
For the Chief Musician. A contemplation by the sons of Korah.

PSALM 42: 1 As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants after you, God.

The psalmist earnestly longs for the ordinances of the Lord's house, Psa 42:1-4; describes his deep distress, Psa 42:5-7; endeavors to take comfort from the consideration that the Lord would appear in his behalf, Psa 42:8, Psa 42:9; speaks of the insults of his enemies, Psa 42:10; and again takes encouragement, Psa 42:11.

The title, To the chief Musician giving instruction to the sons of Korah. This is the first of the Psalms that has this title prefixed, and it is probable that such Psalms were composed by the descendants of Korah during the Babylonish captivity, or by some eminent person among those descendants, and that they were used by the Israelites during their long captivity, as means of consolation: and, indeed, most of the Psalms which bear this inscription are of the consoling kind and the sentiments appear to belong to that period of the Jewish history, and to none other. The word מִשְׁכִּיל maskil, from שָׂכַל sakal, signifies to make wise, to direct wisely, to give instruction; and here is so understood by our translators, who have left this signification in the margin; and so the Versions in general.

The Syriac says, "It is a Psalm which David sung when he was an exile, and desired to return to Jerusalem." The Arabic says: "A Psalm for the backsliding Jews."

Verse 1

As the hart panteth after the water brooks - The hart is not only fond of feeding near some water for the benefit of drinking, "but when he is hard hunted, and nearly spent, he will take to some river or brook, in which," says Tuberville, "he will keep as long as his breath will suffer him. Understand that when a hart is spent and sore run, his last refuge is to the water; and he will commonly descend down the streame and swimme in the very middest thereof; for he will take as good heede as he can to touch no boughes or twygges that grow upon the sides of the river, for feare lest the hounds should there take sent of him. And sometimes the hart will lye under the water, all but his very nose; and I have seene divers lye so until the hounds have been upon them, before they would rise; for they are constrayned to take the water as their last refuge." - Tuberville's Art of Venerie, chapter 40: Lond. 4th., 1611.

The above extracts will give a fine illustration of this passage. The hart feels himself almost entirely spent; he is nearly hunted down; the dogs are in full pursuit; he is parched with thirst; and in a burning heat pants after the water, and when he comes to the river, plunges in as his last refuge. Thus pursued, spent, and nearly ready to give up the ghost, the psalmist pants for God, for the living God! for him who can give life, and save from death.

PSALM 42: 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

Verse 2

When shall I come - When, when shall I have the privilege of appearing in his courts before God? In the mouth of a Christian these words would import: "When shall I see my heavenly country? When

shall I come to God, the Judge of all, and to Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant?" He who is a stranger and a pilgrim here below, and feels a heart full of piety to God, may use these words in this sense; but he who feels himself here at home, whose soul is not spiritual, wishes the earth to be eternal, and himself eternal on it - feels no panting after the living God.

PSALM 42: 3 My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually ask me, "Where is your God?"

Verse 3

My tears have been my meat day and night - My longing has been so intense after spiritual blessings, that I have forgotten to take my necessary food; and my sorrow has been so great, that I have had no appetite for any. I feel more for the honor of my God and his truth than for myself, when the idolaters, who have thy people in captivity, insultingly cry, Where is thy God?

PSALM 42: 4 These things I remember, and pour out my soul within me, how I used to go with the crowd, and led them to God's house, with the voice of joy and praise, a multitude keeping a holy day.

Verse 4

When I remember these things - Or, these things I shall remember. They often occur to me, and sharpen my distressful feelings. My soul is dissolved, becomes weak as water, when I reflect on what I have had, and on what I have lost. Or, I pour out my soul to myself in deep regrets and complaints, when reflecting on these things. I once enjoyed all the ordinances of God, and now I have none. I once had the joyous communion of saints in God's ordinances; but that communion no longer exists, for there are no ordinances to support it. There was a multitude to worship God in public; with these I often went: but alas, this is no more; now there are found only a few solitary individuals who sigh for the desolations of Zion. There we had our holy days, our appointed feasts, to commemorate the wonderful works of the Lord; now there are no processions, no festivals, no joyous assemblies; all is desolation in Zion, and all is mourning in our captivity. I have endeavored to give a general sense to this verse, but there are several difficulties in it; and different commentators and critics have given it a great variety of translations, and as many different meanings. My plan will not permit me to follow them. Much may be seen in Dr. Horsley's work on this verse.

PSALM 42: 5 Why are you in despair, my soul? Why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God! For I shall still praise him for the saving help of his presence.

Verse 5

Why art thou cast down, O my soul? - Bad as the times are, desolate as Jerusalem is, insulting as are our enemies, hopeless as in the sight of man our condition may be, yet there is no room for despair.

All things are possible to God. We have a promise of restoration; he is as good as he is powerful; hope therefore in him.

I shall yet praise him - For my restoration from this captivity. He is the health of my soul. I shall have the light and help of his countenance, his approbation, and a glorious deliverance wrought by his right hand.

PSALM 42: 6 My God, my soul is in despair within me. Therefore I remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon, from the hill Mizar.

Verse 6

O my God, my soul is cast down - It is impossible for me to lighten this load; I am full of discouragements, notwithstanding I labor to hope in thee.

