

Songs for the Journey

*“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?”
(Psalm 24:3 ESV)*

*“But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”
(Hebrews 11:16 ESV)*

With You, God, There is Forgiveness

January 7, 2024

Psalm 130

Pastor Steve Paul

Our pastor, at the encouragement of our board of elders, has gone off the grid into seclusion these first 2 weeks of 2024 to update his book MILE 1, first published in 2010. Pray for God to empower him that this discipleship tool will be increasingly fruitful for God’s kingdom.

A new year is here. As we consider how to spend the time God gives us and as we reassess our habits and goals, it’s important to remember that **the Christian life is a journey**. You and I are on a lifelong walk of faith. We’re strangers and exiles here. THIS WORLD is not our home, we’re just passing through. Our HOME, the destination our hearts LONG for is (as Heb 11:16 puts it) a *better country, a heavenly one, a city*—not built by human hands—but one *God Himself has prepared for us*.

The best way to **journey** through this coming year is with EYES LOCKED on THAT.

In the rhythm of Old Testament worship, God required His people to **journey** as well. Three times a year they hiked UP to Jerusalem. From whatever geographic point they called home, wherever their pilgrimage began, their journey made a rigorous ascent to the hill of the Lord, where they’d worship the LORD God at His temple. As they traveled, their main concern almost certainly was *to get their hearts ready* to stand before HOLY God. To present themselves before the Almighty in worthy worship.

“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? Who shall stand in His holy place?” asks Psalm 24:3. He who has clean hands, a pure heart, who hasn’t lifted up his soul to an idol.

You have to get ready for that, and God's people composed songs for that purpose.

A collection of 15 of those songs are tucked into our Bible's songbook (the book of Psalms), called "songs of ascent." Psalm 120 through 134 are God-inspired travel tunes they sang as they huddled around the campfire in the frigid desert night or as the hike got hard and shade was scarce by day. This road trip playlist is meant for us, too. The timeless lyrics help us **calibrate our hearts as we make our way HOME**. They're **songs for OUR journey**, too.

I invite you to turn to Psalm 130 (p. 518 of your church Bible). It's a well-worn favorite of mine.

When our boys were young, they loved to hear stories about when WE were young. They especially loved it when we TOLD on ourselves. A frequent request was of when I was age 5, and I snuck some coins from my mom's purse, made for the front door, flew the 100 yards to the corner store, bought contraband candy, and got busted as I lied through my sticky teeth.

One of our guys in particular resonated with that. "Whooo daddy. You were in deep!"

"Yep, worst day of my childhood. Your daddy deserved everything coming to me." When I recounted the "corrective measures my mom undertook" the look on his face was something like what a lifer in prison might get as he rolls up his sleeve to reveal wicked scars.

"Whoa Dad!"

But my son's fascination came from a deeper place in his soul than that. As I recounted my story, his eyes said, "Dad, I know what it feels like. I know what I bring on myself. I know how sin sinks and guilt suffocates. And it helps to know my dad knows, too."

We all know. Don't we?

Unresolved guilt bears down like an oppressive heat wavy. It saps your soul.

Remember how it feels when that unmarked car you notice a little too late moves off the shoulder, lights flashing, and slips in behind you? You know.

Yes. Saved saints still sin.

Sin corrodes.

It deadens.

It kills.

Psalm 130 reaches down into that oxygen-deprived place that personal sin plunges us into. It's a God-given way back for when we're ... *in* over our heads. And like a shaft of light or trail of bubbles it points the way up to the surface where we can breathe again.

Listen in and this song will show us

How to Experience the Relief of God's Forgiveness

I need this. Don't you?

Hear now the Word of the LORD:

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. (Psalm 130, ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Notice how the song is broken into four stanzas—with 2 verses apiece. Each stanza prompts us with help WE need.

To experience the relief of God’s forgiveness, first of all,

1. Cry out for God’s Mercy. (Verses 1-2)

Look at v1:

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! (Psalm 130, ESV)

The singer raises his voice ... literally, out of “deep waters.” You ever tried that? Shout underwater? What comes out? Not a whole lot—garble.

When we do wrong, it garbles our intimacy with God. He’s our Lifegiver. When we choose to walk out of step with Him, we bring dissonance into our relationship. We’ve dethroned our Lord. It’s like cancer in our bones. It’s a corrosion we can’t carry for long.

David puts words to it in Psalm 32.

³ ... when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
 through my groaning all day long.
⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
 my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. (Psalm 32, ESV)

You’ve felt that. Every God-lover knows

¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
 the Lord would not have listened. (Psalm 66:18, ESV)

I can't walk with holy God and pretend we're tight if I clutch sin like a competing treasure.

We know that, but every bent INSIDE us ... and every pressure OUTSIDE makes us point everywhere else but HERE when we sin. We blow smoke screens. It's our upbringing. It's the system. We're the victims. We lash out.

In lifesaving, the one in deep water who keeps thrashing loses. Only when he relaxes and admits he's in a fix, or when he gets mercifully knocked out by the lifeguard, can help really come.

