

Psalm 130 Out of the Depths

Octavius Winslow, and pastor on the other side of the Atlantic in the mid-1800's, started his sermon on this text with these words,

“It is of little moment to our present exposition that we determine the precise occasion upon which this Psalm was composed. Suffice, that it forms one of the richest...of poetical compositions and unfolds one of the most spiritual and instructive chapters in [Israel's] remarkable history. As such, it reflects the lights and shadows, the depths and heights of the Christian life, as more or less vividly portrayed in every believer's history. That there are these opposites of soul-exercise in the experience of all to whom belong [God's] sure mercies, [as] the history of the Church of God fully attests. The Christian life is tortuous and checkered in its course. The royal path to glory is a divine mosaic paved with stones of diverse lines. Today, it is a depth almost soundless; tomorrow, a height almost scaleless.”¹

As believers, many of us would agree with Mr. Octavius that the journey mapped out for us by Sovereignty comes with some measure volatility. One reason for this is that we're spiritually alive, meaning, that though we see through a glass dimly, at times we do understand what we're seeing.² We perceive the world around us being lulled into a deadly slumber by shadowy passions and idolatrous amusements. We've been given sight, at different times, to view the fingerprints and footprints of dark forces of this earth in operation. And beyond those views that certainly have an adverse effect upon us, perhaps most important aspect of spiritual sight we're afforded from heaven is that we gain an accurate vision of our own sin. We feel its pull and power. We hear and are sometimes attracted to its empty promises. And as we succumb to these desires and temptations, we can plummet down into the *soundless depths* of despondency as we see just how unholy we are in light of God's purity and otherness. His essence is holiness; ours, from conception to death, quite the opposite, as scripture would attest. So, the question that falls upon us earthlings then is this: What am I to do with my sin and my guilt?

I. A Plea of Mercy

a. ...From the “depths”

[1] Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! There's not much guesswork about the nature of Psalm 130. Blended with lament and trust, bleeding with deep emotion, the contrition is almost palpable. This distress expressed in our text connotes a sense of alienation from God.³ God is in the heights. The psalmist is in the depths. And though for decades, as the Jewish pilgrims sang this song as a community ascending to the holy city of Jerusalem, what we find in verse 1 is an expression of personal guilt. We know that it has to do with personal guiltiness because of what he asks for in verse 2, which is *mercy*. But this guilt he conveys is issuing forth from the deepest parts of his personage. He has thought at length about his woeful lack of righteousness and his need for it. He has not skimmed the surface of self-reflection, but he's considered what is underneath the veneer and pretense—motive, desire, falsehood in the inmost parts.

¹ Octavius Winslow, *Soul-Heights and Soul Depths*, Banner of Truth, 1.

² 1 Corinthians 13:12

³ Psalms, *Longman & Garland*, 920.

One of the main attractions of Yellowstone National Park is the geyser known as “Old Faithful” in Wyoming. I learned this week that this geyser is one of the chief reasons that Yellowstone became the world’s first national park. I’ve not laid eyes on this personally, but it’s said that the power of that hot-water geyser will often shoot as high as 18 stories. But 27 stories below the earth’s surface is where it originates. From the *depths* we see the power of the elements and the beauty those elements often create.

The Psalmist is seeing things clearly. He has embraced God’s character as holy. He has heard God’s impeccable commands. And his conclusion as he inspects himself inwardly is that he is not like God. He is wretched, guilty of transgression. The old game of blame shifting is off the table. Self-help is a non-consideration. Contrition and honesty fill him. He’s not seeking to negotiate with his God. He’s not interested in setting the terms of justice and fairness. This songwriter is convinced of his status as sinner. In our cultural framework, contrition and confession are often viewed as weakness. But this psalmist’s *cry* is the work of God’s power in operation. Like that geyser attracts many eyes, this cry of repentance attracts the Eye that counts most.⁴ For, the psalmist is crying out...

b. ...*For God to hear*

[2] O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy! God can meet the dangers found in Psalm 129 and has done so for millennia. The cords of the wicked are ever exposed and never too robust for omnipotence to cut. Yet, an overfocus on self-preservation from outside powers to the exclusion of what lurks inside us is an unhealthy oversight at best. So, the psalmist doesn’t run from the offended Party. He runs toward Him! **O Lord, hear my voice!** A constant temptation for the soul, even for believers, is to go into hiding. This was the mode of our first parents in the Garden of Eden. They ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil against the command of their Creator and in their newly darkened minds they thought that the trees and leaves could actually give them cover from His presence.⁵

Yet, this cry from deep within the psalmist was intended for the ears of his God. **O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!** He knows something about the hearing abilities and availability of this God. His own righteousness buckled and failed. His performance slipped. But, he didn’t slink away in his shame, nor did he pull up his sandal straps, aim to put away the “mistake” in his mind. He pleaded for mercy. Covering tracks—no. Seeking to veil what he’d done—no. Are you convinced that you need *mercy*? Then voice your *pleas* to God for it.

We move further into the text and find that the heart-cry was insufficient for the psalmist. He goes exploring. I love that we’ve started considering the attributes of God on Wednesday nights. To discover more of God and rediscover Him afresh is at the heart of Christian discipleship.⁶ Here we begin to discover that this *cry* is not one of futility. What he longs for is not falling on deaf ears, or upon a cold heart, or into atrophied hands. Notice this...

II. A Probe into Mercy

⁴ Isaiah 66:1–2, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.’”

⁵ Genesis 3:7-8 (They failed to remember what we covered this past Wednesday night—omnipresence.)

⁶ The honor of knowing God from the pages of our Bibles, brought home by the Spirit, taught by servants that care for our souls—this is God’s good hand on each of us (Neh. 2:8, 18).

1. *Mercy's absence*

[3] *If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?* One tidbit about the original Hebrew text here, that packed a punch to me this past week, was reading about that this first use of God's name in verse 3. It's not the typical name *Yahweh*, but it is shortened to just *Yah*. Alec Motyer calls this a "diminutive of endearment." A diminutive term is a word we designate for those we love the most. I wouldn't say "Thank you, sweetie," to one of you brothers, but that would belong to Jessica or Beth Ann. Here, Motyer writes, "Yahweh is at his most loving and most loved when the sinner comes for forgiveness."⁷ The New Testament version of this diminutive term is Paul's use of the word "Abba" addressed to God the Father.⁸

The whole of this rhetorical question is for maximum effect—***If you, Yah, should mark iniquities, Yahweh, who could stand?*** The psalmist is imagining an eternal, exacting ledger of a God who sees all and knows all. And it's true. We just considered that He watches over cities from Psalm 127:1; He watches the nations, Psalm 66:7; He watches over the ways of His saints, Proverbs 2:8; His eyes are in every place, watching over the evil and the good, Proverbs 15:3; and more to this text, He watches over my life (Proverbs 6:22), my lips (Psalm 141:3), and my very soul (Proverbs 24:12). There's no hidden sector of personal or private life to which God is not privy. He could very well indeed mark every iniquity. And for some, in the end, He will do so. For those who mistreat God's church, Jesus stated, "...*Have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.*"⁹ For all who reject God's revelation in His Son, "...*No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*"¹⁰ There'll be no miscounting or mishandling of what's been done in secret or in public by those who oppose Him. The Lord is righteous, and He will by no means let the guilty go unpunished. The ledger, with no oversights, will come to bear on those who forsake eternal life.

The Psalmist imagines the worst possible scenario—that God, seeing it all—every word, thought, deed—would, in the end, give us what we deserve! If He did, none ***could stand!*** No human-originating righteousness can or will stand in the end. No self-justifiers. None who are trusting in their impressive list of moral achievements. No from the "better than you" club will gain access to eternal life. All pride will wither into terror and agony. If God ***should mark iniquities***, the very best among the throng of humanity would be as chaff in a hurricane. A determined gnat trying to flutter forward to Jupiter would have a better chance than any of us before His righteous judgment. On our own, we're woefully insufficient to stand. The terrible wonder of this question begs for the relief of verse 4...

2. *Mercy's presence*

Many voices of the past have coined this psalm as a "Pauline Psalm." In fact, it's the very message that Jesus told Paul to herald into the Gentile world.¹¹ That in the gospel God does not, in fact, count against sinners their sin...how is this even possible? "But is not my ledger filled to the brink with ink?" "What of my idolatry and adultery, my theft and lies, and the rank greediness in the deepest recesses of my heart?" "What of these appalling things?!" Please, give me some good news of hope, sir!

⁷ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 381.

⁸ Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6

⁹ Matthew 10:26

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:13

¹¹ Paul rehearses what Jesus told him on the Damascus Road in Acts 26:13–18 to King Agrippa, "...*I am sending you [18] to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins...*"

When we look behind the door hinged on that word **But** beginning in verse 4, we'll find it. **But with you there is forgiveness.** How can this be? How can all my sins of past, present, and future be handled by God in such a way that He declares me, or that I conclude my status is one of being forgiven?

The songwriter didn't ignore the historical cues. Adam wore the skin of a dead animal because of His sin. The priests of Israel offered more sacrifices than could be counted because of the sins of the people. And through these blood-sheddings, God was foreshadowing what would become the final death blow to every sin of His people—the death of death came because, at just the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.¹² He became the payment that was too steep for me or you to pay. And this ransom (that's actually the idea at the end of verse 7)...this ransom was a transaction that has shaped and reshaped the world. Ephesians 1:7, "*In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace...*" This is how there is forgiveness. God is rich to the filthy with grace. He didn't triumph over sin in the ways that perhaps we would attempt to do. We champion education, safety, better laws, and shrinks with unpronounceable degrees and acclaim to fix what we know to be sins. Yet, God became the Victor over our sin because of the shameful offering of His Son on the cross. When we place our genuine trust in Him, the transaction is that we get His perfect righteousness credited to our eternal account, and what He bore on the cross was the actual punishment for our treasonous crimes. To say it another way, Jesus got our ledger, and we got His! He took the verdict we deserved so we could get the verdict He deserved.¹³

The Jews in the psalmist's day, who insisted living under the law of Moses, did the same. They all believed in forgiveness in principle, but they never stopped to ask this question of Psalm 130 which corresponds to that forgiveness. Forgiveness from God is not secured on our end. **But with you...** it is the LORD who grants forgiveness, and He needs no help in doing so. The hands of repentant faith towards Christ, having nothing to commend to God—that's the lowly, empty faith by which God saves. Here, the psalmist is probing the terrible prospect of mercy being absent and following that probe with the truth of redeeming mercy being present in the soul. And this melodic Q&A, penned in verses 3 & 4, is intended to produce sheer wonder. Do you marvel at the grace of God? Have you considered your sin lately, or ever? Do you know that rescue from its penalty is at the heart of what God has done in His Son? If such rescuing forgiveness has burrowed itself in you by the Holy Spirit, God issues a change of course from your old life.

3. *Mercy's purpose*

a. Soul-reverence

[4] But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. This is not the servile kind of fear where there exists a detachment of meaningful relationship; this is not the kind of fear wherein the one having authority and the one who doesn't simply exist in a mutual, utilitarian sense. No, the offender remarkably finds himself loved by the Offended, and as such can only relate back to that kindness with loving respect. Consider this: If the very Son of God, who, being sinless and needing no forgiveness, offered up to the Father loud cries and tears, being heard for His reverence, then what of us?¹⁴ If we despair of our sin and God's judgment, forgiveness is the remedy for such a desperation. But the purpose clause in verse 4 is a warning to the presumptuous—God aims to deal with sin's condemnation,

¹² Romans 5:6

¹³ I believe Tim Keller said this in one of his works, but I couldn't find it.

¹⁴ Hebrews 4:7

but He also aims to humble us to godly reverence.¹⁵ Our character must by necessity display that God is worthy of our highest admiration.

b. Soul-repose

[5] I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; [6] my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. What is the psalmist waiting for? And how does the idea of hope relate? This word *wait* most likely points to the enduring aspect inside of some kind of delay. It's a bit more significant than when Jessica used to tell our children, who couldn't endure another minute without the good thing ahead, "You need to put your patient-pants on!" But the word *hope* fills in the rest of the significance of verse 5. The word suggests an unsettled expectation without the aspect of being anxious.¹⁶ In one sense we're restless for the resurrection, for the disappearance of evil, for growth in grace, etc., but that restlessness shouldn't manifest itself in an all-consuming worry and angst. We hope with a measure of peace and confidence that what God has promised, He has the wisdom and power to do in His timing. But notice what the psalmist is waiting on and hoping in, end of vs 5—God's *word*. Not a burning-bush kind of word, but this very well may be an oracle of forgiveness they would have received either through a prophet or through the priest at the temple in Jerusalem, as they ascend into the city.¹⁷ It's what David heard in 2 Samuel 12 from Nathan the prophet, "*The LORD has put away your sin,*" or what Isaiah declared to the inhabitants of Jerusalem in Isaiah 40:2, "*Speak comfortably to [her, that] her iniquity is pardoned.*"

Yet, this longing songwriter and the community of faith singing as they ascended could be expressing the desire for more than a pronouncement of forgiveness. And I believe we find this in the imagery of a *watchmen*. What did a watchman in Israel do? He sat on walls and near gates to look out for danger. He warned others. And like everyone else, he yearned for peace from danger. Hear the yearning expressed through comparison...*my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning.* The watchman knew that nighttime was an opportune time for enemies to sneak in or for dangerous animals who might be staking out an opportune meal themselves. Again, he, like all living under the night shadows of walls and gates, is waiting *for the LORD*. And God's people, though they have his pardon and forgiveness, they also wait longingly for His providence based on that relationship of forgiveness and godly fear. The psalmist is waiting as a faithful watchman. He's learned that "*unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*" Only God can bring him and the people into the morning light with God's shalom—a peace and a well-being.

This night-watch insinuates other realities. Think about it, are you mostly seized by deep fears and troublesome anxieties at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, or in the quiet of 2 am? I would venture to say that your fears and worries stir more frequently after the sun retires over the horizon. Brothers and sisters, it's what we all want, and it's what God made us for—His repose, His rest, reigning in our hearts through faith, no matter what rages around us.¹⁸ It starts by trusting in Christ, who has ushered in peace by the blood of His cross.¹⁹ And as His continued work in us, He kindly strings together pearl-moments of peace, often in places where we least expect such.

c. Soul-reassurance

¹⁵ John Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, 99.

¹⁶ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, 715.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 716.

¹⁸ Colossians 3:15, "*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.*"

¹⁹ Colossians 1:20

Verse 7, ***O Israel, hope in the LORD!*** In the fire of his own faults, in the soundless depths of his own despair, the song writer has attempted to scale the scaleless—***But with you there is forgiveness.*** And now he wants to bring along all who might be dazed and be paralyzed in that emotional valley of personal failure, keeping them from obedience, service, and worship. The light-filled encouragement for the community is rooted in personal experience of being found by grace, ***O Israel, hope in the LORD!*** Turn your eyes away from all your exactions, all your efforts at causing God to applaud your works; turn your eyes away from your best deeds done with the purest motives; turn your eyes away from fruitless and foul comparisons with other believers. ***Hope in the LORD.*** Why? ***For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.*** We run up against this steadfastness of God’s love all over the Psalter, but this is its lone usage in the Ascent Psalms. It’s the truth of God’s covenant faithfulness, ratified fully and finally in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Yet, this idea of full, plentiful, abundant redemption is something that’s unable to be exhausted.

But hoping in the LORD, though it has a purifying effect in the present, there is always a future sense of this word. The world is not as it should be. All of God’s people stay in this state of waiting. This psalmist is crying out from this very place. He has experienced a divided heart. He is overwhelmed by the incalculable number of his own sins. He doesn’t quite understand the when or the who of the promise for a Deliverer. Yet, he’s living in light of who God has shown Himself to be without the light of the who He will show Himself to be in the incarnation. The present mercies, like a pump, prime future ones. Without the complete picture, like the prophets, the poets of the Old Testament had confidence in what God would do down the line, ***[8] And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.*** The confidence came to fruition a few hundred years later. Colossians 1:13–14, “[Christ] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, [14] in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” And we can look ahead, too. We celebrate the words, “It is finished!” but we still lament a world where God is not finished. Redemption is more comprehensive than our little corner of the world. This truth of verse 8 transcends a few hundred singing Jews ascending to a finite city.

Conclusion

Some years back, a girl, now a young woman, answered that question to one of her pastors’ this way, “My heart is so dirty and there is absolutely nothing I or anyone else can do to wash my sin away. I am just so thankful for all the people in church who have loved me and spurred me on to look to Christ and trust in Him because I know I can’t do this by myself. So just please pray for me.”²⁰ What was this now-young lady doing? She was soul- excavating. She had been to those depths almost soundless, and then she ascended to heights almost scaleless.

Listen, your sin will either find you out on the day of judgment or you will be found forgiven of it all. God hears please for mercy. Kids, Jesus told this parable to a crowd of people one day. You remember what a parable is, right? “*Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a [religious leader] and the other a tax collector. The religious leader, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*” It’s worth another ask: What do you do with your sin and your guilt?

²⁰ Letter from my daughter in 2016. Shared with her permission.

