

- ASH WEDNESDAY

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

These are the words of the psalm we just sang, Psalm 130. 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. Thus far, God's holy word. May God add his blessing to the reading and hearing of his word.

[1 : 12] If you've ever traveled to a country where you didn't speak the native language of that country, you know how difficult and awkward that can be.

How disconcerting it can be for you. To try to have even the most basic conversation. Or to find the simplest place you're trying to go when you can't read the words on the signs, and you don't know what words to use to ask for what you're looking for.

I love languages. And I love being in other countries and trying to learn how to communicate without actually knowing the language. It's embarrassing if you're with me. But I really enjoy it.

Even for someone who enjoys that setting, I can tell I'm missing some of the richness of life, the relationships that would be there because of that language barrier.

It feels even worse if you don't like and enjoy that dynamic. I think that feeling is true for many of us with the language of lament.

[2 : 17] The language of the psalm that we just read and sang that cries out of the depths. The language of lament is not, for most of us, our native tongue.

And it's not our native tongue largely because we haven't spent a lot of time in the depths. I define the depths as an experiential or felt distance from God.

A time or a place where we seem desperate and He seems far away. For most of us, we've lived with most of our needs met and more.

We've grown up with churches on every corner. We've heard it's more spiritual to smile than to frown. We're just not that familiar with the depths.

It doesn't seem right to us. God seems to be nearby. At least, we should act like it. In fact, I think to put the first three verses of this psalm into the native tongue of most middle class American Christians, they would sound more like this.

[3 : 27] And I don't mean this in a blasphemous way, just to help us notice some of the differences. We might say something like, in the midst of life's inconveniences and frustrations, I complain to you, O Lord.

O Lord, hear my gripes. Listen and do something about my discomfort. If you, O Lord, kept track of sins, well, no one's perfect.

That may be most of what we could put into words. In our language, we're not used to speaking the language of this psalm. And it's not just this psalm.

The lament is the most common type of psalm in the entire psalter. The hymn book of God's people. The words God has written to be put in the mouths of His people.

The language He tells them they ought to speak and that He teaches them to speak. Lament is a primary dialect in the language of the psalms.

[4 : 30] The psalmist speaks often of feeling distant from God. Of being in the depths. So we as God's people must learn the language of lament.

The language of the depths. Why, I want to ask tonight, why particularly is that so important for us? Three brief reasons that we see here as we look at Psalm 130.

The first reason is our universal human condition. The depths are where we experience or feel distance from God. And that, by the very nature of who we are, is what humans experience. There is a huge gap between creator and creature. We are in many ways very different from God. We're not like Him.

His thoughts are higher than ours. His ways are higher than ours. He is limitless while we are by nature. And as He created us, very limited. So the feeling of distance from God is a common human experience.

[5 : 36] He is crying out and saying, God, where are you? You seem far away. That's why the psalmist speaks so regularly of it. You could think of many other biblical characters who experience the depths in this sense.

Perhaps Daniel felt it in the lion's den. Joseph maybe in the bottom of a pit or in prison. Certainly Jonah in the belly of the whale cries out from what he says is the depths of Sheol as far away as he could possibly be from the presence of God.

As people, we suffer and feel God far off in all sorts of ways. The grief of losing a loved one. The trauma of a surprise diagnosis.

The horror of natural disaster or the devastation of war. All sorts of suffering around us that we see, at least in others' lives, day in and day out.

They may make us feel the distance from God. The depths of sorrow and anguish. You've read the news. Those who love God are martyred.

[6 : 48] Lord, their families certainly would weep and cry out, God, from the depths, where are you? Hear me.

When we read these first two verses of the psalm, Oh Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. All of us can imagine in different ways feeling the need to cry out for mercy, can't we?

We need the language of lament to cry from the depths. But why else do we need to learn the language of lament?

I think secondly, it's the undeniable reality of sin. Look at verse 3. If you, oh Lord, should mark iniquities, oh Lord, who could stand?

It's in this verse that we see the particular situation that called for this psalm of lament. It was the psalmist experiencing the depths and the sense of seeing the reality of his own sin.

[7 : 54] He realizes that if God kept records of sins and used them against us, none of us would stand before Him. In fact, God's Word says, far from standing, we fall before His glorious and perfect standard.

All of us. But the psalmist's vision of his own sin has made him desperate, hasn't it? That's what it is that caused him to cry out from the depths where he feels overwhelmed by the distance that needs to be bridged to reunite a sinful psalmist with His holy Creator.

He's pleading for mercy because he knows there's no way that he deserves to be near God. He's not just less than perfect. He's desperately wicked.

He's slowed down to examine his heart and his life and he's disgusted and distressed by what he finds. Romans describes no one as righteous.

Instead, it says our tongues are deceiving. Our mouths are cursing and venomous to wound others. Our feet are rushing to violence, leaving destruction in our wake.

[9 : 07] And those are harsh words, but that happens in our homes, in our relationships every day, doesn't it? But we say, well, I just had a bad day. You know, really, that's just not like me.

I slipped up. We minimize and gloss over our sin. We fail to appreciate the depth of our depravity. And we need the language of lament to speak about it appropriately, the way God sees it.

