

RUF Bible Study – Songs of Ascents
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Psalm 130 - Hope²

*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.* *ESV*

*1-2 Help, God—the bottom has fallen out of my life!
Master, hear my cry for help!
Listen hard! Open your ears!
Listen to my cries for mercy.
3-4 If you, God, kept records on wrongdoings,
Who could stand a chance?
As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,
And that's why you're worshiped.
5-6 I pray to God—my life a prayer--
=and wait for what he'll say and do.
My life's on the line before God, my Lord,
waiting and watching till morning,
Waiting and watching till morning.
7-8 O Israel, wait and watch for God--
with God's arrival comes love,
With God's arrival comes generous redemption.
No doubt about it—he'll redeem Israel,
buy back Israel from captivity to sin. *The Message**

I have two questions for you, ones that we'll answer I promise.

The first question is this: What is the difference between a painter and an ophthalmologist?

The second question is this: What is the most hopeful show on television?

Our psalm today is a psalm of hope. Psalm 130 would be sung on the way to Jerusalem as one of the Songs of Ascents. You can imagine the travelers tired on their way, maybe ready to give up. Some may have fallen. Some may be wondering if they're ever going to make it. The kids are whining, "Are we there yet?" and "I have to go to the bathroom." The parents are fighting about which way they were supposed to turn and who was supposed to pack the water. They may be thinking, *Last year grandma was with us. I'm sad she's gone.* Maybe they're wondering why they're going at all. Isn't this a big waste of time, an expensive trip, just for the same thing over and over? This is a psalm about hope in the travels. They would say it, sing it, reminding each other that there was a reason for the trip. Hope springs eternal. What do you hope in?

Suffering In the Depths

*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!*

This psalm doesn't begin in a very hopefully place, does it? It starts off in a real, but bad place. *In the depths.* As Martin Luther puts it when he writes this hymn, *In the depths of woe.* Eugene Peterson goes this way in *The Message: The bottom has fallen out of my life!*

How deep are the depths? I did some searching around and found out that the deepest place is naturally in the waters. The Marianas Trench is 39,000 feet deep, almost 8 miles deep.

The very depths of the oceans are scary places. There is floundering and terror there. Remember in the Disney Pixar classic *Finding Nemo* when Nemo and Dory go the bottom and find creepy, scary fish? There are fish yet undiscovered. Scientists and explorers say the depths of the ocean are the last frontier. We just don't know and understand what is down there.

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² The reader is to assume that nothing is original to me. I have read and therefore borrowed, hopefully not explicitly, from Eugene Peterson's (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*) and James Montgomery Boice (his commentary on the Psalms).

The water is not considered a safe place for a land dwelling, historically nomadic people. It is associated with displacement and terror.

Psalm 69:1-2 expresses this same sentiment in another place: *Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. 2 I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.*

Let me mention too that the shallow waters can harbor destruction too. The reefs have sharks. The surface can get you as well. You don't really want to be bobbing on the top of the waves and see a shark fin coming at you.

Now it should be obvious that this psalm isn't a lamentation about water. There is contained in the song a metaphor. The depths of your life. The depths of pain and suffering for you. And the question is, What do you do when you find yourself there?

The first kind of depth we see and think about is that of suffering.

Suffering is pain plus. Physical or emotional pain plus an awareness of it. Some of you are struggling with addictions or watching ones you love struggle with addictions. Some of you are in the pain of lost and wayward children. Some of you have parents who are not doing the right thing. Some of your bodies, or the bodies of your friends, are breaking down. I have a friend who is gluten intolerant. No wheat. That stinks for her. It's not her fault. Some of you have been done wrong to, recently or in the past. Maybe life wasn't what you expected. Maybe you wish you were in some different family or school or church or state or country. Some of you have a deep-seated regret about something in your life. Some of you have terrible stories about things that have happened to you, stories you dare not tell.

