

### A WORLD WITHOUT WORDS

Imagine what it would be like to live in a world without words. Before we ignore such a thought as a Twilight Zone episode, we must admit that many of us know this world. We know the feeling of being speechless when learning of the cancer diagnosis of a loved one. We also know that damage that harsh words, broken promises, and bad memories can leave in their path. We often cannot trust words. For the believer, this may often be just as true in our relationship with God—though we would not be quick to admit it.

The Psalms were written to serve as a guide for the church in its worship and prayer. When we don't have words before God, when our prayers are silent, He has given us words. Through the words of Psalm 130, the writer models for us an honest confession of hope in the midst of despair, and calls us to seek the same Lord, even in our own despair.

### PSALM 130

#### A SONG OF ASCENTS

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!
- 2 O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!
- 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?
- 4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.
- 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.
- 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.
- 8 And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

### A WIMPER FROM A WELL

Almost 18 years ago, a little girl not much older than my daughter Lucy, captured our nation's attention. Baby Jessica, as we came to know her, had been playing in her aunt's backyard in a small Texas town. Her mom had gone inside for a moment and she returned to discover that her little girl was missing. Eventually, she discovered that Jessica had fallen 30 feet below ground into an 8-inch well. Unable to climb out, she could barely move inside the shaft. At various times during the rescue, the workers stopped their work in tears, because they could hear this little girl "singing nursery rhymes and crying for her mother." In fact, it took almost 100 rescue workers 58 hours to get her out. Drilling through bedrock, the diamond tipped drill-bits kept breaking. Eventually, they

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ended up having to dig a second shaft beside the well, and send down a paramedic to get her out.

The writer of Psalm 130 isn't literally trapped in a well, but his cry "out of the depths" makes that a helpful image. We know this feeling don't we? The bills are piling up and creditors are calling. The approval words we long to hear from our parents never come, no matter how hard we try to earn them. The cold distance of a spouse only grows with more effort to improve the relationship. There doesn't seem to be any way out. And fighting against it only makes it worse.

Our lives are often characterized by struggle and frustration, such that these things often seem much clearer to us than God's promise of redemption. Verse 8 of this Psalm says it clearly: "he (God) will redeem Israel from all its iniquities." This is the promise of life for the believer, and yet so often our hearts betray our reticence to believe that this is Good, True, and Real. And the question then becomes, until we believe it, until we know this truth with confidence, how do we live?

Psalm 130 is one of 15 "Psalms of Ascent". The Hebrew word for Ascents could be translated as 'steps' (serving as a metaphor for walking up the steps of the Temple in worship). This Psalm is arranged such that two-verse couplets represent each a step. These 'steps' are NOT parts of an equation to produce a desired outcome, but rather steps in thought and processing through the circumstances of life.

### STEP 1: HELP!

The first step of the Psalm—verses 1 and 2—gives us the simplest challenge, and yet often the most difficult in our condition: ask for help. We hear it first right away in verse 1. There's a raw honesty in these words, an honesty that begins from a personal perspective, acknowledging the low condition of the writer. As this word (depths) is used elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Ps. 69.2, 14), it signals a place of despair, even "terror . . . [where] self-help is no answer" {Kidner}. The imagery of the little girl trapped in a well may be helpful – confused, afraid, unable to move, and barely able to speak.

Added to this desperate condition are the words of verse 2, where we hear the Psalmist calling out to the Lord, the One who knows all and is in control of all but in the midst of despair, he finds himself pleading even to be heard. We hear hints of doubt in his voice. He may not be convinced he will be heard. But he knows that God is the only One to whom he might cling. There is no presumption here, there is no arrogance. There is no pleading based on good things accomplished; there is no talk of injustice as if he didn't deserve what was happening. It's honest desperation crying out for help.

I want to be extremely careful in our consideration of this, but as a minister of the Gospel I need to say that there are times when we forget to do this, and therefore we need to hear in these words a challenge to cry out to God in our pain and suffering. This isn't a magical incantation—we need to resist the thought that there are always 'right words.' We can find

confidence in the honesty and even doubt in the words before us. Our lives are messy, and God knows that. Our anger, fear, and doubt—even expressed at Him—do not surprise Him. They do not scare Him off; they do not kindle His anger against us. The words before us challenge us to seek Him in our need, and to cry out for help, even when we may not grasp what it is we need.

## STEP 2: CONFESSION OF SIN

In the second step of the Psalm, verses 3-4, the Psalmist continues to wrestle with his suffering, but here he does so in terms of sin, and he call us to confess. Traditionally, this Psalm is referred to as a 'penitential Psalm,' as an example of appropriate confession of sin (cf. Psalm 51). However, some commentators believe that this means that he's in this place of despair strictly because of wrongs he had done. While this is part of the truth here it is not the complete truth, and it means everything to us as we face difficulty.

Notice his words in verse 3 as his understanding of his circumstances becomes more clear: "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities . . ." Another translation rightly says, "If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins." He goes on to say, at the end of verse 3, that "every one of us, apart from Grace, is an enemy of God, and were he to execute His judgment upon us, not one of us would have any right or ability not to be destroyed." Our wrongs committed against God are enough that if He were keeping track of everything we had ever done, the list would consume us, and His wrath would destroy us. Apart from grace, we are God's enemies.

We need to be careful to understand that it's not simply the writer's sin that has consumed him, but it's something much broader: the sin of the world in which he lives. None of us could be quick to argue that sin has no consequences. However, we need to be careful as we consider the converse of that—problems in our lives are not always the result of our sin. We live in a world broken by all of our love of ourselves, and we daily face the consequences not only of our own decisions, but of those of the people around us. Confessing sin is not merely a personal, individual statement; it also includes the pervasiveness of the problem.

In the face of this, God is gracious and offers to us forgiveness: He is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . . He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" [Ps 103.8, 10]. The goal of this action toward us is that we might fear Him—that our hearts would submit to His rule in our lives and embrace the love and grace that He extends toward us.

## STEP 3: READY, SET . . . WAIT

The third step of this Psalm, verses 5-6, serves as the center of the entire Psalm; the call is to wait. The Psalmist does not treat sin as if that is the end of the matter. We hear more confidence in his voice in these words, and yet we cannot assume everything is 'all better.' He models for us the honest assessment of his circumstances. The image he gives us is that of a person standing guard on a city wall during the night. This would have been a time of loneliness—most of the city asleep, and even fear—from the threat of attack from enemies. But at the same time, the watchman looks toward the morning with great expectation, knowing that it will come at an appointed time. The night is difficult, but it is not endless.

The object of the waiting is the Lord himself. This is direct in the repetition in verses 5 and 6. In verse 6 the word 'waits' is supplied by English translators; in Hebrew it simply reads "my soul is to the Lord." The point here is that "with his whole being he waits" for the Lord {UBS}. He knows that what he needs more than "escape from punishment" and even from relief to his suffering is the Lord Himself. The anchor to which he clings as he waits is the word of the Lord [5], the promises God has spoken, and the trust that He will remain faithful to His word.

This is the center of this Psalm, because it covers so much of life for us: the wait. We long for relationships to be healed, we pray for sickness to be made better, we look and look and look for stable work. And yet in the midst of what is an often instant world, often the fulfillment of our greatest needs and longings take place over long periods of time. But hear again the honesty of these words: even with the knowledge of God's forgiveness, night doesn't vanish; pain and fear don't immediately run away. We can live with the confidence that there is an appointed time (even when we don't know it) for the darkness to end, and we will live in the Eternal Morning. And so waiting—even waiting in the confidence of the Gospel—includes both the honest assessment of life when things are bleak, and the hopeful waiting for God Himself.

## STEP 4: HEAR!

The last step of this Psalm, ver. 7-8, again direct our attention outside of ourselves and call us to hear the eternal promise of the Gospel. From experience, the writer calls his fellow Israelites to put their hope in the Lord. He offers a clearer understanding as to why the Lord Himself is the object of the longing of every part of His being: because of who the Lord is.

He first mentions the Lord's "steadfast love," his *hesed*. This is the Old Testament way of talking about grace—" . . . the mercy which removes the guilt of sin and its consequences, and puts freedom, peace, and joy into the heart" It is God's commitment to love His people in such a way that we do not face the judgment we deserve, and we experience the blessing of knowing Him in this life, and the hope of living with Him in the next. This flows not from our right, or any good things we could do, but because of God's love for His people, a love that comes from no where but God Himself.

But quickly the writer adds to this the promise of "plentiful redemption" [7]. This is the hope of deliverance from struggle, that God has the unlimited power and goodness to meet us in our sin and suffering, and to shine the Light of His Truth and Beauty into our lives. This is not the climax of an action movie in which we sit on the edge of our seats wondering how the hero will win the day (if everything works just right). With God there is plentiful redemption—there is an abundance of grace that He will extend to His people.

As a final (almost understated) benediction, the writer repeats Himself [8]. The emphasis in this verse, though, is that the hope of redemption—of all things being made new—is to be found in God alone, and in no other. For baby Jessica, the hero of the story—a claustrophobic paramedic—took his own life a few years later. But in Christ we have the sure promise of the One who has conquered death in our place. Wherever we may find ourselves, the words given to us, guide us to cry out in our need, confess the brokenness of the world, set our hearts to wait, and to hear the promise of the Gospel.

