Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

While we were under Level 4 and Level 3, Sunday mornings and Sunday afternoons involved a camera in my dining room, YT, your TV or device, and a few songs, a prayer or two, and some Bible reading and teaching. What was missing was us being physically together, a duty elder, an official call to worship, Lord’s Supper and baptism, and the collection of tithes and offerings.

Now, some have commented that it was nice to watch church in pyjamas, and to be able to pause church to make a coffee, or even to watch church on Tuesday morning or whenever ☺ But on a more serious note, there have been some who watched the YT videos who have never been inside our building. So we do thank God that we were able to use YT during lockdown.

And then a few Sundays ago, we dropped down to Level 2 and we have been with *some* of the congregation here at SGR. But we were not together as a *full* church family and there were still parts of our services that were missing. So one of my regular prayer points has been that the Lord would soon bring us *all* together for worship here at SGR. And I trust that this was one of your regular prayer points also.

Well, today, that Covid prayer has been answered! The Lord has brought us all together for worship. **Psalm 122:1** says, “*I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"*” And this afternoon Pastor Graeme Zuidema will preach from **Psalm 126**, which says: “*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.*” So it is right that we are glad, and that there is laughter and shouts of joy!

But *why* exactly we should be glad and joyful? Is it just because we get to see each other again? Is this just our social community? Does it really matter that we have not been able to physically gather for worship for nearly three months? In other words, is physically gathering for worship important or special or necessary? Well, we will only know the gladness and joy that these Psalms speak about if we understand that the gathered worship *is* special and important and necessary. And we are helped to do this with Psalms 42&43.

Now, boys and girls, earlier in the service we sung Hymn 173 – Great is Thy Faithfulness. It is one of the songs in our Psalter Hymnal that has a **refrain**, which is a set of words that is repeated at the end of each verse. And songs with refrains are often among our absolute favourites! We memorize the refrains because we sing them over and over so we belt them out, just as we did with 173! Well, Psalms 42&43 have a refrain also. I am sure you noticed that vv5&11 of Psalm 42 and v5 of Psalm 43 are exactly the same. So these two Psalms are typically viewed as one Psalm made up of three stanzas that each end with the refrain. So the three stanzas of this combined Psalm will be our three points today.

And as we shall see, this three stanza Psalm is the prayer of an individual who has not been able to worship with the Lord’s people but he has confidence that he will soon be at worship again. And we too were unable to physically worship together for some time. But today the Lord has assembled us together as a congregation. So it is right for us to see this three stanza Psalm as a **Prayer that the Lord *has* answered**. But we will also see that we have every reason to keep praying this prayer in the hope of an even better answer!

Now, if you look above the Psalm you will see that it was written by **the Sons of Korah**. And the Sons of Korah composed music and song for temple worship and led the people in worship. And as we just noted, this Psalm is written from the perspective of an individual who had not been able to worship at the temple for some time. **Verse 2** says, “*When shall I come and appear before God?*” and **43:3-4** describe this person’s longing to return to God’s holy hill and His dwelling and altar, which are all references to temple worship in Jerusalem. And Bible commentators like to guess about the particular circumstances of this individual. Verse 9 talks about “*the oppression of the enemy*” and **43:1** speaks about deliverance from a “*deceitful and unjust man*.” But the fact is that we can’t know for sure who this person was or what his precise circumstances were. So that makes the Psalm appropriate to any situation that keeps the believer from worship.

But in terms of reading Psalms and understanding how they apply to us, I want to demonstrate the most important interpretation ‘key.’ And this interpretation key is the one that really opens up the Psalms for believers. Look at the end of **43:4**:“*And I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God*.” So this Psalm describes someone who was cast down and oppressed by His enemies and separated from the presence of God, and who cried out “*O God, my God.*” Does that remind you of someone else in the Bible? Does that remind you of the Lord Jesus, on the cross? For He was cast down and oppressed and forsaken by the Father, and He cried out, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” But He also knew that He would soon enjoy the presence of the Father again, not at the temple in Jerusalem, but in the heavenly Jerusalem! So this is a Psalm of Jesus, congregation; this is a Psalm that He would have prayed and sung; a Psalm that would have given Him comfort and hope and gladness! And we will come back to this reality later in the sermon but I hope this helps you see why it is good to begin your meditations on a Psalm by thinking about how it would have been a Psalm of Jesus, how it would have *spoken* to Him; how it *points* to Him; how it *describes* Him. For that will help you see best how the Psalm applies to you *as a believer*.

