

In this, I hope

Kim talked earlier about our identity being in Christ....how none of the things we aspire to or *strive* for can fulfill us and the only identity that matters is that which Christ gives us and we should be confident in that. Juliet spoke on rest in Christ. Again, we *strive* for so many things and run ourselves ragged trying to be enough but we can only find rest in knowing that Christ has done it all and that we can rely fully on him. Both of those topics involve a striving. A striving to be whatever it is that you are feeling you need to be at this moment. A striving to do whatever it is that you are feeling you need to do to make through.

We were reminded that we should be seeking our identity fully in Christ. We shouldn't be trying to do it all: to seek our salvation in what we get done or how good we are. We *should* be seeking our rest in Christ, not in the never ending to-do list being completed. But what about those times when we just don't feel it? We feel fairly confident in our identity in Christ, we know that we should rest in him but we aren't where we thought we should be and we know that there just has to be something more out there.

Psalms 42 is one of my favorite Psalms and it starts out like this in verses 1-3: "As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul 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 the day long, 'Where is your God?'"

How many of you hear of the good things that you ought to be directing yourself toward and hoping for but you feel like you are floundering. A family member just found out they have cancer. A friend's teen is rebelling in ways that could cause long-lasting damage. You can't find a job, you just lost your job or you just plain don't enjoy the job you do have. Or things should be going ok but gosh darn it, your kids just won't cooperate and it's sooooo much harder than it should be! Your plans didn't work out. "Where is your God?"

A couple of verses further down, in Psalm 42:5, the psalmist asks the question, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" and then he encourages, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." That's all well and good to say but how do we put this into practice? I don't know if you've ever tried to conjure up hope in a time of doubt but in my experience, it doesn't work very well. I just end up feeling like more of a failure because I can't get myself to be more hopeful! Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" and I can tell you from experience, it's true!

Now naturally, if we aren't diligently seeking Christ, just as we will seek our identity or rest elsewhere, we will default to seeking our hope somewhere else as well. And there are a lot of places to find it. We live in a world of false hope! As Kim and Juliet described earlier, a world of find your own solution, do this and this, etc. So we start to come up with our own solutions, our own systems, our own things that are going to fix it.

I found myself (and sometimes still find myself) in this spiral over the last year and a half as I was trying to get my baby to learn to sleep in the midst of ear infections, teething (who has 16 teeth before they're

18 months old???) and cold after cold. I would pep talk myself, "If I can just get him through this cold it will be better." "Once these teeth come through he'll sleep through the night." "Once these antibiotics kick in...." I found myself sitting on his bedroom floor nursing him or standing there bouncing him trying desperately to get him to sleep, feeling like I was ignoring my other children and my husband and feeling guilty, absolutely and utterly exhausted and hopeless. And every trick I found that worked Harris found out worked and then....it stopped working. He's a stubborn little stinker! People offered help but there really wasn't anything anyone could do when it was 2, 3, 4, and/or 5 o'clock in the morning and all he would take was me. I felt like I couldn't be used by God to do what he wanted me to do because I was(am) so darn tired and there wasn't(isn't) time. I get frustrated because I have other responsibilities that I was able to do when I had 5 kids under 7 but I can't seem to do them now with this needy baby. And I knew that "this too shall pass" but when you're tired it doesn't feel like anything is going to pass and I just felt like I was going to be stuck there forever trying to rock this sweet little boy - that I loved so much but who was driving me to utter craziness - to sleep. And if I *do* get him to sleep to get him to stay that way for longer than two hours. And dear God in three months I'm supposed to be talking to ladies about hope? How is that supposed to work??? Right now I feel like I could give a talk on hopelessness.

