

Derision of the Devil

Psalm 130

[Phil Johnson](#)

Our text this morning is Psalm 130, one of the most beloved and most important of the fifteen Psalms of Ascent. It's more personal than most of the psalms in this group. It doesn't sound like a chorus written for group singing. It speaks with an individual voice (in first person singular). Psalm 130.

What you hear right away in this psalm is a desperate plea for help. The opening verses convey a tone of deep loneliness and discouragement. This is a lamentation and a plea for help from someone who is mired in the gloom of guilt and deep depression. He feels like he is drowning in the depths of a bottomless ocean and lost in utter darkness.

And here's what *really* intrigues me about this psalm: This is the prayer of a believer. These are the words of someone who knows the Lord. It is the song of a redeemed man in a time of trouble—and it's trouble of his own making, which makes his burden even more difficult to bear. This is clearly not a cry for salvation from a lost soul—like the thief on the cross, or the tax collector in the parable of Luke 18, who **"would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"** The desperate tone

of this psalm's opening verse sounds similar to that, but this is a prayer for mercy from a *believer* who is seeing with fresh eyes just how thoroughly sinful he is.

It doesn't really become clear until the second half of the psalm that this plea for mercy is coming from the heart of a person who knows the Lord. But it soon becomes clear that he understands how willing God is to forgive sinners. Still, he doesn't take God's grace for granted. He can't cavalierly dismiss his own conscience when it smites him with a sense of guilt and shame. He doesn't try to comfort himself with an appeal to the doctrine of eternal security.

Every now and then I run into little pockets of people who teach that since we are justified by faith and promised full and free pardon for all our sins—past, present, and future—we don't need to confess our sins or seek God's forgiveness again. (Even though Jesus taught us to pray, "**Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins**"—these guys seem to think they know better.) Behind my office door I have a "heresy" bookshelf where I keep books that I need to refer to occasionally but would never recommend. There's a stack of books there by authors who say Christians should never ask God for forgiveness. That's an act of unbelief, they say, since God has already granted us forgiveness. Here's an excerpt from an author who teaches that. He says:

God wants us to have confidence before Him, and to be more aware of our righteousness and His grace than of our

shortcomings & mistakes. . . . How can we have boldness before God if we have to grovel on our knees and plead for the forgiveness of our sins every time we pray?

The psalmist sees things differently. He is going to make it clear that he already trusts the Lord for full forgiveness. He knows (v. 4) that "**with [the Lord] there is forgiveness.**" He ends this psalm with a triumphant expression of bold confidence: "**He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.**"

But at the moment, the psalmist is utterly appalled and depressed by his sin. That's what has him in the depths. He *feels* his guilt. He knows deliberate disobedience is out of place in the life of one who has been redeemed. After all (v.4), one of the fruits of forgiveness is supposed to be a reverential fear of God. But sin is the exact opposite of godly fear. So the psalmist has not been acting like a believer should act. His sense of holy confidence before God has been shaken. And in a case such as this, those fears and emotions are perfectly appropriate. This psalm is his response to God, and it's a good one.

Spurgeon says,

Prayer is never more real and acceptable than when it rises out of the worst places. Deep places beget deep devotion. Depths of earnestness are stirred by depths of tribulation. Diamonds sparkle most amid the darkness. Prayer [out of the depths] gives [glory to God in the highest].

Psalm 130. Here is the psalm:

***A Song of Ascents.* 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.

There's a note of something we have heard before in the tone of this psalm. It reminds me of the prayer of Jonah, in Jonah 2. That was literally a prayer "out of the depths"—perhaps coming from a lower depth (further below sea level) than anyone had ever prayed before. I suppose in a modern submarine you could reach a lower depth than Jonah's and still be able to pray, but normally, prayer out of the depths is a miraculous thing.