God gives dignity to suffering. You might be right or you might be wrong in your suffering, but this psalm doesn't take the time to sort that out. It doesn't give a catalogue of acceptable cries and unacceptable ones. I don't care at this point if your cry is profound or whiney. It is there.

The message is that Christians face and live through the suffering. We don't ignore it, pretending it doesn't exist like a Christian Scientist or Buddhist. There is real pain in the world. We are not cynics, saying to ourselves and to others, "Well, that's just the way it is." No it's not. It's not supposed to be this way. We should be overly melancholic and for heaven's sake don't take the path of the atheist intellectuals and consider suicide a viable option.

What do we do? We set suffering before God. God gives suffering dignity. The psalms are filled with people passionately and openly acknowledging and expressing suffering to God and to each other. There is a voice for this.

We humans are not constantly healthy and happy, as much as the world tells us we should be. But when do you express these feelings, what do we hear? What do you hear from the culture, from your family, from your school, from your friends?

A myriad of answers, I would presume. Most of them will listen to you and then prescribe to you a method, or a medication, or remind you that you must continue to participate in the consumerist culture around you.

But the Bible offers something different, something surprising.³

No glib answers – "Well, that's just the way men are."

No band-aids – We do this to our kids. We put a band-aid on when we know it won't do anything except make them feel better that "something" is being done.

No lectures – "What we have here is a metaphysical manifestation of your desire for fatherhood."

No pop psychology – "I was watching Dr. Phil on Oprah the other day and he was talking about just this very thing..."

No power play protests – "March with me on City Hall!" or "Let's go to a different church. We'll show them."

No vacations – "You just need to get away so you don't have to think about it for awhile."

No hobbies – "You need a diversion."

No drugs – "This will make you feel better."

No cover-ups – "I know it seems bad, but let's keep it to ourselves for awhile. That way no one gets hurt."

No power of positive thinking – "You just have to believe in yourself."

No masochism – "Pain is good. Pain is fear leaving the body. Seek more and more pain."

The Bible doesn't offer any of those solutions for our problems, but it does have something to say. It says: God is personal and God is a redeemer. It says: "There is a meaning for our lives and there is a salvation for our lives."⁴

³ From Peterson

⁴ Peterson, 141

This psalm, and the Bible as a whole, both tell us “God is at the foundation and God is at the boundaries. God seeks the hurt, maimed, wandering and lost...”⁵

Are you in the depths today? Do you feel like Joseph, thrown in the pit by your brothers? Do you feel like Job, attacked by Satan? Do you feel like David, pursued by the very one that you are to replace? Do you feel like Leah, unloved by your husband? Do you feel like Hosea, unloved by your wife? Do you feel like Jonathan, wondering if your parent is a Christian? Do you feel like Abraham, unsure of what step to take next? Do you feel like Peter, wondering if Jesus really knows what he’s doing?

Join the club. Write it down. Tell someone. Give voice to your suffering. Cry out from the depths to God.

What do you hope will heal your suffering?

Sin In the Depths

3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

Ah, but there is something else to say in addition to our suffering. Suffering is bad things done to us. Sin is the bad things we do to others. This psalm expresses this guilt.

It turns our eyes away from the things done to us, so that we can also consider and then take ownership of the things we have done wrong. If you only think of how people have sinned against you, as right as you may be in this, then you will never truly understand this psalm and Christianity.

This psalm is ultimately not about illness or depression or homesickness. It is about guilt. Your guilt. My guilt. Our guilt.

God isn’t only interested in the maimed, wandering and the lost, but “God woos the rebellious and confused.”⁶

Do you ever think about your sin? Do you think about how your sin affects others? How it affects your parents? When you rebel, when you are mean, when you are lazy, when you are disobedient, that your sin affects others around you and *it’s not all about you??*

Do you think about how your sin affects your spouse? How your sin affects our church? How your sin affects our city, our state, our nation? YOU do stuff that hurts me. I do stuff that hurts you. Does that grieve you – ever?

Ultimately, do you ever grieve that your sin affects God? Do you long for forgiveness? Do you need a redeemer?

Do you always think you are right and justified to do wrong?

Most of us think too lightly of sin. It is illuminating and convicting to meditate on what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about sin – look at the ways the writers of this talk about the sins of the 10 Commandments and then what is required by the 10 Commandments. This is not how I think of sin!

What do you hope will assuage your sin?

Forgiveness In the Depths

4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

God forgives sin. That is good news. Do you believe this good news? Do you need it?

“Because of that forgiveness we have a place to stand. We stand in confident awe before God, not in terrorized despair.”⁷

Julie and I have been going to marriage counseling. Our counselor, Bruce, just this last time was talking about four levels of repentance. The first is “I am sorry.” This is really a sadness of getting caught, of getting found out. It’s embarrassing to be found out in our sin. Most people, and Bruce contends that most *Christians*, don’t go past here very often.

But the second stage or level is “I am sorry I hurt you.” This personalizes the offense and involves the offender as well. It isn’t only an embarrassment or the concept of sin, but I recognize that my actions have affected you negatively and I want to tell you that. This is good, but difficult. Again, this is unusual.

Bruce then says there are two more levels, ones that I frankly not only haven’t though much about, but haven’t been to very often. The third is when you can say this, “I am sorry I hurt you, and I meant to hurt you.” Whoa. This acknowledges the sinfulness of our own hearts, the anger we have at the world and other people and shows that we understand that we could have done differently but really, deep down, didn’t want to. I wanted to hurt you so I did.

⁵ Peterson, 141

⁶ Peterson, 141

⁷ Peterson, 141-142

It's hard to imagine a fourth level. It is this: "I am sorry I hurt you, and realize I intended to hurt you because really I am raging at God." This is the deepest level of repentance because it has the other three levels, but then lays the root cause at the real place it exists. We are mad at God. Mad at God about our health, our circumstances, his placement of us in this family, the way he didn't heal or protect or change something.

Let me put it this way: You're mad at God, aren't you? Nod your heads, for it is true.

Until you really get this, you will have to sing, From the shallowness of woe I sing to you, for that will be a better picture of your heart. It will be real, yes, but it will be shallow. Sort of like an adult in a kiddie pool screaming for help because he is drowning. It is certainly possible to drown in a few inches of water, but you want to come alongside and say, "Stand up, fool!"

Wading pools aren't scary. Being dropped into the ocean without a lifejacket (watching the Discovery Channel) – that is scary.

But... But there is forgiveness. Otherwise, we'd have no hope. God forgives. God saves.

James Montgomery Boice muses on God's forgiveness. He mentions that:

God's forgiveness is inclusive. All sins are forgiven, not just some of them.

God's forgiveness is for now. There *is* forgiveness, not there *will be* forgiveness. The psalmist expresses this when he writes "with you forgiveness" it is right now, present.

God's forgiveness is for those who want it. You must confess sin. You may not cover it up. You have to ask for forgiveness.

God's forgiveness leads to godly living. The psalm, after expressing the fact of forgiveness, writes "Therefore you are feared." It's interesting that it doesn't say "therefore you are loved." It says "feared." This is worship. Understanding this sort of fear of God brings about words in our lives like: love, worship, softened, humbled, overwhelmed, determined not to sin, do not want to even when they do.

So...

Do you confess sin this way? Can you catalog your repentance to see if you have ever gotten past level one? Can you see your sin is often level four, actually springing from your anger at God?

When we say the Apostles Creed, when we say "I believe in the forgiveness of sins," do you believe that? Do you understand how important and profound that is?

There is another application here for you today. The text says, "*3 If you, O Lord, would mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared*"

This means that God does not sit there with a ledger and tick off the times you've sinned and the times you've asked for forgiveness and making sure that the items are perfectly balanced. He doesn't mark iniquities that way.

