

Psalms 42:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.

Analysis

As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. This opening verse introduces one of Scripture's most beautiful metaphors for spiritual longing. The psalm begins Book II of the Psalter (Psalms 42-72) and is attributed to "the sons of Korah," Levitical musicians who served in temple worship. The imagery is vivid, visceral, and deeply emotional—depicting desperate spiritual thirst through physical analogy.

"As the hart panteth" (ke'ayal ta'a'rog, כְּאַיִל תַּעְרֹג) uses hunting imagery. Ayal is a male deer or stag; arag means to pant, long for, cry out. The verb suggests the panting of an animal pursued by hunters or suffering from drought, desperately seeking water for survival. This isn't casual preference but life-or-death urgency. The deer's panting communicates both exhaustion and intense desire.

"After the water brooks" (al-afikei mayim, עַל-אַפִּיקַי מַיִם) specifies the object of longing. Afikim means streams, channels, watercourses—flowing water in Palestinian terrain where water sources were scarce and precious. Mayim is water. In the hot, dry climate of ancient Israel, water meant life. A deer without water would die. The metaphor suggests the psalmist feels spiritually desperate, as if survival depends on encountering God.

"So panteth my soul after thee, O God" (ken nafshi ta'a'rog elekha Elohim, כֵּן נַפְשִׁי תַעְרֹג אֵלֶיךָ אֱלֹהִים) applies the metaphor directly. Nafshi (my soul, my inner being) encompasses the entire person—mind, will, emotion, spirit. The same verb

(ta'a'rog, pants) appears, creating parallel: as the deer pants for water, so my soul pants for God. The preposition *elekha* (toward you, for you) indicates the soul's orientation—not just desiring benefits from God but desiring God Himself.

"O God" (Elohim, אֱלֹהִים) uses the majestic plural emphasizing divine power, transcendence, and majesty. Yet this transcendent God is the object of intimate longing. The verse captures paradox: God is majestic Creator yet personally knowable, transcendent yet intimate, beyond us yet desired by us. The longing is not abstract but personal—"after THEE," not merely after blessings, experiences, or doctrines about God.

Historical Context

Psalms 42-43 form a single composition, evidenced by repeated refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5), continuous theme, and lack of separate superscription for Psalm 43. The division into two psalms occurred later. The psalmist's historical situation suggests exile or distance from Jerusalem's temple. References to "the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites" (42:6) place him in northern Israel, separated from temple worship.

The sons of Korah descended from the Korah who rebelled against Moses (Numbers 16). When the earth swallowed Korah and his co-conspirators, "the children of Korah died not" (Numbers 26:11)—spared by divine mercy. Their descendants became prominent temple musicians (1 Chronicles 6:31-38), composing Psalms 42-49, 84-85, 87-88. This demonstrates God's redemptive grace—rebels' descendants become worship leaders.

The deer (hart) imagery had cultural resonance. Song of Solomon uses deer metaphors for beauty, swiftness, and grace (Song 2:9, 17; 8:14). Proverbs 5:19 speaks of the loving hind. Deer hunting was familiar activity in ancient Israel. The image of a hunted or drought-stricken deer desperately seeking water would be immediately understood by original audience.

For Levites whose identity centered on temple service, separation from worship was particularly painful. Their calling was worship leadership; their vocation was

facilitating others' encounter with God. To be distant from temple wasn't merely inconvenient but existentially disorienting. The psalmist's longing wasn't nostalgia for familiar surroundings but desperate need for worship, for communal encounter with God, for the place where God's presence was manifest.

Christian tradition has seen in this psalm a picture of the soul's longing for God. Augustine wrote extensively on this psalm in his Expositions, seeing it as expressing the believer's pilgrimage toward heavenly rest. Medieval mystics used it to describe spiritual desire. Reformers emphasized that true worship is internal (heart's longing for God) not merely external (temple rituals). The psalm reminds that authentic worship flows from desperate desire for God Himself, not mere religious obligation.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to 'pant' for God, and how is this different from casual religious interest or dutiful observance?
2. How does the deer's physical need for water illuminate the soul's spiritual need for God? In what ways is this need life-or-death?
3. What circumstances in your life have created the kind of spiritual desperation described in this verse?
4. How might distance from corporate worship (like the psalmist's) intensify awareness of our need for God?
5. What is the difference between desiring God Himself versus desiring blessings from God or experiences of God?

Interlinear Text

כַּאֲזִי ל	תַּעֲרֹג	עַל	אֶפְיָקִי	מִיָּם	כִּי	נַפְשִׁי י	תַּעֲרֹג
As the hart	panteth	H5921	brooks	after the water	H3651	my soul	panteth
H354	H6165		H650	H4325		H5315	H6165
אֶל יְיָ	אַלְהֵינוּ:						
H413	after thee O God						
	H430						

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 119:131 (Parallel theme): I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments.

Psalms 48:1 (References God): Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness.

Psalms 46:1 (References God): God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Psalms 85:1 (Parallel theme): LORD, thou hast been favourable unto thy land: thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob.

Psalms 45:1 (Parallel theme): My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the king: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer.

Psalms 47:1 (References God): O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph.

Psalms 44:1 (References God): We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old.

Psalms 49:1 (Parallel theme): Hear this, all ye people; give ear, all ye inhabitants of the world: