

Psalm 130
Waiting, Watching, Hoping

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January 20, 2019

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There are various experiences, emotions, thoughts, and questions that are common to the human life: birth and death; famine and feast; to love and be loved. Common to our human life, throughout all time and in all places, is the experience of suffering, of trouble, of challenge. Every human experiences suffering, trials, challenges. It is true that we do not all suffer in the same way or from the same circumstances: some of us suffer from miscarriage or infertility; or from family dysfunction; or from addictions; or from chronic pain and illness; or from unemployment or job dissatisfaction; or from war and poverty; or from loneliness or anxiety or depression. Your experience of suffering is unique to you; just as my experience of suffering is unique to me. So although suffering is universal, why we suffer differs from person to person, and how we suffer varies.

Long considered a gem among the Psalms, Psalm 130 speaks about this very human and real theme of suffering. It brings to our attention the real human experience of suffering and trouble. So common is suffering to the human experience that other songs of ascent also deal with it:

- I call on the Lord in my distress. Save me from lying lips and from deceitful tongues (Ps 120)
- Have mercy on us for we have endured much contempt. We have endured much ridicule from the proud, much contempt from the arrogant (Ps 123)
- If God had not been on our side when men attacked us, when their anger flared against us, they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us, the raging waters would have swept us away. We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare. (Ps 124)

- Restore our fortunes. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping will return with songs of joy (Ps 126)
- In vain you rise early and stay up late toiling for food to eat (Ps 127)
- They have greatly oppressed me from my youth. Plowmen have plowed my back and made their furrows long. (Ps 129)

The Christian disciple is no stranger to trouble and pain and suffering. The unbeliever is also not immune to trouble and suffering. To be human is to know suffering, to experience trouble, to face hardship. No person – Christian or not – can escape suffering. But there is a difference between the Christian and non-Christian in how suffering is approached. The Bible provides the disciple with language, perspective, and a way to face suffering. This Psalm tells us what to do when we face suffering. The details of what caused the suffering are not important right now. What is important is how we approach suffering and what we do when we suffer. This is what Psalm 130 teaches us: how the Christian disciple approaches suffering, and what the Christian pilgrim does in suffering. This is the song that we sing to teach us how to bring our daily struggles, our daily troubles, our daily challenges into the presence of Yahweh God.

Let me provide a big picture perspective of the Psalm first. The songs of ascent, as you know, are songs that were sung by God’s people as they journeyed to Jerusalem. These are songs that give expression to questions, circumstances, and situations that each person experiences: how to live and work and play, how to suffer and rejoice, how to worship, how to relate to others. These are songs and prayers spoken from each individual but experiences shared within the community.

This Psalm reminds us that there are no quick answers to suffering, there are no cliché statements or one-liners, there are no band-aid solutions, no lectures given to the experience of suffering.

There is no quick cure or salve for suffering. The Psalm rejects the cultural views to treat suffering: it's not about escaping for a vacation, it's not about ignoring suffering, it's not about self-medicating, it's not about plastering the experience all over social media.

In a big picture perspective, this Psalm tells us that the way to approach suffering is to face it, to acknowledge it, to voice it, to express it, to bring it before God and wait, watch, and hope. So the starting place for suffering is to express our trouble: *out of the depths I cry to you*. When we give our suffering a name and a voice, we give our experience of suffering dignity, purpose, and power. It is not that we give suffering power over us, rather when we voice something, it is us choosing to have power over it. Our freedom from suffering begins with this cry to God; it begins when we confront our brokenness, our sin, our woundedness, our pain. It begins when we give expression to our troubles and suffering, giving them voice to God. It begins when we invite God into the depths of our struggle.

But here is the key: the disciple of Jesus Christ articulates suffering to the Triune God. We don't go to facebook or twitter or Instagram or some other social media outlet and express our greatest sorrows. We don't start by emailing or texting our entire friend and family list. We don't even start by confiding in our spouse, our parent, or our best friend. The starting place for dealing with or responding to suffering is to express our trouble to God: *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 supplications!*

