

July 26, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

Jesus says, *"Come unto me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... learn from me"* (Matthew 11)

Psalm 42 lays open our inner struggles, longing, wrestling, questioning, and debating—those moments when we or those around us ask *"where is our God?"* If the Psalmist can ask these deep questions without shame, apology, or fear, maybe it is safe for us to question, long and doubt as well?

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
My tears have been my bread day and night,
while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"*

Ancient Israel was a sliver of productive farmland, surrounded by imposing deserts. The mountains brought rains off the Mediterranean Sea so that the Jordan River Valley was filled with fruit, vegetables and grains. Commentators point out that the "thirst" image is not of a deer sipping spring water under the pines, but a desperate animal rooting, stomping, digging in a dry stream bed hoping to coax a few sips of water from the dried up earth. This ancient liturgy names the deep self-examination and questioning we all experience.

Have you passed through a spiritual desert, a time when God felt far away? My driest spiritual season came when I was 22, a youth director in my home church. I knew I had to leave my fundamentalism I no longer believed, but had no idea what was next. Have you prayed, *"My soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.?"*

David May points out that in the same Gospel where Jesus says, *"I am the living water"* Jesus cries out from the cross *"I thirst"* May wonders if beyond Jesus' physical suffering, Jesus experienced the parched spiritual seasons so common to us? What if Our Crucified Lord meant, *"I thirst for God"* (John 19, Psalm 42: David May Interpretation)

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
I pour out my soul*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted (moaning) within me?
My soul is cast down within me
I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully because enemies oppress me?"
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?*

Where did downcast souls go in the 3000 years before Freud invented profession counselling and bookstores had self help sections? You went to your rabbi, priest, Imam, chieftain, or pastor. You went to the elders at the gate, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. You found help from strangers. (John 4, Genesis 29) Only emperors or generals rode in private vehicles. Everyone walked everywhere and people talked to each as they traveled along the roads. In Luke 24 two deeply depressed disciples headed home on what we now call Easter, after a disastrous weekend. They begin to chat with a perfect stranger who turned out to be the Risen Christ. Hebrews 13 counseled *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."* Our spiritual ancestors knew the healing power of conversation, community, and congregational sharing.

When our forebears were downcast, they went to synagogue, church, the temple, and places of prayer by the rivers. (Acts 16) Astounding us, scholars tell us that people prayed even private prayers out loud. Just think about pouring out your souls where others could hear your inner struggle.

It is one thing to silently pray in your heart,
*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
My tears have been my bread day and night,*
It is a bigger commitment, risk and maybe a bigger blessing to pray that out loud from the communion rail, around your dinner table or in a small group,

What if we were fully present as we confessed aloud our doubts, woes, fears, joys and hopes in public confession? What knew enough love to make our dinner tables, our church, and our cubicles the safest places to question, doubt, ask, seek, and knock? I think we all would feel a little less lonely and we would find wisdom from others who have already passed through the spiritual deserts.

Imagine collectively leaning into the prayer in worship or inside a small group
*my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold the face of God?
My tears have been my communion bread,*

And then someone in the Sunday School class or small group raises their voice and shares:

*These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, you remember that palm Sunday procession of children and
the Easter breakfast before we went to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving.
Remember the All Church Retreat
the Feast of Lights
and lighting candles on Christmas Eve,
the multitude keeping the festival!*

The psalmist invites us into the healing power of beautiful memories and the joy of belonging to a faith in community. Remember singing together, passing the peace, welcoming others, carrying each other's burdens, that ASP trip, coming together not to be entertained but to worship.

Some scholars speculate that Psalm 42 was written during the Exile, when no one could go to the Temple. The Temple, the Holy of Holies, the great altar only existed in their collective memory. Yet, somehow we find healing in mental space. James 5 tells us that confessing even our lowest moments brings healing. During the 70 years of the Babylonian Exile, the people prayed Psalm 42 and found they could sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land, they could keep the sabbath without an altar, they could celebrate the festivals with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving even when they had lost their homeland, loved one and more. I went to Ebenezer UMC yesterday and saw people far from their homeland breaking bread and celebrating community like those ancient exiles.

Two weeks ago, Heather preached a masterpiece farewell sermon. She artfully named so many good memories for us to treasure. I felt a little downcast at her leaving and even some anxiousness wondering "what will we do about this or that"? However, the blessings Heather has given us do not leave us when she carries the last box of books from her office. That same week, I searched my phone for photos of Heather and there was one of Daren, Jefferson and Heather serving together at our church camp. Jesus tells us In Matthew 10, "*whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*" Deuteronomy 5 promises that when we are a blessing to people, the blessing endures

to “*the thousandth generation*” “*These things I remember...*” in prayer is a deeply healing practice. My father-in-law's table blessing always ended, “*Lord, keep us mindful of our many blessings*”. We can sing when the Temple is no more, we can laugh when Caesar sits on the throne, we can treasure Heather as she moves to a new church. The blessings endure for a thousand generations.

*My soul is cast down within me;
Someone in our small group speaks up
therefore I remember
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your waterfalls;
all your waves and your billows have gone over me.*

Scientists understand that just going outside can improve our mental health. For people of faith observing the wonders of creation reminds us of God's presence all around us. The Temple is no more, but the Creator sends living water over Fall Creek Falls. Go outside, take a walk, talk with someone along the way.

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
A friendly voice offers us their experience, perspective and hope
Hope in God,
for I shall again praise God,
who is our help and God.
By day the Lord teaches steadfast love,
and at night God's song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.*

Did you notice how the Psalmist did not say “*start praising God right now?*” No, right now I am downcast. Today, I am pouring out my soul, today “I thirst”. Today, my taunting enemies are getting the better of me, but one day, one day hopefully soon, I shall again praise the Lord! God knows and loves downcast souls even as God lovingly heals and restores us to a place of praise. God never demands “*get over it, or stop crying*”, no we must go through it to overcome it and yet we hope in God, trusting one day we will praise God again.

38 years after my spiritual desert, my most downcast season, I am so glad I did not stop seeking, struggling, wrestling, walking and worshiping... There may be other deserts ahead but I have come to know that God's love is deeper, wider, higher and longer than

I could ever have imagined, so I raise my witness and say, do not give up, stay in community, keep praying....

*My soul is downcast,
therefore I remember
I hope in God,
Trusting we shall again praise God,
Remembering by day the Lord teaches steadfast love,
and at night God's song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
We shall praise God again. Amen*