

15. Psalms 41-43

Praying Psalm 41 with Jesus



¹Blessed and happy are those who care for the poor.

When times are hard, GOD will rescue them.

²GOD protects them, preserves their life,
and blesses them in the land.

GOD will not give them up
to the will of their enemies,

³but on their sick bed will sustain them,
restoring them from sickness to health.

⁴I said, 'GOD, be gracious to me; heal me.'

⁵Enemies wish evil upon me: 'When will you die?

When will your name be forgotten?'

⁶When they come to see me, they pretend to be friendly
but they are planning mischief in their hearts.

⁶When they leave, they gossip about me.

⁷All who hate me gang up and plot evil against me.

⁸They say: 'He has contracted an incurable sickness;
Confined to bed he will never rise.'

⁹Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who shared my table, has abandoned me.

¹⁰But you, O GOD, be gracious to me. Restore me to health,
so that I can show them how wrong they are.

¹¹I will know that you are pleased with me
when my enemies do not triumph over me.

¹²You have restored my health.
Keep me in your presence for ever.

¹³Blessed be GOD, the God of Israel,
for ever and ever. Amen! Amen!

The psalmist has contracted what appears to be an ‘**incurable disease**’ (verse 8). According to the mentality of the time, it was assumed that sickness must be God’s will, and, since God is just, sickness was thought to be punishment for sin (verse 4).

This was still the common assumption in Jesus’ time, an assumption which Jesus challenged: ‘As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him’ (John 9:1-3).

Sickness and death are part of the human condition. What Jesus’ ministry reveals is that Love, when welcomed in faith, can bring a measure of healing.

³On their sick bed God will sustain them,
restoring them from sickness to health.
⁴I said, 'GOD, be gracious to me; heal me.'

The psalmist begins his prayer with a profound act of trust in God. As we pray this psalm with Jesus we hear him encouraging us in our sickness: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me' (John 14:1).

⁵Enemies wish evil upon me:

‘When will you die? When will your name be forgotten?’

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The psalmist’s enemies and friends all share his assumption on the connection between sin and suffering.

The psalmist’s main concern seems to be that he does not want his enemies to see in his illness a vindication of their judgment of him.

⁹Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted,
who shared my table, has abandoned me.

This is his most acute pain

This pain is echoed in the New Testament when Jesus is betrayed by one of the Twelve: ‘The one who shared my bread has walked away from me’ (John 13:18).

The psalm ends with gratitude.

¹²You have restored my health.

Keep me in your presence for ever.

¹³Blessed be GOD, the God of Israel,
for ever and ever. Amen! Amen!

Verse 13 does not belong to Psalm 41. It marks the conclusion to Book I of the psalms.

As we pray this prayer with Jesus, let us invite him to touch our vulnerability and pain, trusting that he has compassion for us. Let us listen as he invites us: ‘Come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your soul’ (Matthew 11:28-29).

Psalm 41

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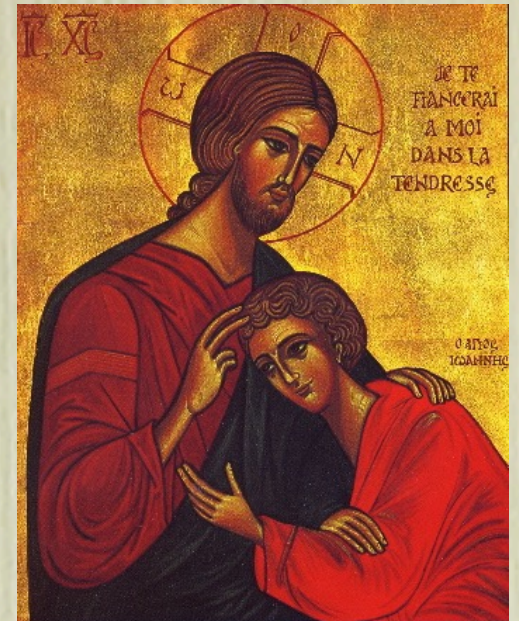
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Praying Psalm 42 with Jesus



¹As the deer longs for running streams,
so my whole being longs for you, my God.

²With all the yearning of my soul
I thirst for God, the living God.

When will I come and see the face of God?

³My tears have been my food by day and by night,
as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?'

⁴These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I would lead the rejoicing crowd into the house of God,
amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving, the throng wild with joy.

⁵*Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?*

Hope in God. I will continue to praise you, my Saviour and my God.

⁶My soul is cast down within me as I think of you, from the region of the Jordan and Mount Hermon, from the hill of Mizar.

⁷Deep calls to deep in the roaring of the waters.

All your waves and your billows crash over me.

⁸By day GOD sends forth such gracious love.

By night I keep singing, pleading to the living God.

⁹I say to God, my rock: *‘Why have you forgotten me?’*

Why must I go mourning, oppressed by the foe?’