In the midst of this struggle I read a book by Abigail Dodds, *(A)Typical Woman*, and a sentence she said stuck out to me. "We must be faithful women in the life and circumstances He has given us." I knew that. It wasn't a new statement. I've told other people the same thing. But in that instance it struck me again, put me in my place, brought me to repentance, and made me think about all of the things that we as Christians feel like we need to push through before we can be of use to God. We put our hope in pushing through or past these things so we can get to the real living for God. Once I can get to working out regularly..... Once my new medication starts working.... Once the kids are in school.... Once the kids are out of school for the summer.... Once I get that new job.... Once I get this system in place.... Once I get this baby to sleep normally.... And the lists go on and on and on. And a new "once I" takes the place of the old one quicker than they get fulfilled,

The alternative to the striving to make things work is becoming tired and apathetic and just plain giving up, but trying to make that ok. (I realize that some of you struggle with depression but that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about making excuses for what we know deep inside is laziness.) We try to celebrate our shortcomings by putting them on a t-shirt or blogging about them or creating a meme. "I'm a hot mess, deal with it." "Don't talk to me before my coffee." "Bless this mess." Now obviously some of these are meant to be a joke but some of us if we are truly honest live by these little mantras. We sit around and take a load off and use the excuse that it's too hard or we need our "me time" but we don't do any of the things that God calls us to do because "God just made me this way, there's nothing I can do about it." "You have to love me the way I am." Or we talk crap about those that are trying their hardest. We are covering our inadequacies by glorifying them. Yes, God does love us the way we are but he calls us to change. He calls us out of our life of apathy. He calls us to live differently FOR HIM. The same thing applies to us that fall back into apatheticness as to those of us that are wrongfully striving. "We must be faithful women in the life and circumstances He has given us." Our hope should not be in giving up and letting the chips fall where they may and pretending that we don't care. We must do something. We must have hope and live out that hope.

So where does the Bible tell us to place our hope? Psalm 62:5 says, similarly to Psalm 42 that I read from earlier, "Find rest, O my soul, in God alone, my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken." "Find rest, O my soul, *in God alone.*" Biblical hope is in our God ALONE. Not in the next system or circumstance going our way. Not in pretending it's not an issue. God doesn't promise that things will be easy or go the way we want them. But he does promise to keep his promises.

Ephesians 2:12 states, referring to the time before salvation, "remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Proverbs 23:18 says, "Surely there is a future and your hope will not be cut off." We were lost, separated from Christ. But now we have hope through Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection from the dead. We can be with him in glory forever.

But how does that knowledge help us today? I don't know if you like me have ever had the thoughts of, "Sure, that's nice for the future but what about right now? How does that help me to serve God where I am now? Because I'm just not feeling it!"

Hebrews helps out with my first point of this future hope in Christ in the here and now. The first thing that hope does in the here and now is act as our anchor. Hebrew 6:19-20 says, "We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf." In 10:23 we read, "Let us hold fast the confession to our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." And in Hebrews 11:1 we see that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We may not see it right now. We may not feel it right now. But we can have faith that God will keep his promises and that faith anchors us and gives us a hope that is unexplainable.

Secondly, hope gives us joy. I quoted the first part of Proverbs 13:12 earlier, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick." The second half of that verse states "But a desire fulfilled is a tree of life" which makes me think of being blissfully satisfied and content. Paul says in Romans 5:2, "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" in Romans 12:12, "Rejoice in hope," and in 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." Our longing, whether we acknowledge it or not, is *for Christ* and *in him*, that desire is fulfilled...in *him* we find our hope and that hope gives us an unexplainable contentment and joy in the here and now.

The third thing (and the one I hold onto the most at this point in my life) is that hope gives us endurance. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." We read the Bible for encouragement, to see what God has done through those who have gone before us and that gives us endurance and hope. In 1 Thessalonians 1:3 in the NIV we see that Paul is commending the believers in Thessalonica of their "Endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Isaiah 40:31 says, "But they who wait (in the NIV hope) for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. Titus 2:11 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce

ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, *waiting for our blessed hope*, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ.” We don’t do the things we do in vain. We don’t do it just throwing up our hands and figuring it will all wash out in the end. We do it “waiting for our blessed hope,” knowing that the hard things we see and do here on this earth are not the end. Jesus is coming back to make all things new! And *that* hope gives us endurance to see us through to the goal.