The way back from the depth of guilt is to admit, "I've got no excuse. I've got no appeal—only this, "God, I need your mercy."

That's a prayer God will always hear:

¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
he has attended to the voice of my prayer. (Psalm 66:19, ESV)

This vital truth comes up often in God's Word. Because we need it regularly--

¹³ Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,
but **he who confesses** and **forsakes** them **WILL OBTAIN MERCY**.
(Proverbs 28:13, ESV)

⁸ **If we say we have no sin**, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ **If we confess our sins**, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ **If we say we have not sinned**, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1, ESV)

God-lover, do you regularly experience the relief of God's forgiveness? Repentance and confession is God's gift. It's a daily discipline designed to fill us with fresh vitality on our journey Home.

Make good use of it. **Cry out for God's mercy.**

Then, secondly

2. Acknowledge That God Does Forgive. (Verses 3-4)

He REALLY IS the One who pardons. See verse 3?

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand? (Psalm 130, ESV)

God, if you were to keep track, log each misstep, mark every blotch on my record ... O Lord! ... the question is rhetorical, isn't it! I'D BE TOAST! We'd ALL be!

All over the world there's a notion that someone somewhere tracks our trespasses. Even in cultures like ours where that notion is suppressed and scoffed at ... we're reminded ... someone somewhere is "*keeping a list, checking it twice, finding out who's naughty and nice.*" On a mountain peak in Tibet, there's a cave barely big enough for a skinny person to squeeze through. It's said that if you can't get through that tunnel, it's due to the karma collected on your soul over the past incarnations like fat on your frame. On Good Friday each year, people in the Philippines and in Hispanic America crawl on their knees until they're bruised and bloody or they allow themselves to be temporarily crucified in an attempt to impress the someone somewhere keeping track. In Africa and Haiti, unpredictable spirits keep score in a way nobody understands except the local witchdoctor. Someone somewhere is keeping track.

In 2021, a columnist wrote a piece entitled "The Internet Has Turned Our Past into a Curse."

"Our words and [our] gestures fade in memory. Old photographs are lost. But online every dumb picture, every unfinished conversation and every idle feud is preserved. Living as we are in the 'land of no forgetting,' online, we are not so much people as [we are] vast, unwieldy filing cabinets waiting to be browsed by our friends or raided by our enemies." (James Marriott, *The Times*)¹

¹ James Marriott, "The Internet Has Turned Our Past into a Curse," *The Times*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-internet-has-turned-our-past-into-a-curse-37l6sp7dq>.

There is an online record on us, some we want to remember, some we wish no one ever knew. But it's out there and can jump us any moment.

The GREATER reality is more fearsome than that. The Bible tells us that the True and Living God, our Creator and Judge ALREADY knows it all. He doesn't have to go digging.

¹³ ... no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:13, ESV)

God has made it clear in His Word that one wrong in my life taints my soul, like one drop of sewage in a glass of water makes it undrinkable. God doesn't have to keep score—everything is exposed and laid bare before Him. He knows it all. What I've done in the dark, he knows like the blaze of day. Break one law, and we're guilty of breaking the entire code. With a record like that ... **who can stand** in His court of law?

BUT ... the stanza continues,

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared. (Psalm 130:4, ESV)

This psalm doesn't go into HOW God goes about doing that. It just celebrates: With YOU there IS FORGIVENESS. God really does ERASE our RECORD. But how?

He's the One ...

⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, **forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, BUT who will by no means clear the guilty** ... (Exodus 34:7, ESV)

How can He both FORGIVE yet BY NO MEANS clear the guilty? Answer? In Christ.

¹⁹ ... **in Christ** God was reconciling the world to himself, **not counting their trespasses against them** ... (2 Corinthians 5:19, ESV)

Sinners never get off “scot-free.” God deals with our guilt **in Christ**. How?

²¹ For our sake [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

Christian, with God ... there IS FORGIVENESS. At the steep cost of His Beloved Son’s spotless life, and by His death in our place and for our sake, offered by His grace and received by faith, He simply wipes out our record of wrongs. He tosses them as far as east is from west. He chooses not to count them against us. EVER. And He can do so justly ... because Jesus took our entire record of wrong (past, present and future) on Himself and PAID it IN FULL.

With YOU there is forgiveness. What relief! When God forgives, we’re buoyant! We can breathe again!

Notice though ... forgiveness is not an end in itself. See that in the second half of v4?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared. (Psalm 130:4, ESV)

God pulls us out of our muck—not so we can wallow back in and carry on as before—but so we can do what we’re designed to do.

Fear Him.

Live in the light of His holiness.

Enjoy Him in uncluttered fellowship.

Worship Him worthily.

Reflect His goodness and glory.

Obey Him with joyful trembling.

Love Him with awestruck wonder.

He forgives us so we may fear Him.

When **we experience how God DOES forgive sin**, it makes us LONG to do what GOD LONGS for us. Have you ever heard God sigh?

²⁹ Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever! (Deuteronomy 5:29, ESV)

That's what He YEARNS for us this year! He desires it for forever!

