Research on: Psalms 42:2,8,11 (Responsive Reading)

“In the book of Psalms we meet the religion of Israel at its greatest depth and its most passionate intensity. The psalmists fell heir to the profound insights and spiritual experiences of the prophets. These latter were Israel’s intellectual and spiritual pioneers, blazing new paths to God and clearing new trails for human feet. The psalmists largely found ready at hand these insights. They took them up, lived their way into them experimentally, applied them to the life of individuals and of the community and linked them to the religious worship that centered in the Temple, all the while both deepening and intensifying them.

“Coming from a vast variety of individuals who had learned both how to exult in unspeakable joy and to cry out unto God from the deeps of inexpressible anguish, it is a mirror of the life of the soul, not of Israel merely, but of humanity. It is the noblest book of devotion possessed by men, and comes down to us enhanced by the reverence of centuries to which it has contributed both strength and light” (*ABC* 509).

“ It is the hymn and prayer book of the second Temple. Many hymns are pre-exilic in origin, but in every case in their present arrangement they have been collected and edited for the post-exilic period.” (*ABC* 512).

“In the light of ancient Near Eastern literature it is probable that the original of almost every ps. was composed in pre-exilic times for use in public worship during the period of the monarchy. Once introduced into worship, however, a ps. would naturally be adapted and revised to make it appropriate to changing circumstances. PSS. originally spoken by the king at a time of national stress came to be used by individuals for crises in their personal lives” (*ICB* 253).

*My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God (Ps. 42:2)*

KJV generally translates the Hebrew word *nephesh* as "soul," which no longer means the same today as it did then. For the Hebrews it had a variety of meanings, but in general it stood for the individual, the whole person and what makes him or her unique; so it is better translated by some such word as "life, self, being." Thus NEB reads, "With my whole being I thirst for God.” A major affirmation among the Hebrews, who saw the idolatry of neighboring cultures as the worship of death—that is, of a totally insensitive, inanimate object.

8 Yet the Lord will command his lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life.

Several modern versions identify the song *as* the prayer—e.g. NEB: "His praise on my lips is a prayer to the God of my life."

“Verse 8 is unexpectedly hopeful, and commentators often treat it as the psalmist’s recollection of a happier time. The reference to ‘day’ and ‘night’ recalls v. 3, and v. 8 even seems to answer the question raised in v. 3, affirming the presence of God’s steadfast love. The refrain has already hinted at hope and help, and the psalm is moving in the direction of assurance” (*NIBC* IV.852).

*Command* in Hebrew is *tzawah* which “is used for the instruction of a father to a son, a farmer to his laborers, a king to his servants. It reflects a firmly structured society in which people were responsible to their right to rule by God’s command. . . God ‘commanded’ the world into existence. All creatures and elements therefore obey his command. . . What God commands to be done, he provides the means to accomplish” (*TWOT* 1887, Accordance).

*Lovingkindness* in Hebrew is *checed* and it means “kindness, mercy, steadfast love, unfailing love” (Thayer 698, Accordance).

“In his self-doubt the psalmist remembers the covenant love of the Lord. By day and night he experienced the evidences of God’s care, protection, and blessing. He sang praises to him and prayed to him morning and evening (cf. 92:2). That was a time of fellowship with a God who was always present. The very experience of communion with God made Yahweh ‘real’ to him as ‘the God of my life’ (*EBC*, Accordance).

11 Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.

*Cast down* in Hebrew is *shachach* which means “to sink or depress, bend, bow down, humble one self, sink low” (Gesenius 7817, Accordance).

*Disquiet* in Hebrew is *hawmaw* which means “to make a loud sound; a great commotion or tumult, to rage, war, moan, cry aloud, rage, roar” (Gesenius 1993, Accordance).

"Yet" need not refer simply to some hoped-for occasion in the future. Other translations of the Hebrew adverb are "once more," "again," "still," "continually," "always."

"Health" had a wide range of meaning to the King James translators, including spiritual and moral well-being; also deliverance or salvation—the meaning of the Hebrew here. The word translated “health," literally "salvation," at this point is in the plural, a fact which, in accord with Hebrew idiom, can imply the intensification of its meaning. Thus it might be justifiably taken as indicating “perfect health;” also "welfare, prosperity, deliverance" (cf. BDB).

Smith renders it: “My help.” "My countenance" represents the Hebrew *panim* “my face”—here almost “myself" or “me."

So NEB translates simply, "I will praise Him continually, my deliverer, my God."

 Gesenius: "The face, countenance, is...often put for the look, mien, air of a person, as expressing the affections and emotions of the mind."