

Hope in God, O My Soul

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Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0 : 00] Our text for tonight will be Psalm 42, 1-11. Psalm 42, 1-11.

To the choir master, a maschal of the sons of Korah. As a deer pants for the flowing streams, so my soul pants for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, Where is your God?

These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I 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.

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.

[1 : 02] My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep.

At the roar of your waterfalls, all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to God, to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock, why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, Where is your God?

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.

I was reminded recently that the Christmas season is not a joyful one for everyone. My funeral home hosts what we call a remembrance service every year in December, where we invite anyone in the community who has maybe lost someone over the past year to come and talk about them, pay tribute to them.

[2 : 28] We hang an ornament on our Christmas tree with their name on it. And the reason we do this in December is that Thanksgiving and Christmas can be especially difficult.

for these people. These are very family-oriented holidays, and it's hard to see that empty seat at the table during this time of year. To make matters worse, the days are shorter.

They are colder. The permacloud settles over us, and we may not see the sunlight for days. In fact, it's pretty well documented that cases of depression tend to rise in late fall and winter, at least for those of us here in the Northern Hemisphere.

So, what do we do in these seasons of life when we are struggling to find joy? Seasons when the soul feels dry, when joy is seemingly lost, or seasons of sorrow, affliction, distress, discouragement, or darkness overtake us.

What do we do when even God feels so very far away? Well, Psalm 42 gives us wonderful insight into how we might pursue joy and peace in those kinds of seasons.

[3 : 52] First, notice the inscription or heading at the top of this psalm, to the choir master, a mascal of the sons of Korah. Now, the sons of Korah were a family of priests and temple singers set apart to lead the people in their worship of God.

2 Chronicles 20 shows them an action when it says, they stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice. And clearly, this psalm was written by them for the purpose of being sung.

It is addressed to the choir master. Of course, we have many psalms of this kind in the Bible, and I'm thankful we do. I've said before that the Bible is very honest about the human experience in a fallen world.

It never pretends that all of life is easy or that the Christian never has any troubles. The Lord knows very well we do. He experienced it in the flesh.

And not only does the Bible confess this, but here we have divinely inspired psalms giving voice to our emotions and to our trials and telling us, sing it.

[5 : 10] You feel it. Now sing it. Sing it to your God. He knows, he cares, and he understands. I'm sure these words were very personal for the author.

And yet God essentially says, rip them from your personal diary, take them to the congregation, and sing them together, because you're not alone.

There are others who inevitably feel the same way you do. That's one of the primary reasons my funeral home has an annual remembrance service. I always tell people who come, look around this room, you're not the only one going through this.

There are others who understand exactly how you feel. And yet this psalm is not merely for the purpose of expressing one's distress or depression.

Notice that word mascal in the inscription. That's a Hebrew word that most English translations of the Bible don't even attempt to translate because it's not entirely clear what it means.

[6 : 20] Most believe it refers to some sort of song or poem, which would make perfect sense. But its root means to instruct or to teach.

So we might say that Psalm 42 is an instructive song. In other words, it's designed to both give voice to the feelings expressed here, but also to teach us something about, say, how we feel or what we might do in response to those feelings.

Not long ago, I dug up some old recordings of the band I was in some 20 years ago, 20 plus years ago. And while most of the songs were about love and pining and love lost, you know, the kinds of things you write about as a teenager, we had some really depressing songs as well.

In fact, one of them was titled Depressionville Hotel. Another was called Everything is Not Okay. And maybe those songs weren't inherently sinful, but they're hard to listen to now because they offer no resolution.

Unlike Psalm 42, there's no wisdom to be gleaned in them. There's no instruction. There's just a kid singing about how terrible life seems to be with no sense of hope or how he might eventually find peace.

[7 : 46] Well, Psalm 42 is a mascal. It describes what the author is feeling, but it also contains God-given wisdom and instruction. Now, to be clear, the author doesn't find resolution in this psalm.

He cries out, and as we'll see, he has faith in God, but the Lord doesn't answer his prayers within this psalm. Presumably, that will come later, but the resolution isn't the point of this psalm.

The point is, he's living in darkness, yet he knows where to turn, and he knows what to do. In other words, he's not surrendering to the depression or his dire circumstances.

He's fighting back. He's fighting for hope. And at the end of the psalm, he's still fighting, but he's fighting from a place of faith in God. So let's look at it.

Verses 1 and 2. As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

[8 : 57] When shall I come and appear before God? Now, we can only speculate about the precise circumstances under which this was written, but we get a general sense of what was happening here.

Evidently, the psalmist is far from Jerusalem. He's up north near the headwaters of the Jordan River somewhere. He mentions a few geographical locations in verse 6.

Maybe he was exiled. Perhaps he was forced out by a physical threat. He's run away from a physical threat. Maybe he's been captured.

He mentions his adversaries and enemies in verses 9 and 10. Regardless, he's far from Jerusalem, and he desperately wants to return to Jerusalem.

Why? He wants nothing more than, as he says here, to appear before God. And you'll notice his memory in verse 4 of leading the throngs of people in procession to the house of God.

[10 : 04] He wants to be in the temple. He wants to return to the presence of God. He wants to worship. He wants to sing God's praises with God's people. Now, that might feel somewhat strange to us because we don't think of God's presence being in a physical, specific location.

But under the old covenant, the temple in Jerusalem was the place he chose for his presence to dwell in its fullest here on earth. You might remember that in Moses' day, they built the tabernacle per the Lord's instructions.

And once it was complete, we're told, the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Then, once Solomon completed the temple, we read, the priests came out of the holy place, and a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud.

For the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. Now, by the first century, God's glory had left the temple, in that sense, because of the people's sins.

Yet, it was still understood that Jerusalem was the proper place of worship. That was the go-to location. In fact, a Samaritan woman confronts Jesus with this very issue in John chapter 4 because the Samaritans had come to believe that Mount Gerizim was the proper place of worship, and Jesus says to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

[11 : 53] You, a Samaritan, worship what you do not know. We, the Jews, those who go to Jerusalem to worship, worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.

But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, not in a specific location, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him.

You see, that's what you and I know. But the psalmist here knows that he must return to Jerusalem to worship in the presence of God, and that's what he's longing for.

That's what he really wants. That's why he's distressed. More than anything, he wants to return to God and to His people for the purpose of worshiping Him.

And we see the desperation in his longing as a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. I don't know what you imagine when you read this, but in my mind's eye, I see a deer who's possibly frightened and exhausted.

[13 : 07] If he's anything like the psalmist, perhaps he's been running from a predator. His heart is beating out of his chest. His legs are trembling. His energy is drained.

And on top of it all, he's desperately thirsty. He pants for flowing streams. This is an intense craving born out of severe thirst. Oh, what I would give for a little water.

And the psalmist says, that's what I feel toward God. I need Him. I want Him. Oh, what I would give for just a moment in His presence and to feel Him near to me.

Clearly, these words spring from the heart of a believer. And that's an important note to make here. This psalm is incredibly instructive for the believer who knows his or her hope is in God alone, who wants nothing more than to sense God's close presence.

Yes, the psalmist would love for his circumstances to change. But at the heart of his prayer, like so many in the psalms, his greatest desire, his greatest need is God Himself.

[14 : 20] That's what he's desperate for. And that's what makes counseling an unbeliever so challenging. Perhaps you've been there. Maybe somebody's come to you for advice because they're struggling, they're depressed, they can't seem to find peace.

And now you would love nothing more than, or I should say, they would love nothing more than for you to tell them how they could possibly change their circumstances in such a way that would lead to contentment, if not utter happiness.

But that's rarely possible. And in one very real sense, it's completely impossible because they will never find genuine peace while remaining estranged from God.

So the best advice you could ever give is not, I don't know, quit your job or move to a new city or maybe you need to have that conversation with your spouse, but rather, be reconciled to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

If they don't know the peace of God through our Savior and Mediator, a change in circumstances won't ultimately help them. Many times, we can't change the circumstances anyhow.

[15 : 35] If I have an incurable disease, for instance, I can't change that. But I can have peace within my soul. And I can have genuine hope despite my circumstances because of that saving relationship I have with God through Christ.

And that's where we find the psalmist here. Though it would be appropriate, he doesn't initially petition the Lord to deliver him or remove his hardship.

He doesn't ask for his situation to be changed, at least not explicitly in the first part. Instead, his primary request is for God himself. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God? This is a cry of confusion. It's a plea for renewed hope and restored communion with the Lord.

But the precise circumstances of the psalmist, even in the psalmist's own words, are secondary. He knows he needs the Lord before all else.

[16 : 49] Verses 3 and 4. My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, where is your God? These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I 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.

Clearly grief has overtaken this man's life. He cries out day and night. There isn't a moment of respite for him. He's confessing here, I cry all the time.

I'm drowning in my tears. When he says, my tears have been my food, he's describing how this depression and despair have become his daily portion.

Just as you might sit down to three meals a day, every day his sorrow has become just as regular for him. All the time. Perhaps he's even hinting at the fact that he's not eating because of his sorrow.

Instead, all he can do is cry. He's lost his appetite. Weeping has taken the place of his regular meals. Now, suffering alone, quietly, that's hard enough.

[18 : 08] But as this man cries, his tears are begging a question. Where is your God? And as we see in verse 10, this question doesn't originate with the psalmist.

He has the voice of his enemies in his head. They're the ones who are looking at his miserable condition, taunting him by asking, where is your God?

They say to me all the day long, where is your God? If he were real, if he were living, if he cared, he would be here to help you. That's the insinuation. Your sorrow is proof that either he isn't living or he doesn't care about you.

What did the psalmist call God in verse 1? The living God. So there's no question in his mind about God's existence. And I don't believe he's doubting that the Lord cares.

He clearly remembers the goodness of God in the past. These things I remember, he says. How I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise.

[19 : 22] But after his prolonged struggles, his faith is revealing some weaknesses. And those seeds of doubt that his enemies planted are beginning to sprout.

His tears are beginning to ask the same skeptical questions as his enemies. Where is God? Why does he feel so distant? Has he really forgotten about me?

Has he abandoned me? Now, questions like this are not inevitable for a believer that maybe is going through a prolonged season of depression, but they're not altogether uncommon either.

There's a scene in John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress where Christian and Hopeful are trapped in Doubting Castle, being held prisoner by giant despair.

And Christian asks, Brother, what shall we do? The life that we now live is miserable. For my part, I do not know whether it is best to live like this or to die without further notice.

[20 : 34] As we'll see, Christian's response is really the opposite of how the psalmist responds here, but it illustrates how Satan uses our depression, how he uses our sorrow, you know, he drops it like a thick fog in front of our eyes so that we can't see anything but it.

We can't see beyond it. It feels as though depression is all there is and all there ever will be. In other words, it feels so absolute, so final. It feels like a prison that will never escape.

And that's why Christian in the story is tempted to end his life. Why not, he thinks. Surely death is better than this if this is all there is. But hopeful, aptly named, reminds Christian, let us remember again that the power over life and death is not in the hand of giant despair.

Others have been taken by him as well as ourselves and yet have escaped from his hands. Who knows, perhaps God, who made the world, may cause that giant despair to die.

I am resolved to take courage and to try my hardest to get out from under his hand. My brother, let us be patient and endure a while longer.

[21 : 53] The time may come that we will be happily released, but let us not be our own murderers. So what does hopeful have that Christian doesn't?

Hope. Hope. They're both trapped in this prison of despair. But hopeful reminds himself of the God who made the world and how he is certainly capable of freeing them from this tiny prison.

By faith, he sees just a hint of light on the other side of that fog. He doesn't believe it's necessarily permanent. There may be a way out.

He doesn't yet see the way out. He doesn't know how it might come, but he sees that there's at least a possibility of a way out. Even if they don't see it yet, they just have to hold on a while longer.

And that's what I have to tell myself during these cloudy months of winter. Somewhere, somewhere beyond the permacloud, there is a sun and I will see it again.

[23 : 01] I just have to endure a little while longer. Or half a year as the case may be. And that's precisely the psalmist's response to his sorrow here.

Verse 5. 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.

Now you'll notice this psalm has two, possibly three, refrains. You might think of them as the chorus of the song. The first is here in verse 5, the second is in verse 11, and the third is quite possibly verse 5 of Psalm 43.

You'll notice Psalm 43 doesn't have a heading and it certainly feels like these two psalms belong together and perhaps they were originally one psalm or more likely Psalm 43 was written as a continuation or a sequel of Psalm 42.

Regardless, the refrain in verse 5 is a pivotal moment for the psalmist. In his anguish, he could go one of two ways. He could think like Christian and sink into such despair that he sees no way out and he gives up altogether.

[24 : 25] Or, he could be like hopeful and fight. Yes, I'm trapped in this place but I will not give up. I will lean into my hope, namely, my hope in God.

I will trust in his goodness. I will remind myself of his promises. I will fight against the current that is trying to drag me down to the very grave.

By God's help, I will endure this season of depression. And as we see, he chooses the way of hopeful. Except, he doesn't have a companion to come alongside him and remind him of this hope in God, so he preaches to himself.

Oh my soul, he says. Why are you cast down? And why are you in turmoil within me? Now, he knows the reasons for his distress.

That's not the question here. He's far from the temple in Jerusalem. He's oppressed, at least in some way, by his enemies and that becomes even clearer in Psalm 43 if the two do indeed belong together.

[25 : 34] But that's not really what he's asking himself. He's not really asking, what prompted me to feel this way in the first place? What he's really asking is, should you feel this way?

You feel terribly distant from God, you're questioning his whereabouts in your time of need, your enemies' taunts are getting into your head, you're crying day and night without reprieve.

While you may have more than enough reason to be troubled, should you really be imprisoned by giant despair and doubting castle? Hasn't your living, faithful God given you a way of escape?

Maybe he hasn't allowed you to escape from your circumstances, but why can't you escape from this dungeon of despair? Why are you crying day and night?

I can imagine this man standing in front of a mirror talking to himself. Why are you cast down? Why? And as I said, this is the turning point.

[26 : 40] He could have given up, but he didn't. He could have desperately poured all of his energy in trying to change his circumstances if that were even possible.

But as we discover, it really wasn't possible. Notice what he says in verse 7. Deep calls to deep. At the roar of your waterfalls, all your breakers and your waves have gone over me.

Your waterfalls, your breakers, your waves. This is the psalmist readily acknowledging the sovereignty of God over his situation.

He's not here by accident. He realizes this. For reasons unknown to him, he's here because God has led him here. And while some might be inclined to think that's terrible, how could a good and loving God ever providentially lead someone into such dire circumstances, the psalmist takes comfort in it.

Why? Because the only thing more terrifying than the trouble we might face in this world is facing that same trouble outside of the Lord's control.

[27:55] You see, if the breakers and the waves are within his control, first of all, he must have a good and wise purpose for them. Furthermore, he can cause them to cease at any moment.

In other words, as bad as any situation may seem, we're not trapped in chaos where no one anywhere has any control over what's happening. We're not left to the whims of an impersonal force of some kind.

Our God knows what is happening and he's in complete sovereign control over what's happening. And, he knows what's best for us.

And that's crucial. He knows what's best for us. And with that in mind, we can say with the psalmist here in verse 8, by day, the Lord commands his steadfast love.

And at night, his song is within me, a prayer to the God of my life. Please note that the psalmist writes, verse 8, even though the waves and the breakers are still crashing over him, he's still in the midst of this depression, yet he knows the Lord is sovereign and he knows the Lord is good.

[29:09] In fact, this almost reads as though he's saying, the Lord has led me into this hard providence, but I know it's according to his steadfast love.

He commands the waves and his love all at the same time. In other words, there might be a sense in which the psalmist recognizes even his hardships as a loving act of God, even if he doesn't understand it completely.

But getting back to the refrain in verse 5, what does the psalmist preach to himself while he's standing in front of that mirror?

Hope in God. Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. In his book, Spiritual Depression, Martin Lloyd-Jones asks, have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?

You see, the psalmist's tears were antagonizing him with that question, where is your God? But instead of just sitting there, listening to those taunts over and over again, getting buried in his despair, this man rises up, he goes to the mirror, if you will, and he begins preaching.

[30:39] And what does he preach? He preaches to himself about who God is and what he has promised. Hope in God, he says.

You will again praise him. He is your salvation. He is your God. He has not abandoned you. He will not leave you here.

He will rescue you. You can hope in him. That's what he's saying to himself. To be clear, this is not some sort of mindless optimism without any grounding whatsoever.

This is the truth of God grabbing sorrow by the collar and saying, you will not define reality. You will not determine the course of my life.

My God is greater than any depression. My God has said, if God is for us, who can be against us? Today we could add to that, couldn't we?

[31:39] He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Christ. So the psalmist refused to let his circumstances or his current feelings dominate his thinking.

And instead, he grounds his faith not in circumstances, not in feelings, but in the steadfast love and unchanging character of God.

So what can we learn from this? Well, if nothing else, we're reminded that when the soul is cast down, our hope is not determined by our changing circumstances or our feelings, which are likely out of our control anyway.

[32 : 53] Instead, we must press into ourselves, preaching to ourselves that we do have hope. And our hope is our unchanging God who loves us with a steadfast love.

In other words, we answer despair with the plain truth of God. Now, as the psalmist continues, we see how he remembers God in verse 6.

Throughout this psalm, he remembers and he reminds himself of God's character and faithfulness in the past. He acknowledges God's sovereignty in verse 7. He acknowledges his love in verse 8.

And he prays through all of his ongoing pain until he comes again to the refrain in verse 11. 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. So you'll notice that he doesn't stop preaching to himself.

[33 : 58] As long as the trial continues, his preaching continues, hope in God, hope in God, he is your salvation, he is your God. Over and over.

And that's it. Even if we include Psalm 43, this man's longing remains unresolved. The enemies are still present, the depression is still there, the thirst is still there, he hasn't yet tasted the fullness of what he hopes for.

And in that sense, this Psalm mirrors the entirety of the Old Testament where God's people are asking over and over again, when shall I come and appear before God?

And how does God ultimately answer that question? Well, he essentially says, don't bother coming to me, I'll come to you.

In John 14, Jesus says to his disciple, Philip, in particular, have I been with you so long and you still do not know me, Philip?

[35 : 08] Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. In other words, Jesus says, if you want to be in the presence of God, if you want to enjoy communion with him, if you want to see his face, if you want the ultimate resolution to all of your troubles, here I am.

I'm here. If anyone thirsts like a deer panting for water, let him come to me and drink. as it happens, God not only stepped into our darkness, but Christ has gone even deeper than any depression we've ever known.

Even lower than any loneliness we've ever known. Even darker than our darkest nights. Where is our God? There he is hanging on a cross for sinners.

shedding his blood. Opening a fountain of mercy for every soul that thirsts. God has come to us.

He is our hope and our salvation. Which is why the Apostle Paul can write, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

[36 : 32] For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

After days and days in Doubting Castle, beaten and starved, Christian suddenly remembers something. He says, What a fool am I to lie in a stinking dungeon when I may as well walk at liberty.

I have a key in my pocket. called promise that I am sure will open any lock in Doubting Castle. That's precisely what Psalm 42 invites us to do.

We may not be able to change our circumstances. The permacloud may still be there until March, April, who knows when. Our tears may be our food. But in Christ, we have a key in our pocket.

Always. As Peter says, we have precious and very great promises. So when your soul is cast down, reach for the key.

[37 : 44] Sounds so simple, doesn't it? It is. Reach for the key. Open your Bible. Read. Remind yourself of God's promises to you. Lift your eyes up to that cross and that empty tomb.

Try to imagine Christ, even now, standing at the right hand of the Father, interceding on your behalf, hearing every prayer you speak.

And stand in front of that mirror and preach to your own heart, 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. Let's pray. Father, we often feel weary.

We're often cast down. And yet, we are not without hope. You know the sorrows that weigh in our hearts at times. You have counted every tear.

[38 : 48] And none of them is wasted according to your wise and loving purpose. We'd ask that you would grant us the grace to speak truth into our souls when needed. when despair is preaching lies in our ears.

Teach us to answer with hope in you. Help us to fix our eyes on Christ who came down into our darkness. He bore our griefs and He opened up for us an everlasting fountain of mercy.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our living hope. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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