

# “Waiting on the Lord”

a sermon by

The Reverend David H. Green

First Presbyterian Church  
Galveston, Texas

**July 23, 2006**

*Text: “Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD! LORD, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” (Psalm 130:1-2).*

The charge for any Christian preacher is to preach the whole Gospel of God. In contrast to that command, the *inclination* of every preacher is to stay close to the texts and topics that are more comfortable or personally compelling. As a general rule, preachers also prefer to stay with the texts and topics that allow the sermons to be a bit of a pep talk or a pleasing word of encouragement – anything to let you leave this place with the good, warm-fuzzy feeling.

But life itself is more than the satisfaction of enjoying the controlled moments of success and celebration. Within our lives and throughout our world, there is a certain amount of brokenness.

Even Galveston, this place that more than a few of you describe as Paradise, knows something of brokenness. In saying that, I’m not speaking of the nightmares inflicted by storms of years gone by. I am speaking of the sadness, turmoil and tragedy that can strike at any time.

And yet, even when the people of God are stinging with the pain of this life, we gather together. Once here, we praise God, confess our sinfulness, hear of our forgiveness, receive God’s word proclaimed, give of our possessions and then, we go back out into the world.

In witnessing the faithfulness of God’s church, the world asks two questions of us: “How?” and “Why?”

In asking “How Christians gather in the presence of God?” the world is asking any one of several questions. Some are asking for the procedures and practices that allow people to be close to God. Others are accusing us of hypocrisy – pretending that we are holier than we actually are. For thousands of years, the Biblical Psalms have testified in response to these same questions. So we would do well to begin by reflecting on these remarkable writings.

When writing of the Psalter, that is the full collection of the Book of Psalms, Martin Luther said that it “might as well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.”

John Calvin considered the Psalms to be “An anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;’ for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”

The Biblical Psalms are often described as either the *prayer book* of the Bible or as the *song book* of the Bible. Both of these descriptions are correct. At once each psalm is a poetic psalm and a prayer. Not only do the words of the Psalms inform our minds, the Psalms also touch our hearts. Perhaps this is why the Psalter has held importance to every reader of the Holy Scriptures.

Through the ages, the Psalter has been of great importance to the people of God. Just as the Psalms have spoken in the past, they continue to speak to and through us today. Some years ago, a young scholar observed that “Reading the Psalms implies simultaneously two congregations of worshipers far removed from one another temporally and spatially. The first are those pilgrims of ancient Israel who expressed in the psalms their journey to the God of Israel. The second are pilgrims who throughout all time and in all places journey to God through praying the Biblical psalms. The pilgrims of the Biblical psalms have become models for subsequent pilgrims worldwide.”

This morning I read the 130<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The 130<sup>th</sup> Psalm is among the Psalms that is described as “A Song of Ascents” or as a ‘pilgrim’s song.’ Before the days of air travel, pilgrims would journey to Jerusalem, walking uphill through the terrain. Approaching the beautiful city, and what was once the temple set on high, the pilgrims would sing songs along their way.

In this context, it makes perfect sense for the pilgrim to sing out, saying:

“Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD! LORD, hear my voice! Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?”

On this journey, the pilgrim is quite literally walking out of the depths to the dwelling place of the Lord on high. Equally true, the pilgrim is walking figuratively out of the depths of despair and from sinfulness to approach the Lord on high.

Some of you have traveled to Jerusalem. You have seen for yourself, and perhaps have even traveled, on those ancient roadways that ascend into Jerusalem. For you this Psalm will hold a unique and special meaning.

Some of you have not traveled to Jerusalem. Even though you have not seen the hill for yourself, this Psalm is no less important.

Each person of faith, each human being for that matter, must encounter the experience of reaching out from despair. This is a very real part of life.

Now, I know that on this summer morning there are some vacationers worshiping with us. You came here because you thought Galveston to be an island paradise where nothing bad ever happens. Well, you are right, this is an island paradise and, with only a few exceptions, nothing bad ever happens.