1. So with that in mind, let’s look at the first stanza of this combined Psalm, vv1-5a, where the Psalmist **remembers worship**.
   1. Boys and girls, have you studied poetry in your English classes? Do you know the difference between a metaphor and a simile? Both are types of word pictures but there are two words that tell us that we are dealing with a simile and not a metaphor. They are? ‘Like’ and ‘as.’ And this Psalm begins with an “as.” So verse 1 is a **simile**. This person is ‘as’ or ‘like’ a thirsty deer in a dry place like a desert.
      1. And you can picture the dry tongue of this deer, as it pants for water. And this is the perfect picture of this person’s spiritual thirst for God, and especially the worship of God. He says, “*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?*”
      2. And we will come back to this in a moment, but in v3 we have a **metaphor**; there is no ‘like’ or ‘as’ here, just a word picture. And once again the word picture involves water – tears. The Psalmist has spent so much time crying that anyone would think his tears were what he was eating to stay alive! What a vivid image!
         1. What is the longest time that you have cried for? Have you cried day and night? Or cried over and over again, many times, about the same thing? This was a deep and profound sadness.
   2. And v4 explains why this person has been crying; it is as he remembers worship. The Sons of Korah, as I noted earlier, composed music and song for temple worship and led the people in worship. And some of you will know that Psalms 120-134 are called **the Songs of Ascent**. We believe that they were the Psalms that the people would sing as they walked up the hill to Jerusalem to celebrate the three annual festivals that the Lord commanded all the people to gather for. So this son of Korah is surely remembering those magnificent occasions; “*how [he] would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival*.” And the memory of those times fills him with this deep pain and sorrow.
   3. And so, we come, in v5, to the **first use of the refrain**. And there is no doubt that the emphasis in this first refrain is on the first half of the refrain: the thirst and the longing and the tears and the sorrow add up to: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.” Remembering worship has left the Psalmist in a deep despair.
   4. So, now the first stanza of the Psalm **application question**: When Covid prevented you from coming to church for worship these past months, were you as a deer seeking water in the desert? Were there tears because you could not be with the congregation on the Lord’s Day? Now, the Psalmist obviously didn’t have YT or sermonaudio.com or a smartphone, as we do, all of which made no church easier to bear. And I am not saying that if you didn’t cry about worship then you are not a serious Christian. But I hope that you can see from this first stanza that **gathered-worship** is special and important and necessary. We should miss it when we are not able to come together.
      1. In the OT, the Lord commanded the people of Israel to gather together every Sabbath Day and to gather together as a nation for the three annual feasts. These gatherings were called “**holy convocations**.” The Hebrew word literally means “people gathered together for a holy purpose.”
      2. And the NT word for what we are doing now is **church**. The Greek word literally means “called out ones”; we are called to come out of the world in order to gather together to worship the Lord. And that call comes from the Lord and through the elders. So we are *commanded* to physically gather for worship. We *need* this. It is not just our social community.
         1. We come together as a congregation to worship God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
         2. We come together as a congregation of sinners to be refreshed and renewed in the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ.
         3. We come together as a congregation to hear Christ speak to us by the preached word and the Spirit working together.
      3. So while what we did during lockdown was *private* or *family* worship, which is good, there simply is no substitute for physically meeting together as the Lord’s congregation. It is why **Hebrews 10:25** rebukes believers who didn’t see the need “*to meet together*.”
      4. And that is why it is right that there is gladness and joy and laughter today. We are once again able to obey the Lord’s command to gather together in the name of Jesus and to join our hearts and voices together in the praise of our Triune God! Are you glad and joyful? Is there a loud Hallelujah! in your heart just bursting to get out!
2. Well, that’s the first stanza of this Psalm, where the Psalmist **remembers worship**. But in the second stanza, verses 5b-11, the Psalmist **remembers God**.
   1. I said in reference to the first refrain of v5 that the emphasis is very much the being cast down part. And that emotion continues in the second half of v5 where the second stanza beings with “*My soul is cast down within me*.” So, remembering the *act* of worship has not lifted the Psalmist out of his despair. So now he remembers the *object* of worship – God Himself. And this is a very important point. The term I have used to describe what we are doing here today is **gathered-worship**. And you can’t see it but there is a hyphen between those two words so that they are tied together. What is so special and wonderful about today is not just that we are together but that we are together *to worship the Lord*! And that is because, by God’s design, gathered worship is where we enjoy communion with God in the deepest sense possible. And this is not to say that we cannot worship God when we are by ourselves. Of course we can. The Psalmist did. This Psalm is an act of worship; it is a prayer to God that the Psalmist prayed while he was unable to be at worship with the congregation. Nevertheless, as the Psalm makes plain, because he was not able to gather with the Lord’s congregation, it was as though God were absent or far away from the Psalmist.
      1. The place names at the end of v5 are probably places where he experienced sweet communion with the Lord among the congregation of His people. But rather than this memory being like a refreshing drink of water, it is as though the Lord overwhelms him with the chaos of a waterfall or crashing waves in v7.
