

Restoring Your Soul Through Psalms
Joy Comes in the Morning
Psalm 30

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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It's called the Full English. Eggs, bacon, sausage, mushrooms, tomato. All grilled together in wonderful grease and served with buttered toast. Forget Big Ben and Buckingham Palace. It's worth the trip to England just for the breakfast!

So, I truly resonated with a child's interpretation of Psalm 30. Abby Castle carried the basket of tartans for us at our Kirkin' service. She often makes drawings during church and shares them with me. She said I could tell you about this one. For Psalm 30, Abby had a row of sad faces on one side, and a row of happy faces on the other. Between them she wrote the heart of the Psalm. Weeping may last for the night, but joy comes... with breakfast! That's a girl after my own heart. No matter how hard the night is, joy comes with breakfast, *especially* if there's bacon.

Irish rock singer Bono told the story of his calling to write and sing music in "The Ballad of Joey Ramone." In the song, Bono says he has music "so I can exaggerate the pain/And give it a name." That's why we love songs that express big, deep emotions. They say even more than we feel but in doing so they enable us to feel our feelings, to get them out within the scope of the song.

We feel that's what's going on in the psalms. David's songs are the intersection between what's going on in his daily life, the deep places of his heart and soul, and the reality of the God he loves and serves. They come together as he writes his prayers with as much honesty and faith as he can summon.

The songwriter paints with bigger pictures than he has seen. He says more striking emotions than he has felt. He cries out extremes so that his own pain is contained within the comparison. Then he can feel it safely, knowing it fits within something more. He can explore his emotions and consider their cause knowing he hasn't short-changed anything.



David used moving word pictures that were more than he could have literally experienced. “O LORD, you have brought up my soul from Sheol; you restored me to life from among those who go down to the pit.” That’s very evocative. We all get that. We even speak like that: “Man, I thought I was a goner. They had me dead to rights. We were dead in the water. That just killed me.” So anyone can understand what David meant. He was so sick, he was sure he would die. Or his enemies were so close to having him that he felt like a dead man walking. But literally, he was not in Sheol, the place of the dead. No one goes to the place of the dead and comes back. If you get thrown into the pit of death, there’s no climbing back up from that darkness. No, David didn’t literally die. He spoke in exaggerated terms so that his experience of stress and fear could be contained within a worse fate. In that way, he could feel it, look at it, reflect on it. As Bono sang, I’ve got “Music to exaggerate my pain, and give it a name.” That’s what we do with words and music. We go big so we can manage what we’re experiencing.

When our children were little, we lived in the countryside at the end of the road at the foot of a mountain. It was beautiful and peaceful. Nothing terrible happened to us in terms of violence or illness or accident. Our older daughter, though, was prone to worry. Uncertainty about a situation, like potentially being late, or missing a flight or an appointment could make her feel panic. She’ll freely tell you she got pretty worried about things. Now lots of boys liked her, even adored her, but for a long time, none of them truly captured her heart. Then a young man she had known since freshman year of college came home from three combat tours with the Marines. Decorated for heroism in a battle in Afghanistan that included wounds while saving others, Tyler offered a different perspective on what is truly dangerous and what is nothing to worry about. Leah married him almost immediately. Here was a man who could contain her fears within the greater perils he had faced. He steadies her, and she steadies him with her love.

The trials we have undergone can give us ability to contain the fears of others. But who can contain the experience of a combat veteran who’s seen so much death up close? Who can contain the experience of the family law attorney who has seen so much of the dark side of human relations? Who can contain the sorrow of the oncologist who fights a career of losing battles against the monster of cancer?

That's where the words David used in Psalm 30 are so important. He wrote bigger than he could have experienced. But we believe that the Holy Spirit was inspiring his psalm writing. Imagine for a moment, that the Holy Spirit in his wisdom was moving David to write in poetic exaggeration what the Son of God would literally undergo a thousand years later when he came to us as the man Jesus. What if the Spirit led David to leave behind a script which Jesus could pick up to give him courage for what he would undergo? And what if Jesus was going to journey to the extremities of human suffering in body and soul in order that all our experiences of suffering could be contained within his? What if what Jesus went through would give meaning to all we go through, even the very worst of it?

For some time before his arrest, Jesus knew that he would eventually be stopped by the authorities. He predicted that he would be crucified, but also that he would rise on the third day. He knew what was coming. But that did not make it easier to face. It made it worse.



In Luke 12: 50, while he still had much ministry left to do, Jesus declared, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished." Jesus had already been baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River. So what was he talking about?

Baptism is a going down under the water followed by a rising up from the water. We get the symbolism. If you go under the water you can die. Baptism always meant a dying to the old life. But if you come up for air, just in time, it feels like you live again. Baptism has always meant a rising to new life. Jesus knew that. I will go down and then come up. But that doesn't mean the going down is easy. If only it could be the few minutes it takes to drown. But crucifixion is a horrible, agonizing, long physical dying. But worse, Jesus knew it would be the death of his soul. He would feel cut off from his Father. He would plunge down into the waters of death as a forsaken man. The beloved of the Father would be cursed, cut off, cast away. He would experience the hell of God-forsakenness. He would die but not be annihilated. His spirit would endure the uttermost limit of human existence in isolation and despair. It terrified him.

So what do you do when you are facing such a future? God's people have always gone to the Scriptures. You read what has comforted you before. You turn to what you have a history with. Jesus prayed the psalms. I believe he had

committed them to memory. And I believe Psalm 30 gave Jesus' lyrics for processing the death he would face and the life that would follow.

What David experienced as a metaphor, Jesus would experience as a literal reality. His soul would be with the dead. He would go to the deepest pit, where souls felt forgotten by God, cut off from all loves and all light. He would experience David's words to the LORD: "You hid your face: and I was dismayed." I wonder if he recited these words in the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane,



"Father, what profit is there in my death, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Let this cup pass so that I can continue my ministry to the lost sheep. Take this cross away from me so I can worship you as the one faithful man on earth and lead them back to you.

I wonder if Jesus knew things had gone long past bargaining or reasoning. Maybe he just prayed out the raw plea in Psalm 30: "Hear, O my Father! Mercy! O LORD, my Father, be my helper. Do for me what I cannot do for myself. Save me!"

It's been ten years now since I started studying intensely Jesus' descent into the place of the dead. Even after writing and rewriting a book about it, I can't stop thinking about what it means that Jesus went to the furthest reaches of forsakenness for us. In fact, I think it's crucial that we recover a robust doctrine of Christ's descent into hell if we are to speak to people today about the gospel. Amidst this national tension, people want to know: "Is there anyone who can contain the anxiety I feel about the world and the future? Is there any human experience which goes beyond the chaos and unravelling I feel so that my terror can be contained? Can anyone get his arms wrapped around this mess and hold it together?"

Jesus is the Son of God. He relates to the whole world as its creator. He also relates to each individual human being as the one who created us all. He has the capacity to connect to every single person and the whole world all at once.

Yet, Jesus is also the Son of Man. He is human. He underwent the human journey of birth, life and death. The human journey of Jesus went to greater extremes than anyone who ever lived. He knew deeper love. He experienced deeper sorrow over brokenness. He laughed a heartier laugh of joy. Worshipped

with a truer spirit. Felt a sharper sting of betrayal. And knew an utter forsakenness in death that no one has ever yet had to undergo. He experienced more acutely, more dismally, the hell that is due the worst sinner. He became sin and entered its condemnation. There is no place we can go emotionally, physically or spiritually that Jesus the man has not been.

Now because Jesus is God, his human life can be applied to every human life in the world. Jesus the man who is God has the whole world in his hands. The whole world of human pain fits in his nail pierced hands.

This is the message the world longs to hear. You're not alone. You can't fall outside the range of Christ's care. He contains it all. So he can tend to it all. The cuts, the stabs, the lies, the attacks, the forsaken loneliness—he's been through it. He's there with you now. He contains it all. And redeems it all.

I don't know how long Jesus stayed inside the tomb on Easter morning just realizing that he was alive again. I wonder if he took some time to give thanks to his Father. Think how Psalm 30 would have sounded on Easter morning. O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me! O LORD, you brought me up from Sheol! Weeping may tarry for the night (and what a long, cold night it was!). But joy comes in the morning! You have turned for me my mourning into dancing. You have loosed my grave clothes. You clothed me instead in a resurrection body. O LORD my God and my Father, I will give thanks to you forever.



Now think of what this means for us. Way back in the fourth century, an author whose name is lost to us, did some holy imagining. He visualized Jesus, as he was rising from the dark place of the dead, going to free Adam and Eve from the prison of death. Our first parents had been waiting the longest for release from the darkness. How long had it been since they walked face to face with God in the Garden? Jesus crashes open the gates, and speaks tenderly to Adam, “Peace be to you, Adam, with your children, through immeasurable ages!”

In this holy fantasy, Adam falls onto his knees at the feet of Jesus. The Lord lifts him up. Adam grabs his hands and kisses them. Weeping many tears, he cries, “Behold the hands which made me!” What a relief after so many centuries of death. Oh, you came for us! You came, you came, you came! I have not seen these hands, the hands that made me, for so long. You did not forget us. You went even

beyond this death so you could remake it all.” In this sacred imagining, the last Adam clasped the hand of the first Adam, and so gathered all the human race within the reach of his redeeming love.¹

Psalm 30 is a great individual prayer. As I’ve taught it through the week, I see how people connect to its rhythm of the ups, downs and ups of life. We resonate with crying out to God to save us. All good. But today, I wanted to take you deeper and point you higher. I wanted us to see how our prayers are contained within Christ’s prayers. We are not independent, isolated beings. You and I live within the embrace of Christ’s life on our behalf. He has gone to deeper depths and higher heights than we ever could, so that not one person need fall outside the range of his care and all he has done for us. When we get this, that we live within the life of Jesus who lived for us, a whole new sense of optimism, assurance and hope open up. You know, far more surely than your own ups and downs, that because Jesus the Man is also Christ the Lord, all is well at the deepest levels. My little life is contained within his great life. It’s about way more than me. It’s good news for the whole world, for the whole universe: weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

¹ 4th c. *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, Latin 2nd version, chap 9. Quoted in Dawson, *Raising Adam*, pp. 101-2.