July 28 Lesson 9 (NIV)

Expectant Watchfulness

Devotional Reading: Matthew 25:1–13
Background Scripture: Psalm 130

Psalm 130

A song of ascents.

[1] Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;
[2] Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

[3] If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?
[4] But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.
[5] I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
[6] I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

[7] Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
[8] He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.

Key Text

Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.—**Psalm 130:7**

Hope in the Lord

Unit II: Expressing Hope

Lessons 6–9

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How to Say It

BabylonianBab-ih-*low*-nee-un.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer*Dee*-trik *Bawn*-haw-fer.

Ketchikan*Keh*-chuh-kan.

Kidron*Kid*-ron.

Psalter*Sawl*-ter.

Sheol *(Hebrew)She*-ol.

Introduction

A. Out of the Depths

For such a short prayer, Psalm 130 covers a lot of ground. It begins by acknowledging the terrifying possibilities of human life and ends with hope for a different future. Yet, in reading it, we should not skip too quickly to the end.

In this psalm, the focus does not lie on outside, terrible forces but precisely on human sin. The terror that the psalmist faces comes from the human tendency to allow vices to overcome us. That tendency threatens to take over everything we do and are, thwarting our best plans and spoiling our best intentions. What can be done about this problem of sin?

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Together, they [the disciples, the church] bring their guilt before God and pray together for grace. May God forgive not only me my sins, but us our sins." That sense that both our sin and the possibility of forgiveness unite us is central to this psalm and to the Bible as a whole.

B. Lesson Context

Psalm 130 is part of a larger cluster, usually called the Psalms of Ascents or, less often, the Pilgrimage Psalter (Psalms 120–134). The psalms in the group may have originated at different times and places (as would be true of a modern hymnal) but functioned together as songs for the pilgrims entering the Jerusalem temple in the period following the Babylonian exile.

The group of psalms falls into three subgroups (Psalms 120–124; 125–129, and 130–134). Perhaps the pilgrims sang them at different stops on the road from the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley, and into the precinct around the temple itself. Psalm 130, in particular, may have served as part of a night vigil as the pilgrims awaited the dawn, which in turn would symbolize the dawning of God's light in their lives (see 130:6, below). Those hypotheses are reasonable but hard to prove. Yet they would explain the varying moods of these psalms and their progressive closeness to the temple itself.

More certain is that the psalms together address a wide range of concerns and moods. Together, they allow the worshipping community to express anxiety and hope, fear and trust, sorrow and joy. That is, they help worshippers bring their entire lives to God, share their lives with each other, and eagerly await God's transforming work.

Psalm 130 moves the pilgrims from an attitude of despair (v. 1, below) to one of supreme confidence in God's saving work (vv. 7–8, below). When the one singing focuses on his or her personal suffering, fear and sorrow can overtake faith. But when the focus shifts toward God's inclination to save and the consequent hope that the entire people may enjoy, the mood may change to hope. So it is here.

The poem, though very short, moves in several steps, from a statement of need addressed to God, to an acknowledgment of God's mercy and confession of hope, to an address to all of Israel. Psalm 130 begins with a cry to God, as most laments do. Here the attitude is one of deep need and expectation of help. It differs from some psalms of lament by being briefer and jumping to praise without much preparation. In these songs born of distress, the singer either promises to praise God or does so. The promise or the praise is born out of gratitude for God's generous response to the petition for help.

Psalm 130 seems like a very condensed lament that shades into something different altogether. Perhaps that difference from other psalms reflects this one's placement in a larger group. It does not have to do all the work a "normal" lament does because it does not stand alone. Psalm 129 describes longstanding attacks on faithful Israelites and expects God's deliverance, while Psalm 130 expresses contrition before God. Collectively, these psalms together position the one praying as someone in the correct spiritual position before God.

I. Address to the Lord
(Psalm 130:1–6)

A. God Listens (vv. 1–2)

1. Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;

The phrase *out of the depths* might be a shorter form of the phrase "the depths of the waters" (Ezekiel 27:34; compare Psalm 69:2, 14). Isaiah 51:10 speaks of "the depths of the sea." While the Hebrew word here translated *depths* only occurs in these instances in the Bible, images of the watery deep were frequently used as an image of danger or chaos, especially the horror of drowning (examples: Exodus 15:5; Psalm 69:2).

Additionally, the concept of depth is linked to Sheol, the place of the dead. Depths and Sheol should not be conflated, but neither should the possible link between them be neglected. Like Jonah crying from the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2:2–5), the psalmist here speaks metaphorically of having descended to the realm of death, to Sheol. Though not an equivalent of the place we would call hell, Sheol was under the earth and generally considered far from God's presence (Numbers 16:30–33; Psalm 6:5; contrast 139:8); no one worshipped God there (88:10–12). These characteristics of Sheol give insight into what death entailed to ancient Israelites' way of thinking. The cry from the gates of the realm of death, Sheol itself, points to the many sorts of problems humans may face, including our mortality and proneness to sickness, as well as the hostile attitudes of wicked people or the irresistible power of some historical or natural events. The depths may take many forms.

From there, the psalmist now addresses God in hopes of being heard and saved (compare Psalm 49:15). A call asking God to listen comes early on in many of David's laments (examples: 4:1; 55:1–2; 61:1; 86:1; 141:1). The psalm before us is not attributed to David, nor is the request to hear repeated word for word. But each instance shares the idea that God will be inclined to listen, that the human being ought to seek God's attention, and that each supplicant may do so freely and in the company of others (see 130:7–8, below).

The psalmist is not in danger of drowning (or how could he write?) and may not literally be about to die (see commentary on Psalm 130:3). But many different forms of suffering can feel like a death—from physical ailments to relational estrangements and beyond. In all circumstances—even as far from God as Israelites could imagine, at the bottom of a body of water—we can still call on the *Lord*.

2. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

The opening address to the *Lord* continues with a petition to listen. These two clauses express essentially the same thing, repeating both the sense of the verb *hear* and the direct object *my voice*. This poetic device of synonymous parallelism reinforces the importance the psalmist places on receiving God's full attention.

The second clause asks for tangible but unspecified expressions of God's favor. His care begins with listening attentively to the content of the *cry* and acting to alleviate those specific concerns. As is common in psalms, we do not know the specific occasion for writing—a feature of the poems that invites us to consider our supplications.

Similar language appears several times in psalms of lament (examples: Psalms 86:6; 140:6; 143:1). Psalm 28:6, for example, offers a counterpart to the request for God to hear by

celebrating that God already had heard (compare 31:22; 116:1; etc.). All these psalms expect that God desires to listen to sincere requests for help and will respond with speed and compassion. We do well to remember, however, that God's timing is not our own (2 Peter 3:9), and a perceived lack of an answer from God does not mean he has not heard or has no intention of acting (examples: Habakkuk 1:2–5; John 11:21–22).

B. God Forgives (vv. 3–4)

3. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

The psalmist affirms God's mercy in the form of a question, as if to remind him of his choice to exhibit mercy. God could obsess over human sin to keep meticulous tabs on every stray thought, word, and deed. A similar use of the verb *kept a record* appears in 1 Samuel 1:12, which says that Eli "observed" Hannah's mouth when she prayed for a son. In the context of 1 Samuel, the verb suggests close attention, as it does here. If God decided to tally *sins*, no person could be counted as righteous (Psalm 14:2–3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 3:10–12).

Furthermore, a God who rigorously punished all evil immediately would leave no space for human survival (compare Genesis 6:5–7; 7:21–22). But a God who ignored evildoing altogether would cause great harm to humanity; we might consider the fear of God's abandoning his people as exemplified in Lamentations. The God of Israel, however, engages with human beings to reform their lives (example: Ezekiel 11:19–20).

The psalmist's question is not merely a theoretical discussion of divine mercy. Mentioning sin also likely touches on the psalmist's reason for writing: to repent of sinful behavior and seek God's forgiveness. The psalmist assumes that God delights in forgiveness and the repair of human life that it makes possible (compare Ezekiel 33:11; Acts 2:17–39). By appealing to God's mercy, the person praying also commits to reform (see Romans 2:4).

4. But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

But ties this verse closely to verse 3, implying a sequence of closely related events. The experience or even observation of God's forgiveness and its consequences for human life create a sense of awe in the impressionable human. Here the psalmist's knowledge of God's inclination toward mercy becomes clear.

But the sequence of thoughts may seem odd at first. How does the reality of *forgiveness* create an awe-filled sense of fear? Contrary to the possible view that God's hatred of sin or ferocity toward evil will so terrify people that they will live better lives, this verse suggests that God's mercy toward sinners inspires them to honor him more. Instead of being mired in sins and paralyzed to choose or do better, forgiveness creates a new path (example: Isaiah 42:16). Divine gentleness with the people inspires awe in part because it seems so different from human inclinations toward one another. In contrast to the pitiless ways in which we often respond to mistreatment or wrongdoing, God exercises mercy.

The phrase *serve you* is absent in older translations. Still, the idea that fear of the Lord leads to service to him is appropriate (example: Ecclesiastes 12:13; compare John 14:15).

C. Waiting for God (vv. 5–6)

5a. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,

The Hebrew word translated *whole being* can more concisely be translated "soul" (as in the *KJV*). But as the *NIV* translation suggests, this Hebrew word has a more robust meaning than we might consider in English. Ancient Israelites did not believe in a soul that merely inhabited a body (like Greek thinking). Instead of a divide between body and soul, the Israelites thought of the human being as an integrated whole, a body-and-soul unity. The soul was the animating force, the piece of the body that made a person alive. This integration of body and soul remains central to Christianity, which rests on the hope of our bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:50–57) rather than the immortality of a disembodied spirit or soul.

In saying *my whole being waits*, then, the psalmist claims to anticipate God's saving work with every fiber of his being. The psalmist's faith involves an orientation to a future in which the problems of the moment find a solution (see commentary Psalm 130:5b–6, below).

5b. and in his word I put my hope.

To *hope* here is a synonym for waiting on God (see Psalm 130:5a, above). We never hope in vain when we place our hope in his promises. God's *word* refers here, not to the law as it might, but to his promise of salvation given first to Abram (Genesis 12:2–3), which becomes the focus of the faithful person's life. Having confidence in that promise shapes behavior for a lifetime as well.

6. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

This verse repeats *more than watchmen wait for the morning* for rhythmical purposes; we might recognize this convention in our hymns. The repetition also expresses the intensity of waiting for God's saving act. The waiting involves a person's entire being (see Psalm 130:5a, above, regarding the Hebrew concept of the soul).

What this particular phrase means, however, is less than obvious. The emphasis could be on waiting at a specific time—during the night. Or it could be emphasizing the sentinels who are watching. In either case, an analogy is drawn. Just as nighttime sentries eagerly await the dawn and the relative safety of daytime, so does the one praying wait for a new day in which God will act. Once again, the psalmist's faith requires hope in God's future action.

II. Address to Israel
(Psalm 130:7–8)

A. Hope in God (v. 7)

7a. Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love

In the last two verses, the psalm shifts focus from an individual psalmist to the whole community. This sort of shift frequently occurs in psalms of lament (see Lesson Context, above). But this one lacks any transition, as the psalm turns from the address to God to the address to the people. The *hope*, especially in God's *unfailing love*, that the psalmist expressed for his personal circumstances is prescribed for the gathered community.

7b. and with him is full redemption.

The Hebrew behind this phrase is difficult to understand and translate. One reason for this is the scarcity of biblical uses of the precise Hebrew word translated *redemption* (Psalm 111:9; translated "deal differently" in Exodus 8:22 and "deliver" in Isaiah 50:2). However, the related verb is more common, which gives us confidence that redemption is the appropriate translation here.

While we don't often think of it this way, redemption is a legal metaphor. In ancient Israel, the term often applied to the purchase of slaves to free them. The language is prevalent in texts describing God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (examples: Deuteronomy 7:8; 9:26; 15:15; 2 Samuel 7:23; Micah 6:4). Here, however, the liberation does not involve political oppression (or at least not just that), but the oppression of human sin in all its forms. The psalm anticipates God acting to free Israel from sin's power. This redemption is the ultimate fulfillment of God's ancient covenant with the ancestors (see commentary on Psalm 130:5b, above; compare Luke 1:46–55).

B. Receive Redemption (v. 8)

8. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

As laments often do, the psalm ends with an expression of deep trust in God (example: Psalm 22). This ending repositions the whole poem because it moves readers from focusing on the individual to God's care for the whole people. In God's great mercy lies hope for *Israel* and everyone within it. This psalm probably lies behind the promise of the angel to Joseph in Matthew 1:21: "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." For Matthew, Jesus became the sign and instrument of God's redemption of Israel and to the larger world.

There is a tight connection between the individual's experience and the community's proclamation. The people of Israel were the community whom God rescued from evil in all its manifestations, of which we are the spiritual descendants. The people announced and celebrated the good news that such deliverance had occurred (example: Exodus 15), and they sought more of it. And, of course, that understanding also applies to the church, the community grafted into Israel (Romans 9–11). We also experience, both as individuals and as a community, the power of God's forgiveness, which we imitate in our dealings with others.

Conclusion

A. The Power of Waiting

Psalm 130 speaks to faith that involves waiting for God's grace to make itself known. During such a time, the person may doubt God's ability or willingness to save, question the integrity of other human beings, and even lose self-respect. Waiting for salvation challenges every fiber of a person's being.

Yet, that challenge itself strengthens faith in the long run. As this psalm makes clear, trust in God does not come without some doubts. Will God listen? Biblical faith is not a Pollyanna attitude about life. It is realistic and honest about hardship. Yet it does not remain there. The spiritual challenges we face—the depths—become opportunities for grace. Therefore, learning the

discipline of waiting is part of learning to live with God and all others who are also awaiting God's help. This psalm, in short, exposes an important truth about human beings: our profound need and desire for God's presence.

As part of a community of pilgrims seeking God's presence, the faithful person can speak to God even in the most desperate moments of life. The communal worship of the Israelite community acknowledges that fact. God does not skimp on acts that will benefit human beings but rather frequently engages in them. Worship in the community still reminds us of God's mighty acts. May we, in our darkest moments and in the grasp of the sins that don't want to let us go, cry out to our God and heed the call to hope in his saving works.

B. Prayer

O, God who hears the cries of broken people and sees our tear-stained faces, who sutures broken hearts and shattered relationships, hear every cry from the depths of us as well. Do not forget us in our day of distress, and help us not forget to be thankful when you have rescued us with one of the many methods at your disposal. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faith celebrates our hope in God's forgiveness and calls others to do the same.[1]