

Studies in Psalm 130 Out of the Depths

Psalm 130 is one of the psalms that are classified as the Penitential Psalms. In this psalm David begins in deep trouble of soul. God's people often find themselves in soul trouble when the Holy Spirit convicts them of their sins. This trouble of soul is called "godly sorrow" by Paul in 2 Cor. 7: 10. Only one who has been there can identify with this spiritual agony. H. C. Leupold quotes Vilmar as writing that this psalm "has proved helpful in pastoral work to reassure troubled consciences of the certainty of forgiveness..."

Martin Luther wrote a beautiful hymn based on this psalm, "From the Depths I Cry To You"

From the depths, I cry to You.
What love could be so true!
My life is brushed with deep regret,
But You, O Lord, forget,
and don't keep score.

I long for You in prayer.
In this darkness, Lord be there!
Though justly in these depths through sin,
Yet may-through grace, forgiv'n-
My life be spared.

Like a watchman in the night.
I await Your morning light.
You are the Hope I long to see-O Lord!
Lord, be with me.

In the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church there is a beautiful prayer called *A General Confession* which is in the same vein of thought and feeling:

Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

Several hundred years ago Thomas Ken expressed the same depth of feeling which has characterized the saints in all ages as he penned the words of the song *When Overwhelmed with Doubts and Fears*:

When overwhelmed with doubts and fear, Great God do Thou my spirit cheer;
Let not mine eyes with tears be fed, but to the Rock of Ages led.

When storms of sin and sorrow beat, Lead me to this divine retreat;
Thy perfect righteousness and blood, my Rock, my Fortress and my God.

When guilt lies heavy on my soul, and waves of fierce temptation roll;
I'll to the Rock for shelter flee, and take my refuge, Lord in Thee.

When called the vale of death to tread, then to this Rock may I be led;
Nor fear to cross that gloomy sea, since Thou hast tasted death for me.

A good concise summary of this psalm is given by Robert Hawker in *The Poor Man's Commentary*:
"This most precious psalm contains the deep breathings of the soul under a sense of sin; the holy triumphs of the soul in view of the propitiary, the redemption by Jesus: and the earnest recommendation of a soul that, having found mercy himself, holds forth encouragement to others."

Verse 1, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD."

There are many depths into which a child of God may find himself. These depths may be physical, mental or spiritual. This psalm is helpful to whatever trouble the saint is in. As John Gill wrote, "It may be applied to any person in distress, outward or inward; applying to God for help and deliverance, for pardoning grace and mercy; encouraging himself and others to hope for it." The depths are like the deep waters of the sea which seem to have an endless bottom and threaten to drown us. Sometimes these may be health problems. They may be family sorrows, financial problems. The death of loved ones can plunge one into the depths. Deep depression or mental anguish at times seem to almost drown God's little ones. The worst of the depths that the child of God suffers, however, is the deep sense of his sinfulness. This sense of sinfulness, which is brought about by the Holy Spirit, plunges the saint into deep mourning and sorrow. However, this godly sorrow does not ultimately lead to despair but leads to repentance. The one who is not a child of God comes to despair. Paul calls this the "the sorrow of the world": which "worketh death." (2 Cor. 7: 10).

Jonah got into the depths because of his own sin, but he still cried into the Lord out of these depths. It seemed as if it was not possible for him to be delivered from his situation, but he cried out to God. As is recorded in Jonah 2:2, "And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice."

When the child of God becomes acutely aware of the horror of his sinfulness, he nevertheless has the holy boldness to approach his God because he knows that he has a merciful High Priest Who is interceding for him. This is beautifully portrayed in Hebrews 4:14-16, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

Verse 2, "Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications."

This is a strong plea for God to hear his prayers. The strong implication here is that the psalmist is praying aloud. This reminds us of Psalms 5:3, "My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up." Of course, the Lord hears the prayers of His children when they are not audible to the human ear. He hears their thoughts and even the groaning of their souls. In Romans 8: 26 Paul refers to this as "groaning which cannot be uttered."

However, the saints are sometimes so burdened with a sense of need that they find relief in praying aloud. God gives great encouragement to us that He is indeed a prayer-hearing, prayer-answering God. This is plainly expressed in 1 Peter 3:12, "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil."

Verse 3, "If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"

This verse indicates that sin is involved in David's problem if sin is not the problem itself. He realizes that if his sins are held against him there is no hope for him. He knew that God is a holy God who cannot look with favor on sin. God hates sin with a perfect hatred. Sometimes God's children do not realize how horrible sin really is. Then the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and we see it in its horrible true colors. It is perversity, missing the mark and out and out rebellion against God. At one time Paul did not see the horror of his sins. Then God revealed them to him and he had an agonizing experience. This is expressed in Romans 7:13, "Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." In fact, this revelation of the exceeding sinfulness of sin led him to cry out in Romans 7:24, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Thankfully the answer to this anguished plea was, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The force of the Hebrew expression "if thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities" is rendered by Leupold "shouldest be on the watch for iniquities." God not only knows our actions. He knows our motives, thoughts, and even attitudes. He is aware of all of the terrible implications and facets of our sinfulness. If He were to be on the watch for our iniquities that He might judge them, we would all be irretrievably lost. Only those whose sins are covered by the blood of Christ can stand before Him in judgment. David wrote in Psalms 1:5, "Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous."

M. M'Michael, cited in Spurgeon's *Treasury of David*, has a very striking and vivid word picture of this. He writes:

We are introduced at once into all the solemnities of a criminal court. The judge is seated on the bench: the culprit is standing at the bar, charged with a capital offence, the witnesses are giving their evidence against him. The judge is listening attentively to everything which is said; and in order to assist his memory, he takes notes of the more important parts. If the Lord were to try us after this fashion, what would be the result? Suppose him seated on his throne of inflexible righteousness, taking notes, with a pen in his hand, of the transgressions which are proven against us. Nothing is omitted. Every sin is marked down with its peculiar aggravations. There is no possibility of escape from the deserved condemnation. The evidence against us is clear, and copious, and overwhelming. A thousandth part of it is sufficient to determine our doom. The Judge has no alternative but to pronounce the awful sentence. We must die a felon's death.

Verse 4, "But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared."

This verse shows the true nature of a genuine fear of God. This is a loving, reverential, grateful fear that expresses itself in an intense desire to please Him Who has so graciously forgiven us our sins on the basis of the perfect sacrifice of His dearly beloved Son. This fear is the product of regeneration. Those who do not have spiritual life do not possess this kind of fear.

At first glance, this verse appears to be illogical. It would seem to carnal reasoning that such a forgiving God would not inspire fear. If God is so forgiving, would not that make sinners careless? But that is not the case at all for those who have been born from above. Those who have been saved by grace and have been made conscious of God's forgiveness realize that they owe Him a debt of gratitude. The more they realize how much they have been forgiven the more they want to live in a way that pleases such a kind and forgiving Savior. Jesus Christ made this plain in one of His parables. It is written in Luke 7:47, "Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." The more we recognize we are forgiven by Him the more we love Him. This love is expressed in obedience. We fear to offend God and long to serve Him acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

It is true that to the unenlightened mind it may seem as if people would despise such a gracious God. But that is not the case with the born again child of God. Paul made this plain in Romans 6:1-2, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?"

Among the wicked there may be dread and trembling, but no love. This is apparent from James 2:19, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble." They may tremble, but they do not obey Him and love Him.

This godly fear is beautifully described by George Bowen in *The Treasury of David*:

This forgiveness, this smile of God, binds the soul to God with a beautiful fear. Fear to lose one glance of love. Fear to lose one work of kindness. Fear to be carried away from the heaven of his presence by an insidious current of worldliness. Fear of slumber. Fear of error. Fear of not enough pleasing him. Our duty, then, is to drink deep of God's forgiving love. To be filled with it is to be filled with purity, fervency, and faith. Our sins have to hide their diminished heads, and slink away through crevices, when forgiveness -- when Christ -- enters the soul.

Michael Gowens commented on this in the following words:

Nothing actuates the praises of God's people like a sense of His pardoning grace. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "A Christian is a person who never ceases to be amazed at the fact that he is forgiven. He doesn't take it for granted." Instead, He stands in awe at grace. He never tires to exclaim with the prophet, "Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger forever, because He delighteth in mercy" ([Mic 7:18](#)). And, taking his cue from this verse, he sings with Samuel Davies:

*Great God of wonders! All Thy ways
Display the attributes Divine;
But countless acts of pardoning grace
Beyond Thine other wonders shine;
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

*In wonder lost with trembling joy,
We praise the pardon of our God;
Pardon for crimes of deepest dye,
A pardon bought with Jesus' blood;
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?*

Or who has grace so rich and free?

*O may this strange, this matchless grace,
This God-like miracle of love
Fill the wide earth with grateful praise,
As now it fills the choirs above!
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

Verses 5 and 6-, "I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning."