I'm afraid too often we do. We remember them. We feed off of them. We add them up. We weigh them in our minds. We dream about them in our subconscious. We say things like, "I could never forgive them for that." We look for ways not to forgive.

That isn't Christian. God forgives. There is no way, absolutely no way that you have asked for forgiveness for every thing you've ever done. That is the thought that basically paralyzed Luther into spending all day, every day in confession.

This is the parable of the unmerciful servant, which contains the scary Bible verse, "If you do not forgive, your heavenly father will not forgive you."

First, understand your need of forgiveness, how if your misdeeds were marked that you would not be able to stand before God. Bask in that mercy.

Then, forgive others as God has forgiven you. Do not delay your forgiveness in either respect. Let them go. God forgives.

Waiting and Watching = Hoping In the Depths

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.

So this psalm tells us that we can do a few things when we give voice to our suffering and sin. The first thing we can do is to cry out, asking God for forgiveness.

And we can do something else too. Are you glad about that? Don't you want something else to do? This is an important job.

Eugene Peterson goes on at some length at this point about his job as a night watchman. Several of you have had jobs like this. One of them is the night shift at the desk at the dorms. You sit there from 10pm until 6am to make sure nothing happens. And usually nothing does happen. For the most part, a night watchman has an important job, but he doesn't "do" anything.

What does he do? He waits until the morning. He knows it will come, and because of the surety of that fact, he waits. He can only do this if he is confident that other people are really in charge of the building. That the engineers have constructed it so it won't fall down during the night. If the right people have the heat and air working properly so that no one will suffocate. That the elevators won't crush anyone. That the locks work correctly. If he doesn't believe in these bigger forces, then he will panic. He will scurry. He will worry.

But if he does trust that all is order, he can watch and wait, which is his job.

The principle here is that God is at work. He is sovereign and he is good and he is in charge. Do you believe that? The doctrine of predestination is a strong one for you today. Nothing is allowed to happen that will not give God glory. Nothing.

Not even my friend Dustin Salter in his coma. I don't understand it. I don't like it. I don't get it. But it's true. His life, his condition, his coma even, is for God's glory.

So is whatever you are thinking of as a bad thing for you. Your depths, your struggles in it, are for God's glory. Have you read the Old Testament? Over and over again, you will read about God's superintending all things for his good. That is no less true now for you today.

Your job isn't to make it happen. Your job isn't to take the reins and get in control. Your job isn't to worry. It's to hope.

Hoping isn't doing nothing. It is hard work to hope, to pray. Hoping like this isn't dreaming; it's not fatalistic. It is going about our assigned tasks, confident that God will provide the meaning and the conclusions.⁸

The night may seem endless, but morning will come. We are busy about the business of waiting for God himself, not just relief for forgiveness, but God.

It is promised to come. It is pictures for us in his forgiveness. It is a plenteous redemption. A big forgiveness. So too is it when God shows up, when morning comes.

This psalm is a call to all of us. *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.*

Don't give up hope!! There is steadfast love in God. There is plentiful redemption with God. All your sins will be forgiven! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

We have to tell this to each other or else we'll forget. It is a part of who God is, a part of his nature, to forgive. WE can have not a trembling hope anymore, but a confident one. For the good news for you today is that when sin abounds, grace abounds all the more.

Jesus in the Depths = Christmas

Do you really understand what I'm telling you? I'm telling you about Jesus! This really is the perfect Sunday for this psalm, here squeezed in between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Looking back, we have so much to be thankful for. It's been another year of God's goodness. He has been exposing our sin, drawing us closer to Christ, adding more to our number, working on our campus, in our town, in our families and in our lives. Were you thankful last Thursday?

And I'm also giving you a pre-advent season Christmas story. In the darkest night, God arrives. In the farthest depths, he is there. Down to the Marianas Trench of the world, he swam down to save the nasty fish. He is Immanuel, God with us. He gave up his riches in heaven to tabernacle among us. In the depths of woe, he is there.

This then is the difference then between a painter and an ophthalmologist.⁹ A painter has a vision of the world and tries to get you to see it as she sees it. There are good communicative painters, but it's all in interpretation.

But an eye doctor wants us to see the world as it is. He fixes you so you can see reality.

My parents realized I was sitting way too close to the television when I was in third grade. Off to the eye doctor I went, found out I had 20/400 vision and got glasses. Not very cool, but I could see. I've been tons of times to correct my lenses, get contacts and finally laser eye surgery.

I've noticed you aren't seeing very well. I've noticed that over the past few months, the past few years, the past life you've led, that your eyes are growing dim. They're filming over. You have sight problems. I want to be your eye doctor today. Can you put your head in my contraption. Just relax. It won't hurt. Can you read the chart? Okay, what if I do this? Here are your choices – A or B – which is better? Okay, now let's try this – A or C?

⁸ Peterson, 144

⁹ This idea and illustration is from Eugene Peterson's book.

We're narrowing in on it. You need correction. You've seen the world improperly up to this point. Christmas helps orient you, but you have to wear your glasses. Don't forget them at home. Don't think they look bad. They work. Christmas is for you.

Because Christmas is about hope. Jesus came to save sinners, of which you are the worst. You have unexplored depths in your heart. He came from the ultimate heights in order to heal your depths. Whatever suffering you have gone through, Jesus has experienced. Rejection. Condemnation. Misunderstood. Unloved. Lack of intimacy. Lack of job promotion. Whatever sin dilemma you have, Jesus has also gone through on the cross. He was forsaken for you. Hew as the worst sinner of all time. He plunged into the depths of hell, descended so that you wouldn't have to make that journey.

Do you see this? The greatest hope on television has to be *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*. You've seen the show. A family writes in, describing their plight. And they are big ones. Dad has died of cancer was last week. They show the house they have and it is always a pit. Suffering. Pain. Hurt. Despair.

And Ty and the others come in. They demolish the house. They build a new one, a better one. They always try to retain something from the old, personalizing the space for the family. The community gets involved. People donate time and money.

And there is a lot of crying. Why so much crying? Because of the hope. Somehow getting a new house, filled with beautiful things, functional and personal, brings hope to these people. And to you and me. And we cry.

I sure do. I can't hardly stand it week to week. When I get to watch it, I cry like a baby because of the hope in the midst of the darkness.

It's a hard world. I hurt with you. I hurt a lot myself. I get angry. I lash out. I sin. I suffer. You do too. What chance do we have?

We can, as CS Lewis says, lock our hearts away so they won't get hurt. But if we do that long enough, our hearts will change. They will become so hard, so unhurtful, that they also will be unable to feel at all. They'll become unlovable. They'll turn to stone.

Or we can acknowledge our hurt. Lay it before God. Bring up to him the ways we have been hurt and the ways we have hurt others. We can ask for perspective and forgiveness. We can watch and wait. We can hope. Together. We can wait for Christmas, a long expected salvation to come this year. God made flesh. God near to us. God involved in our messes and messiness. That's what Christmas is all about. Hope. Extreme Makeover Home Edition in your soul.

1. Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Savior, hide,
'Til life's storm is past;
Safe into the haven guide;
Receive my soul at last.

2. Other refuge have I none,
I helpless, hang on Thee;
Leave, oh leave me not alone,
Support and comfort me.
All my trust on Thee is stayed,
All help from Thee I bring;
Cover my defenseless head
In the shadow of Thy wing.

3. Thou, O Christ, are all I want,
Here more than all I find;
Raise the fallen, cheer the faint,
Heal the sick, and lead the blind.
Just and holy is Thy Name,
I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am;
Thou art full of truth and grace.

4. *Plenteous grace with Thee is found,
Grace to cover all my sin;
Let the healing streams abound;
Make and keep me pure within.*
Thou of life the fountain art,
Let me take of Thee;
Spring Thou up within my heart;
For all eternity.