So, cry out for God's mercy. Acknowledge that God does forgive.

And thirdly,

3. Grip God's Word No Matter How You Feel. (Verses 5-6)

Look at v5:

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. (Psalm 130, ESV)

There's a whole lot of waiting there. What's that about?

When we've felt the corrosion of our sin, admitted our need for God's mercy, and come to God for His pardon, ... truth is ... our feelings can lag behind. Can't they? It can take time to FEEL ... Am I forgiven? Have I really been sprung free? Is it really off my record? Am I truly pure before God? We want relief so badly we could burst from waiting. Like being underwater, hardly able to hold our breath a second longer before finally breaking the surface.

But don't forget. Feelings fail us. They're not reliable guides. Make them follow the lead of God's promise. Conform them to what God says is true and what He will be faithful to do. That's how David did it.

⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and [FACT] **you forgave the iniquity of my sin.** (Psalm 32:5, ESV)

Grip God's Word. Remind yourself again and again:

⁹ If we confess our sins, **he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins** and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9, ESV)

Keep telling God, "With you God, there IS forgiveness. You won't hold out. It's your character to keep your word—you're faithful. It's your work through Jesus that's makes it true—you're just. Thank you! And those are just the things I'm aware of. Thank you that you go farther to expunge every last ugly dreg that you in your perfection know is there. Thank you."

If you've ever pulled an all-nighter or worked security, you know how not having much to do can make a long night LONG. LONELY. Interminable. Will this shift ever end?!

There's MORE in this waiting than hoping for our feelings to catch up with God's promise. This is the yearning in our hearts for full and final relief, for complete and conclusive release—not just from our sins, but from our sinful condition.

In Romans 7, where Paul describes every saved saint's daily wrestle with sin, he exclaims:
²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Who will fully and finally release me from doing what deep down I don't want to do? In Romans 8, he goes:

²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, **groan inwardly as we wait eagerly** for adoption as sons, **the redemption of our bodies.** (Romans 8:23, ESV)

More than YEARNING to be cleansed from the wrongs I do every day, I CAN'T WAIT to be released from the capacity to repeat offend ever again.

One thing is sure about a watchman's long night—Psalm 130 reassures us—DAWN ALWAYS comes! Night GIVES WAY to the full blaze of day. ALWAYS.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who has been quadriplegic all her adult life, writes:

Some don't quite believe me. They think I want Jesus to come back so I can jump out of my wheelchair and walk again. Although at one time that was true, decades of leaning on Jesus in my suffering have driven my longings for heaven deeper. A glorified body will be nice, but I want a pure heart. I want to be holy.

(Joni Eareckson Tada)²

That's the ultimate promise from God that we grip—one new day will dawn when prayers of confession will be no more, because SIN IN US will be no more.

That takes us to the concluding stanza. If you cry out for God's mercy, acknowledge that He does forgive, and grip God's Word no matter what you feel, you'll want to

4. Invite Others Into the Hope of Full Redemption. (Verses 7-8)

⁷ O Israel, hope **in the LORD!**

For **with the LORD** there is steadfast love,
and **with him** is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And **he [Himself]** will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities. (Psalm 130, ESV)

² Joni Eareckson Tada, "When My Quadriplegia Ends: What Makes Me Long for Heaven," *Desiring God*, May 31, 2021.

What an astonishing statement of hope!

Do you see? God is the one in the limelight here!

Not us.

Not our guilt.

Not our despair.

What we can't do for ourselves, He does. **He** does. The emphasis in the Hebrew makes it clear that He does it HIMSELF. Fully. Plentifully. Completely. ALL our iniquities will one day be gone! And gone forever!

"Praise the LORD!

His mercy is more.

Stronger than darkness.

New every morn."

Christian, the encouragement that comes from practicing this privilege of confession is this:

Every deliverance is a preview and a pledge of that great day of redemption, and every experience of forgiveness [now] is a foreshadowing of the final redemption from sin and everything connected to it! (Allen Ross)³

God doesn't just love us as we are to leave us as we are. Through Jesus and by His Spirit, He loves us into greater loveliness—into the radiant beauty of Christ's character.

By His mercy, He pulls us from the gutter of our guilt, makes us buoyant again with His forgiveness (all because of Jesus), and (with the help of His Holy Spirit) through stretches of longing, He teaches us to treasure His pardon, giving us a greater TASTE for His full and final redemption ahead, a deeper YEARNING for the comprehensive restoration He guarantees is coming.

³ Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, Vol 3, Kregel, p. 711.

Today, you and I can look forward to a day where no sin will ever hamper us again. A day when, you and I will look back and find that even the consequences of our wrongdoing, the scars from our choices, the adversities we brought on ourselves are erased, reversed, done, gone.

In CHRIST, God has done that. God is doing that. And, God will do that.

O people of God,

put your hope in the LORD.

For with the LORD is steadfast love;

and with him is plentiful redemption.

He himself WILL redeem you from ALL your sins.

Let's pray: