

# 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12: Excelling at Love

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's please stand for the reading of God's word. Psalm 130. A song of ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. 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 plentiful redemption.

And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let me see it. Let me see it. It was August of the year 1914 when Ernest Shackleton and his 27 crew members set sail from England in an effort to cross the Antarctic over land.

[ 1 : 35 ] In the flyleaf of the Bible given to Shackleton by Queen Mother Alexandra of England were these words. May the Lord help you to do your duty and guide you through all the dangers of land and sea.

May you see the works of the Lord and all his wonders in the deep. And all his wonders in the deep. What awaited that crew at the bottom of the world was the most desolate and lonely region on the face of the earth.

By October of the following year, no sign of them had been made. The ship, in fact, had been trapped, crushed in the ice.

And for five months, Shackleton and his men were castaways, drifting on ice packs, and literally holding on for survival.

[ 2 : 44 ] The sights and sounds of the ice flows made as they were coming in upon the ship are magnificently described.

And I want to read them to you. As they were at the bottom of the earth, in all of its blue ice, and their only remaining earthly hope was disappearing, it did so because of this raging ocean.

The whole surface of the ice was a chaos of movement. It looked like an enormous jigsaw puzzle, the pieces stretching away to infinity and being shoved and crunched together by some invisible but irresistible force.

The impression of its titanic power was heightened by the unhurried deliberateness of the motion. Wherever two thick flows came together, their edges butted and ground against one another for a time.

Then when neither of them showed signs of yielding, they rose slowly and often quiveringly, driven by the implacable power behind them. There were sounds of the pack in movement, the basic noises, the grunting and whining of the flows, along with the occasional thud as a heavy block of ice collapsed.

[ 4 : 07 ] But in addition, the pack under compression seemed to have an almost limitless repertoire of other sounds, many of which seemed strangely unrelated to the noise of ice undergoing pressure.

Sometimes there was a sound like a gigantic train, with squeaky axles being shunted roughly about with a great deal of bumping and clattering. At the same time, a huge ship's whistle blew, mingling with the crowing of roosters, the roar of a distant surf, the soft throb of an engine far away, and the moaning cries of an old woman.

In the rare periods of calm, when the movement of the pack subsided for a moment, the muffled rolling of drums drifted across the air.

Out of the deep. Those are the sounds. It's the picture that I attached with Psalm 130 in verse 1.

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. What was it that the Queen wrote him?

[ 5 : 24 ] May you see the works of the Lord and all the wonders of the deep. The writer of this psalm was experientially aware of seasons in life when their inside heart rose like ice meeting ice and ground its way to the depths of the sound of a cello pleading, pleading for God's mercy.

If you can't feel that, you'll have trouble entering where Psalm 130 begins.

It is accompanied by all the instrumental sounds that threaten life itself. And to whom does this psalmist cry in such an hour?

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. To Yahweh, Adonai.

To the Lord who is master over all things. And it's a cry for? For mercy. Let your ear be attentive, verse 2, to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

[ 6 : 49 ] Have you ever prayed like that before? A prayer that comes from the very depth of your being and shakes the very core of your substance in an hour when you wonder where the deliverance will be had.

Interestingly, it's not the first time in this collection of songs that we've been looking at this summer, 120 to 134, not the first time that it has opened with the psalmist at the bottom of the earth in blue ice looking for God's hand.

Turn back to Psalm 120, the very first of the songs of ascents. Verse 1 and 2, In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me.

And what was it that He was distressed about in Psalm 120? Verse 5, Woe to me that I sojourn in Meshech, and that I dwell among the tents of Kadar.

It was a call to the Lord in the distress of soul that was under the strain of living in this wilderness world, being pinched, crowded from all ungodliness.

[ 8 : 19 ] Thus comes the prayer for deliverance. Psalm 121, Likewise starts in the same manner, I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my health come?

And this one is not necessarily the strains of living in the world where you feel crowded by ungodliness, but in verse 7 you see that it's from all the evil that just seems to roll through life.

And when the evil rolls across the threshold of your life, there is this call of lifting up to God in prayer, asking for His help.

Psalm 123, To you I lift up my eyes, you who are enthroned in the heavens. The end of verse 2, Have mercy upon us.

Verse 3, Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us. Why? What is this prayer rooted in? For we've had more than enough of contempt, our soul has had more than enough of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

[ 9 : 26 ] Not rising from the strain of living in the world, not pleading for the evil that has crossed your threshold, but a contempt from the way they have been treated by all the outsiders.

It is no surprise to come to Psalm 130 and see in this collection, it rising initially from the depths of the earth.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. What is surprising about our psalm is the circumstances that brought it.

Not the world, not the evil, not feeling like you've been mistreated by the outsider. It's the prayer, it's the entreaty of a man or a woman who realizes that their own sin has made them out of sorts with God.

The cry in 1 and 2 is understood by the confession in verse 3. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

[ 10 : 42 ] That's the uniqueness of the psalm. The writer is moved to prayer because of an internal awareness that he or she is out of sorts with God, not because of the world, or the flesh, or the devil, because deep within the very heart that is calling for mercy is the awareness that this heart itself has gone wrong.

Someone once said, I don't know what the heart of a bad man looks like, but I know what the heart of a good man looks like, and it's terrible. You ever feel that way? It says there, If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Rudder's piece translates the word amiss, a good translation.

Iniquities literally means a thing which is not equal. Whatever breaks the commandment of God is not equal. In other words, iniquities are those things which are out of proportion to who God is and what God would do.

So anywhere in our lives, in our thoughts, in our feelings, in our affections, in our desires, in our pursuits, in our grasping, anything that is not in perfect conformity with the character of God or the goodness of God or the way in which he would think or the way in which he would act, it is in iniquity.

It is not equal. It is out of proportion with your creator. Creator. It is therefore amiss. That's why so many people define sin as missing the mark.

[ 12 : 20 ] It doesn't square up. That's the nature of this highly unusual psalm. And I want to just stop here for a moment and let us think our way clear.

This is an unusual prayer in our times. The gut-wrenching groan of someone who's come to know that they are out of relationship with God and it is their own doing.

Those aren't prayers we often offer. We offer prayers to God because of a gut-wrenching sense that we have been wronged in this world, that things are not right in this world, that we've been mistreated by this world.

But this psalm is different. Out of the depths I cry to you. My iniquities have overwhelmed my own soul.

Today there are very few who even go so far as to call themselves a sinner. And I don't speak in terms of the world, I speak in terms of the church. How often have I run into it over the last ten years when we ask the question for membership, do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His wrath, save His sovereign mercy?

[ 13 : 40 ] And how many have wrestled with being able to affirm that truth. That without God's mercy I am a sinner can be defined as such.

This is a foreign prayer. I'm not speaking in terms of the culture only. But to the church. We've convinced ourselves that we're intuitively good.

Inherently good. You see this in philosophy. Where the doctrine of total depravity was thrown off some time ago. Where mankind, humanity, was vested with inherent goodness that was put on.

You see this in politics. You'll hear all sorts of appeals to this from both sides of the aisle on this in the coming six weeks.

That we are appealing to the better side of our nature. That this notion that we are stained in every aspect of our being is not true for voting Americans.

[ 14 : 50 ] We are inherently good. And if we can just confine ourselves to the goodness, we'll rise.

You see it not only in philosophy or politics. You see it in educational psychology. You see it over the last 50 years where one's concerned and rightly so for our self-esteem has been so guarded that we have raised a culture that is inherently good.

We see this most ironically in the church. We live in an era where the church has really adopted the Beatles theme song All We Need Is Love.

We forget, of course, that then they broke up. If we could just have a little more love. If we could just get you channeling in week to week on positive things, you'll be able to move forward.

Well, we may need love, but we all have something between us for which we should lament. The psalmist says, If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

[ 16 : 10 ] That's a judicial term. Who could enter your presence if you were to actually mark what is amiss or unequal or not right? The implication, of course, is no one. The implication in our day, of course, is, well, everyone.

Who could stand? It reminds me of the words of one of the Hodge brothers. I can't remember if it's Charles or A.A., whoever wrote the Book of Life, anyway.

and the words say something to the effect of if we were to number our sins according to our conscious acts of violation of duty, they would be as numerous as the moments of our existence.

What he's trying to drive at is never in our life, in your life or mine, have we fully aligned ourselves with God's character and goodness.

Never has there been a single thought that is completely pure. That's the teaching of the scriptures. Interestingly, in the history of our own world, it is when the doctrine of sin emerged within a political sphere in England under Wilberforce that mankind would inherently treat people in ugly ways.

[ 17 : 33 ] It wasn't until that was lifted up that the slavery laws in England were overthrown. It was the recovery of Psalm 31 that had life-giving transforming power to the culture.

And yet the church runs from it. And our prayers are not well acquainted with it. Well, we don't want to stay there forever.

There's more I could stay there on, but I don't want to. It's too depressing. But let me say this is perhaps the greatest need of the hour. I know that's a strong statement, but I think it might be true. Perhaps the greatest need of the hour to be able to sing this verse with the intended authorial intent of I am a sinner and undone Savior, sovereign mercy.

perhaps our love for God is so shallow. Perhaps our appreciation for the cross is so diminished. Perhaps our experience of his power so little because the lament of our sins is so infrequent.

[ 18 : 49 ] God is so important. I know that these opening verses will not resonate with all. there's objections to be made, and I understand them.

All rather morbid, you know, to come to church on a Sunday afternoon, to be pulled down into the depths with the blue ice and the sounds of the creaking wood breaking and no help to be found. I know what it's like to come to church and feel like, oh my gosh, here we go again. I've had quite enough of feeling bad this week already. And I want to say I agree with you, if that's where the psalm ends.

But the Christian faith must help us rise above this call. It must have something to say beyond this confession, and the psalm does. So turn the page, not in your Bible, but in your mind.

Confession takes place in the church within the certainty of God's goodness and anguish will give way to assurance.

[ 20 : 02 ] Thus, in the order of ancient services, the prayer of confession is followed by absolution and the prayer of assurance. Anguish does give way to assurance.

Look at Psalm 130 and verse 4. But, but with you there is forgiveness. Amen. Imagine being stuck in the bottom of your soul, acknowledging and knowing that you're out of sorts with God, and there be no hope for you.

But that is not the Christian message. The psalmist coming up from the depths says, but with you there is forgiveness.

The unequal ledger will be set right. The rupture can be repaired. And so there ought to be, even within your lamenting, an immediate grasping hold of the certainties of the Christian faith that begin to elevate you in your rising.

Hope. There is hope. There is hope for you and for me. Praise God. God. Interestingly, notice the result.

[ 21 : 20 ] Verse 4, but with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared. That's a striking word, isn't it? I mean, at first glance, fear seems to be a strange outcome for the one who gets forgiven.

You're going to be forgiven so that you'll fear. And it's only an indication of what fear really means in the wisdom literature, in the Hebrew understanding.

Fear does not mean this kind of servile, you know, frightened life. I'm forgiven and I can't, I'm walking on eggshells all my life. No. The fear of the Lord is inherent within it, is reverence for God and relationship with God.

So when it says that with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared, that you may be known, you could actually say. That you may be well acquainted with me and me with you.

What a great thing to have all of that restored. So where do we go? How does it happen? How do we emerge from the Antarctic of our life to the warmer sites above?

[ 22 : 33 ] Verse 5, I wait for the Lord. My soul waits and in His word I hope. I would turn you to His word.

just as the rudder's peace, just so majestically elevated in His word. I trust. I want to stop on this for a minute too.

Our only hope is in God's word. Let me see if I can give you the implication of this. It is the word of God and that alone which will grow faith in God. nothing else will do it.

Your salvation and mine is dependent upon God's word. Now that explains why when you come to Holy Trinity Church there's such an emphasis on word and on words.

In fact, words are what make humanity distinct from all other creation. this incredible ability to relate and to communicate, to know and to be known in ever elevating ways.

[ 23 : 41 ] And so when you come here there's an emphasis on word and on words. And it's not that we're trying to intellectualize the Christian faith. It's not that we're trying to make the Christian faith elitist.

we're devoted to words, particularly God's words, because without them we are not saved. That's what I believe, the core of my being.

At the end of the day, I want you to know this explains why we should be concerned that every child in our city learns to read, that every child be able to appreciate words, that every one of them is familiar with that which is spoken and that which is written and that we are ever growing to do it a better job at it.

It's not merely so that we can compete in a global economy, as important as that is. It's not merely so that some can rise from economic dependency, as important as that is.

It's not merely that we can secure better vocational opportunities, as helpful as they will be. It's because without the ability to apprehend words, you cannot know God.

[ 24 : 50 ] And what does he hope? hope, and in his word, I hope. A relationship with God without words is impossible.

And in his word, I hope. And the psalmist is confident that God will be true to his word, that God has spoken.

This is what makes Christianity distinct from any other religion. It believes that in Jesus Christ, God has spoken. God has spoken. And that word, apprehended, is life.

And so when you're wallowing in a soul that is caught, conflicted, and knowing that you're amiss, I want you to know today there is hope. But it resides in his word, in that word made flesh, in order that he might make the Father known to all those who believe, that you and I might become children of God.

The psalmist is confident that God's word will come true. I'll tell you why he's confident. Look at verse 6. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman for the morning, more than the watchman for the morning.

[ 26 : 07 ] Listen, if there's one thing the watchman waiting for the morning knows, is that at a certain time, the sun is going to rise. that's what the watchman knows.

If he never thought it would rise, he wouldn't be out there waiting. He is certain. The psalmist says, I know that I shall live because of God's word.

And I wait for that even more than the certainty with which the watchman waits for the morning light. Because night will give way to day.

And that confidence then, if you just see it, the cry that opens of confession is rooted in the certainty of God's forgiveness. And it then gives way to this call, verse 7 and 8.

And this is where you ought to see the psalm because you begin to see now that it is completely moved and progressed. Oh Israel, hope in the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption.

[ 27 : 16 ] And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. That confidence now has turned into a call. And it's not a cry to God for mercy. It's a call to all the world.

Keep coming. Keep hoping. Keep looking. At his word. You too shall be saved.

From that wretched man that I am. What a glorious, glorious gospel. I love to actually connect verse 6 to verse 7 in the context of those original travelers.

Imagine they're marching their way toward Jerusalem at one of the great feasts and they're lamenting many things and they're praying for protection in the world and they're praying against evil and they're praying against the contempt with which they're treated in the world and in the workplace and they're also praying and lamenting their own sins and as they come to the gate after this line about the watchman waiting on the city wall for the morning there are those already having arrived crying out over the tops of the wall.

Oh Israel hope in the Lord with him there is plenteous redemption. shit. You too shall get in.

[ 28 : 43 ] Wow. Me? Me? Me? Me who is amiss in mind? Me who is amiss in desire?

Me who is out of sorts with God? I shall get in? What news is this that comes from the height of the city wall?

This is the Christian gospel. There's hope for you and for me. Let me conclude by making the links as firmly as I can for you because I'd love to know that there were some today who came in despair of soul and will walk out today in newness of life.

Take a look at this word in verse 4. Psalm 130 verse 4. It was Jesus who would pick up on this word in his own ministry and look at the paralytic and say your sins are forgiven.

To which the religious leaders would say but who can forgive sins? But God. And Jesus says well if you want to know whether or not I can forgive sins which is harder to say your sins are forgiven or take up your malady and walk but that you might know that I can forgive sins.

[ 30 : 03 ] Arise! Arise! Take up your bed and go home. In Christ forgiveness comes.

He is God's word for you. Look at the word redemption in verse 7. O Israel hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption.

I love that word because I need not just redemption but I need it in abundance. But redemption. How does the New Testament treat this word?

With him is plentiful redemption. Paul writes in Romans 3.24 through the redemption that is in Christ. The Christian writers take all of this psalm and show you God's word come in the flesh. Titus 2.14 who gave himself to redeem us speaking of Jesus. Psalm 130 verse 8. O Israel hope in the Lord I'm sorry and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

[ 31 : 05 ] All his iniquities. All his sins. Matthew 1.21 in regard to Jesus. You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. Revelation 1.5 Jesus who freed us from our sins.

So you come here today and you begin to feel within your soul. You know what? I know everywhere I go everybody tells me I'm not out of sorts with God. I've come to Holy Trinity this afternoon. I've come to realize I am out of sorts with God.

Is there hope for me? Even me? The answer of course is yes. because of the work of Jesus. And so I want you to know that all the theological language of Psalm 130 is found in Jesus and Jesus has come for you.

so there might have been many tears in your journey. I would point you today to the cross and I would tell you with certainty and confidence that you can know him, that he will be known by you, he will take you in, he is the God of open arms.

He's not like these barricades out here trying to keep you away this afternoon. He says, come unto me, all who are weary, heavy laden, I'll give you rest.

[ 32 : 29 ] The result of course is your own voice, which is crying for mercy, will begin to call to him in praise.

First sign of a new Christian. They begin to arise and thank God. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this beautiful psalm. May the trajectory of the psalm fit the trajectory of our hearts on this day.

Whether we've known you for 50 years or for five minutes, may we acknowledge that without your mercy, we are undone, but that you are merciful in plenty.

and we grasp hold of Christ, asking that with our own voice, we might rise into your presence and sing your praise. In Jesus' name, amen.

Amen. Amen. God. Amen. Come on, man, let's go.

[ 34 : 09 ] Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right. Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right.

Take off your guilty tears and wrath. The evidence above the things we went to see. Starring deep in love, fresh and empty feet. Blood atone for every breath, blood atone for every breath.

It sprinkles down the throne of grace. Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right.

Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right. Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right.

[ 35 : 13 ] But we will see that we see the glory. And our reflection brings to strong and glory.

So give him hope for him to cry. Give him hope for him to cry. Let that grace of God. Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right.

Take off your guilty tears and wrath. Arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right.

Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right. Arise, arise, arise, arise, my soul on the right.

Take off your guilty tears and wrath. Amen. Amen. Hear now the benediction.

[ 36 : 52 ] Seek his face. You shall find that you do not seek in vain. For can the ear of sovereign grace be deaf when you complain?

No. Still the ear of sovereign grace attends the mourner's prayer. May you ever find the access to breathe your sorrows there.

Amen. You may be seated. Please. Thank you.