

## “Songs in the Night”

The writer of Psalm 42 said this, “By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me” (Psalm 42:8). Psalms 42 and 43, in the Hebrew Scriptures, were actually one psalm. It was written by a musician who played the “lyre” – a stringed instrument. “I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God,” he professes (Psalm 43:4).

These psalms are a *lament* – an expression of sadness and mourning. The writer is in some kind of trouble or distress. He recalls happier days, joyful times of worship with God’s people. He even led others (presumably through his music) as they went in procession to the temple for the great religious festivals. “These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival” (Psalm 42:5).

But now those glory days are but a memory. Life has taken a downturn for him. We’re not sure what’s going on in his life. But he’s far away from Jerusalem and the temple. Perhaps he’s sick. Apparently some are mocking him for his faith. We can catch the mood of this man as we read through the psalm: “My tears have been my food day and night...” (Psalm 42:3). “My soul is cast down within me...” (Psalm 42:6). “I say to God, my rock: why have you forgotten me?” (verse 9). He feels overwhelmed: “All your breakers and your waves have gone over me” (Psalm 42:7).

Like so many of the psalms, *doesn’t this psalm reflect our life experience?* We have our pleasant times and happy days, when life is good...and we can smile and sing. Aren’t you glad for the *happy times* of life! But then there are those periods of life *when night comes*...and the sun doesn’t shine... and problems or worries mount...and days are dark and depressing. It could be sickness, or trouble in the family – a parent, son or daughter. It might be that a friend betrays us or lets us down, or a loved one dies, or it’s just a string of little annoyances or problems that hit us, or maybe we’re just feeling the blues as winter’s coming on. A few years back Nancy and I went through a spell where our water heater went out when we were on vacation (it cost almost 3 times what I thought to replace it); a niece was battling mental illness and making terrible choices; our oldest son was going through a drag-em-out divorce (a divorce he didn’t want); and our younger son’s wife’s father died after brief battle with illness. Then the toilet upstairs sprung a leak and a piece of the ceiling in our family room came down. More expense. I know, there are a lot worse things, and I tried to keep a perspective, but all in all everything became a pain in the neck! We’ve all had spells like that, when bad or annoying stuff comes in bunches.

*The Christmas season itself is for many a sad and difficult time.* We have this aura around Christmas that it’s such a happy time. “It’s the most wonderful time of the year” (the song goes). Christmas shows started back in early November. Heartwarming stories that are supposed to help us all feel the “glow” of Christmas! But for some, the holiday season is the *worst* time of the year, the *most difficult* time of the year. I’ve heard so many people say, “I’ll be so glad when the holidays are over...” or, “If I can just make it through the holidays...”. If we’ve just lost a loved one, or if we’re a long way from home, or we’re struggling financially, chances are, the Christmas holidays are not a happy time. One year shortly before Christmas I got an email from

a from a lady who had two young boys. He had an illness and job issues, and was struggling financially. She mentioned how she had to choose her medicine or her boy's medicine, and she opted to get his and do without hers – although not taking her medicine makes her more depressed. She's saying that she doesn't see how they'll have any money at Christmas to give her boys presents. There is this unrealistic expectation that you have to be happy at Christmas. But the reality is that many people do feel sad and blue at Christmas, and it's OK to acknowledge that.

But there's more to Psalm 42-43 than the psalmist just lamenting his misfortune. All the while he is hanging onto his faith in God! There is this refrain over and over in this psalm: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (Psalm 42:5, 11 43:5). He can proclaim, "By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me" (Psalm 42:8). I love that image: "at night his song is with me" (Psalm 42:3). As bad and black as things seem, there is this melody from God during the dark, lonely night!

This psalm writer is not the only one who could have a *song in the night*. Come with me to the city of Philippi, somewhere around the middle of the first century. The Apostle Paul and Silas are missionaries. They encounter hostile resistance as they preach the gospel. Charges are brought against them that just aren't true. Let's pick up the narrative: "When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks" (Acts 16:20-24).

*Note their situation!* They are cut and bleeding, with raw, open wounds. Their pain must have been awful. And they're in jail! Have you ever been in jail? (I hope not as a resident!) I've visited people in prison. Never been in their cell, but even the waiting areas are drab, usually institutional grey, architecturally cold. Stark with just bare necessities. Not a fun place! I'm sure the Philippian jail was a lot worse. Paul and Silas are in the inner prison. Their feet are in stocks. It is nighttime (about midnight). *And what do they do?* They don't gripe. They don't complain. They don't throw a pity party for themselves. They don't curse the people who threw them in jail. They don't get mad at God for allowing this. ***They pray. And they sing!*** "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). They are in a miserable situation. But they've got a "song in the night"! They are singing hymns!

Note the effect this had on those around them: "The prisoners were listening to them..." (Acts 16:25a). Imagine what they must have thought! Then there is an earthquake! The prison shakes on its foundation. Prison doors fling open. The jail keeper is jolted out of his sleep, sees what's happened, and is about to kill himself, assuming that the prisoners had escaped (which

would have spelled curtains for him). But they are all there. As a result, this man becomes a believer in the Lord, along with his entire household.

