

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 2, 2012**

REDISCOVERING HOPE

Psalm 42:1-11

Having just sung a hymn based on Psalm 42, I now invite you to turn to Psalm 42 in your Bible, or in the pew Bible, where you will find it on page 401. Let's look at it together. And let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

In addition to the hymn we sang a few minutes ago, there is a worship song from the 1980s written by Martin Nystrom that is also based on Psalm 42. It is one of the most frequently sung worship songs of the last 25 years. Many of you know it, I'm sure. I'm not going to sing it, but I want you to listen to these words:

As the deer panteth for the water,
So my soul longeth after Thee.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship Thee.

You alone are my strength, my shield;
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship Thee.

I want You more than gold or silver,
Only You can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy giver,
And the apple of my eye.

You alone are my strength, my shield;
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire,
And I long to worship Thee.

Do these words express the longing and desire of your soul for God? Do you thirst for God like a thirsty deer searching for a stream from which to drink? Psalms like this one provide a stimulus to examine our hearts. Like the song, Psalm 42 itself is a confession of the psalm writer's intense longing for God and his hope in God, in spite of the most troubling and baffling circumstances in life.

We don't know for sure who wrote this particular psalm. The heading says: "A *maskil* of the Sons of Korah." A *maskil* is some sort of liturgical or musical term. The sons of Korah were a family of Levites who served as worship leaders at the temple in Jerusalem. Both Psalms 42 and 43 may have been written by one of them. Or, setting aside the question of authorship, it

may be that these psalms are identified with the sons of Korah as part of a larger collection the sons of Korah put together for use in the temple worship.

Though we read just Psalm 42, I think it makes sense to consider Psalms 42 and 43 together as one song or hymn with three stanzas. The first stanza is Psalm 42:1-5, where the psalm writer expresses the longing of his heart, the thirst in his soul, for God Himself. Stanza two is verses 6-11, where he finds himself stuck in depressing circumstances in spite of his longing to experience God's presence and favor, causing him to wonder: Has God forgotten me? And then, stanza three, in Psalm 43:1-5, is a passionate plea to God for vindication, rescue, and restoration.

The song as a whole is in the form of an individual or personal lament. In each stanza the writer laments the circumstances of his distress, the troubles and pressures that prevent him from going to worship God at the temple. He longs to go up to the temple as in days past because, as he says in 43:3, it is "the place where You dwell." Cut off from the temple worship, he feels cut off from God Himself. He grieves and laments his subjection to enemies who taunt him mercilessly, asking: "Where is your God?" (42:3, 10) In other words, if He is such a great God, why doesn't He do something? Why doesn't your God deliver you from your unpleasant circumstances? If your God is so great, why are you in this predicament?

These are really good questions, don't you think? Even if they are meant as jabs, even if they are dripping with scorn and derision, they are good questions for us to think about. All of us. Each of us. It wouldn't surprise me if many of you have been in situations at some point in your life where you have thought about these exact questions. Or questions like them.

But, when you look at the structure of these psalms together, the thing to notice is that it is not all lament. It is not all just a recitation of the psalm writer's troubles punctuated by a bunch of "Why?" questions. Count them up, and you'll find a total of ten "Why?" questions in Psalms 42 and 43 together. Four of them are addressed to God directly. They are honest questions. They are asked sincerely. They come from the heart of one who feels cut off from God and who desperately longs for his circumstances to change so that he will once more feel God's presence and favor. He longs once more to have the privilege of worshiping God with songs of thanksgiving and joy in the company of God's people in the temple.

Worship in God's house with God's people was a privilege he treasured. Do you see that? He cherished it. His heart ached for it. If given the opportunity, he would not miss it. Going to church was not something he fit into his week around other things, if he had time for it. It was the other way around. Going to church was a priority in his weekly calendar, and he would not permit lesser things to get in the way of it.