It isn’t always going to be easy. More often than not, the pieces won’t fall into place or at least not when we thought they would. I still don’t and I may never have that farmhouse. But we can be confident that God has our best interests in mind and put our hope in him and his plans, no matter where they take us. “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”

We’ve covered a lot of stuff today but a lot of very important stuff that we deal with regularly in this world. Things so often feel heavy and out of control. We so often feel like we need to find our identity in the myriad of identities that the world offers us. We desire to go, go, go so that when we finally get it all done and have achieved everything perfectly right God will accept us and then we can be at rest. We find ourselves lacking and looking for hope in the next thing we can set up to regain that control we think we need. But we can find all of these things: our identity, our rest, and our hope in Christ and in Christ *alone*. None of the other answers will suffice. None of the other things we strive for will satisfy us.

And I want to reiterate and echo what Kim said earlier. We don’t do it for us. We do it for him. Jesus did what we couldn’t do. He lived a perfectly, spotlessly, sinless, holy life. He died in our place. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” When God looks at us, he sees what Jesus did, not what we have done. Out of gratitude for him and his love for us, we serve him and we give him *all* of the glory. And when we do this - when we let go of all of the expectations and aspirations that we have of ourselves and instead look to Christ and what he would have us do, it all fades away. And the only thing that is important is him and serving him. This is where the verse, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” is appropriate. We CAN do all of the things he has CALLED us to do. Not all of the things. Not none of the things. What he has called us to. When we are giving him the glory and making him the center, striving to do what he wills, he will give us the strength to do exactly what he has for us to accomplish and we will be able to breath easy knowing that we have done what we have done for his glory and our good is a bonus that we get to enjoy if not in the present, most definitely in the much anticipated and hoped for future. In the words of Abigail Dodds, “We carry in us the hope of glory, and all the while, that hope carries us through the dark nights and unique circumstances we find ourselves in. It’s a hope that simply cannot be quenched.”

In a few minutes we are going to end with a song, spend about 20 minutes in personal reflection, and then get back together in our small groups for discussion. As you reflect and discuss, be honest with yourself and with others about where you struggle with these things and then call them what they are. What they are is a lack of reliance on God and that is a sin. Repent of that and then commit to seeking him and him *alone*. And we do that through reading his word, through prayer, and through the church community that he has given us to work these things out in. BUT we can’t even do that on our own. Ask

God to help you. Ask God to give you the desire for him. Jesus tells us in Matthew 6, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

If you need someone to talk to, please don't hesitate to ask Kim, Juliet, Nicole, or I and we will be happy to lend an ear and pray with you.

I'll leave you with this excerpt from St Patrick's breastplate:

Christ, be with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie,
Christ where I sit,
Christ where I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

We do it all IN CHRIST ALONE.

Discussion Questions

1. Where do you find yourself putting your hope? Are there unhealthy patterns that you know you repeat when you feel like things aren't going right?
2. What would it look like for you to be content in whatever life circumstance you find yourself?
3. Have you experienced hope that serves as an anchor? As endurance/strength? That gives you joy?
4. How can you begin to pray and trust that God will use every seemingly hopeless situation he puts you in to make you dependent on him for your good?
5. How can you begin to lay down your personal preferences and goals when you feel that you aren't being "fulfilled" or that things aren't going the way you planned? How can you change your attitude to one of hope rather than one of despair? How can you serve the Lord more fully where you are at right now?

6. God calls us to be content where we are but sometimes there are changes that we need to make so that we can serve him better. Are there any ways that you are convicted that you should change your direction or how you handle things?

7. In what area of your life have you felt most challenged this weekend? What habits can you put in place to more fully place your identity, your rest, your hope, and your all in Christ?