And I think finally we need to learn the language of lament because of the unparalleled riches of God's forgiveness.

not just so we can voice our universal human distance from God, not just so we can accurately account for our sin, but also so we can rightly appreciate God's incredible grace.

That's what the rest of this psalm speaks of the last several verses. Look at verse 4. No one can stand. We're full of sin. And then, but.

[10:10] But. There's something else. There's more to the story. With you, there is forgiveness. Verse 7. With the Lord is steadfast love and plentiful redemption.

He'll redeem us from all our iniquities. Verse 8. Those same iniquities that were the ones that made us not able to stand before Him. Isn't that glorious once you've faced the depths of your sin?

Once you've despaired over your separation from God, then you hear plentiful redemption and you're desperate for it. Those become beautiful words. Plentiful redemption.

Oh, there is hope. But until we really see our sin rightly, that plentiful redemption will seem merely like a nice gesture rather than our only hope for life.

It's the difference between a refill on your drink during lunch at a restaurant and a stream of water that you lap up desperately after days of walking in the desert and your mouth is parched.

[11:18] Is God's forgiveness merely a refill to you? Nice to have because you weren't quite perfect? Or have you really seen your sin and gotten desperate for a drink?

Longed for hope somewhere? Ask God over the next few minutes and the next few weeks in this season of Lent to show you the depths of your sin.

Because you won't be stuck there. If He pulls the curtain back for you, He'll not only show you a little bit of your sin, He'll be there too. Full of forgiveness.

If you let Him expose you, it will make your joy even greater because your desperation for His deliverance will be so strong. Spurgeon said this psalm teaches us that he that cries out of the depths shall soon sing in the heights.

You have to get there to the depths if you really want to enjoy the song at the end of it. I love this other line from Spurgeon. I'll put it in context a little.

[12:25] He said, Deep places beget deep devotion. Depths of earnestness are stirred by depths of tribulation. Diamonds sparkle most amid the darkness.

And here's the line I love. Prayer de profundis, which is from the depths, gives to God gloria in excelsis. You know those words.

Prayer from the depths gives God glory in the highest. Those who learn the language of lament also learn to sing with the angels, don't they?

They're overjoyed at God's provision. They rejoice the way God has said we should. It's natural. We don't have to pretend. So how do you learn the language of lament?

Boy, you can't order that online, can you? How do you learn the language of lament? I think it's similar to the best way to learn another language that's not your native tongue.

[13:24] What's the best way? It's immersion in the culture, right? Go. Live with those who speak the language. Live around it. Just a few ideas for this particular language I'd offer you tonight.

Listen without judgment to those who have suffered deeply. Don't criticize them for not smiling or sounding spiritual to you in the moment when they're sharing their deep pain.

Listen to them. Learn without pride from those under severe persecution. Don't look down on other cultures but learn from brothers and sisters around the world.

Read a blog or a news report or an interview with someone who's had a family member martyred and don't think of how you're better than they are. Learn from what they've gone through.

Say look without excuse at the sin in your own heart. Don't downplay it. Really take this season and ask God to show you what you often miss.

[14:37] Take an honest look and ask that God would reveal your sin to you. And then perhaps easiest but most important, lament without editing from God's Word.

Don't be too creative. Read the Psalms. Learn how God's people are to cry out to Him. You can't flip more than a couple without hitting a Psalm of Lament. You can get a list of them anywhere.

Read the Psalms of Lament. See the words that God puts in the mouths of His people to speak to Him, to cry out from the depths to Him. When you begin to learn a new language, you get through some of the discomfort and you find a richness of life and relationship on the other side.

It's a painful process. Difficult often. But you find that you connect in new ways with the people all around you. The ones who speak that tongue naturally.

I hope we're starting some of that together tonight. During this season of Lent that we have together. We must learn this language so that we can fully enjoy the richness of life together in God's kingdom.

[15 : 50] Because it's full of this. It may not be your native language tonight, but it's the one that someone sitting next to you needs. It's the one that they can't find to voice what's going on in their hearts.

It's one that soon you'll be longing for and reaching for. We must learn it together so that we can share the fullness and the richness of the life that God intends for us.

The good news is God's committed to teaching it to us. Puritan Archibald Simpson once wrote, When we are in prosperity, our prayers come from our lips.

And therefore, the Lord is forced to cast us down that our prayers may come from our hearts and that our senses may be wakened from the security in which they are lying.

That can't be a pleasant process, I don't imagine. But I look forward to learning together more of what it looks like to pray from our hearts. I suspect in the next few days, in the next few decades, of living as God's people, that won't be easy or pain-free, even in Huntsville.

[17 : 03] But as we experience the depths, He will meet us there. And one day, someday, we will also sing together in the heights. Amen?

Amen. Amen. In response to God's grace, in the knowledge that there is indeed plentiful redemption to be found when we cry out to Him, let us therefore embrace a season of self-examination and repentance by prayer, fasting, and self-denial, and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word, and to make a right beginning of repentance, and as a mark of our mortal nature, let us now silently confess our sins and shortcomings before the Lord, our Maker and Redeemer.

Let's pray. Almighty God, You have created us out of the dust of the earth. Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and repentance.

We are created from the dust of the earth. To dust shall our bodies return. Grant that we may remember without Your gracious gift of everlasting life, we would be nothing more.

Through Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.

[18 : 39] Southwood.org. Amen. Amen.