¹⁰With cries that pierce me to the heart my enemies revile me,

saying to me all the day long: ‘Where is your God?’

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When will I come and see the face of God?



We listen to Jesus as he expresses his longing in these words

It was this longing that drew Jesus to the Jordan to be baptised by John, a longing that opened his soul to hear God's response: 'You are my Son. I love you. I delight in you' (Mark 1:11).

It was this longing that drew him into the wilderness to depth the meaning of God's response, for himself and for his mission (Matthew 4:1-11). It was this longing that kept calling him into prayer. He needed to be alone with God (see the reflection on Jesus' prayer in Psalm 4).

Because of the intimacy of his communion with God Jesus could say: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:11). As his death drew near, Jesus could say to his disciples: 'I am going to the Father' (John 16:17), and to God: 'I am coming to you' (John 17:13).

John concludes his account of Jesus' passion with the words: 'When Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said: "I am thirsty"' (John 19:28). He was always thirsting for closer communion with God.

It is because of his own thirst that he recognised this same thirst in others. He recognised it in Andrew and his companion who followed Jesus to see where he lived (John 1:37-40).

This was the thirst experienced by the people celebrating a wedding in Cana. Jesus' mother sensed this thirst when, representing every mother who longed for the coming of the Messiah, she said to Jesus: 'they have no wine' (John 2:3).

This was the thirst that drew Nicodemus to Jesus. He wanted something more than his inherited religion could give him. His thirst was for 'eternal life' (John 3:16).

This is what John the Baptist yearned for. He saw himself as the best man rejoicing in the presence of Jesus, the bridegroom (John 3:29).

Jesus sensed this thirst in the Samaritan woman whom he encountered at Jacob's well: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him and he would have given you living (life-giving) water' (John 4:10). He went on to say: 'The water that I give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14).

The paralysed man at the pool of Beth-zatha wanted to find healing in the pool. Jesus knew he was longing for something more and made it possible for him to 'walk again' (John 5:9).

On hearing of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdrew to a deserted place to be alone. The people joined him. Jesus 'was moved with compassion for them and cured their sick' (Matthew 14:14). Mark writes: 'Jesus was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things' (Mark 6:34). They were hungry. Jesus knew that their hunger was for more than food: 'Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, the food that I will give you' (John 6:27). 'The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (John 6:33). 'Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so you will live because of me' (John 6:57).

Jesus was in the temple for the celebration of the New Year Festival. It was the final day of the celebration, the Day of Rejoicing in the Torah, a festival of water and light. Here again, drawing on his own experience, Jesus wanted to connect with people's deepest yearnings. He cried out: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart (the heart of Jesus and the heart of the disciple) will flow rivers of living water"' (John 7:37-38). John goes on to explain: 'He said this about the Spirit which believers in him were to receive' (John 7:39).

John recounts the story of the man who was born blind. It is a story of enlightenment. He sees after he washes in the pool of Siloam (John 9:7) – a washing that is a symbol of baptism into the community of Jesus' disciples.

Jesus is deeply moved by the death of his friend Lazarus (John 12:33-35). Lazarus's sisters, Martha and Mary, want their brother to live. In this, the final sign in John's Gospel, we are being invited to believe that physical death is not the end of our longing or of our life of communion with God. We will cast off the burial cloths and be welcomed into eternal life: 'Unbind him. Let him go free' (John 11:44).

At the Last Supper, 'Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end' (John 13:1).

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you' (John 14:1-2).

Philip longed to see God: 'Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied' (John 14:8). Jesus responded by telling Philip that to see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9), because: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:10). Jesus promised that God would send his Spirit to dwell in us (John 14:17). This is the Spirit promised in John 7.

Moreover Jesus and his Father would come to us and make their home in us (John 14:23). Jesus knew that our thirst is ultimately a thirst to enjoy the intimacy of God's life. Hence his prayer: 'I ask that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17:20-21), 'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

We draw this reflection to a close by focusing on Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb. She was surprised to find the tomb empty, and ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple who ran to the tomb, and, finding it as Mary Magdalene had told them, they 'returned to their homes' (John 20:10). Not Mary, who remained at the tomb, weeping (John 20:11). It was because of her intense longing to see Jesus that she alone 'saw' him (John 20:18), when he called her by name (John 20:16).

In The Book of Revelation we read: 'The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift' (Revelation 22:17).

³My tears have been my food by day and by night,
as I hear it said all the day long: 'Where is your God?'

These words take us to Gethsemane and Calvary. At the Last Supper Jesus assured his disciples that even though they would leave him: 'I am not alone. The Father is with me' (John 16:32). In Gethsemane he continued to trust God. He continued to commit himself to do his Father's will (Mark 14: 36).

On Calvary Jesus cried: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34) as he heard the leaders scoffing: 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, God's Chosen one' (Luke 23:35).

