

The Pilgrim's Waiting

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[0 : 00] Psalm 130 on page 518. This is a psalm for people who are stuck, for people who feel like they've fallen into a very big pit.

But this is a psalm for those who feel they are paralyzed and can't get out of their own situation. It's the third of the pilgrim psalms that we are looking at together for those who are walking the life of faith.

And this believer has fallen into a very deep hole and is about to go under. Verse 1 and 2. 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. We're not told exactly what the depths are the psalmist faces.

We're not supposed to know because the depths are... There are not just one kind of deep place. And this covers every deep circumstance in our Christian life, whether it's the distress is physical or emotional or financial or familial.

[1 : 33] Every Christian experiences the depths at some time or other. I look out, some of you are teenagers. And some people think if you're a teenager you can't have experienced the depths.

It's not true. Every single one of us at some time, whether by a trauma, a fast suffering, or the slow erosion of faith, or an overwhelming sense of shame in myself and my own sin, a deterioration in your marriage or in your family or betrayal or loss, every single one of us at one time or other, when we experience the deep place, will learn to cry this, out of the depths, O Lord, I cry to you.

Hear my voice. There's a desperation here. This person is floundering. And you know, when you get into that deep place, self-help is no help at all.

Self-help is only help in the shallows. And there's only one thing the psalmist hangs his thread of hope on. It is that God will hear him. Sometimes the psalms speak about the deep place as in the waters, where you are sinking under the waves.

Nothing to put your feet on. And the waves are breaking over you. And you've been kicking your legs and your arms. And they feel like they are lead weights. And you're just tired. You feel like you're about to be overwhelmed and go down.

[3 : 02] Other times the psalms speak about the deep place as a hole or a pit. The walls are slippery.

And it doesn't matter what you do. You cannot climb out. And if I could be personal for just a moment. In late 2009, I fell into a pit.

And the first thing that happens when you fall deep into the pit is you lose perspective. You can't see anything except the walls that are around you. You feel very much alone.

You can't see what's really going on. You can't see over the edge. And in the isolation, you recognise that you've got to go through this on your own. And nice people come to the edge of the pit and they call out things to you.

Like, dig this way. Or, here's a spade. Or things like that. And the more you dig, the deeper you go. What makes this so painful in this psalm is a deep sense, the psalmist writes, of his own foolishness and twistedness and sinfulness.

[4 : 12] Look at verse 3. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

This is not guilt. This is not just self-blame. The word iniquity means crooked, bent, twisted. And the word mark is the word to watch.

In other words, if the Lord watched and saw all my crookedness, I couldn't possibly stand. Because what happens when you sink into the depths is that all the masks that we've so carefully constructed with other people and with ourselves, they don't work anymore.

They get stripped off. It's in the deep place you have to face certain truths. And you stop trying to justify yourself and you stop trying to compare yourself with others.

And you stop denying your own twistedness. You stop competing with others. You stop worrying about what other people think. You give up that ludicrous belief in your own goodness.

[5 : 25] And you learn that what others think of you is not important and what you think of yourself is not all that important. But there's only one set of eyes that matter. And that's the eyes of God.

And God, if you should set your eyes on my twistedness, I'm sunk. And I don't think he's saying this because he's created his own pit.

But he's recognizing that if God were to deal with us according to our own twistedness, there would be no hope. And you might be thinking, why can't we hear something more positive this morning, David?

This is a very disheartening. I come to church to get encouraged. I want to hear an inspiring word. If I wasn't depressed before I got here, I am now.

This is what's called a psalm of lament. There are different psalms, praise psalms, lament psalms, repentance psalms. The biggest number is psalms of lament.

[6 : 27] And there's a scholar called Walter Brueggemann who says that what psalms of lament do is they bring a formfulness to our grief.

All of these psalms are meant to be sung and said in the Christian community together. But the problem, when you fall into the hole or when you think you're going under the waves and it feels so arbitrary and so random and so formless and so alone, what the psalms of lament do is they take the worst experiences of life and make it so that we can speak them with honesty in the presence of God, the only one who truly knows and can truly act.

They're given to us as a Christian community to give us a language and a grammar, if you will, so that we can articulate with honesty our pain and our distress and to name it to the God who can change things.

I think that's one of the hardest things. It's to be truthful and to articulate what's really going on. And praying these psalms together is a way for us to hold those, hold each other, who are in the deepest pit.

And we are saying to those of you who are in the pit right now, your experience is real and genuine and we are pilgrims together.

[7 : 58] And when we pray them through the psalm like this, and what we're going to do at the end of the sermon is we're going to read the psalm together. When we do it together like this, we are saying to each other, the pit is not bottomless.

It seems random, but it's meaningful. Your distress has a shape. Your grief is not the ultimate reality.

And I think it's amazing when you look through this psalm. He never prays that God would get him out of the pit. I imagine he has thousands of times, nothing wrong with that.

And even more amazing, when we come to the end of the psalm, there is no change in his circumstances. He's still up to his neck, but everything has changed and he leads in praise.

So the psalm of lament often have a turning point. And you can look at verse 4, the turning point begins. But. And what is the turning point?

[9 : 00] What is the change? It's the two little words that follow that but. But. With. You. But. With.

You. Because you see, the psalms of lament, the idea of the Christian life is we're not supposed to pray and then sort of have a stoic resignation to the difficulty of our circumstances.

We're not fatalists. Psalms of lament are protest. They're saying things ought not be this way. And we bring it in humility and anger.

And it ends in praise. And what happens by bringing it together and bringing it into the presence of God? It just slowly moves me out of the centre of the picture and puts God at the centre of the picture right there with me in the pit.

So the centre of the psalm and the critical turning point is the recognition is that the great issue is not our circumstances. The great issue is my fellowship with God.

[10 : 07] I want to say this as clearly as I can. Our highest good is not our comfort. It's not the smooth running and ease of our lives.

Our greatest good is our communion and fellowship with God. And it's in the depths we come to a completely new situation where we learn to want not what God can give us so much as we long for

more of God himself.

So what does that look like? How does it work? What does it mean to say, with you, with God, with the Lord?

And the psalm gives three answers. The first one is this. In verse 4, with you means forgiveness that leads to worship.

Now, if you're starting to feel hot, that's fine. As Dan said, I have worked under much more difficult circumstances. When I was first ordained, I worked in a very hot church.

[11 : 18] And at Christmas, our first Christmas, the temperature was 40 degrees. Thank you. And I wore full robes. And we had half a dozen services that day.

And then the midnight service came, Christmas Eve. And half the congregation was drunk. So in my second year, there is, in the prayer book, there are some very stern exhortations, which say, if you're not in your right mind, if you're out of fellowship with God, if you've sinned against your neighbor, don't come to communion, because God will judge you.

So from then on, at the friendly Christmas Eve services, I would read that. And the incidence of drunkenness went down somewhat, but it was still very hot.

So, how does it help us to say that God is with us? The first thing is, it means forgiveness, which leads to worship. Verse 4, If you put verses 3 and 4 together, you get the simple gospel message of the whole Bible in one word.

That things are far worse than we thought they were, and far better than we can possibly imagine they are. They're far worse, because if God the Lord brought our sins before his eyes, we would all face judgment.

[12 : 46] They're far better, because the same God who hates sin, does not treat us as our sins deserve.

He comes to us with forgiveness in his hands. With him is forgiveness. Absolutely critical if you're in the deep place.

Forgiveness isn't like a rock God throws down to us. It's not separate from him. It's the assurance that, it doesn't matter if you've dug the hole yourself, if it's self-inflicted your suffering, no matter what you've done, God comes to you, not based on your circumstance, and not based on your sin, but based on his own fatherly tender love.

He deals with us, not, he relates to me, not based on what I've done so much, but because of his love and because of his forgiveness, he comes to me as though I was perfect.

The reason, when we cry to the Lord from the depths, the reason he hears us, has to do with him and with his strong forgiveness. And it doesn't matter how deep the hole you're in.

[13 : 59] It doesn't matter, because with God we have someone who is greater than our circumstances. He's greater than your fears, greater than your sins. And he reaches out to us in forgiveness, in the deepest possible trouble we can say, with you, Lord, there is forgiveness.

And you might think that the response to that is happiness and joy and relief and relaxation. In verse 4, it's not, it's fear. And the fear, the fear is not groveling and cringing and being humiliated. This is the Old Testament word for worship. One of them. Do you remember Jesus said, do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more they can do.

I warn you whom to fear, fear him who after he has killed has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. This is the Savior, the Redeemer, speaking these words.

And here in verses 3 and 4, the very one who has authority to cast us into hell comes to us with forgiveness in his hands. By ourselves we cannot stand before him, but with forgiveness, forgiveness, we can stand with him and he can stand with us.

[15 : 20] And those two things lead to worship. Those two things together mean that we're not longing just for relief and for a leg out of our situation, but for the Lord himself.

If you're in a deep place right now, I think the temptation is probably to despair, but the presence of God is with you, with the forgiveness of sins, and that means that you learn to worship in a new way.

That's the first thing it means. The with God means forgiveness that leads to worship. Secondly, it means hope that leads to waiting well.

And that's a bit of a surprise. And wouldn't you think after forgiveness we should expect something about freedom and happiness? No, no. It's hope that leads to waiting well.

Well, Jonathan Aitken was a conservative parliamentarian in England who spent some time in prison after being found guilty for perjury.

[16:23] He actually, he became a Christian a year or so before he did his prison sentence, which is a good time to become a Christian. And he said that in prison, there's one group of prisoners who are always moaning and griping and complaining.

There's one group that do their time very badly that everyone else avoids, and it's those who are doing double sentences, those who are serving double sentences who have no hope of parole or ever getting out.

He said, they're consumed with bitterness and anger. And they spend their days ranting about the wretched judge and the wretched jury or the wretched gang member who left their fingerprints at the crime scene.

And they try and justify themselves forgetting that they're guilty of crimes in the first place. And he says, they wait badly because they have no hope. It's hope that gives us power to wait well.

Hope based on forgiveness. Waiting for the Lord. Notice how personal verses 5 and 6 are, please. I wait for the Lord.

[17:33] My soul waits. And in his word, I hope. My soul waits for the Lord. More than watchman for the morning. Again, more than watchman for the morning.

What happens in the deep place is that all the other hopes that we have had in our lives suddenly become empty and they don't work anymore. You know, our finance, our health, our good parenting, our career, our beautiful body.

You see, if your real hope is not in God, if your hope is still in one of those things or any other number of things, when you hear that God comes with forgiveness in his hand, it's not going to make any difference.

You're going to wait badly. And our problem is that we expect God to give us instant answers, don't we? And we dare to be disappointed with God when he doesn't.

Prove your love to me, God. Get me out of this pit, we say. But you know what? If God gave us everything we asked for, we would be little entitled monsters and we'd miss out on what's really going on.

[18:48] See, what feeds hope is the word of God because it's about the future. Think about the promises we've heard about the last two weeks. He will keep your going out and your coming in from this day forth from evermore.

He will keep you from all evil. I don't think waiting is easy. It's not natural. We're impatient people. But God is taking us through a process.

He's weaning us from other hopes. And I think real change takes time. I'm a very slow learner and I am still learning things from what happened in 2009 to me.

But if you know that your hope is in him, you find he is the one hope that's worth waiting for. So with him not only means forgiveness that leads to worship and not only hope that leads to waiting well, the third thing is with him means redemption that leads to praise.

And I want you to see how things have changed for the psalmist even at the beginning of verse 7. Nothing's changed in his circumstances. He's still in the deep.

[20:05] But now he calls on his brothers and sisters to praise God and to hope in God because God is with him. See verse 7?

O Israel, hope in the Lord for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption. You see what he's doing?

He's calling out to those who are outside the hole and he says, hope in God out there. I'm down here and I'm with God.

With God there is steadfast love. With God there is plenty, plenty of redemption, redemption, redemption. And I think this shows something of how much we need each other.

How we suffer is very important to God. God has expectations of those who are suffering, you know. When you suffer you're not exempt from the expectations and the love and the redemption of God.

[21:09] It's crucial for those of us who are not suffering to weep with those who weep and it's crucial for you if you're suffering to call out from the depths, hope in God for with him is steadfast love.

And for us to echo back to those who are in the deep place, hope in God for with him is plenty of redemption. I know that's hard.

If you're grieving or you're betrayed or there's something that's gone sideways, you don't even want to be with people. And you don't want to be with people particularly if you have developed a mask where you're strong and you don't want to look weak or you've developed a mask where you have it all together and you don't want to look like you're falling apart.

It's a great gift to us this Psalm 130. It just strips away our own assessment. What we think of ourselves is not important. What others think of us is not important.

It teaches us to be with the Lord. Not to base our lives on the outward circumstances but to base our lives on the Lord and his steadfast, steadfast love.

[22 : 23] And I think the mention of redemption which is this great big massive word in the Bible which is covered with blood, it shows that the Psalm is not a therapeutic processing of our difficulties.

This is not, these Psalms of lament, they're not a technique to get us on top of things. Much, the work is more profound than that. It's unmasking and laying us bare before the Lord and this itself is part of our redemption.

So in the last verse you see, this is where the Psalm comes to. And he, verse 8, or in the original perhaps more likely, he himself will redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

God himself will come. God himself will redeem us from sin and from evil and from twistedness and when he is finished with us we will no longer be twisted in on ourselves.

It's the highest possible promise, it's the highest possible blessing that God himself will enter our depths to rescue us, to restore us, to redeem us.

[23 : 41] Not just, and that doesn't just mean freedom, some sense of freedom in the pit but it means our eternal hope. And I don't think you can read these words without thinking of Jesus Christ of the time when God, the God of Israel visited and redeemed his people through his son Jesus Christ.

You remember when Jesus was born he was called Emmanuel God with us. He came from the highest heavens he went to the deepest depths to win redemption for us, the forgiveness of our sins.

And on the cross I don't know how to say this but on the cross Jesus went to the bottom of the bottomless pit deeper than any other human could possibly experience.

so that now God can look on us and though he sees our sin and he sees our twistedness he says I love you and am redeeming you anyway. And then God raised him from the dead and the first light of dawn has broken.

And before he went to heaven Jesus said to his disciples I will be with you all of every day until the end of the age. there are all sorts of implications.

[25 : 09] Just one of them is this but for those of you who are in the depths right now as you cry out to the Lord you can say with the Lord there is forgiveness with the Lord there is steadfast love with the Lord there is plenty redemption and we say to you the risen ascended Lord is with us the man of sorrows acquainted with grief and he is redeeming us and he will redeem us from all our iniquities.

thanks.