Think about this, and it will encourage you, I think: It wouldn't be possible for us to pray at all when we're in the depths if the Lord did not sovereignly protect and preserve

us. Whether we're talking about depths of misery or literally the lower parts of the ocean, deep places normally engulf and put to silence anything that sinks into them. Jonah, for example, could not have prayed without the Lord's enablement. He would have drowned and his voice would have been silenced forever. But the fish that swallowed Jonah was a means of preservation and safety and correction rather than an instrument of divine wrath or judgment. So virtually all of Jonah 2 is a prayer sent up from out of the depths. Listen to the opening words of Jonah's prayer:

Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish,

2 saying, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

3 For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me.

Here in our text the psalmist prays, "**Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!**" And just like the story of Jonah, it's clear from the full context of our psalm that the Psalmist is in despair because of some sin (or sins) he has committed. The guilt of his failure is weighing heavily on him, and that is what has thrust him into the depths of despair. Perhaps it is a habit he has failed to mortify completely, or a sin so shameful that it

believes his profession of faith in God. His assurance has been shaken by it, and this prayer is his plea to God.

We know the issue is sin, because (verse 2), he is praying for "mercy." The Hebrew text literally says, "**Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.**" And that word "supplication" speaks of an earnest prayer for grace and favor. The context here makes clear that he knows he is seeking forgiveness, so the ESV gets the proper sense of it: "**Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!**"

The psalmist is feeling the disgrace and despair that sin brings. He acknowledges that he is guilty (v. 4): "**If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?**"—or to paraphrase: "*Lord, if you were counting my sins with an eye toward judgment, I would be doomed a hundred times over.*"

This is a man in trouble, and the trouble is of his own making. It is the fruit of his own sin. He's keenly aware of that, and he's feeling the weight of his guilt—guilt like a massive concrete sarcophagus, dragging him deeper into the depths. The psalmist here is having the very same kind of thoughts that provoked the apostle Paul in Romans 7 to say:

when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,

23 but I see in my members another law waging war

against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Sounds like the same mood as the psalmist in our psalm, right? In fact, those two passages make an interesting comparison and contrast. As *the apostle Paul* ponders his sin, he exclaims about what a wretched man he is. As *the psalmist* ponders his sin, he exclaims about how remarkable the Lord's redemption is. And you know what? They are both right. Both of those are perfectly valid perspectives. And both Paul and the psalmist clearly see both sides. It is obvious from the psalm that the psalm-writer deeply senses his own wretchedness. That feeling of wretchedness is what has him in the depths. It is also apparent in Romans 7 that Paul rejoices and rests in the Lord's redemption, because immediately after lamenting how wretched he is, Paul says, **"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"**—and then he goes on to write an entire chapter about life in the Spirit and the security of the one who trusts in the Lord.

But what *both* passages reveal is that it is perfectly normal—and for any thoughtful believer, it's even a common and inescapable response—that when we are sensitive to sin and aware of our own fallenness (especially in the aftermath of some egregious spiritual failure), we should sense a degree of sorrow, and shame, and self-doubt. If you respond to your own sin with nonchalance or indifference, *you ought to question your salvation*. If your sin shatters your

self-confidence and plunges you into the depths—making you feel like Jonah that you are in the very "**belly of Sheol**," here's a psalm that shows the way out.

Psalm 130 is one of seven penitential psalms—psalms of repentance. Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 all are prayers for relief when we are weighed down by sin. Since the time of the church fathers, those seven psalms have stood out as models of how believers should confess their sin. And it's fitting that the pilgrim psalms should include a psalm of penitence.

Unfortunately, medieval Catholicism ripped this psalm out of context, and to this day, in Roman Catholic liturgy Psalm 130 is used as a prayer for the souls of people in purgatory. There's even an app for the Iphone called "Catholic Meditations on Purgatory," and the promo for that app says this: "Central to the app is Psalm 130, "*De Profundis*," a traditional penitential psalm." *De profundis*, of course, is Latin for "**out of the depths**," the opening words of the psalm. Catholic priests intone the psalm in Latin as a prayer for the dead.

I came across this 450-year-old comment by Solomon Gesner, an early Lutheran commentator who lived one generation after Luther. Gesner wrote a commentary on the Psalms titled, *Disquisitions on the Psalter*. Here's what he says about psalm 130:

[This psalm] has been perverted to the most disgraceful abuse in the Popedom . . . that it should be mumbled in the lowest voice by slow bellies, in the sepulchral vigils for their liberation of souls from purgatory: as if [the Psalmist] were here treating of the dead, when he has not even spoken a word about them . . . But leaving the buffooneries of the Papists we will rather consider the true meaning and use of the Psalm. . . .

And from there he writes his commentary on psalm 130.

Speaking of Lutherans, this psalm has always figured large in Lutheran worship. Martin Luther himself loved Psalm 130. He rejected the use of this psalm as a prayer for the dead and embraced it as a perfect expression of his own struggle with the fruits of human fallenness. Luther even wrote a hymn based on it. In German, it's called *Aus Tiefer Not*. I don't know why we don't sing this hymn anymore. It's a great one. Here's the first stanza of the English translation:
From the depths of woe I raise to Thee, a voice of
lamentation.

Lord, turn a gracious ear to me, And hear my supplication.
If Thou iniquities dost mark, Our secret sins and misdeeds
dark,

O who shall stand before Thee?

Luther constantly went to Psalm 130 in times of trouble and depression. He referred to it as a Pauline psalm, because it

echoes so many of the same doctrinal themes that reverberate through Paul's epistles.

In 1530, Protestantism was on trial at the Diet of Augsburg. That was an imperial meeting convened by the rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. Luther was forbidden to attend by his liege lord, the Duke of Saxony—because the Duke was afraid Luther would be imprisoned or burnt as a heretic by Roman Catholic authorities. So Luther spent six months holed up in the castle of Coburg, translating the Bible into German.

Cut off from fresh air and exercise, Luther (who was prone to melancholy), suffered from depression and migraines so severe that one night he fainted. When he regained consciousness, Luther said to his friends, "Come, let us sing that Psalm, 'Out of the depths' . . . in derision of the devil." He said he believed the message of that psalm would severely hurt the devil's feelings.

A hundred ninety-four years later, another Lutheran, Johann Sebastian Bach wrote a Cantata based on Luther's hymn version of this psalm. In our generation, an Anglican composer, John Rutter, made Psalm 130 the second movement of his *Requiem*. So the musical pedigree of this psalm is long and rich.

John Owen, the great Puritan theologian, in all his voluminous writings, wrote only two works of verse-by-verse exposition. One was a massive seven-volume

commentary on the book of Hebrews. The other was a 325-page exposition of Psalm 130.

For John Owen, this psalm marked a major turning point in his life and ministry. He says he ministered for several years without fully grasping what it meant to have access to God through Christ. Then, Owen says,

The Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Psalm 130:4, "**But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.**"

Evidently, Owen was describing an experience fairly early in his ministry when he had a crisis of confidence. He lost his assurance. He came to a point of despair in the midst of some affliction where he doubted his salvation. I gather some sin or spiritual lapse of his own was at the root of it, and that's why this particular psalm showed him the way out. Because that is the whole point of the psalm: it shows the way up out of personal defeat and discouragement back into the bright light of full assurance.

If you're someone who is easily shaken by your own failures, so that you have difficulty finding settled assurance, you ought to memorize this psalm. You can recite the words of this text in derision of the devil every time the accuser

points to some inconsistency or transgression in your life and tries to tell you your faith is in vain.

Now look at the structure of the psalm. It divides evenly into four strophes of two verses each, and each section has a different tone. Each stanza is brighter than the last. So the Psalm moves us from the depths to the heights by degrees. It's a perfect psalm for an uphill journey. Although it starts on a depressing note, it ends with one of the most uplifting choruses in this whole collection.

Here's the breakdown: Verses 1-2 are a cry to God; verses 3-4 are a confession of guilt; verses 5-6 are a crescendo of gladness; and verses 7-8 are a chorus about the gospel. In the first two verses the psalmist is *pleading*. The next two verses find him *trusting*. Verses 5-6 are all about *waiting*. And in verses 7-8, the theme is *hoping*.

And we progress from contrition to humility to hope—and each mood provides fuel for the next. His contrition humbles him; his humility provokes him to wait; and while he is waiting, he finds hope. And as we will see, it's not a vague, wishful hope. It is a settled rest in the knowledge that "**with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.**"

So let's look at these stanzas one at a time. First is:

1. A CRY TO GOD (1-2)

Next to the famous opening line of Psalm 22 ("**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?**"), this may be the most forlorn and desperate line in all the psalms: "**Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!**"

This is the song of a redeemed man in trouble, and as we've said, it is trouble of his own making. He has been brought low, and he knows it was by his own fault, so his prayer is a prayer for *mercy*. This is not (like Psalms 120 and 129) the plea of someone afflicted by wicked enemies. It's not like Psalm 17, which starts out, "**Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry! Give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit!**"

This is a cry from someone who knows he has brought trouble on himself by his sin. It is his own *guilt* that has brought him into the depths of depression, desperation, and disconsolation. He is greatly burdened by it—and there is a note of helplessness in the plea. Whatever *self*-confidence got him into this predicament is shot. He has reached the end of himself.

He is like the Prodigal Son. Luke 15:16-17 says of the Prodigal Son, "**He was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But . . . he came to himself**"—meaning "he came to his senses."

But when we have to be brought to our senses by the consequences of our own sin, it's a pretty dismal awakening.

No soul could ever sink into a darker or more distressing depth than the pit of sin. The descent usually starts slowly, gradually, almost imperceptibly. Sin looks enticing, pleasurable, and there seems so little danger if we just dip a toe in it. *That feels so good, why not go wading ankle deep? That's no big deal, we think.* But sin is a thick, sucking quicksand bordered by steep, slippery banks. And we don't even begin to sense the danger until we are already in over our heads.

Sin *always* promises pleasures. Scripture even acknowledges that there are "**fleeting pleasures [that can be derived from] sin.**" But the aftermath of sin is nothing but gloom and sorrow—and "**the wages of sin is death.**" The solicitation to sin always points to those "**fleeting pleasures.**" It's an appeal to the flesh. In the words of James 1:14-15: "**Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.**" That is what Scripture calls "**the deceitfulness of sin.**"

The psalmist has fallen into some sin, and he is now sunk deep in it—well over his head. Whatever pleasure he was promised at first is now gone, and all he is left with is horrible shame, the relentless voice of a troubled conscience, and a savage sense of regret. He is in the dark depths of

gloom and guilt—weighed down by the knowledge that his despair is the fruit of his own folly. He feels the dishonor of it. He thinks he has alienated himself from God. Jonah described the very same feeling in his prayer from inside the fish. Jonah 2:4: **"Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight.'"** It feels like he is on the very doorstep of hell. It seems like there is no way up.

And if you have ever reached that point in your own experience, you understand how God, who sits on high, can *seem* remote and unreachable from such a depth. That's what prompts the plea of verse 2: **"O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!"** There's a desperate urgency there that even two exclamation marks can't convey.

God is not really remote. As David says in Psalm 39,

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

9 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,"

12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

Now notice the nature of the psalmist's plea in our psalm. It's not a plea of innocence. He is not pleading his own case.

He's not protesting that he doesn't deserve to be brought so low. This is an appeal to the Lord for mercy. He speaks of it in the plural: "**my pleas for mercy.**" "**Supplications**"—plural. It is as if he is begging, imploring the Lord with repeated petitions for clemency, though he knows he has no righteous claim to forgiveness.

This is not at all like those other psalms where the psalmist beseeches God to overthrow some enemy or make right some horrible injustice. This time it's *mercy* he wants, not *justice*. There's a clearly implied confession of guilt in this.

And stanza 2 takes up that theme. Stay with me here, especially if you like to take down the outline. Here it is: Those first two verses are a cry to God. Verses 2-3 are:

2. A CONFESSION OF GUILT (3-4)

As he contemplates his guilt (set against the backdrop of a holy God whose righteousness rules out any and every imperfection) the psalmist realizes the utter hopelessness of trying to remedy his own sin or measure up to the divine standard.

And he realizes he's not alone. All humanity is in the same predicament.

The average person foolishly sees that as a reason for self-confidence. They think, *Well, I'm not as bad as most*

people. I'll be OK. God will overlook all but the very worst sins. If I do my best, God will surely accept that.

But He wont. Unless you are absolutely perfect (and trust me: you're not), your "best" will not be good enough to earn God's approval. Jesus said, "**You . . . must be perfect** [How perfect?] **As your heavenly Father is perfect.**" That's Matthew 5:48, and it comes in a context where Jesus had already said (v. 20): "**Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**" Of all the rigorous denominations who ever claimed to follow Scripture to the letter, they were the most religious, most meticulously painstaking in their observation of legal minutiae. And Jesus said they weren't fit for heaven.

The psalmist gets that. Verse 3: "**If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?**" To paraphrase: If the Lord kept a careful record of sins, no one would be able to stand before Him.

Here's the problem for unbelievers: The Lord *does* keep a meticulous record of sins. Not one transgression ever escapes His omniscient notice. Scripture says even all our secret sins will one day be exposed, and "**on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak.**" That's what Jesus Himself said in Matthew 12:36. "**Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.**" Luke 12:2-3: "**Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore**

whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops." God sees and hears and knows everything. Hebrews 4:13: **"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."**

Furthermore, Ecclesiastes 12:14: **"God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."** And in Exodus 23:7, God says, **"I will not acquit the wicked."**

The psalmist is well aware of all that. He knows that God *does* keep a record of sin, and because God is righteous, (Psalm 1:5) **"the wicked will not stand in the judgment."**

But here's our first clue that this psalm is from the heart of a genuine believer. He also knows that God has promised to blot out the record of sins on behalf of all who come to Him in repentant faith. Isaiah 43:25, God speaking, says: **"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."** A chapter later in Isaiah 44:22, He says, **"I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you."**

Isaiah 1:18: **"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."** Jeremiah 31:34: **"I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."**

And my favorite of all these promises, Micah 7:19: "**He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.**" He pulls the believer up out of the depths, but He leaves the guilt there.

The promise is not that God will literally *forget* what we have done. Omniscience is one of the attributes of deity, and He doesn't divest Himself of it. You see an example of this at the end of David's life. David was forgiven for his sin with Bathsheba and his treachery against her husband Uriah. And yet there's an epitaph in 1 Kings 15 describing David's faithful life, and it mentions "**the matter of Uriah the Hittite**" as an egregious exception to an otherwise faithful life. God did not literally forget that it happened; but He graciously passed over the guilt of it, imputing that guilt to Christ, who died to pay the penalty of the sins of His people. Thus God eliminated David's guilt forever—blotting it out of His ledger.

That's how forgiveness always works. God *does not* simply overlook sin or pretend it never happened. He *erases* the guilt by bearing sin's penalty Himself in the person of Christ, our perfect substitute. Christ thus paid the price of sin in full—satisfying the demands of justice, pacifying the wrath of God against sin, and blotting out our guilt. So God can be faithful to His gracious promise of mercy and yet not compromise His impeccable justice.

It is perfect justice, because every sin is ultimately paid for—one way or the other. Christ died for the sins of those who trust Him. Unrepentant sinners will reap the wages of their own sin throughout eternity.

The psalmist had no understanding of how Christ would offer one sacrifice for sins forever. That mystery was hidden until Christ revealed it. But the psalmist knew by faith that God is both faithful and just. In fact, this whole psalm is a perfect illustration of that familiar promise in 1 John 1:9: **"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

Whatever the limitations of his understanding, the psalmist knew enough to claim the promise of forgiveness. He knew from the Old Testament Scriptures that God is **"good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon [Him]."** He had access to many promises in Scripture where sinners are told they can find mercy by turning to the Lord. Isaiah 55:7: **"Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."** Isaiah 43:25 (God speaking, says): **"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."** Numbers 14:18: **"The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression."** Psalm 86:5: **"You, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you."**

I could go on for a long time, quoting Old Testament texts about the Lord's eagerness to forgive. The writer of this psalm was clearly familiar with that truth, and it became a lifeline to him there in the depths.

Look at verse 4: "**But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.**" I thought long and hard about that verse. At first glance it seems paradoxical. It's clearly an inspired thought, not the product of human wisdom. The carnal mind would be inclined to say, "*With you there is forgiveness, so I don't need to fear.*" Indeed, that's the spirit behind this false teaching that Christians never need to ask for forgiveness or confess their sin. It's antithetical to the psalmist's attitude.

Here's what he is saying in verse 4: Only God can forgive sin. Pardon and cleansing from sin cannot be obtained from any other source. We can't earn forgiveness for ourselves. Only God can grant it. There is no better reason to fear God. We are doomed without His forgiveness.

And listen to Proverbs 8:13: "**The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil.**" Put that next to Psalm 36:1: "**Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes.**" This kind of fear is a holy horror at the thought of God's displeasure. It's the spirit that lies at the heart of true reverence for God. I hesitate to use that word "reverence," as a definition of fear, because so many people use it to gloss over the whole idea of fear. This is not the sort of artificial atmospheric "reverence" we associate with

high-church liturgy—decorated with candles, incense, and priestly vestments. It's a sanctified apprehension of God's majesty. It causes the believer to recoil at the very notion of trifling with God, or taking His mercy for granted, or **"turn[ing] the grace of our God into licentiousness."** There's a genuine, holy terror in the idea. You hear an echo of this kind of fear in the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 6:1-2: **"What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid[!]"**

It's not chicken-hearted or irrational fear, but it's a true fear nonetheless. It's not the fear of superstition; it is a legitimate, sensible spirit of overwhelming awe in the presence of God. And this kind of fear is *not* incompatible with the biblical admonition to **"come boldly unto the throne of grace."**

In fact, notice the verse that immediately follows: **"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope."** I'm intrigued by the close juxtaposition of two polar opposite dispositions—fear and hope. The *fear* is rooted in the fact that we know the gravity of our sin; we know what it really deserves. The *hope* is because we have laid hold of the promise of mercy, which we don't deserve—but we have full trust in the faithfulness of God.

That's exactly how the psalmist is thinking. His heart was clearly calmed as he recited the truth of God's eagerness to

forgive. There's a distinct and very sudden change in mood with verse 5, and that gets us to stanza 3 of this psalm.

Here's our outline: He starts (verses 1-2) with a cry to God. That gives way (verses 3-4) to a confession of guilt. Now stanza 3, verses 5-6. We'll call it:

3. A CRESCENDO OF GLADNESS (5-6)

The theme of this stanza is *waiting*. Verse 5: "**I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.**" He has gone from sheer desperation in verse 1 to an almost supernatural optimism in verses 5-6. I almost said "patience," but there's really nothing patient about this. He's eager. He's not impatient in any negative sense, but it's clear that he longs to see full redemption soon. I love the poetic imagery of verse 6: "**my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.**" He says it twice to emphasize the urgency of his expectation. The rhythm in the original Hebrew is elegant. A literal translation would be: "**My soul is for the Lord, More than those watching for morning, Watching for morning!**"

The picture he draws is of a watchman in the final watch of the night. I used to be a night watchman in (of all places) a funeral home. When you're alone and awake at night, the morning comes much more slowly than when you're asleep and not particularly eager to get up. These days, I'm hardly ever eager for morning to come speedily. But when I was

working that job, the wait for sunrise seemed grueling. You don't know what expectation feels like if you have never been in that situation.

What he's expressing here is an eagerness for the Lord to intervene and lift him permanently out of the depths and into perfect glory. He longs for that. Actually, it's not an *event* that he hopes for, but the Lord Himself. "**My soul waits for the Lord.**" In the meantime, he is nurturing a sense of profound hope. He *knows* redemption is coming.