I wonder: Is that how you feel about the importance of gathering with God's people in God's house to worship God? Do you give the same priority to meeting together to worship the God of our salvation, the God who loved us so much that He sent His Son to us, *for* us? Is worship with God's people a priority for you? For your family? Something to think about.

Back to the psalm. As I was saying, it is a lament, but it is not all lament. It is more than just a sad song about how good it was in the old days, and how bad it is in the present. There is a pattern in the song, and a common refrain following each lament. You see the refrain in 42:5. It is repeated in 42:11 and again in 43:5.

Every time he gets down in the dumps, every time he feels the urge to sing the blues, every time he feels discouraged in his spirit, every time he feels overwhelmed with the stresses and distresses of his life, and he can't figure out why God doesn't just punish evildoers and fix what is wrong with the world, every time he bares his soul in a song of lament, what does he do then? He preaches to himself. In the midst of his tears, he reminds himself to fix his eyes on God. He urges himself to put his hope in God, and not to give in to despair. After each of his laments, he preaches the same message to himself:

Put your hope in God,
for I will yet praise Him,
my Savior and my God.
(42:5, 11: 43:5)

“Put your hope in God.” People today use the word *hope* in different ways. Often it expresses nothing more than a casual desire or wishful thinking. For example:

I *hope* the Redskins win tomorrow night.
I *hope* we have a white Christmas.

After seeing the movie *Lincoln*, I *hope* Daniel-Day Lewis wins the Oscar for Best Actor.
I sure *hope* the President and Congress don't allow our economy to fall off the “fiscal cliff.”

No matter how fervent my hopes (or yours) for these things, I have no assurance that any of them will actually happen. The hope in God the psalm writer urges upon himself is different, though. In the Bible, as Warren Wiersbe explains, “hope” is not just “hope so.” Biblical hope – hope in God – is way more than something you desire or wish for. It is an unshakable assurance, an unwavering confidence, in the unchanging character and promises of God. Even if your present circumstances are anything but desirable.

Even if it seems like the whole world is falling apart, including our country.

Or maybe your personal world is falling apart.

Maybe your marriage has fallen apart, or your parents' marriage.

Maybe it is a diagnosis you didn't want.

Maybe it is the heartbreaking sorrow of losing a loved one.

Maybe it is what Anne Graham Lotz calls “the twisted maze of suffering and pain.”

Maybe it is unemployment or a major financial setback.

Maybe it is a personal tragedy of some kind.

Any of these things can drive you to discouragement and even despair, if you make the mistake of leaving God out of the picture. *Don't* leave God out of the picture. *Don't* forget about God and all that He has done in the past. *Don't* forget His faithfulness in the past and His promise to be faithful always. *Don't* become so obsessed with your circumstances, your

hurts and disappointments, or your desire for more and more “stuff” that you just push God out of your way in your attempt to get what you want out of life.

No matter what you may be going through, dear friends, put your hope in God. Why? Because of who God is. Listen to what it says about God in these two psalms. First, in 42:2, it says He is “the living God” who satisfies the soul’s deepest thirst. Not only that, He is “my Savior and my God” (42:5, 11; 43:5); He is “the God of my life” (42:8) and “God, my Rock” (42:9). He is “God my stronghold” (43:2); “God, my joy and my delight” (43:4); and simply, “my God” (43:4).

The *living* God. Your Savior and your God. The God of your life. Your rock. Your stronghold. Your joy and your delight. *Your* God. And you are *His*. His banner over you is love.

You and I can hope in God, because God is bigger than our circumstances and greater than our greatest problem. His love – the love He demonstrated to us at Christmas in the coming of His Son to us – is the most powerful force in the universe.

When life is difficult and we wish our circumstances were different, you and I can still hope in God, because in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Child of Bethlehem, the Christ of Christmas, the Christ of the Cross and the Empty Tomb, we know that the future is secure, God’s love is forever, and He will never ever leave us nor forsake us.

Put your hope in God, dear ones. Wait in hope for the Lord, for He is our help and our shield (Psalm 33:20). Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12). And do not forget that those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.