Therefore untill I remember thee from the land of Jordan - That is, from Judea, this being the chief river of that country.

And of the Hermonites - הרמונים the Hermons, used in the plural because Hermon has a double ridge joining in an angle, and rising in many summits. The river Jordan, and the mountains of Hermon, were the most striking features of the holy land.

From the hill Mizar - מהר מצער mehar mitsar, from the little hill, as in the margin. The little hill probably means Sion, which was little in comparison of the Hermons - Bishop Horsley. No such hill as Mizar is known in India.

PSALM 42: 7 Deep calleth to deep at the noise of your waterfalls. All your waves and your billows have swept over me.

Verse 7

Deep calleth unto deep - One wave of sorrow rolls on me, impelled by another. There is something dismal in the sound of the original; תהום אל תהום קורא tehom el tehom kore; something like "And hollow howlings hung in air." Thompson's Ellenore. Or like Horner's well known verse: - Βη δ' ακεων παρα θινα πολυφοισβοιο θαλασσης. "He went silently along the shore of the vastly-sounding sea."

Il. i., ver. 34.

The rolling up of the waves into a swell, and the break of the top of the swell, and its dash upon the shore, are surprisingly represented in the sound of the two last words.

The psalmist seems to represent himself as cast away at sea; and by wave impelling wave, is carried to a rock, around which the surges dash in all directions, forming hollow sounds in the creeks and caverns. At last, several waves breaking over him, tear him away from that rock to which he clung, and where he had a little before found a resting-place, and, apparently, an escape from danger. "All thy waves and thy billows are gone over me;" he is then whelmed in the deep, and God alone can save him.

Waterspouts - A large tube formed of clouds by means of the electric fluid, the base being uppermost, and the point of the tube let down perpendicularly from the clouds. This tube has a particular kind of circular motion at the point; and being hollow within, attracts vast quantities of water, which it pours down in torrents upon the earth. These spouts are frequent on the coast of Syria; and Dr. Shaw has often seen them at Mount Carmel. No doubt the psalmist had often seen them also, and the ravages made by them. I have seen vast gullies cut out of the sides of mountains by the fall of waterspouts, and have seen many of them in their fullest activity.

PSALM 42: 8 the LORD will command his loving kindness in the daytime. In the night his song shall be with me: a prayer to the God of my life.

Verse 8

The Lord will command - Every day the Lord will give an especial commission to his loving-kindness to visit me. During the night I shall sing of his mercy and goodness; and alternately mingle my singing with prayer for a continuance of his mercy, and for power to make the best use of these visitations.

PSALM 42: 9 I will ask God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

Verse 9

I will say unto God my rock - God, my Fortress and Support.

Why hast thou forgotten me? - This and the following verse is badly pointed in our Bibles: "Why go I mourning as with a sword in my bones because of the oppression of the enemy? Mine enemies reproach me daily, while they say unto me, Where is thy God?" See on Psa 42:3 (note). Their reproaches are to my soul as cutting and severe as a sword thrust into my body, and separating between my bones; because these reproaches are intended to fall on thee, my God, as if thou hadst not power to save us from the hands of our oppressors.

PSALM 42: 10 As with a sword in my bones, my adversaries reproach me, while they continually ask me, "Where is your God?"

PSALM 42: 11 Why are you in despair, my soul? Why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God! For I shall still praise him, the saving help of my countenance, and my God.

Verse 11

Why art thou cast down - There is no reason why thou shouldst despair. God will appear and release thee and thy brother captives and soon thy sighing and sorrowing shall flee away.

Who is the health of my countenance - As a healthy state of the constitution shows itself in the appearance of the face; God will so rejoice thy heart, heal all thy spiritual maladies, that thy face shall testify the happiness that is within thee.

There is a curious gloss on the first verse of this Psalm in my old Psalter, which I cannot withhold from the reader. The author translates and paraphrases the verse thus: -

Trans. Als the Hert yernes til the welles of waters; so my saule yernes til the God.

Par - This Psalm es al of perfite men, that er brinnand in the flamme of Goddes luf, and passes in til the contemplatyf lif: and tharfore it es sungen in the office of the dede men: for than haf that, that thai yearned; that es, the syght of God. Far thi, sais he, als the Hert that has eten the nedder, gretely yernes to com til the welles of waters for to drynk and wax yong opayne: so destroyed in me vices and unclennes, my saule desyres with brinnand yernyng, to come til the God.

Aelian, Appian, Anstotle, Nicander, and Pliny, all inform us that one cause why the hart thirsts for the waters is, that they eat serpents, and that the poison of them diffused through their entrails produces a burning heat and fever, to ease and cure themselves of which they have recourse to water. Many of the fathers tell the same tale, and from them the paraphrast in the old Psalter has borrowed what is inserted above: "Like as the hart, which has eaten the adder, greatly longs to come to the fountains of water to drink, that he may grow young again." The hart is undoubtedly a cunning animal; but it would be as difficult to believe that he eats serpents as it would be to believe that he seeks for and eats the fresh water crab or cray fish, in order to cure and make him grow young again, as Eusebius, Didymus, Theodoret, Jerome, Epiphanyes, Gregory Nyssen, and others of the primitive fathers gravely inform us.