***Why are Paul and Silas able to sing songs of praise in the worst of circumstances?*** Look at what Paul wrote in Colossians 3:15-16, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Paul and Silas knew the Lord. In the midst of unbelievable personal turmoil they had the peace of Christ in their hearts. The word of Christ did richly dwell in them. Because their lives were rooted *eternally* in Christ, and not what happens to them in *this world*, they could be thankful and sing even in the worst of circumstances

It's 1944, in one of the Japanese prison camps. The brutality and inhumane treatment of American POW's were indescribable. One of the prisoners of war was a man from Illinois. Often he would hum songs to himself as the prisoners were being led out into the fields to work. Walking along in the sweltering heat, miserable, unfed, unwashed, he would hum. One of those days he started humming the tune to America the Beautiful. The Japanese guards didn't know the song so it meant nothing to them. But to the other prisoners, the tune evoked images of home - amber waves of grain, purple mountain majesties. Soon, the whole camp was humming the tune each day as they went out to work. The guards remained oblivious to the defiance of this gesture. It was this "song in the night" that kept them going and gave them the will to live.

When we know the Lord, when life turns dark for us, we can sing, because our homeland is not this earth, but heaven. And no matter how bad things are, we've got we've got a home in glory land that outshines the sun!

***There was a "song in the night" the night Jesus was born.*** Listen again to these timeless words from the gospel writer Luke: "In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'" (Luke 2:8-14). Talk about a song in the night! Wow!

***Life was pretty dark for those who heard the angels sing that night God set foot on this planet:*** Palestine was an occupied country – everywhere you went, there were Roman troops with swords and spears. The Hebrews once again were at the mercy of a conquering nation. By the time of Jesus, the Jewish religion had become so corrupted, so off-track, that a few elite people benefitted from it, but ordinary people like those shepherds in the fields were ignored and despised by the religious establishment. *The world situation back then was no brighter than it is in our time.*

But listen to the angels sing in the darkness of the night. "Glory to God in the highest!" "Peace

on earth, good will to all!” A Savior has been born! God has come to us. God is with us – even in the darkness!

***Do you hear the angels singing their song in the night?***

Martha Williamson, Executive Producer of the TV show *Touched By An Angel*, tells of the time when her father had just died, and she visited a therapist to help her work through her grief. She told the therapist of her love for her dad, who was a musician, and that his favorite song was *How Great Thou Art*. The family made sure that this hymn was played at his funeral. Even though the song speaks of faith in God, Martha still had a lot of questions, perhaps foremost among them – she just wanted to know that her father was all right now. On the way out of the therapist’s building, Martha encountered “a pleasant-looking man” in the elevator. As Martha walked out of the elevator, she heard the man begin to sing, “Then sings my soul, my savior God to Thee...”. She turned in time to see the pleasant-looking man turning a corner and disappearing out of sight. Quickly she went around the building to talk to him, but there was no one there. Martha found great comfort in that man’s song, and it helped her deal with her sorrow. Now whether Martha Williamson was “touched by an angel” that day, we can’t be sure. But we know that she was touched by a song in that dark time of her life.

***When we know the Lord, no matter how dark life becomes for us, we can have a song in the night!***

Karen was a young mother, an active church member, who lived in Morristown, TN. When she discovered that she was pregnant with their 2<sup>nd</sup> child, a girl, she did all she could to prepare her 3 year-old son Michael for the arrival of his baby sister. Day after day, night after night, Michael sings to his sister in Mommy’s tummy. Finally, Karen’s labor pains start. But what had been a normal pregnancy suddenly took a turn in another direction. Complications arose in her delivery. Michael’s sister is born, but she is in serious condition. An ambulance rushes the newborn to the neonatal intensive care unit of a larger hospital in Knoxville. Days inch by; the little baby’s condition gets worse. A pediatric specialist tells the parents, “There is very little hope; be prepared for the worst.” So they contact the local cemetery about a burial plot. All the while, little Michael begs to be able to see his sister. “I want to sing to her,” he says.

Week 2 in the intensive care unit. It looks like the end will come before the week is over. Michael keeps nagging about singing to his sister, but children are not permitted in the intensive care unit. However, Karen makes up her mind: she’s going to take him, whether they allow children in or not. If he doesn’t see his sister now, he’ll never see her alive. She dresses him in an oversize scrub gown and marches him into the ICU. The head nurse sees them enter and barks, “Get that child out of here! No children are allowed in this unit!” Karen’s mothering instinct rise up strong. The usually mild-mannered mom glares steel-eyed into the head nurse’s face and insists: “He is not leaving here till he sings to his sister.”

Karen tows Michael to the room and to the bedside. He gazes around at the unfamiliarity of hospital setting and then at his little sister dying, and he begins to sing. It’s an odd song for a 3 year-old, but one he and his mommy had sung many times during the pregnancy: “*You are my*

*sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray... ” . Immediately the little infant responds. Her pulse rate becomes calm and steady. “Keep on singing, Michael,” Karen urges. “You never know dear how much I love you, please don’t take my sunshine away.” The ragged, strained breathing becomes as smooth as a kitten’s purr. “Keep on singing, Michael.” “The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamed I held you in my arms... ”. Michael’s little sister relaxes as a healing rest seems to sweep over her. Keep on singing, Michael. The bossy head nurse, witnessing it all, begins to cry. Karen glows. “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. Please don’t take my sunshine away.”*

Well, funeral plans are scrapped. The next day – the very next day – the little girl is well enough to go home. *Woman’s Day* magazine called it “the miracle of a brother’s song”. The medical staff just called it a miracle. Karen called it a miracle of God’s love.

We have an older Brother – Jesus – who sings to us in the darkest moments of our lives. And His song gives us life and hope.

There is a contemporary gospel tune called “He’s My Song. It includes these words:

“He’s my song, when I don’t feel like singing,  
He’s my life, when I don’t feel like living.  
When I’ve done all I can, and I can’t go on,  
He’s my rest, my love, my song.”

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