

Hope's Prescription

Psalm 130

Introduction – The Darkness of Despair

It was just two weeks ago that our nation was saddened by Robin Williams taking his own life. In a very heavy news cycle with riots at home and terrorism abroad, the news of his suicide claimed headlines for over a week. I do not know of his spiritual state. I know much of his stand-up was raunchy. Nevertheless, he was brilliant and made many people laugh and smile. Along with millions of other people, I do miss him.

Suicide is devastating to those who loved the person, and I know that some of you have walked through those very deep waters. We can hardly imagine what conditions in the soul would cause a person to take their own life. I have never been suicidal, but I have known despair. I have an intense personality. Thoughts of self-destruction have crossed my mind in the depths of despair, but I have not allowed myself to dwell there. By God's grace, I have always discerned a ray of hope.

It is said that a body can survive a week without water and a month without food. But no one can survive without hope. It is one of the three essentials of life: faith, hope, and love. We all need hope. It gives us a reason for living. Hope is the one thing that enables us to get up in the morning and to put one foot in front of the other even in the midst of deep suffering and confusion. Hope is the antidote to despair. It is what the writer of Psalm 130 was seeking as he poured his heart out to God.

Text – Psalm 130:1-2

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!

Prayer

No Shame in Suffering

Today's message is the last in our series on the psalms. From the beginning, we have discovered that the psalms are a language of honest and gutsy prayer. In the psalms, nothing is held back. There are no games to be played. If the psalmist is angry or afraid, he brings it to God in prayer. If he is confused or bitter, that, too, is brought honestly to God. But there is always – always, a sure expression of faith. That is the kind of prayer language that we need – honest, gutsy, and faith-filled. Psalm 130 is that kind of prayer. Like Psalm 126, which we dealt with a few weeks ago, this psalm is a psalm of ascent. It is one of fourteen psalms that the Israelites would sing as they ascended the Temple mount in Jerusalem to worship Yahweh. In a wonderful sense, then, this psalm is intensely personal, but it also speaks for the corporate people of God.

Years ago, when my family was joining a Baptist church in California, the pastor came to visit us in our home. He asked us what our favorite book in the Bible was. I replied that I liked the honesty of the book of Psalms. This summer series has only strengthened that conviction. Psalm 130 is an affirmation of suffering in the life of a believer. Suffering is more than physical or emotional pain. When we suffer, we question our own worth as people made in the image and dignity of God. The question – sometimes unanswerable – of “why?” is inevitable. We all experience suffering, but most of us try and hide it or are ashamed of it. We live in a culture that believes that somehow we should always be perpetually healthy and happy and when we're not, something is terribly wrong. But Psalm 130 sets suffering and despair squarely and passionately at the feet of God. It's embraced and expressed. A Christian should be a person who stares suffering in the face and lives through it. From this biblical perspective, there are no quick cures for suffering. Of Psalm 130, pastor and author of *The Message*, Eugene Peterson says, “[It] teaches us to respond to suffering as reality, not deny it as illusion, and leads us to face it with faith, not avoid it out of terror.”¹

But we don't celebrate suffering. God hasn't asked us to be masochists-people who intentionally seek out pain and suffering. Instead, he asks us to turn to him when the brokenness of this world threatens to crush us. The words of the psalmist are desperate, but filled with faith as he looks upward to God:

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 139.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!

O Lord, hear my voice!

Don't miss the language here. He calls God "Lord" twice because he is the one who is sovereign – who controls everything. God alone can help him and so the psalmist turns to him. Have you ever been "in the depths" where there seems to be no way out and no hope? It is a dark, dark place. No one can live there. You have to be rescued. You have to have a way out. So the psalmist cries out for mercy.

Grace-inspired Fear – vss. 3-4

For hundreds of years, commentators have labeled this psalm as *penitential* – meaning, it is a confession of sin. I am reluctant to go against the wiser voices of tradition, but I believe there is much more here than a confession of sin. Verses three and four are where the church has historically seen the confession:

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared.

Every one of us knows that we are unworthy to stand before God. We know that, in our own merits, we have no standing – no right – to bring any request before a holy God. We continually fail. Isaiah the prophet spoke for all of us when he declared, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). The psalmist is saying what we all intuitively feel in our hearts whenever we are in trouble. "I deserve this because I'm a sinner. I really have no right to bring it to you, God."

But then there is one of those lovely "arresting adversatives" of the psalms. The psalmist is thinking and speaking one way, stops in his tracks (that's the "arresting" part) and turns the other way. I'm talking about the wonderful line:

But with you there is forgiveness.

Stop and camp there for a moment. Contemplate that idea. It should stop us in our tracks. It should blow us away. We are unworthy to stand before God. I don't care how good you are – how moral you think you are. None of us can stand before a holy God. But he opens the door to you – and to me. Why? Because he is a forgiving God. Contemplating God's great mercy in his forgiveness brings me back to the Apostle Paul's reflection in Ephesians 2:1-5.

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...

Ephesians 2:1-5 (NIV)

That's why we worship God. The psalm says, "...with you there is forgiveness so that you may be feared." This "fear" is not a terror that keeps us from God. On the contrary, it is a reverential awe that draws us to God in gratitude and wondrous worship.

Waiting and Watching – vss. 5-6

And it is in that state of worship – when we have come into the sanctuary of God's presence and have seen things as they really are – that we find refuge in the depths of despair:

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
 and in his word I hope;
 my soul waits for the Lord
 more than watchmen for the morning,
 more than watchmen for the morning.

Here friends, is where we find the prescription for hope in the midst of suffering and despair. It is in the waiting and the watching for God to deliver and vindicate us. Three times in this passage the psalmist says he waits for the Lord. It is a common theme throughout the psalms, occurring at in at least six other psalms and throughout the Old Testament. Jeremiah, the prophet reflects, “The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him” (Lamentations 3:25).

What does it mean to wait for the Lord? There is perhaps no clearer description of biblical faith. To wait for the Lord means to be patient and endure your current circumstances while you wait for God to deliver you according to his promise. Waiting for the Lord means that you are no longer unraveled about your circumstances. You have peace because you know God will act on your behalf. Despair is banished.

And how do we wait for the Lord? First, we begin with Scripture, because, as the psalm says, it is “in his word I hope.” Saturate your mind with the Word so that your imagination is turned towards God’s promises. The psalms are perhaps the best place to start because of their honest and gutsy prayer language. Second, seek out solitude. You need to quiet the noise of the world so that you can reflect and listen to hear God’s gentle voice. Beyond Scripture and solitude, do the things that bring you close to God – that help you to discern his voice. For many, being outside in nature helps them to connect with God. Speaking with a mature, listening friend may enable you to hear his word to you. I have found that music and journaling are avenues in which I have often heard God. When I am disturbed, my journal entries become more frequent and I spend a lot of time at the piano. I know most folks can’t do that, but you probably have some activity that enables you to slow down, reflect, and pray. God has made you uniquely, and there are things that you do – unique to you – that connect you to him. Spend time doing those things.

There’s a geyser in Yellowstone National Park named “Old Faithful.” Ever since its discovery in 1870 it has erupted with regularity between 35 and 120 minutes, depending on the intensity of the previous eruption. It has never failed to erupt within that time frame. You have to wait for it, but it will erupt. It is the same with God’s word. And it is the surety of God’s word, the

psalmist says, that gives him hope. We may not know exactly when or how God will act on our behalf, but we do know that he will rescue us. Waiting for the Lord is the expression of true and biblical faith.

The psalm then uses another word that helps us to visualize what it means to wait for the Lord. It is particularly appropriate for one who is deep in despair. The night can be a terrifying time. In the city, darkness is often the cover for crime. In the wilderness, the night is when the most dangerous predators are on the prowl. If you are at sea, the night can be particularly terrifying in a storm as you might run aground or, as the crew on the Titanic found, you might hit an iceberg. Those who wait through the night long for the hope of early morning light. What a wonderful picture of faith in God while in the darkness of despair. God specializes in beautiful mornings. It was in the morning that the manna came for the children of Israel in the wilderness. It was in the morning King Darius discovered that Daniel has survived the lion's den. It was in the morning, most profoundly, that the women discovered Jesus, their crucified Savior, had defeated death and rose from the grave. "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5b). Wait for the Lord. And watch through the dark night of your soul. Morning will come.

V. The Prescription for Hope – vss. 7-8

As a psalm of ascent, I can just imagine how powerfully it spoke to the people of Israel as they climbed the hill to Jerusalem. So much of their story had been chiseled on the tablets of suffering. As a people, they knew the chastening of the Lord because much of their suffering was a result of their own disobedience and breaking of the covenant. But with God, there is forgiveness and restoration. And so, with joyful voices and hopeful hearts, they made their way to the place of worship:

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.

We all face suffering in our life. And in that suffering, we have a choice: despair or hope.

Chuck Swindoll quotes celebrated American playwright and novelist, Thornton Wilder, who had insightfully noted:

Hope is a projection of the imagination; so is despair. Despair all too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy and arouses the mind to explore every possibility to combat them. In response to hope the imagination is aroused to picture every possible issue, to try every door, to fit together even the most heterogeneous pieces of the puzzle.²

Faith turns our imagination towards God, where hope is born.

This is a corporate psalm of ascent. But it is also a deeply personal psalm of hope. You may have come today and you are in the depths of despair. Put your name in the psalm:

O____, hope in the Lord!

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

And he will redeem you
from all your iniquities.

Or perhaps, you know someone right now who is drowning in a sea of hopelessness. We cannot live without hope. They need the hope offered God's word. Put their name in the psalm...

O____, hope in the Lord!

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

And he will redeem them
from all their iniquities.

² Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations and Quotes*, p. 275-276.

God's word has been spoken here this morning. And God's word always requires a response from everyone. For those who are suffering, his word of hope is offered freely to you. Jesus said: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28)

Words of Invitation and Prayer

*O Lord, you have made me for yourself,
And my heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.
I long to know you more clearly,
Love you more dearly,
And follow you more nearly.
So I commit myself entirely to you.*

*In utter dependence upon Jesus Christ
As my ever-loving Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend.
I will seek continual renewal as I wait to hear his voice.*

*Take, Lord, and receive
All that I am, all that I have, and all that I possess.
You gave all to me; to you Lord, I return all.
I am wholly yours; do with me what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace
For that is all I ask, and all I desire. Amen.³*

Song of Response – "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" #102

Benediction – Romans 5:2-5

Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

³ Adapted from the Renovare covenant prayer.

and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.