Notice (v. 5): his hope is grounded in the Word of God. That is the only secure place for our hopes to be anchored—not in the philosophies of the worldly-wise, or the wild prophecies of charismatic charlatans, or military might, or political clout, or any of the other things people typically anchor their hopes in. All those things change constantly and they will ultimately pass away. But the Word of God stands, unchanged and unchanging, eternally. Luke 16:17: "**It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.**" First Peter 1:24-25: "**All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.**"

Furthermore, God has "**magnified [His] word above [His] name.**" "**Scripture cannot be broken.**" Hope in the Word of God is as sure as the immutable character of our glorious God.

The earnest expectation described in this stanza is something every genuine believer can relate to. It's the realm in which true believers live, **"waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."** (That's Titus 2:13). **"Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ"** (Philippians 3:20). And according to 2 Peter 3:12, an eager expectation of the Lord's return defines **"what sort of people [we ought] to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God."** In fact, according to Romans 8:19, **"[all] creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God."**

Everything about that hopeful longing should energize and stimulate our sanctification. It encourages us and stirs us up **"to love and good works . . . and all the more as [we] see the Day drawing near."**

By now the psalmist is so full of hope that his heart is gladdened and his tongue is loosed and he closes the psalm with a chorus calling all Israel to share his hope.

Notice: in the short span of these eight verses, the psalmist has run the gamut of emotions—from the depths to the heights. The only circumstance that has changed is that he has laid hold of God's mercy by faith.

It's a perfect illustration of how the gospel brings us up **"out of [a] horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and [sets our] feet upon a rock."** That's what is celebrated in the final stanza.

So to review: stanza 1 is a cry to God; stanza 2 is a confession of guilt; stanza 3 is a crescendo of gladness. Now the closing stanza:

4. A CHORUS ABOUT THE GOSPEL (7-8)

I love the confidence in these two closing verses. And notice the sudden shift in perspective. The previous stanzas were peppered with first-person singular pronouns "I cry"; "hear my voice . . . my pleas for mercy!" "I wait . . . my soul waits . . . I hope." His attention turns now outward: "**O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.**"

Notice what he celebrates. He mentions two things: the Lord's "**steadfast love.**" That's the root of gospel truth. And "**plentiful redemption.**" That's what God's steadfast love procures for His people.

I like that expression "**plentiful redemption.**" That's what he was praying for in verses 1-2. By faith he has laid hold of it, and he wants the whole nation to join him in celebration.

For those who may worry that their sins are greater than the grace of God—not so. "**With him is plentiful redemption.**" That echoes Isaiah 55:7: "**He will abundantly pardon.**" We worship "**a God [who is] merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.**" His grace is greater than all our sin.

"And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities." There's a prophetic sense in that promise, of course. It looks forward to a time when national Israel will be grafted back into the olive branch, and in the words of Paul from Romans 11:26: **"And [so] all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.'"**

But the psalmist's main point here is not to lay out a prophetic chart outlining the future. He is urging his spiritual brethren, the true people of God, the real offspring of Abraham, to **"hope in the LORD!"** His point simply is that God's promise of full and final redemption will eventually come to full fruition.

In the meantime, we hope. And you understand, I think, that when the Bible speaks of *hope* it's talking about forward-looking, settled, confident faith. It's not a maybe or an uncertain wish, but a secure promise. In this case, it is the promise of full redemption: **"He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities."** Not only from the guilt and punishment and consequences of sin; this is a hope for full, final redemption from sin's power and dominion—and even more than that, we look forward to an eternity of pure freedom from the very existence of sin.

Meanwhile, we hope in the Lord, knowing that because of His **"steadfast love, and . . . plentiful redemption,"** we don't have to languish in the depths. If our hope is anchored in God's Word; if we long for Him **"more than watchmen for the**

morning"; if we have laid hold of His forgiveness by repentant faith, then Scripture says He has **"blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."** He has **"raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."** Live in that light. Reckon it to be true. **"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**