It seems here as if the psalmist has already experienced a sense of God's forgiveness, and is now cultivating a habit of waiting on the Lord. This is a life of intense waiting. There is a concentrated longing in this waiting. There are several reasons for a person to look with passionate anticipation for the morning light. It may be someone sitting by a sick bed. The night is gloomy. The dawn makes things seem brighter. It may be a weary watchman who has spent a long night on duty and longs for the dawn to appear so he can take some rest. It may be the Levitical priest, who watches for the first rays of dawn so that he can begin the morning sacrifice. As strong as these desires are the psalmist says that his soul waited for the Lord even more than those watching for the morning! There is no indifference here.

What gives substance to this waiting is not mere wishful thinking. The writer wrote that "in his word do I hope." The Word of God is sure and steadfast. The promises of God are sure. God and His promises are a solid rock to stand on in time of need. He who waits will not be disappointed. The same Hebrew for "wait" is used in Isaiah 40:31, "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." This word is *kaw-vaw*' and means "to wait or look eagerly for; to lie in wait for; to wait for, linger for."

Notice what is being waited for. It is not the blessing so much as it is the Blesser! "I wait for the Lord." All is well when He is near. Like a young child who is terrified in the dark relaxes with a sigh of relief when his father appears, so the child of God is filled with a sense of peace and safety when his heavenly Father makes His glorious presence felt. This is reminiscent of Psalms 103:1-2, "Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:" Here David blesses the holy name of the Lord before he thinks of the benefits.

When we have hope we are willing to wait. This is taught in Romans 8:24-25, "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it."

Charles Spurgeon has a good comment on the value and purpose of waiting. He wrote:

"Waiting is a great part of life's discipline, and therefore God often exercises the grace of waiting. Waiting has four purposes. It practises the patience of faith. It gives time for preparation for the coming gift. It makes the blessing the sweeter when it arrives. And it shows the sovereignty of God, -- to give just when and just as he pleases."

Verse 7, "Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption."

When a child of God has experienced forgiveness and restored fellowship with the Lord he wants to share this wonderful experience with other believers and to encourage them that they too can experience this spiritual renewal. David did this also in another Penitential Psalm. He wrote in Psalms 51:12-13, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee."

The psalmist had good grounds for the saints to wait on and hope in the Lord. God is a God of mercy and He has plenteous redemption. The mercy of the Lord toward His children is incomprehensible. There is a most wonderful description of the vastness of His mercy in Psalms 103:11, "For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him." This is an inexhaustible ocean of mercy!

The Lord also has "plenteous redemption." The Lord is exceedingly rich in all His graces and gifts, including redemption. He gloriously saves His people from all their sins. The prophet expressed this truth in Isaiah 55:7, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

The apostle John wrote in John 1:16, "And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace." William Hendriksen comments on this phrase in his *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*. He says that the expression "grace for grace" means grace in the place of grace or grace upon grace. This means that just as soon as a manifestation of God's grace is consumed another immediately takes its place. He thus wrote of this endless supply of grace which comes from God's infinite fullness: "Our own experience as believers enables us to bear testimony with reference to this plenitude that is in Christ, for *out of his fullness we all have received grace upon grace*, like the waves that follow one another upon the seashore, one taking the place of another constantly."

We must gladly concede that the psalmist had more than adequate reason to encourage his fellow saints to passionately wait for and expectantly hope for the smiling face of the Lord!

Verse 8, "And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

The psalm closes on a glorious note, the complete redemption of the children of God from all their iniquities. When he speaks of Israel he is speaking of all the elect of God. Paul refers to these elect children of God in Galatians 6:16, "And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God." He had already referred to them when he wrote in Galatians 3:28-29, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." This is the ultimate consolation of the child of God. He has already been saved from the **penalty** of sin. He is even now being delivered from the **power** of sin in the sense that he is not a slave to sin like one who does not have spiritual life. He knows that, praise God, he will soon be delivered from the very **presence** of sin!

This wonderful psalm should strengthen the tempest-tossed child of God, no matter what kind of

trouble he is experiencing. As Haldor Lillenas wrote many years ago in the magnificent song *Wonderful Grace of Jesus*:

Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus,
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea;
Higher than the mountain, sparkling like a fountain,
All sufficient grace for even me,

Broader than the scope of my transgressions,
Greater far than all my sin and shame,
O magnify the precious name of Jesus,
Praise His name!