But he could still pray: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46).

The psalmist has experienced God's presence. Now he is exiled from the sanctuary and his priestly ministry and misses the experience of closeness (verse 4). He experiences God as absent, but he is like a timid female deer, alert to the scent of the life-giving water for which she longs.

We think of the water flowing from the right side of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34), and, once again, recall his promise: 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water' (John 7:38).

We long to see the face of God (see the reflection on Psalm 31).

Paul assures us: 'Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The Book of Revelation assures us: 'They will see his face' (Revelation 22:4).

5/II Why are you cast down, my soul? Why groan within me?

Hope in God. I will continue to praise you, my Saviour and my God.

The psalmist questions his sadness. God is called 'Saviour'. God does not prevent us from having hurtful experiences (often brought about by us and others refusing to obey God), but God does come to us with God's saving help, sustaining us to go through the difficulties, and maintaining for us the divine communion in which life consists.

The psalmist gives expression to the sadness that comes over him as he describes being overwhelmed with forces of chaos, made all the more painful by the taunts slung at him for believing. In his pain, he prays: 'My soul is cast down within me as I think of you' (verse 6).

The sound of the cataracts bursting out from the mountain where the Jordan rises symbolises for the psalmist the destructive and chaotic forces that threaten to overwhelm him (verse 7).

The pagan neighbours have their idols. The psalmist has nothing to show. They challenge him: 'Where is your God?' (verses 3 and 10). Compare the taunt thrown at Jesus as he was dying: 'He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son' (Matthew 27:43).

As we pray this psalm with Jesus, pray to share Jesus' faith, hope and love. Pray to share Jesus' thirst for God, Jesus' longing to see the face of God. Jesus gazes on us with such love. Trust him and know that in returning his gaze we are looking on God and enjoying the communion for which we are being held in existence.

Psalm 42

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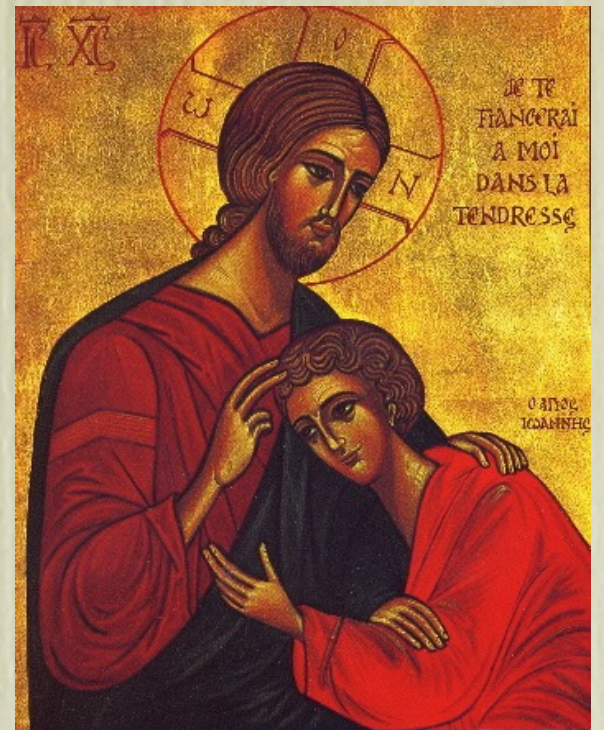
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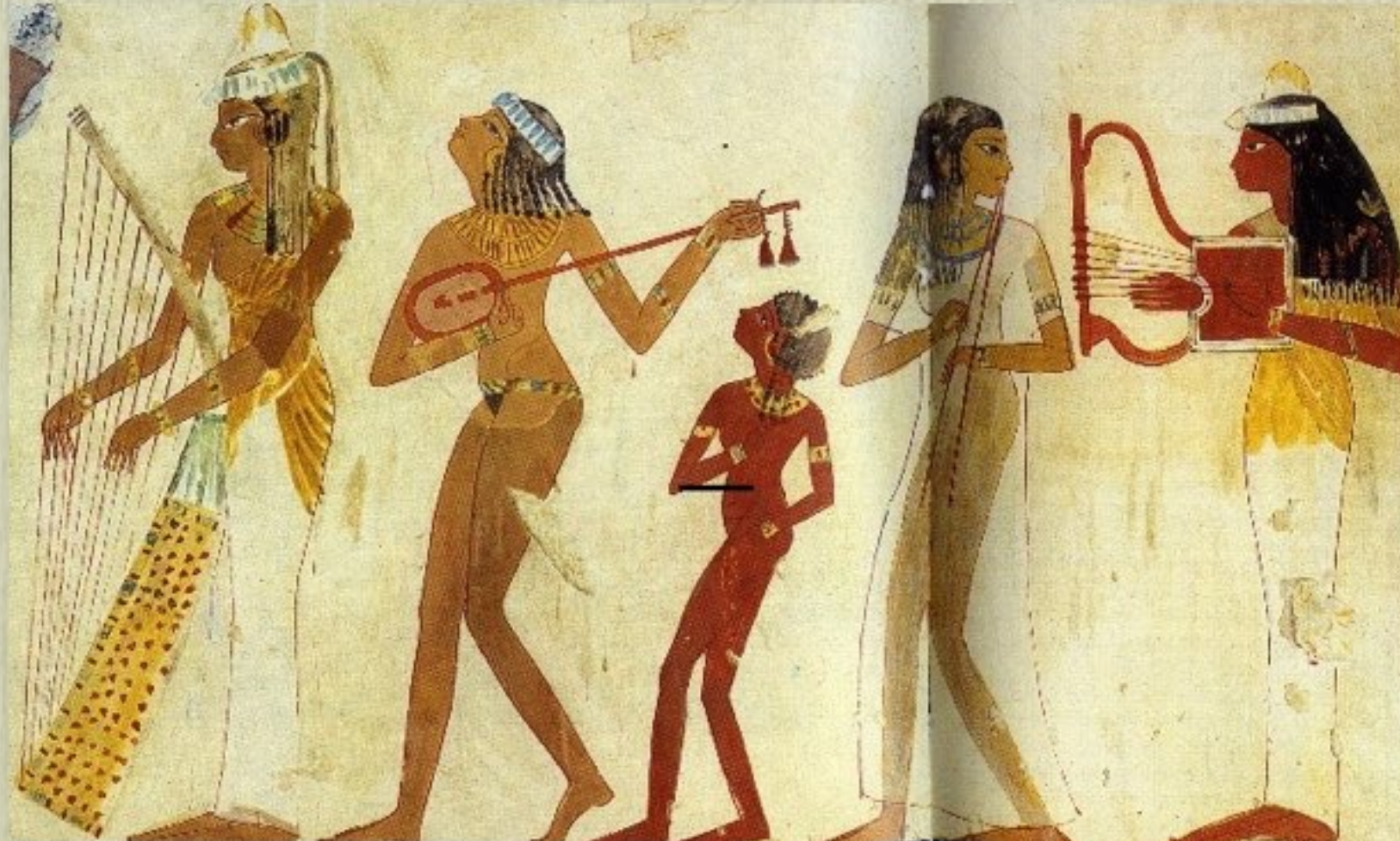
Praying Psalm 43 with Jesus

Harp

Lute

Oboe

Lyre



¹You be my judge, O God.

Defend my cause against a godless people.

Rescue me from the deceitful and unjust.

²You are God. I take refuge in you.

Why have you cast me off? [= Psalm 42:9]

Why must I go mourning oppressed by the foe?

³O send forth your light and your truth; let these be my guide;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.

⁴I will go to the altar of God, to God, my exceeding joy;
and I will praise you on the harp, O God, my God.

⁵*Why are you cast down, my soul? Why are you groaning within me?*
Hope in God. I will continue to praise you, my Saviour and my God.

[= Psalm 42:5, 11]

¹You be my judge, O God.

Defend my cause against a godless people.

Rescue me from the deceitful and unjust.

²You are the God in whom I take refuge.

The imagery is taken from the court, as the psalmist is appealing to the highest tribunal – that of God.

³O send forth your light and your truth; let these be my guide;
let them bring me to your holy mountain,
to the place where you dwell.

As in Psalm 42 the psalmist thinks of the cult (holy mountain, dwelling, altar, praise).

He expresses his desire and his trust that he will experience again the communion with God which he experienced in the past. In exile the psalmist asks for God's light and truth to escort him back into God's presence (verse 3).

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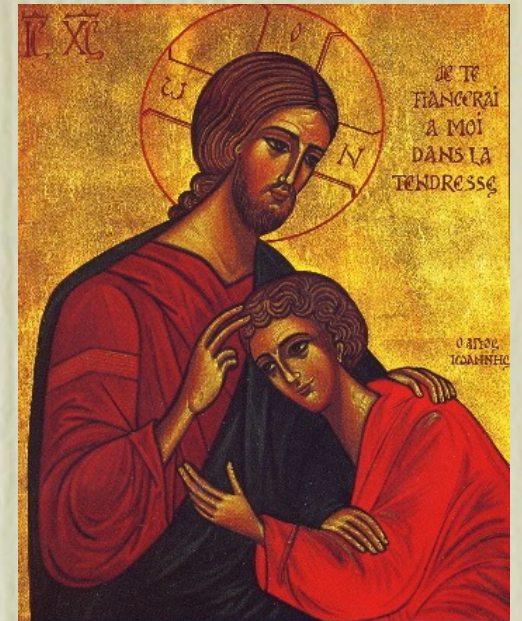
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Celtic Blessing