      2. And then in v8 he remembers those times when the Lord revealed His love in the daytime and gave him sweet and song-filled nights; truly a beautiful picture of communion with God. But them comes v9, “*I say to God, my rock: ‘Why have you forgotten me?’ Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of my enemy?*” It was as though God were far away from the Psalmist.
      3. And in v11, the taunts of his enemies about God having abandoned him had made him sick to the bone.
      4. So even though he could pray to God where he was, he yearned for gathered worship.
   2. And so, in v11 we have the **second refrain**. And again, the emphasis is on the first half of the refrain: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God.” Even remembering God left the Psalmist still in a deep despair.
      1. But notice what the Psalmist was doing; I and many others call it preaching to yourself. And you have heard me talk about preaching to yourself before. You see, the Christian life is a life of highs and lows. There can be times when we feel well and whole and happy, and close to God, but there are also times when we feel sick and sad, and far from God. Perhaps you are enduring one of those low times right now. And in those times, even reading the Bible doesn’t seem to help; you just can’t shake your doubts and depression. Do you know what I am talking about? It’s awful. Well, the Psalms are God’s gift you! You are in good company with the Psalmist of Psalms 42-43. But even though he was cast down, He kept preaching to himself, “*Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God*.”
      2. And as we shall see with the last stanza, to borrow a modern idea, what he repeated in his head eventually became the experience of his heart.
   3. But before we look at that third stanza, let me say again that by God’s design, gathered-worship is where we enjoy the deepest communion and fellowship with God. That is why we have described physically gathering for worship as important, special, and necessary. And we could add extraordinary and supernatural to that list. That is why today is so special! Is this your experience of Sunday services? Do you look forward to gathered worship and miss it when you cannot participate? May the Lord make it so for all of us!
3. So that brings us to the third and last stanza, Psalm 43. And while many of the things that the Psalmist has already referred to in Psalm 42 are referred to again in Psalm 43, there is a major change of perspective and mood in this third stanza. And this is probably why what really is one Psalm has been divided into two Psalms in our Bibles. For while the Psalmist has thus far remembered *worship* and remembered *God*, horizontal and internal acts, if you like, now his perspective goes vertical and external as he **prays to God about Worship**.
   1. In my mind I picture the Psalmist sitting there and silently pondering everything in Psalm 42, but now he stands up and lifts his face to heaven and cries out, “*Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people*.” So he’s not looking at his enemies anymore, and letting their taunts get him down; He has filled his vision with the Lord.
      1. The **Book of Hebrews** was written to discouraged believers. So in ch. 11 we have the list of the heroes of faith. But the author of Hebrews knew that even a long list of wonderful heroes would not be enough to lift the believer out of his or her depression. So do you remember how ch. 12 begins, “*Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith*.”
      2. And that’s what the Psalmist does here. He looked, by faith in God’s promises, to Jesus: “*Vindicate me, O God … for you are the God in whom I take refuge*.”
      3. And we need to be reminded of this again and again – don’t look that way <-->, look that way ^ Look to Jesus!
   2. And then there is more of this dramatic mood and perspective change as we come to vv3-4, “*Send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God*.”
      1. The Hebrew word translated as “mourning” in v9 literally means “to be in **darkness**.” So boys and girls, do you remember how the earth is described when it was first created in Genesis 1? “*The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep*.” But then we get’s God’s first command. Do you remember what it was? “‘*Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.*” So the Psalmist knows that the only thing that will chase away his ‘darkness’ is the light of God. And with these words, he is looking, by faith, to Jesus. For what did Jesus say about Himself in **John 8:12**? “*I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*.” And what did Jesus say about Himself in **John 14:6**? “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*.” So the Psalmist is looking, by faith, to Jesus.
      2. And as the Psalmist fills his mind with the Promised Messiah, temple worship, which he had previously remembered, you know, as something from the good old days, becomes something he can almost reach out and touch: “*let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God*.” You can feel his absolute confidence!
   3. And that brings us to the refrain, again. But the emphasis here is surely on the last part of the refrain. The first half is now a rhetorical question: “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?*” It is as though he is telling himself that he has no business feeling so miserable anymore. And then comes the crescendo: “*Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God*.” He knew for certain that soon he would be among the Lord’s congregation in gathered worship again.

Well, as we draw to a close, we don’t know the rest of this Psalmist’s story. We don’t read three days later or three months later or three years later he was back at the temple. But we do know our story. We prayed that the Lord would once again gather as for worship at SGR. And here we are. Hallelujah!

But congregation, there is actually something better than gathered worship at the temple or at SGR. Temple worship and SGR worship is ‘practice,’ if you like, or a foretaste, of something even more magnificenter! And that is gathered worship in heaven. **Revelation 5** describes gathered worship in heaven. And I can assure you it is not by YT livestream! We are told that there are “*people from every tribe and language and people and nation* [and] … *living creatures and the elders and the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb!"*”

So while it is right that we are glad and joyful that the Lord has answered our Covid prayer, let’s keep ‘practicing’ each Lord’s Day and praying for the day when all God’s people will be a part of the congregation in heaven that sings, “*Worthy is the Lamb*.”

And all God’s people said? Amen.