

OpenTheo

November 16th: Psalms 42 & 43 & Acts 16:6-40

November 15, 2020



Alastair Roberts

As the deer pants for flowing streams. Paul and Silas in Philippi.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Psalm 42, to the Choir Master, a Mascal of the Sons of Korah. As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food, day and night, while they say to me all the day long, Where is your God? These things I remember, as I pour out my soul. How I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God, With glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

My soul is cast down within me. Therefore I remember you, from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep, at the roar of your waterfalls.

All your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his

steadfast love, and at night his song is within me. A prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, where is your God? Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. Psalm 43 Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people. From the deceitful and unjust man deliver me.

For you are the God in whom I take refuge. Why have you rejected me? Why do I go about mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? Send out your light and your truth. Let them lead me, let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. The 42nd Psalm begins the second book of the Psalter.

The Psalter is divided into five different books. Psalms 1-41 are the first, 42-72 the second, 73-89 the third, 90-106 the fourth, and 107-150 the fifth. As a book, the Psalter gives indications of its being a collection of previous psalm collections that likely circulated independently.

One thing pointing towards this is the near repetition of certain psalms or parts of psalms in two books. Psalm 53 in Book 2 is almost identical to Psalm 14 in Book 1. Psalm 70 largely repeats the conclusion of Psalm 40. While the divisions between sections are not that sharply defined, and relations between adjacent material can often be quite loose, one can notice some thematic and other structuring of the wider body of the psalms.

For instance, there are book-ending psalms. The first two psalms introduce the entire collection, the first as a psalm concerned with the law, and the second as a royal psalm. The second book closes with another royal psalm, Psalm 72, as does the third, Psalm 89.

There are both broader clusters of psalms and various smaller clusters and pairings, such as the pair of Psalms 111 and 112. Save for Psalms 86 and 89, for example, the entirety of the third book of the psalms consists of psalms of Asaph and the Sons of Korah. Books 4 and 5, with which the Psalter concludes, are overwhelmingly praise and thanksgiving psalms.

The fifth book is largely Hallelujah psalms, songs of ascent, with a series of Psalms of David in Psalm 138-145. Psalm 150 concludes the entire psalter on a doxological note, much as Psalm 1 frames it by way of the righteous and the wicked, and the righteous man's meditation upon the law of God. Psalms can be ordered thematically and also share certain stylistic features.

For instance, books 1 and 2 of the psalms are largely composed of psalms of individual complaint, whereas book 3 is mostly composed of psalms of communal complaint. Stylistically, the second book of the psalms shows a preference for God over Yahweh or Lord. Conrad Schaefer notes that the uneven style of some of the psalms raises the possibility that they were fusions of two or more separate psalms.

He gives Psalms 19 and 27 as possible examples. Psalm 70 seems to exert the conclusion of Psalm 40, making it a psalm in its own right. There are various psalms that are divided differently in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament from the 2nd and 3rd centuries BC.

This leads, for instance, to divergences in numbering at various points. Others have suggested that some psalms are divisions of a single psalm into one. Psalms 42 and 43 are an example of psalms about which this claim has been made.

Schaefer observes that these psalms share a liturgical character and a major and a minor refrain. The major refrain is repeated in verses 5 and 11 of Psalm 42 and in verse 5 of Psalm 43. Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

The minor refrain is found in verse 9 of Psalm 42 and verse 2 of Psalm 43. Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? In some manuscript editions, these two psalms are a single psalm. Various modern commentators across the theological spectrum argue that they should be regarded as a single psalm that was subsequently divided.

For instance, Alan Ross, Craig Broiles, Arthur Weiser, Marvin Tate and Peter Craigie, Trempe Longman, Derek Kidner, Gordon Wenham and James Mays. There are a few dissenters. Nancy de Classe-Walford argues that they are significantly different from each other in a way that justifies their being treated separately.

One, for instance, addresses the soul while the other addresses the Lord. Whether or not we should regard these psalms as a single psalm that was divided at some later point, a position I find more persuasive, they are clearly paired. The connection between them is strengthened further by the absence of a superscription for Psalm 43.

Psalm 42 begins with the evocative imagery of a panting deer longing for refreshing water. William Brown unpacks the imagery here, commenting upon the image of the deer as one of a vulnerable independent creature hunted by its enemies. The stooped head of the deer corresponds with the downcast soul of the psalmist.

The water is God himself, flowing streams like the living God. God is the source of refreshment, of strength and of life. The desire for God's presence and blessing is as essential for the life of the psalmist as a creature's need for life-giving water.

