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Psalm 42:1-11

Rest, Renewal & Grace: A Thirsty Deer

Pastor Jonathan Romig
CornerstoneWestford.com

On Palm Sunday, I preached about donkeys. My big idea was “Be a donkey!” Well, we’re talking about deer today, so maybe the big idea should be, “Be a deer!” A doe, a deer, a female deer. Be a deer.

About a month ago, I was meditating on this passage, and the elders and I were talking about my sabbatical, and we thought this text could be a good way to kick off my time away, but also the church’s summer too. While you’re not taking a sabbatical, I hope that this summer can be restful for you. That’s why I’ve asked all our guest preachers to preach on “Rest, Renewal & Grace.” I hope you’ll take intentional time to rest. As I was reading this Psalm, I feel like I encountered that theme of Rest, Renewal & Grace.

Psalm 42:1-2 (ESV)

¹ As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God?

The Psalmist describes himself as a thirsty deer panting for flowing waters. I don’t see many deer around here. I saw some white-tail deer in our office complex next door to our house but haven’t seen them since last summer. Last summer, when we traveled to Colorado, we saw two mule deer with big ears (that’s why they call them mule). They had antlers and came wandering through the picnic site in the National Park. I actually have a selfie of Elijah napping in my lap and deer walking past us in the background.

The campground picnic area was really beautiful. There was lots of vegetation and a gurgling river flowing by. I could see why the deer would be attracted to it. My family went on a short hike and saw a moose, but Elijah and I missed it. We were napping. But did you know you don’t have to go into the National Park to see deer? You can swing by my parent’s house. They’ll walk right through the yard.

Or I just had someone tell me the story this week of how they went all the way to the National Park to see a big herd of elk, and they were so excited, and afterward, they went to the Safeway parking lot, where they saw another herd of elk. The elk love the town golf courses too. The elk love Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park because there’s plenty to eat, and they are safe. It’s a place of abundance and free from hunters. A deer puts its head down to drink when it feels safe.

And that’s what this Psalm does. It invites us to come and drink at God’s well, to feel safe enough to seek him. The Psalmist longs for that experience, but you know, he actually doesn’t feel safe or satisfied. He actually feels far from God. “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before him?” This Psalm is about a depressed deer. It’s about a thirsty deer who feels far from God.

Psalm 42:3-4 (ESV)

³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”

⁴ 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.

My parents would put up protective wire around their crabapple trees because the elk would come through and rub themselves against it, sometimes destroying it. They get all itchy when their velvet comes off. We call it Elk rutting. My mom just sent a video of the trees in bloom, lots of pink flowers. But one year, a baby deer got caught in the wire. So, we called the police department, and they came by and cut it loose. But it's a sad story because the baby deer didn't recover.

Here's a man who is so far from God he feels like he won't recover. Will he ever draw close to God's presence again? He used to be a worship leader at the temple, the place where God's presence was real and tangible, a place where he knew he could be near God. But verse 6 tells us the Psalmist is all the way at the heights of Hermon, a mountain range over 100 miles north of Jerusalem. It's like he wants to go to a Boston Red Sox game, but he's in Canada. It's terrible.

I love seeing our teens go on mission trips to places like France. But we warn our kids about the "after-camp" crash. We go to camp, and we worship the Lord. We get real with Jesus. He feels so close. And then what happens? You go home, and Jesus doesn't feel so close. He feels far away. And that can be true of the Christian journey too. I remember when I got real about my faith in high school. The Lord felt so close. I was so excited. I just wanted to tell everyone about him. And then time went on, and I've gone through seasons where Jesus feels close, but I've gone through many seasons where he feels far. When the "camp high" wears off, we can sometimes ask, "Where are you, God?"

What do you do when you feel that way? It's not that I want to recapture the camp high. I just want to sense Jesus' presence, and maybe you do too. Maybe you're a thirsty deer like me. Don't you wish you were a camel? Camels can walk for miles and miles in the desert without drinking any water. They're huge. They're sturdy. You ever know someone like that? Who always seems to be okay, even in the hot desert sun? Even when life gets hard? Maybe it's just an act, but maybe it's because they've drunk from the well. If you're a thirsty deer, come to the "streams of water."

Look at what the Psalmist does; he directs his mind's eye back to God. He purposefully and intentionally calls out his soul and places his hope in God. In other words, he talks to himself and reminds himself of the goodness of God.

Psalm 42:5-6 (ESV)

⁵ 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 ⁶ 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.

No matter how far away he feels from God, no matter how thirsty or even depressed, he is going to place his hope in God. The Psalmist says, "I shall again praise him! My salvation and my God!" What does the Psalmist mean by "I shall again praise him?" I think he's thinking of all those times he praised God. All those times, he led in worship. All those times when he really felt close to God. He senses he'll be back there again. This dry desert is only for a time.

But, I also wonder if he's thinking further back to his family's story. If we look back to verse 0, the header for the Psalm says "the Sons of Korah" wrote Psalm 42. So, it's not just one Psalmist who composed this, but many. There's comfort in that. A whole bunch of people felt this way. Worship leaders and pastors struggle too. Guys, I struggle. But looking even further back at Israel's story, we find a man named Korah, and Korah wasn't a great guy.

My English translation calls Numbers 16 "Korah's rebellion." Korah and 250 chiefs rose up and complained that Moses and Aaron were acting as priests, and they couldn't do the same. God had given them the role of Levites, who served at the tabernacle, but they wanted more. I don't think they wanted to be closer to God. I think they wanted more power. So, they grumbled against Moses and Aaron, God's appointed leaders, and disobeyed them. So, God almost consumed the whole Israelite camp. But instead, he had Moses separate out Korah, his family, and his followers, and the earth opened up and swallowed them (Num 16:33).

You would think that all of Korah's family would be lost. But God, in His mercy, spared Korah's sons (Num 26:11). So, they're especially grateful for all God has done for them and want to worship as close to God's presence as they can. They don't want God's presence for their own empowerment like Korah seemed to want. They want to know God for God, to be close to him. God has transformed their entire family.

Look back at your family, your history. How has God been working in it to redeem it? God can even use trauma and loss to bring renewal. He did it for Korah's family and can do it for yours. Seeing God move and sensing his presence is what makes us want to draw near to him, to joyfully praise him.

I struggle with joy. One of my mentors, Sam Kim, who is preaching in August, suggested I reframe my thinking by journaling and writing all the ways God has been faithful. So, our family created a "God is on the move" thankfulness notebook. And we try to take time over family dinner to write down one thing we're thankful to God for from the day. For example, Elijah is thankful for "Going to school." When we ask him, what Evangeline is thankful for, Elijah says, "Butterflies!" Monica is thankful for the chance to garden, and I'm thankful for completing a little more of my Doctorate of Ministry.

I read one commentary that said the big idea of this passage is, "When God seems far away, it's time for an honest talk with him—and with yourself." I listened to another pastor who said that when we're feeling down, don't listen to yourself; talk to yourself. What he meant by that is if we only ever listen to our mind and heart, chances are we'll become more depressed. But if we talk to ourselves and tell our hearts and our minds what God has done through Christ Jesus, it will re-orient how we think. It's not just that we pump ourselves up and say nice things to ourselves, but we remind ourselves of God's goodness.

The pastor listed several things God promises. If you're justified in Christ, if you've been forgiven and made holy, you don't need to beat yourself up for the past. You don't have to keep piling on yourself with shame. Be free, child. But God is also sanctifying us. That means you don't have to feel discouraged that you'll always be this way and will never grow and change. The Holy Spirit is changing you for the better! That's sanctification. How about God's adoption of us? Through Christ Jesus, God adopts us into his family. He loves us and hears our prayers. How about the resurrection? Because of Jesus' death and rising again from the grave, and his extension that any who believe in him will receive the same, you don't have to be afraid of growing old, of getting sick, or even of dying. Talk to yourself. Remind yourself of Jesus and his good work.

God will draw near, but it might not feel like you expect.

