

An honest conversation with God...

Retreating with Psalms 42-43

The following retreat notes were developed for a half-day retreat integrated in CASET 2018, a four-day regional training event in the Caribbean for around 80 staff and emerging leaders.

The introduction that was given to this half-day retreat reflects the value and character of retreats in general:

We are taking the time for a half-day retreat in the midst of this conference. Some of you may wonder: Why come together from across the region and then spend so much time in silence? Some of you are maybe worried: what will I do with so much time? Others are curious to see what this time will look like.

With this retreat, we are taking time to focus on what matter most in our lives; we are taking time to focus on what defines our fellowship – our relationship with God.

We as a team believe that this retreat is a precious gift. It is the gift of:

- *Space - space to spend time with God and his Word;*
- *Stopping – stopping, and reorienting your life;*
- *Silence – silence that allows us to hear more deeply than we normally do.*

This morning, I invite you into an attitude of open hands:

Holding out your life to God – *with everything that is there: the beautiful and the ugly, the joy and the pain;*

Waiting to receive – *this time is not about producing any results; it is about letting God do whatever he wants to do – he might encourage you this morning – he might disturb you; he might speak clearly and deeply into your life – he might not; But one thing is sure: God is here. As we spend time in his presence and in his Word, it will have an effect on us.*

Original Context of this retreat

At CASET 2018, the half-day retreat had the following structure:

9:00 Worship and Introduction to retreat

9:45-12:15 Silent retreat: everyone received the notes below to help guide them through this time.

12:15 Plenary reflections on Psalms 42-43

13:00 Sharing in small groups

13:40 Short plenary closure (songs and prayer)

Using this resource:

You can simply use the notes below for a personal retreat of 2-3 hours. Or you might want to integrate this time of silence in a communal setting; let your context decide what this looks like. The above is not a model of how it should be, but just one concrete example.

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Retreating with Psalms 42-43

An Opening Prayer:

Lord,
I believe
 my life is touched by you,
 that you want something for me,
 and of me.

Give me ears
 to hear you,

eyes
 to see the tracing of your finger

and a heart
 quicken by the motions of your Spirit.

(Ted Loder)

Looking at the Reality of my Life in the presence of God

Look back at the past four weeks:

- What characterized your life?
- What characterized your relationship with God?

Space for Notes:

Where do you currently need God most?

Read Psalms 42-43.

Read them again slowly. What resonates with you today? Stay with these words/phrases in prayer before God.

Going Deeper into the Word and our Conversation with God

Once more, read Psalms 42-43. What names, titles or descriptions of God does the Psalmist use? Write them down:

What do these mean for you?

“All your waves and breakers have swept over me.” (42:7)

Name the waves and breakers in your life:

Imagine yourself in these waves and breakers. What is happening to you? Capture your feelings and what is in your heart. Hold everything out to God.

“Why my soul are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.”

Multiple times, this is how the Psalmist speaks to himself. Listen carefully to what he says. Then, listen to your own inner voices: what do you say to yourself? What does your soul need to hear today?

This is what I want to say to my soul today:

“I say to God, my Rock, Why have you forgotten me? You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me?” (42:9; 43:2) These words remind us of the words of Jesus on the cross: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mk 15:34).

Read Mark 15:33-39. Look at Jesus hanging on the cross and reflect on how his suffering, death and resurrection bring comfort and hope to your faith journey.

Place for notes:

Enter into a time in prayer:

How do Psalms 42-43 help you to pray your own life, the circumstances of student ministry, the realities of your nation?

Closure:

An attitude of open hands – this is what you were invited into as you started this time of listening and praying. As you look back at these past hours spent with God, what did you receive from him? What did he place in your open hands?

Try to capture this in just two or three phrases/sentences. You might want to write them on a piece of paper that you place in your Bible where you will often see them.

If you are doing this retreat in a communal setting, share what you have been hearing from God and pray with one another.

Additional Notes – at the original retreat, these were part of a reflection on Psalms 42-43 given in the plenary after the time of personal silence.

Living the Journey

The journey of this Psalmist is not linear – it is not from despair to joy; it is not from a problem to its resolution; throughout the Psalm we see trust and distress remain close to one another. And yet, a sense of hope grows as the Psalmist enters more deeply into prayer and looks to God for help. In the first part of the Psalm, God is often spoken of in the third person; in the last part – Psalm 43 – everything has become a prayer, addressed directly to God.

Living the journey. The Psalmist does not flee from his present experience. It is painful and very lonely, but he faces it – acknowledging his feelings and struggles, engaging deeply with them as he wrestles with God. He is willing to live all phases of the journey fully.

And at the same time, the Psalmist does not isolate this situation as if it were the whole of his life. He reminds himself that his situation is not the whole journey. He intentionally looks both to the past – where he has come from. And to the future – where he is going.

In 42:4, we see the Psalmist remembering – remembering past experiences with God and with the community of God. By doing so, his present situation becomes a part of a longer journey – it is no longer absolute. It is not everything there is to be said about his life.

It is worth looking back: When have I experienced God's goodness and love? How has God spoken to me in the past?

Remembering helps us to trust God in situations where we do not see his goodness and love, when he seems far away.

The Psalmist looks back and he looks forward – praying his hope for the future: 43:3-5. At the moment, he is far away from the community of God's people, from the temple, from God himself. But he looks towards a time to come when things will be different. And for him it is clear: then, he will praise God for what he has experienced.

Living the Journey. All of us are on a journey – sometimes we feel very close to God; sometimes God seems like a stranger to us and we don't understand him. Tears and questions are appropriate expressions of our faith in some phases of life; in others, we are full of praise. Let us live our journeys – sharing them with God and with one another.