The flowing streams here are associated with the temple and its throngs. Huge streams of worshippers ascend and descend from the house of God like great water courses. Yet the psalmist finds himself weak prey in a thirsty land, longing to be back in Jerusalem, a place well watered with God's presence and blessing.

The temple had a bronze sea and water chariots flowing out, playing upon this water imagery. The psalmist was once a leader of the multitude in worship, but now he is surrounded by predators, mocking him, declaring that his God is nowhere to be found. The water imagery extends beyond the comparison of the flowing streams with God.

The psalmist thirsts, but he has to subsist on his own tears. His own soul is like water, which he pours out in tears and in prayers before God. The psalmist began by describing his trouble as the experience of his soul.

Such descriptions of the soul can be found on many occasions in the Psalms. The soul, here compared to a parched deer in a land of drought, a vulnerable and dependent animal, characterises the psalmist's experience of himself as a limited and weak creature. This dimension of his existence is taken seriously, but it is also addressed from a different internal vantage point.

In the great refrain that is repeated in verses 5 and 11, and in verse 5 of the following psalm, the psalmist speaks to his own soul. He addresses himself as if that creature he described in verse 1. Speaking to his soul from the position of his confidence in God's truth, goodness and promise, he encourages his downcast soul to look up, turning with confidence towards God and putting its hope in him. He will bring the soul's salvation.

The second stanza returns to the experience of the soul. The psalmist is in a remote location in northern Israel, near the headwaters of the Jordan River, near Mount Hermon. He is remembering God from that place.

The water imagery now reappears, albeit in a different form. The region he is in is one of waterfalls, roaring waters above and roaring waters below. But these are threatening, dangerous waters that might overwhelm him.

He describes breakers and waves going over him, perhaps referring to the waters of a tempestuous sea, or perhaps still referring to the torrents and cataracts of the waters descending from the mountain heights, booming, seething and cascading in the pools and the channels beneath. He is submerged beneath terrifying and tumultuous depths, and he sees no way out. He is longing for the refreshing and gentle waters of God's presence, but God has sent him these waters instead.

Even in this situation, however, he continues to know something of the Lord's steadfast love, even if only in the dogged confidence of his faith, which can recognise the sun of God's goodness even when it is hidden by the darkest of clouds. This is the only

reference to the name of the Lord, God's covenant name, in the psalm, a detail that is likely of some significance. The knowledge that he has produces an answering song within him.

He returns in it to his lament, a lament expressed with the confidence of faith in a God who hears such distress. It seems that God has forgotten him, not coming to his aid. This is made so much crueller by the fact that his adversaries are mocking him, claiming that God has utterly abandoned him.

As if the gasp of a man trying to escape drowning, the psalmist breaks the surface of the abyss with the deep breath of the returning refrain, Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. In Psalm 43 we move from the lament of Psalm 42 to a prayer to God for vindication. Against the backdrop of the beleaguered position that he described in Psalm 42, the psalmist calls upon God to vindicate him and to act on his behalf against his enemies.

He has taken refuge in God, yet it feels as though God has rejected him. Placing his situation before God in prayer, however, pouring out his soul, he confidently seeks the Lord's light and truth in his darkness. They will lead him back to God's holy hill, where he will return with great joy, with sacrifice and with song.

The psalm ends with the repeated refrain once more. However, nothing is ever repeated exactly, and one of the purposes of the repetition is to encourage the singer or the hearer of the psalm to hear that refrain differently on the third repetition than they did on the first two. Earlier, in Psalm 42, the words of the refrain were like the dogged gasp for air of a man struggling in the deep.

Now, however, the words are like the settled breaths of a man confident in the Lord's deliverance. The encouraging voice of faith that the psalmist addresses to his beleaguered soul is now stronger than his existential turmoil and fear. A question to consider, how can we learn from the example of the psalmist in our efforts to address God's assuring truths to our troubled and frightened souls? Acts chapter 16, verses 6-40 And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

And when they had come up to Mycia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So passing by Mycia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night.

A man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, Come over to Macedonia and help us. And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. So setting out from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to

Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God.

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay. And she prevailed upon us.

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination, and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation. And this she kept doing for many days.

Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.

And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice. The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods.

And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul cried with a loud voice, Do not harm yourself, for we are all here. And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.

And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before

them.

And he rejoiced, along with his entire household, that he had believed in God. But when it was day, the magistrate sent the police, saying, Let these men go. And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, The magistrates have sent to let you go.

Therefore come out now and go in peace. But Paul said to them, They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison. And do they now throw us out secretly? No, let them come themselves and take us out.

The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them, and they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia.

And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. In Acts chapter 16 the gospel finally arrives in Europe from Asia, and Paul and Silas carry out their mission in Philippi. Paul and Silas had a plan for the second missionary journey.

They intended to visit churches that they had already visited, and to spread the gospel further in Asia. However, as they try to do this, they find that the Holy Spirit stops them from engaging in further ministry in Asia. The apostles depend upon divine guidance for their mission throughout.

The mission is ultimately the Holy Spirit's mission. It's the mission of Christ continued from Heaven in his ascended position. We could perhaps draw comparisons here with the way that kings in the Old Testament seek the Lord's counsel before battles, military maneuvers, or various campaigns.

Paul and Silas are engaged in a different sort of conquest. The gospel is spreading from Jerusalem and Judea, through places like Samaria, through Syria, through Asia Minor, and now into Europe. And at each step the Spirit is directing those who are spearheading the mission.

How the negative direction of the Spirit came is not entirely clear. Perhaps it came in the form of prophetic words. Maybe the missionaries received some strong internal intuition about the Spirit's direction.

Or maybe there was a vision, or perhaps just some obstructing circumstances. Whatever it was, it was clear that this was not the way that the Lord wanted them to go. In verse 6, the Holy Spirit forbids them.

And in verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus does not allow them to go into Bithynia. The association between the Holy Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus is a very important indication of just how high Luke's Christology is. In Luke's understanding of Jesus, Jesus

is so identified with God that God's Holy Spirit is understood as the Spirit of Jesus.

After this succession of obstacles or negative guidance, the missionaries go down to Troas. Troas was in the region of the famous city of Troy, about 25 miles away. It was beneath the Hellespont and would have been an ideal place from which to sail to Macedonia.

One way to see this, perhaps, is that Paul and Silas are engaging in an invasion of Macedonia and Europe from Asia. And this was the mirror image or reversal of Alexander the Great's invasion of Asia from Macedonia earlier in history. Paul receives a vision of a man of Macedonia.

The man doesn't seem to be a specific individual. Some commentators have suggested that the man might have been Alexander the Great, or perhaps the Philippian jailer. However, no indication of either of these things is given us within the text itself.

We should note that the first occurrence of the we pronoun for the missionary journeys occurs here. It seems as though Luke may have joined Paul and Silas in Troas, subtly indicating his presence by this shift in the language. With this shift in the pronouns, we have an indication that we are now getting a first-hand report of what occurred.

Following the vision, Paul and Silas set sail from Troas to Samothrace and then on to Neapolis, from where they go to the small city of Philippi, which is a Roman colony in the region. The city of Philippi enjoyed autonomous rule and exemption from taxation, and would have had a far more Roman character than many other cities. This is the first arrival of the Gospel in Europe, and the significance of this event should not be understated.

From this small seed of an event arises vast swathes of human history. On the Sabbath, Paul and Silas go to a place outside of the city, by the riverside, where they expect that there will be a place of prayer, possibly a synagogue. Some have suggested that Jews and God-fearers met there because it was outside a line restricting burials and small cults to a site outside of the city proper.

Perhaps finding no evidence of a synagogue within the city, they looked for the most likely site of prayer for a small Jewish community. Beside a river would be a promising location for such a community. It would be a place where ritual washings could be performed.

It was also possible that they had heard reports in the city of a group meeting in such a location. The likelihood that it was a synagogue community is lowered by the fact that it seems to be primarily women engaged in prayer, rather than the male and female company that one might expect in a typical synagogue. One of the people there is Lydia, from Thyatira, a Lydian city that might help us to explain Lydia's name.

She is a seller of purple goods. There is no statement here that she actually dyes the goods herself. If she dyed the goods herself, she might have been kept outside of normal society as it was a smelly profession.

Another example of such a smelly profession would be the work of tanning. We encountered Simon the Tanner at the end of chapter 9 and beginning of chapter 10. It's likely that Lydia had some independent status and wealth, but as a foreign merchant she would have been looked down on by any member of the local aristocracy.

Nevertheless, she seems to have a large enough house to be able to put up Paul and Silas without displacing the other members. She also seems to have a number of people working for her as slaves and others. Lydia seems to be a God-fearer, not a Jew nor a pagan, but she opens up her heart to the gospel and as a result her whole household is baptized.

The description of the baptism of her household with her suggests that it's almost a matter of course that the faith of the leader of the household would be shared by all of the members within it. Although the other members of the household would presumably largely be adult slaves, Lydia's reception of the gospel is expected to have implications for everyone within her orbit. This is a feature of the reception of the gospel that we can see on a number of occasions within the New Testament.

The reception of the gospel is not just a matter of personal heart conversion, it's a matter of public solidarities, alignments and allegiances. And where these sorts of things are expressed by the head of a household, everyone under them, children, slaves and others, are implicated within their decision. While each person would be expected to affirm this within their own lives, it was presumed that they would do and that their coming under the reign of Christ was not just a matter of private and personal individual decision.

While they're going to the place of prayer, Paul and Silas are met by a slave girl who has a spirit of divination and who follows them, declaring that they are servants of the Most High God. This girl is possessed by a Pythonian spirit, a spirit of divination, inspired by Apollo the Pythian god who defeated the Python servant. This servant girl might be similar to some of the priestesses at Delphi.

The confrontation with demons and evil spirits that we see here continues from the book of Luke. In the Gospel of Luke we see Jesus confronting the spirits in his temptations in the wilderness, in rebuking and exorcising demons. The same conflict continues here.

The apostles are struggling against Satan's kingdom. Throughout this book of Acts we've already seen magicians like Simon the Sorcerer and Elymas, and in later chapters we'll see more examples of people committed to magical arts. Lest we forget, the missionaries are not struggling against flesh and blood, but against principalities and

powers and rulers of this present age.

In carrying out this mission, they are facing many evil forces that will seek to oppose them or drive them back. The slave girl is bearing witness to Paul and Silas, but in a way that is quite troubling, perhaps not least in the fact that she is a voice of someone representing polytheism. After many days of this, Paul becomes annoyed and commands the spirit to depart from her, and as a result the owners of the slave girl are angry because of their loss of money.

What happens here is a sort of threat to the social order, in a process of which the character of the social order is revealed. This is a society built upon demons and upon the desire for money. They are accused of threatening the customs and the laws of the city when they are brought before the leaders.

These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or to practice. This is very similar language that we find elsewhere in the Book of Acts, on the lips of the Jews.

The movement of Christ is overturning both Jewish and Roman society. They are here blamed as Jews, but this is ironically similar to what we see the Jews accusing them of in chapter 21 verse 21. The crowd attack them and the magistrates align with the crowd.

They strip Paul and Silas of their clothes and beat them with rods. This was probably a public beating designed to humiliate them, presenting them as threats to the peace. After this humiliating beating, they are thrown into the prison and committed to the charge of the jailer, who puts their feet in the stocks.

There are a few examples of deliverances from prison in the Book of Acts. These events take the pattern of the Great Jail Break itself, the story of the resurrection, when Christ was delivered from the clutches of the grave and from the tomb guarded by the soldiers. Here Paul and Silas are engaged in prayer and singing hymns to God.

Perhaps we may even imagine them singing imprecatory psalms, calling for God to act in their deliverance and in judgement upon those who have opposed them. There is a great earthquake, the foundations of the prison are shaken, all the doors are opened and everyone's bonds are unfastened. This is truly remarkable.

This is not just the release of the apostles as we see earlier on in the Book of Acts, or the release of Peter as in chapter 12. This is a more general release. This is something that shows the power of the Gospel more generally, to loose every chain, to deliver not just Paul and Silas as the messengers of the Lord, but everyone associated with them.

Waking up and seeing that the prison doors are opened, the jailer is terrified and he seeks to kill himself. He has failed in his charge, he presumes that all the prisoners have escaped. But Paul calls with a loud voice and reassures him.

And the jailer goes in and sees that Paul and Silas are still there with all of the other prisoners. In his fear he throws himself down before them and asks, What must I do to be saved? These men were committed to his charge, presumably, as missionaries of some foreign god. And now a manifestly divine sign has occurred, one that does not look good for him.

What can he do to be delivered from the wrath of this God, who is angry with him because he has mistreated his messengers? Paul and Silas' response is that he should believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. As he submits himself to Christ, he will know deliverance, both in the present and in the future, from the wrath to come. And not just for him, but him and his household.

The presumption once again is that the household is included in his response. Paul and Silas go on to speak the word of God to his household. And they all respond in faith.

They are all baptised and then he tends to their wounds and puts food before them. The next day the magistrates send the police with instructions to release them. And the jailer tells Paul, but Paul is not willing to go.

They have been treated as disturbers of the peace. They have been humiliated and dishonoured. They have been falsely accused and badly mistreated.

And to treat a Roman citizen in this way was a very serious thing to do. The magistrates should come and release them publicly. The public wrong that they committed to them should be answered with a public apology.

When the magistrates come, they ask them to leave the city. And so they leave the prison, they visit Lydia, and then they spend time with the brothers, those who presumably had been converted during their time of ministry within the city. A question to consider.

How does the story of the ministry of Paul and Silas in Philippi reveal the character of Philippi as a city, serving as an indictment of the city and its values?