Psalm 42:7 (ESV)

⁷Deep calls to deep
at the roar of your waterfalls;
all your breakers and your waves
have gone over me.

The deer begins drinking at a flowing stream but ends tumbling in raging waters. This should be no surprise because one of the words for “flowing streams” (v1) can mean “ravine,” a dark place where there’s water and shadow. God’s torrent isn’t a manageable stream but a rushing ocean. God is much bigger and more dangerous than we realize. When we come to him, at first, we might find a refreshing river, but he’s going to reveal himself more and more. And that can be both glorious and terrifying. God’s presence can give us everlasting joy or “the dark night of the soul.”

In our Christian Education hour, we recently discussed the song “*It Is Well With My Soul*.” One of the verses goes like this.

*If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.*

Even if the water is way above me, even if death feels imminent, even if the pangs of life are overwhelming, I’ll be okay because Jesus is whispering peace to my soul.

Psalm 42:8-11 (ESV)

⁸ By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God, my rock:

“Why have you forgotten me?

Why do I go mourning

because of the oppression of the enemy?”

¹⁰ 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?”

¹¹ 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 deer imagery in this Psalm reminds me of the book [Hinds Feet on High Places](#). I was reminded of this story because a “Hind” is a kind of deer, a female deer, especially a red deer. Have any of you read that book? My parents read it, or the children’s version, when we were growing up. This week I went back and watched “[A Fan Animated Summary](#),” which was a little dorky but fun to watch. [Hinds Feet on High Places](#) is an allegory, kind of like a modern version of [The Pilgrim’s Progress](#). Instead of dealing with the overall Christian journey, it focuses on a life of fear, anxiety, and self-loathing.

The main character is named Much-Afraid. Much-Afraid is constantly harassed by the Fearings, her family. They oppress and criticize her all the time. But Much-Afraid likes the Chief Shepherd, who wishes to take her to the High Places, the mountains. For her journey, the Chief Shepherd gives her two companions; two sisters named Sorrow and Suffering. There comes a moment when she is tempted to give into Pride, to listen to him, and abandon her journey. But she calls to the Chief Shepherd, who comes and rescues her, and gently rebukes her that she should not have let go of the hands of Sorrow and Suffering.

As Christians, our Chief Shepherd gives us Sorrow and Suffering on our journey to keep us humble and to help us call out for Christ. By the end of the journey, the Shepherd transforms Sorrow and Suffering into Peace and Joy and Much-Afraid into Grace and Glory. It’s by loving the Shepherd that God changes us.

And if we look back over this Psalm, we actually find Christ in it. Look back to verses 5-6, “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.” The Hebrew word for “salvation” is “yeshuah.” The English spelling of Yeshua is “Jesus.” Though perhaps the Sons of Korah don’t realize it, their salvation is Jesus, who is their God. In verse 9, the Psalmist calls God “my rock.” In the New Testament, Christ is identified as the “rock” the Israelites drank from in the wilderness, near the time of God’s judgment on Korah’s family (Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:7-11).

See, if you’re a thirsty deer, if your soul is parched and you are down, come to Jesus. Come and remember all the amazing things Christ has done, how he defeated sin and death at the cross and rose to give you a brand-new life. Your life will have sorrow and suffering, but he will transform those into peace and joy. “As the deer panteth for the water, so many soul longeth after thee.” Come to the waters. Be a deer. Let’s pray.

Romans 15:13 (ESV)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen via [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What has you down or depressed?
2. What truths of the Scripture might counteract your feelings and/or circumstance?
3. How do Jesus’ death and resurrection change us?
4. Why are sorrow and suffering a part of the Christian walk?
5. If you could tell your younger self how to deal with suffering, what would you say?
6. How might we better focus our eyes on Christ and recall his goodness?

Sources

Hinds’ Feet High Places – A Fan Animated Summary. YouTube. May 15, 2016.

Psalms Volume 2: Psalms 42-106 (Expositional Commentary) by James Montgomery Boice

Talking to Yourself, Not Listening to Yourself – Psalm 42 Meditation by Tim Keller. YouTube. May 5, 2020.

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