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OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Psalm 130

By

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Out of the Depths
Psalm 130

Columnist Bob Greene, who I think is from the Baby Boomer generation, wrote (*Reader's Digest* [April, 1989], pp. 147-148),

You remember the Permanent Record. In school, you were constantly being told that if you screwed up, the news would be sent to the principal and placed in your Permanent Record.

Nothing more needed to be said. No one had ever seen a Permanent Record. That didn't matter. We knew it was there....

I have a terrible feeling that mine was the last generation to know what a Permanent Record was—and that it has disappeared as a concept in society.

There was a time when people really stopped before they did something they knew was deceitful, immoral, or unethical. They didn't stop because they were such holy folks. They stopped because they had a nagging fear that if they did the foul deed, it would end up on their Permanent Record.

At some point in the last few decades, I'm afraid, people wised up to something that amazed them: there is no Permanent Record. They discovered that regardless of how badly you fouled up your life or the lives of others, there was nothing about it on your record. You would always be forgiven, no matter what.

So pretty soon men and women—instead of fearing the Permanent Record—started laughing at it. The things that they used to be ashamed of, that once made them cringe when they thought about them, now became “interesting” aspects of their personalities.

If the details were weird enough, the kinds of things that would have really jazzed up the Permanent Record, people sometimes wrote books confessing them, and the books be-

came best-sellers. They found out that other people—far from scorning them—would line up in bookstores to get their autographs. Talk-show hosts would say, “Thank you for being so honest with us. I’m sure our audience understands how much guts it takes for you to tell us these things.” ...

As Americans began to realize that there probably never had been a Permanent Record, they deduced that any kind of behavior was permissible. All you had to do was say, “That was a real crazy period in my life.” All would be okay.

And that is where we are today. We have accepted the notion that no one is keeping track. No one is even *allowed* to keep track. I doubt you could scare a school kid nowadays by telling him that the principal was going to inscribe something on his Permanent Record; the kid would probably file a suit under the Freedom of Information Act and expect to obtain his Permanent Record by recess. Either that, or call it up on his or her computer and delete it.

As for us adults, it has been so long since we believed in the Permanent Record that the very mention of it now brings a nostalgic smile to our faces. We feel naïve for ever having believed there was such a thing.

But who really knows? On some distant day when we check out of this earthly world and approach the gates of our new eternal home, our smiles may freeze. We just might be greeted by a heavenly presence sitting there, casually leafing through a dusty, battered volume of our Permanent Record, as we come jauntily into view.

Greene is putting his finger on the reason why many cannot appreciate Psalm 130: We have lost the sense of guilt that comes from realizing who we are in the presence of the Holy One.

I saw an aspect of what Greene writes about in my college days. As a part of a campus Christian ministry, we were taught that if we sinned, we should confess our sins and God would instantly forgive us. Just pull the First John 1:9 lever, and forgiveness spilled out the chute at the bottom. But that teaching seemed to result in a rather flippant view of sin and a much too casual view of forgiveness. I knew of guys who would shrug off looking at pornography

by saying, "Yeah, I blew it, but I just claimed First John 1:9 and everything is okay now."

I got an uncomfortable feeling about that, which later came into focus when I read the words of C. H. Spurgeon (*Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:54), "Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior." These guys viewed sin so flip-pantly that they would not have understood what the psalmist meant by verse 4, "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be *feared*." They had never felt that they were in the depths of guilt and so they didn't fear God when He forgave their sins.

Psalms 120-134 are a group of psalms called, Psalms of Ascents. The pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem sang these songs as they went up to the city for the great Jewish festivals. As such, these songs not only were for worship as they walked, but also they prepared their hearts for the corporate worship they would engage in at the Temple. As Christians, our "festival" of corporate worship is the Lord's Supper. As we approach it, we should be aware of our great need for forgiveness so that we partake with thankful, reverent hearts to our gracious God who sent His Son to pay the penalty for our sins that we deserved. This Psalm of Ascents takes us from the depths of guilt and despair to the heights of joyous hope in the Lord. It says,

No matter how deep you are in guilt and despair, you can cry out to God for forgiveness, knowing that He delights in abundant redemption.

There are four stanzas of two verses each:

1. Out of the depths of guilt and despair, you can cry out to the Lord for mercy (130:1-2).

"Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications." Let's examine each verse separately:

- A. To cry out for mercy, you must feel something of the depths of your guilt (130:1).

The first thing that strikes you about this verse is that the psalmist was no doubt a godly man. After all, the Spirit of God inspired him to write this psalm. While he could be writing about

his earliest experience of God's forgiveness, when he first came to faith, or about a later time when he fell into some sin, even so as a Jewish young man, growing up with instruction in the Torah, I can't imagine that he was what most of us would call a "terrible sinner." And yet, he viewed himself as being in the depths. It reminds me of Jonah, crying out to God from the belly of the great fish, after his disobedience to God's commission to go to Ninevah (Jonah 2:1-9). John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace," was a godless, drunken sailor before his conversion, who had literally fallen into the depths of the ocean and barely escaped death. He titled his autobiography, *Out of the Depths* [Moody Press].

The lesson is, whether at the point of conversion or afterwards, those who have truly come to know the Holy One also know something of the depths of their sin and guilt. Isaiah the prophet was surely a godly man before he had his vision of the Lord. But instantly when he saw God on His throne, with the seraphim crying out (Isa. 6:3), "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts," Isaiah said (Isa. 6:5), "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." At that moment, Isaiah was in the depths!

C. S. Lewis put it (source unknown, cited in *Christianity Today* [March 2, 1979], p. 14), "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less." So whether you have not yet come to faith in Christ or whether you have been a Christian for a long time, getting a glimpse of God in His holiness will plunge you into the depths of guilt and despair, so that you cry out to Him for mercy.

B. No matter how low you may be, you can cry out fervently to the Lord (130:2).

The intensity of the psalmist's cry is seen in that he uses the divine name eight times in these eight verses. He tends to alternate between Yahweh, the covenant name of God that emphasizes His faithfulness to His promises; and, Adonai, which emphasizes His sovereign lordship and thus His ability to fulfill His promises (A. R. Fausset, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical*, by Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown [Eerdmans], 2:384).

His repeated appeal for God to hear his voice and for His ears to be attentive is anthropomorphic (attributing human features to God). But it reflects his awareness that God is on high, while he is in the depths of sin and guilt. There is a huge chasm between them, which (as Derek Kidner points out, *Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 446) self-help cannot answer. So he cries out fervently to God.

As Archibald Symson put it (in 1638, cited by C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* [Baker], 7:71), "Albeit the throne of God be most high, yet he delights to hear the petition of hearts that are most low, that are most cast down by the sight of sin." Or, as Spurgeon put it (*ibid.*, p. 66), "It matters little where we are if we can pray; but prayer is never more real and acceptable than when it rises out of the worst places. Deep places beget deep devotion." Spurgeon cites James Vaughan, (p. 72), who says, "Every one prays; but very few 'cry.' But of those who do 'cry to God,' the majority would say, '*I owe it to the depths.* I learned it there.'" So even if you have done something awful that overwhelms you with guilt and despair, cry out to the Lord for mercy.

2. God's forgiveness leads to fear, because without it, you're doomed (130:3-4).

"If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared."

A. Without God's forgiveness, you're doomed (130:3).

The statement of verse 3 raises the question, "Doesn't God keep a record of all our iniquities?" The answer is, "Yes, He does" (Matt. 12:36). He does not suffer from amnesia! But the psalmist means, "If the Lord were to tally up all my sins and hold me accountable for them, I'm done. I don't have a glimmer of hope."

Often, those who do not know God assume that everything will be okay on judgment day because, "I'm a basically good person." But, add up the list of your sins for just the past month, let alone for your lifetime! Include every wrong thought, word, and deed. Remember to count not only sins of commission, but also sins of omission. In other words, you must add up all the direct commands of God that you have broken, plus all of those that you have ignored or failed to get around to doing.

Have you loved God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength all the time? Have you loved your neighbor (especially your immediate family) as yourself, with no hint of selfishness or anger? Have you put the axe immediately to every prideful, lustful, and greedy thought? Have you been faithful in prayer and in studying God's Word? I could keep going, but you get the idea. If you add up all of your sins for just the past month, you wouldn't stand a chance if you stood for judgment before the Holy God. And He knows everything you've done or not done, not only for the past month, but for your lifetime! Without God's forgiveness, you're doomed! But the good news of verse 4 is,

B. There is forgiveness with God and it leads to fear (130:4).

The "but" of verse 4 is one of the great contrasts in Scripture. Don't miss the crucial declaration, "But there *is* forgiveness with You"! This is comparable to Ephesians 2:4-5, where Paul, after telling how we're all dead in our sins, writes, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together in Christ...." Here (Ps. 130:4), "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." Without forgiveness, you're doomed, but with it, you learn to fear Him.

At first glance, this verse seems strange. You might expect to read, "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be loved." Or, "There is justice with You, that You may be feared." Why does he say, "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared"? It seems to me that when (as Spurgeon put it, *Autobiography*, 1:54), you stand before God, convicted and condemned, with the rope around your neck, and God pardons your sins, you then weep for joy, hate the evil which you've been forgiven, and live to the honor of the Redeemer by whose blood you've been cleansed. You fear God because you know that He had every reason to condemn you, but He did not. You do not fear His punishment now (1 John 4:18), but you do fear Him because you know that He rightly could have cast your body and soul into hell for all eternity (Matt. 10:28). His forgiveness does not make you flippant about your sin.

Thomas Adams put it this way (in Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, 7:76, modified into modern English),

Lord, who can know You and not love You, know You and not fear You? We fear You for Your justice, and love You for Your mercy; yes, fear You for Your mercy, and love You for Your justice; for You are infinitely good in both.

Or, again Adams said (*ibid.*), “No man more truly loves God than he that is most fearful to offend him.”

So the psalmist tells us that no matter how deep you may be in guilt and despair, you can cry out to the Lord for mercy. He adds that there is forgiveness with God, and it leads to fear, because without it, you're doomed.

3. Experiencing God's forgiveness makes you wait and hope for God Himself (130:5-6).

“I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen for the morning; indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning.” The translators have added *indeed, more than*. The Hebrew text, with more forceful poetry, is simply, “more than the watchmen for the morning, the watchmen for the morning.”

There are three questions to answer in these verses: What do we wait for? What is the basis of our hope as we wait? How should we wait and hope?

A. What do we wait for? We wait for God Himself.

He isn't waiting for forgiveness, because he already obtained that in verse 4. Forgiveness is not a feeling, but a fact that we obtain by faith. But sin always strains our fellowship and sense of closeness with the Lord. And so the psalmist is waiting on God for that sense of His presence. He is waiting and hoping for the intimacy with God that he formerly knew. He wants God's assurance that he is His child.

James Vaughan (cited by Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 7:78) points out four reasons why God often makes us wait on Him. First, waiting exercises our patience of faith. Second, it gives time for preparation for the coming gift that we're seeking. Third, it makes the blessing sweeter when it arrives. Fourth, it shows the sovereignty of God, to give *when* and *as* He pleases. This causes us to submit to His sovereignty, acknowledging that He alone is God.

B. What is the basis of our hope? We hope in God's word of promise.

"And in His word do I hope." Matthew Henry observes (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], 3:740), "We must hope for that only which he has promised in his word, and not for the creatures of our own fancy and imagination; and we must hope for it because he has promised it, and not from any opinion of our own merit." Or, as Spurgeon says (*Treasury*, 7:69), "The attribute of mercy, and the fact of redemption, are two most sufficient reasons for hoping in Jehovah...." God is merciful and He has redeemed us. Thus we hope in His promises.

C. How should we wait and hope? We should wait and hope expectantly and confidently.

The analogy of the watchmen waiting for the morning is repeated to make us stop and think about it. The main idea is, we should wait expectantly and with certainty. If you've ever stood night watch duty in the military, you look forward to morning when you are relieved of your duty. The night often drags on slowly and you're tired because you aren't allowed to sleep on the watch. But you know one thing for certain: morning will come! It's never failed. That's how we should wait and hope for the renewed sense of the Lord's presence after we've experienced His forgiveness. It will come; just be faithful in eagerly waiting for Him.

But the psalmist can't stop writing there. Having been in the depths of guilt and despair and then experiencing God's forgiveness, he knows that others also are where he was at. They need God's forgiveness. So he concludes,

4. Experiencing God's forgiveness makes you desire that others would also experience His abundant redemption (130:7-8).

"O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is loving-kindness, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

When you've been in the depths and then been washed with God's forgiveness, you want others to experience the same thing! The basis for hoping in the Lord is that with Him, there is loving-kindness. He is not mean and gruff, but loving and merciful. Do

you recall how He revealed Himself to Moses, who asked to see His face? He said (Exod. 34:6), "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth." David, who cites from that text in Psalm 103:8, adds (103:13), "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."

Also, our psalmist adds, "and with Him is abundant redemption." Not just redemption, but *abundant* redemption! The English Bible translator, Coverdale, translated, "plenteous redemption." Or, as John Bunyan titled his autobiography, there is "grace abounding to the chief of sinners." No matter how great your sin, His redemption is abundant, with plenty to spare!

And, it covers *all* your sins: "He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." The psalmist didn't know exactly how God would do this, but when Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, heard that his son would be the forerunner to Messiah and that Mary was with child with the Savior through the Holy Spirit, he prophesied (Luke 1:68), "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people." With His blood Jesus accomplished our redemption out of the slave market of sin.

Conclusion

Do you know that He has redeemed *you* from all your sins? You can! There *is* forgiveness with the Lord! On the night before August 1, 1830, the slaves in the British West Indies never went to bed. They stayed awake because at daybreak, they would be set free from their slavery. Tens of thousands of them went to their places of worship and spent the night singing praises to God, waiting for the first glimmer of daylight. Just before dawn, they sent some onto the tops of the hills, so they could signal the others that they day had broken. Out of the depths of the horrors of slavery, when daylight came, they would taste the joys of freedom! (In Spurgeon, *Treasury*, 7:80-81.)

When Jesus, the Sunrise from on high, visits you with God's tender mercy (Luke 1:78), you will know the joy unspeakable that comes from having His abundant redemption applied to your soul. Your Permanent Record has been destroyed! Your sins and lawless deeds He remembers no more! Fear Him! Love Him! Praise Him!

Application Questions

1. Are modern Christians too flippant about their sin? Where is the balance between being too morbid versus too cavalier?
2. Does God's forgiveness lead you to fear Him? Is this concept strange to you? How are forgiveness and fear related?
3. Why does God not immediately answer the prayers of those who want to know Him more intimately? Why must we wait on Him?
4. In sharing the gospel, are we too quick to tell people about God's love and offer of forgiveness before they feel the weight of their sin? Should they first feel convicted of their sin?

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