

BY DR. PAUL ENGLE

SPIRITUAL

ANOREXIA

ARE YOU AT RISK?

During his nine years of Soviet imprisonment, Jewish dissident Natan Sharansky set about the laborious task of hand-copying a small-print, pocketbook of the Psalms which he had received in his prison cell. Reflecting on that experience Sharansky later wrote, "I can't say that I understand the Psalms completely, but I sensed their spirit and felt both the joy and the suffering of King David... His words lifted me above the mundane and directed me toward the Eternal." Sharansky stands in sharp contrast to most people today, even church members.

In the closing years of this century numerous Christian leaders have sounded an alarm over the apparent loss of a desire for God by American evangelicals. The more affluent, educated, cultured, and technologically literate we become, the less we seem to know of God—the less appetite we have for Him.

Judging by outward signs, this assessment of spiritual appetite seems to be on target. Too many Christians appear to have left their first love and drifted into a state of spiritual anorexia.

For those who are honest enough to admit their own spiritually weakened condition, no better cure can be found than the book of Psalms.

One of the psalms which may have sustained Sharansky and should likewise direct our thoughts Godward is Psalm 84. It pulses with appetite for God in all three stanzas and is guaranteed to cure the worst case of spiritual anorexia.

ASK GOD TO QUENCH YOUR THIRST

While in graduate school, I remember delivering mail during the summer months in Pittsburgh. After several hours of lugging around a heavy sack in the scorching sun, my mouth was often parched with thirst. One fact kept me going—knowing that in my two-tone blue Nash Rambler parked at the end of the route was a half-gallon jug of ice-cold lemonade.



Dr. Paul E. Engle is the founder of Biblical Discovery Seminars, a teaching and church consulting ministry based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is also Acquisitions Editor in the publishing division of Baker Book House. A noted author and twenty-two-year veteran of the pastorate, he has taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and presently serves as Adjunct Professor of Practical Theology at RTS.

We inevitably experience physical thirst, but what do we know of longing for the Lord with a consuming *spiritual* thirst? The paradox, for those who experience it, is that the more He quenches our thirst, the thirstier we become, which drives us back for more of His refreshing presence.

The early Jewish people celebrated three annual festivals—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Entire families undertook the long, arduous journey to Jerusalem, climbed Mount Zion on which God's temple was located, and assembled in the courts of the Lord for a glorious worship celebration. The air swelled with joyful singing and the sound of musical instruments. Then God made Himself known and blessed His people there.

What made these celebrations so refreshing that people were willing to be very inconvenienced to participate? Because when His people assembled for worship at the temple, God Himself came among them, satisfying their spiritual hunger and quenching their spiritual thirst with the blessing of His living presence.

For some reason this psalmist had been unable to attend these temple festivals, perhaps because enemy King Sennacherib was invading Jerusalem at that time. Disturbed by his plight and feeling alienated, the psalmist began to envy the sparrows and swallows who could at least build nests in the temple courts.

While living in New England, I met an elderly widow who was confined to her home, unable to attend Sunday worship services. Each Sunday morning, when she heard the church bell ringing, she was overcome with feelings of homesickness. Occasionally a group of us gathered in her home on Sunday evening to hold a communion service. This dear lady could hardly find words to thank us because the blessing of being with God's people in His presence quenched her thirst as nothing else could.

A.W. Tozer prays in his devotional classic, *The Pursuit of*

God, "O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need of further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, so that I may know Thee indeed..."

CONTINUALLY DRAW ON GOD'S STRENGTH

Travel can be tiring. My wife and I were recently reminded of that when we flew seventeen hours nonstop across ten time zones and the international dateline to Beijing, China. In spite of comfortable cushioned seats, onboard movies, tasty meals, stimulating books to read, and inflatable neck pillows, we were exhausted upon arrival.

Imagine how tiring travel must have been for God's people in ancient Israel as they made their way to Mt. Zion, traveling by foot or at best on the back of an animal along dusty roads—kids in tow and a hot eastern sun draining them of strength. The trip took them through the Valley of Baca, which was probably an arid valley where only balsam trees could grow (v.6). Even though a gloomy part of the trip, the Valley of Baca didn't deter the pilgrims because they drew on the strength of the Lord and were refreshed. "They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion" (v.7).

In the 1990s none of us need strength to undertake a similar pilgrimage to the earthly Zion in Jerusalem, but like Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, we do need the Lord's strength to make it to our destination of the heavenly Zion. Our limited stamina is all too often depleted by conflicts at work, family friction, spiritual doubts, or simply exhaustion because we have far more to do in a week than hours to do it. Psalm 84:5 speaks to our need: "Blessed are those whose strength is in you." In today's world, admitting we are weak takes courage, especially for men. Divine strength is essential to complete our journey.

CONSTANTLY PLACE YOUR TRUST IN GOD

Obviously, one who trusts in the Lord is one who daily and habitually turns to the Lord in prayer. Note how the psalmist prays for himself, "Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob," and then prays for the king, "Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one" (vv.8-9). The psalmist seemed to recognize that the welfare of the nation was tied up with the welfare of the king, so he prayed accordingly.

Trust also means that we actually prefer spending time with the Lord. "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" (v.12).

The heading of the psalm suggests that the author may have been one of the sons of Korah who served as gatekeepers at the temple on Mt. Zion. Gatekeeping was not a prestigious position. You might compare it to the person who opens the door and greets you at a nice restaurant—probably not a bad temporary summer job, but hardly a lifetime career goal.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, "One day spent in your house, this beautiful place of worship, beats thousands spent on Greek Island beaches. I'd rather scrub floors in the

house of my God than be honored as a guest in the palace of sin."

One way to demonstrate our trust is by setting a high priority upon worship, eagerly looking forward to public worship. Charles Spurgeon remarked, "Some need to be whipped to church, while here (the psalmist) is crying for it. He needed no clatter of bells from the belfry to ring him in; he carried his bell in his own bosom: holy appetite is a better call to worship than a full chime."

Trust is also based on an understanding of God's character. Suppose you were walking along the street in Los Angeles, Nashville, or Washington next weekend, and, despite your finely-tuned map-reading skills, you found yourself hopelessly lost and disoriented. Would you be more likely to ask help from a total stranger who walks toward you out of the shadows or one of your best friends whom you spot unexpectedly walking toward you? Obviously it's easier to trust one whose character we know well.

How well do we know God? The psalmist had a growing understanding of God which helped him to exercise trust. If this is true, how can we fail to trust Him with all the details of our career, family, health, schooling, investments, and future? Trust is engendered by an increasing perception of God's character. Are we willing to invest the time and effort to know God better? Will we encourage our spiritual appetites this week or will we gorge ourselves once again on junk food which can only destroy it?

A new managing editor of *Fortune* magazine heard his predecessor say, "Editing a magazine is like having a passionate love affair; you think about it every waking moment, and you're always trying to make it better."

Do you long to know God with that same kind of all-consuming passion? RTS