For those few exceptions:

Where there is love, there will be loss;  
Where there is work, there will be uncertainty;  
Where there is life, there also will be death.

Regardless of where you may be, you cannot escape the realities of a broken world. Loss, uncertainty and even death are never more than a moment away.

This Psalm does have the image of the pilgrim crying out from the depth of despair. However, this Psalm does not – it absolutely *does not* – include the image of a pilgrim *locked* in despair.

### ***Ascending to the Lord***

This Psalm is not a ‘Song of *Quagmires*.’ This is a ‘Song of Ascent.’

“If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.”

I must stop for a moment and speak of what it means to “fear” the Lord, our God. Consider the sunset. This island paradise is situated perfectly to allow us an opportunity to sit and to be amazed by the setting sun and at the same time by the rising moon. On a good evening, the sky will shift and change hues. Every color of the prism struggles to hold that last glimpse of daylight. Eventually the sun succeeds at dipping below the horizon. As the darkness of night spreads across the horizon, it is interrupted only by the stars in the sky and by the lighted ships at sea. It is an awesome sight.

The sunset – such a large and grand event should compel us to fear the Lord. This is to say that we *should* be frightened by the awesome creative and destructive power held within the hand of God and that is unleashed daily on this world.

But we should not stop with a moment of fright. We should *also* be awed, perhaps even overwhelmed, by the magnificent creative and destructive power held within the hand of God and that is unleashed daily on this world.

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the LORD more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

These are beautiful words: “..hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption.”

The psalm is spoken not from one who is stuck hopelessly in despair. No, this is a song of ascent. This is a song spoken by one who is moving upward and out of despair. This is a song sung to our God, the one who will reach down to lift you up out of your despair.

Do you think this island is Paradise?

As the old saying goes, ‘you aint seen nothin’ yet!’

### ***The Work of Waiting Patiently***

The problem with this psalm is not a problem with the psalm so much as it’s a problem with each one of us.

We demand instant results. We expect immediate gratification and simply cannot understand any reason for delay.

This is not a particularly new and modern creation of humankind. A story has been told of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his preparations for the Yalta Conference. Roosevelt had expressed his hope that the Yalta Conference would be brief. Upon hearing this, Churchill remarked, “I do not see any way of realizing our hopes about world organization in five or six days. Even the Almighty took seven.”

Some projects are simply too big, too complex, to be completed in a day or in a week. In his Inaugural Address, John Kennedy set out a challenge for the world, and particularly, for the American people:

“...to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah – to ‘undo the heavy burdens ... and to let the oppressed go free.’ And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved. All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.”

If we are to work to reach up from despair, if we are to work together to improve our society, we must begin. John Kennedy spoke of this work as a long-term and lasting objective. This made his clarion call all the more important – “Let us begin.”

As we begin and as we continue this journey, there is no way to predict where it might lead. Neither can I speculate as to how long it will take. But I can assure you that if we never begin, we most certainly shall never complete the work at hand.

In the 1890s Orville and Wilbur Wright became interested in aviation through a German engineer and his gliders. With nearly 10 years of study and work building, testing and rebuilding their aircraft, they finally completed their quest. “On Dec. 17, 1903, they made near Kitty Hawk, N.C., the first controlled, sustained flights in a power-driven airplane. Of their four flights on that day, the first, made by Orville, lasted 12 seconds, and the fourth, by Wilbur, covered 852 feet (259 m) in 59 seconds.”

Those two brothers began with an impossible task of building a machine that would fly. But with their success, the work did not end. Even today, just up the road from us, brave women and men continue the work of perfecting flight as they reach into the heavens above. And so it continues... the study and work of building, testing and rebuilding the aircraft.

In a sense, the journey and the work of reaching up from despair, that work of reaching into the heavens shall continue throughout our lives, and throughout the lives of every future generation. Our charge is not to *complete* the work of God. Instead, our charge is to begin. Once started, we are to continue. In doing this we are to be faithful to the work and to the opportunity that are set out before us.

And so I tell you, “...hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous redemption.” The Lord will redeem us from all our iniquities.