**Praying the Psalms**

**Sunday July 22, 2018**

**“Help” (Psalm 43)**

**1. The Bigger Picture: *The Journey from Lament to Prayer***

 The psalmist’s words in Psalm 43 are part of a much larger conversation that includes Psalm 42. The similarities between these two Psalms have lead some to argue that they were *one* Psalm once upon a time. But if you don’t like that idea, then let’s consider the two Psalms *part one* and *part two* of an ongoing exchange about the difficulties of life. One very noticeable thing that ties these two Psalms together is the *refrain*, which occurs twice in Psalm 42 and once in Psalm 43:

“*Why am I discouraged?
    Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
    I will praise him again—
    my Savior and my God!”* (42:5, 11; 43:5).

The repetition of the refrain nicely divides these two Psalms into a neat *three-part arrangement* that maps out the psalmist’s path from *despair* to *confidence*. Here is the pattern of these Psalms:

 1. Psalm 42:2-6 a. Lament

 b. Refrain

 2. Psalm 42:7-12 a. Lament

 b. Refrain

 3. Psalm 43:1-5 a. Petition

 b. Refrain

 Now I mention these important features, not to *wow* you with my research, but to make a couple of important points about prayer and how we handle the difficult, and sometimes traumatic, circumstances of our lives.

*First*, the psalmist clearly expresses his complaint to God and this is a vital part of our prayer life. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann observes, “What strikes one about the book of Psalms, if one notices anything at all, is that nearly *one half* of the Psalms are songs of lament and poems of complaint. Something is known to be deeply amiss in Israel’s life with God. And Israel is not at all reluctant to voice what is troubling about its life” (from his forward in Ann Weems, *Psalms of Lament,* p. x). Psalms of lament, like Psalms 42 and 43, give us permission as God’s people to be honest about our how life really is in all its sadness, pain, complexity and messiness.

But how does complaint and lament fit into our *prayer lives*? Are we comfortable with talking to God about our struggles? Or are we satisfied “singing happy songs in the face of the raw reality” of life (Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms,* p. 52)? Perhaps we feel a bit uneasy talking to God in this way because it seems improper or it reveals a lack of faith on our behalf. Maybe you’ve been told that good Christians shouldn’t have these kinds of feelings or shouldn’t get angry, frustrated or disappointed with God. But the biblical laments, like those in many of the Psalms, aren’t expressions of a lack of faith in God; rather, they indicate a bold faith in God. If the psalmist thought that God was powerless or indifferent with regard to his circumstances, he wouldn’t have bothered to communicate with him. The lament psalms spring from the realization that the situation is not right and intolerable if it continues in this way. The psalmist is convinced that the situation can change, and that God is the one who can change it. So, he cries out to God in the context of faith and honestly expresses the depth of his struggles. In the same way, we are invited to pour out our soul to God, trusting that he hears us and loves us.

 *Second,* while the psalmist’s cry for *help* is *honest*, it is also *contained*. It is not uncontrolled rage and grief. When we read through the lament psalms of the Old Testament, we can observe “a recurring, disciplined form to the complaints and laments” (Brueggemann in Weems, *Psalms of Lament,* p. x). Again, Brueggemann is insightful, “Israel knew how to order its grief, not only to get that grief fully uttered and delivered but also to be sure that, said in its fullness untameable, it is not turned loose with destructiveness. What we have in these poems is not raw rage, anger, and sadness; rather what we have has already been ordered, mediated, and stylized to make the rage and hurt more effective, available, and usable. It is this ordering of raw grief that is the work of the poem and the gift of the poet” (Brueggemann in Weems, p. x).

 The lament psalms invite us to express our sorrow to God, yet they don’t leave us stumbling in the darkness, crying in grief or shouting in anger. They serve as models for fruitful prayer, helping us to reflect upon and process the difficulties of life in constructive ways. Consider the *progression* that we see as we move from Psalm 42 to Psalm 43. In Psalm 42 the psalmist narrates the many problems that he faces, but in Psalm 43 his laments are turned into petitions that are lifted up to God. This is an important transition that reveals a healthy way to face our dilemmas. Psalm 42 reveals the inner voice of the psalmist as he speaks to his soul about the physical, psychological, and spiritual traumas in his life.

• He feels estranged from God, so he longs to be in God’s presence once again (Ps 42:1, 2)

• He weeps day and night (Ps 42:3)

• His adversaries look on and tauntingly ask, “Where is your God?” (Ps 42:3, 10)

• His soul is downcast within him (Ps 42:5, 6, 11)

• He feels like God has forgotten him (Ps 42:9)

He tries to pull himself out this sad state by reflecting upon some of the positive memories from the past. He recalls those times when he “walked among the crowds of worshipers, leading a great procession to the house of God, singing for joy and giving thanks amid the sound of a great celebration!” (Ps 42:4). But even those happy memories can’t pull him out of the downward spiral that he is experiencing.

 As Psalm 43 opens, the psalmist turns to God and asks for *help*. The time of complaint has passed, paving the way for petition. This becomes an important step for him on the journey from *despair* to *hope*. Herein is a significant lesson for all of us in the school of prayer. When faced with troubles, I’m a lot like the psalmist - I fret about them. I review them, over and over again in my head and my heart and I wonder how in the world they’re ever going to get resolved. Oftentimes I feel quite helpless. But turning to God and asking for his help releases us from anxiety. Asking for God’s help entails letting go and letting God. Anne Lamott writes, “Most good, honest prayers remind me that I am not in charge, that I cannot fix anything, and that I open myself to being helped by something, some force, some friends, some *something”* (*Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 25).

 But letting go and letting God is easier said than done. Most times, we desperately hold on to our problems, thinking that if we only tried harder or dug deeper, we’d come out on the other side just fine. To remedy our inability to let go, Anne Lamott recommends using a *God-box –* “One modest tool for letting go in prayer that I’ve used for twenty-five years is a God box. I’ve relied on every imaginable container – from a pillbox, to my car’s glove box, to decorative boxes friends have given me. The container has to exist in time and space, so you can physically put a note into it, so you can *see* yourself let go, in time and space. On a note, I write down the name of a person about whom I am so distressed or angry, or describe the situation that is killing me, with which I am so toxically, crazily obsessed, and I fold the note up, stick it in the box and close it. You might have a brief moment of prayer, and it might come out sounding like this: ‘Here. You think you’re so big? Fine. You deal with it. Although I have a few more excellent ideas on how best to proceed.’ Then I agree to keep my sticky mitts off the spaceship until I hear back” (*Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 25).

**2. The Psalmist’s Prayer: *Send Out Your Truth and Light***

 So the psalmist turns from his internal deliberations about his troubling situation and he utters a heart-felt prayer to God. At the end of his rope, he cries out, “*Help*.” He writes it all down on a piece of paper and puts it in the God box.

His initial petitions focus on his adversaries, whose taunts were making his situation unbearable. It is unlikely that these “ungodly people” and “unjust liars” were the cause of his problems (Ps 43:1), rather, it is likely that they were people who observed the psalmist’s crisis and responded with derisive remarks. They looked upon the psalmist’s hardships and sarcastically asked, “Where is your God?” (Ps 42:3, 10). This only increased the psalmist’s crisis of faith amidst his difficult circumstances. Perhaps some of them were even suggesting that his hardships were a punishment from God. So, already feeling shaky in his relationship with God, the psalmist had to endure these mocking comments that called his faith in God into question.

Tired of defending himself against his adversaries, the psalmist jots down a note and puts it in the God box - “*Declare* me innocent, O God! *Defend* me against these ungodly people. *Rescue* me from these unjust liars” (Ps 43:1). He gives the situation over to God, realizing that God alone is his “safe haven” from the verbal attacks of his enemies (Ps 43:2).

Caught in the darkness of life’s circumstances, the psalmist prays, “Send out your *light* and your *truth*; let them guide me. Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live” (Ps 43:3). I find it very enlightening that the psalmist didn’t simply pray, “Okay, God, get me out of this difficult situation right away.” No, he prayed, “Send your light and send your truth.” In the midst of the darkness, I need your light to guide me. Amidst all the lies that I’m hearing, I need to hear your truth. In our darkest times, we might be tempted to believe the spiritually damaging lies that God doesn’t care about us or that he’s punishing us for something we did. At moments like those we need to hear the truth that God loves us and cares for us.

Reflecting on this wonderful image of *light*, Anne Lamott writes, “In prayer, I see the suffering bathed in light. In God, there is no darkness. I see God’s light permeate them, soak into them, guide their feet. I *want* to tell God what to do: ‘Look, Pal, this is a catastrophe. You have *got* to shape up.’ But it wouldn’t work. So I pray for people who are hurting, that they be filled with air and light. Air and light heal; they somehow get into those dark, musty places, like spiritual antibiotics” (*Help, Thanks, Wow,* p. 16).

O God, send forth your *light* and your *truth* to all those who are lost, hurting, or facing difficult situations today. Please, shine your light upon those who are anxious about their aging parents or living with ongoing health problems or chronic pain or worried about their children or facing major life transitions or fearful about the future. Let those who are spiritually lost or struggling with addictions or dealing with mental illness be bathed in the healing light of Jesus. May your light and truth guide all of us into your presence, to the place where we will discover our greatest joy.

When we are going through tough times, sometimes the last place we want to be is in church. Maybe the joyfulness of the place is a painful reminder for the lack of joy we are experiencing. Perhaps, in our brokenness, we feel out of place in the company of others who seem to have it all together. Yet, great desire of the psalmist is to once again be in the midst of the worshiping community. He prays, “Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me.
*Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live.* *There I will go to the altar of God, to God—the source of all my joy. I will praise you with my harp, O God, my God!”* (Ps 43:3,4). The journey to from spiritual brokenness to spiritual wholeness is made within the context of God’s people, gathered together for worship. It is there that all who thirst for God, who long to meet God (Ps 42:1, 2), have their thirst for God quenched.

Now I realize that my words won’t immediately heal all your wounds or make the difficult circumstances of life suddenly disappear. Church isn’t a TV show where life’s problems are solved in half an hour with two commercial breaks. Scripture isn’t a band-aid that we can quickly apply to make the hurts go away. Even the psalmist was still in the dumps at the Psalm’s conclusion. The situation of sorrow still exists as he asks, “Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad?” (Ps 43:5), but he has an unshakeable *hope* in God, his Savior and his God. He is confident that God has heard his cry for *help.*

So, instead of holding on to your anxieties, place them in the hands of Jesus. Let go and let God. Ask for help.

“Go and find Jesus when your patience and strength give out and you feel alone and helpless. He is waiting for you. Say to him, ‘Jesus, you know exactly what is going on. You are all I have, and you know all. Come to my help.’ And then go and don’t worry about how you are going to manage. That you have told God about it is enough. He has a good memory.” (*Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals,* p. 339).