

“The Mystery of Faith”

Psalm 42

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How many of you own a set of encyclopedias? If you do, you are telling your age. Computers and the Internet have replaced World Book and Britannica. If you have a question that needs an answer, you don't go to the bookshelves, but log on to the Internet.

Easy access to an unlimited source of facts has spoiled us, hasn't it? I suppose we never have liked unanswered questions but we really are impatient now. Why guess when you can Google? Finding answers to a wide range of questions is relatively simple these days.

Perhaps this is why Psalm 42 makes many uncomfortable. It is a chapter filled with unanswered questions. As a matter of fact, this is the distinguishing characteristic of this passage.

It took me a while to realize this but when I did, it helped me to see this Psalm in a completely new light. I better understand and appreciate it now.

I should not be surprised because the key that unlocks the meaning of many passages is not what is written but what is missing. Asking what is not there can lead to deeper understanding. This is certainly the case with this lament.

So, what is missing in Psalm 42? There are no answers to the questions posed by the Psalmist. What questions did he ask?

When can I go and meet with God? Where is your God? Why are you so downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Why have you forgotten me, God? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?

These are heavy questions, aren't they? I would be willing to say you have asked some of them, if not all.

Why do you think the Psalmist asked these questions? I think he was lonely, afraid and confused. Ever felt that way? Sure, we all have.

He was lonely because he was in exile, separated from everything and everybody familiar. It appears he was being pursued by an enemy that was getting the upper hand and he wondered why God had not rescued him and allowed him to return to his beloved homeland. After all, he was “seeking God like a deer pants for water.” Surely God knew this and would quickly come to his aid. However, God was silent and inaccessible.

We tend to ask a lot of questions when we are threatened. That's why the Palmist's questions are so common. They could easily be the questions of a soldier in Iraq or Afghanistan or someone suffering from depression or dying of cancer. These questions could be on the lips of someone that buried a loved one or filed for divorce. An individual that lost a job or was denied a promotion could voice them. I'm confident they have.

Why did the Psalmist not answer these questions? He had no answers and refused to make up some. I commend him for that. How many people succumb to that temptation? How many preachers do?

I am reading a delightful novel by Marilyn Robinson titled, Gilead. It is set in 1956 in the small town of Gilead, Iowa. John Ames, the main character and narrator, pastored a small church there most of his adult life. It is the same church his father pastored. He has a real history with this little town and her citizens.

Ames is seventy-six years old and his health is failing. One of his biggest concerns was that his six-year-old son would never know him. His first wife and child died in childbirth and he remained single for years. Late in life he married a woman half his age and they had a son. He wrote this letter to his son to tell him about his ancestors and his own life.

Gilead, however, is more than one man reminiscing about life. It is a meditation on fathers, children, faith, friendships and love. It is a multi-generational story filled with jealousy, resentment, forgiveness, fear, faith and grace.

The part of the book that speaks to this sermon is Ames' opinion of radio preachers. He doesn't care much for them, or at least what they are preaching. Their certainty about many subjects, especially heaven and hell eliminates the mystery of faith, something he is reluctant to do.

I am, too. Faith in a God whose ways are higher than man's will always be filled with mystery. I find it amusing that the very people that want a God also want to understand Him and everything He does or does not do. I don't think you can have it both ways. Unanswered questions will always be a part of faith.

Authors like Brian McLaren and Reggie McNeal have helped me understand better how to relate to young adults. It is their contention that they are looking for truth, meaning and connectedness. In a recent survey of twentysomethings, finding spiritual fulfillment ranked more important than achieving financial success.

So how do we help young people grow spiritually? According to McLaren, we will not influence young adults with superior reasoning but with superior listening skills and compassion.

If you want to reach young adults, McLaren says that you must tell them how your faith has grown and changed over the years. Let them know you are still a seeker. Voice your doubts and struggles even as you tell them what you believe. It is far better to bring unanswered questions to the table than questions with wrong answers. Cynicism and disillusionment result from the latter.

What do you do with your unanswered questions? How do they impact your faith? How did they affect the Psalmist's? Did he abandon his faith or shop for another god? No he did not. Evidently he accepted the fact that not all his questions would be answered but trusted God anyway.

"Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God."

"Life is a mixture of problems and mysteries," a friend recently told me. "With enough research, creativity and fortitude, problems can be resolved or overcome. Mysteries, on the other hand, defy explanation or resolution and we must learn to live with them." The mature believer understands this, will put an issue in the proper category and deal with it accordingly.

After Vance Havner, a preacher of another generation buried his beloved wife, Sara, he wrote the book, Though I Walk Through the Valley. He described the heartbreak and sorrow that accompanied his great loss and his difficulty adjusting to it. Let me share an excerpt with you.

"One thinks of the line in that precious hymn, 'Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart' that says, 'Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.' There are mountaintop experiences in our journey through this world, those rare and lucid moments when God is consciously near and speaks to us as a man to a friend. There are those ordinary days when we may not be thrillingly aware of His presence but neither do we doubt it. But there are also those strange times when things do not add up or make sense, when we seem to be forgotten, when the heavens are brass, when instead of happy answers to our petitions, an ironic spirit laughs at us and makes mockery of our feeble faith. We sit with Job and wait for an answer that seems never to come. We had better learn the faith that believes anyway when God is silent."

Havner had that kind of unrelenting faith and one reason was because he believed in the eternal goodness of God. Through all of his anguish and struggles, he never abandoned his faith. Instead he revealed his undying confidence in God when he wrote, "I cannot always trace His hand but I can trust His heart, and His heart directs His hand."

We can trust His heart, too. It is pure and good. Like the Psalmist, Vance Havner and many others, we can give Him our questions, life and future and rest assured He will handle them lovingly and responsibly. Will you join me in doing this now?