating out buckets and being put under all this kind of physical pressure. And you're pecking away there and looking around at all these super fit pan people who are just cakewalking the whole thing. And there you are really suffering and slogging away.

But if you're going to actually get the victory out of it at the end, you have to go through it. You put your body under pressure, under strain, you exercise and you lift those weights, you push those lungs.

The breaking point almost, in order to gain the victories. In order to get the strengthening. The health of my countenance, this is David's experience of God.

[31 : 55] It is the Lord who, putting him through these places, brings the greater health to his soul and to his life. And my God, if the health of my countenance is David's experience of God, then this phrase, the statement, my God, is David's relationship to God.

Only a fool says there is no God. But if the Lord fills the heavens and the earth, and if he is mighty to save and he's the great creator, then you might think, yeah, okay, I believe there's a God, but is he my God?

Is he my Savior? Is he my Jesus? And if he is mine, then it is, as the beloved sings in the song of Solomon, my beloved is mine and I am his.

He feedeth among the lilies. He is the health of my countenance and my God. He belongs to me in the sense that my heart belongs to him.

And if he is my God, then it won't actually matter whether I'm in Jerusalem or across the Jordan. It won't matter whether I'm in Mahanaim or whether I'm on the Mount of Olives.

[33 : 08] It won't matter whether I'm in Scalpi or whether I'm in Nazareth or whether I'm in mainland Scotland or Glasgow or Gaza or wherever it happens to be because the Lord will be there who fills the heavens and the earth and the Lord who has come and to be in the midst of his people wherever they gather, whether by many or by few, will continue to be even in times of testing, even in times of trial, even in times of battle, as promised them the victory if they remain faithful to him who is the health of their accountants and their God.

Let us pray.