There are different ways we approach suffering, all of which can be dangerous. First, we may tend to silence our experience of suffering, burying it and ignoring it. We don't give any expression or voice to our troubles and pretend they don't – or shouldn't – exist, perhaps because of feelings of shame or embarrassment. After all, should a Christian believer or disciple suffer? Doesn't the Bible speak of prosperity and blessing? Second, we analyze our suffering: we take it apart and study it from the lens of sociology, psychology, economics, philosophy. We give labels to our suffering in hopes of answering the question why do we suffer? Third, we allow suffering to engulf us: we become consumed by our own suffering such that whenever someone asks us how we are, we answer in terms of our suffering. We broadcast it, give regular facebook updates about it, tweet about it, and use social media to promote our suffering. Fourth, we deal with suffering by practicing self-care or self-medication techniques. We meditate and do yoga, we take a long walk or hike, we read a good book, we find time to laugh with friends, we eat a healthy meal and get exercise and sleep. We try and take away our suffering by focusing on taking care of ourselves in mind, body, and heart.

Fifth, we expect that life should have no pain so we are surprised when it happens to us and suffer more because of that. When we expect or assume that life will have no fears, no confusion, no anxiety, no loneliness, no despair, then we suffer deeply when those experiences come to us. But if we expect that in our lifetime, we will be acquainted with fear, confusion, anxiety, loneliness, and despair then we are better equipped to handle them and the suffering and troubles are defined and understood differently. They are not viewed so much in the light of trouble, because they are regarded as wounds and experiences that are part of the human condition, part

of the human existence. The Christian must learn how to confront suffering, for we cannot be fooled by illusions that the human life, including the Christian life, is perfect, immortal, whole.

The Psalmist teaches us a different way: the Psalmist teaches us to give voice to God about our suffering. Why? Why not ignore our troubles? Why not study and analyze them? Why not try to self-medicate? What does the Christian disciple miss when we don't give voice to our suffering to God? Put differently, what is essential for the Christian disciple that is experienced in articulating our suffering to God? It is not that we should desire or seek suffering. But there is something mysteriously beautiful and grace-filled in the experience of suffering. Why? Because of verses 3 and 4. Suffering always deals with sin. And no where do we encounter God's holiness more than how God deals with sin and hurt. The something mysteriously beautiful about suffering has more to do with the wonder, awe and depth of God than with me or you.

Verses 3 and 4 address the heart of all suffering: sin. There are times where our troubles and suffering are caused by us. We make poor decisions and choices, we treat someone else wrongly and suffer because of it. There are also times where we find ourselves in trouble, in distress, in pain, not because of something we did but because of something someone else has done or said to us. Then there are times where we encounter anguish not because someone acted wrongly towards us but simply because this world in which we live is sinful and broken and we will face hardship because of that. We know grief and anguish when someone close to us dies. No one has sinned against us yet we are hurting.

In all these circumstances of suffering and being at the ‘bottom of the depths’, we are not only face to face with suffering but face to face with sin. And when we are face to face with sin, we must recognize we are face to face with the hope of forgiveness. Though our sinful actions may not have directly led to our suffering, I am certain that sin is part of our experience. Consider how we tend to approach suffering: ignore it, analyze it, let it consume us, or seek self-help practices. In these approaches, we seek control of our situation, to self-medicate, to burst in anger and rage towards the offender. We put ourselves at the heart of the experience, not God.

It should be no surprise that forgiveness is at the heart of the cry for God’s help in times of trouble. Forgiveness is the first declaration in Jesus’ gospel message: repent, for the Kingdom of God is near. Repent – turn around, make a u-turn and return to the Triune God.

So in circumstances of trouble wherein our sin, our poor choices lead to our suffering, it is pretty clear why the Psalmist addresses the need for forgiveness. A common Biblical example is King David’s adultery and involvement in murder. His sin led to his suffering. He needed forgiveness for such sin.

But what is the place of forgiveness when the Christian disciple suffers because someone else has sinned against me, when someone else has wronged me, when someone else’s decisions and actions and words and behaviour have hurt me? What does forgiveness have to do with the Christian believer who has acted righteously but still suffers? The common Biblical example is Job – a man who was righteous before God yet suffered deeply and terribly.

Well, as Christians, we can affirm that every human is created in the image of God: created good. We affirm that every person is born a sinner; born in a state of separation and alienation from God. We affirm that every person is in need of God's forgiveness since we have all sinned, we have sinned by choosing to live a life that is separate from God, autonomous. We sin against God when we speak or act or think in a way that is contrary to what is holy and righteous.

So when someone treats us wrongly and hurts us, contributing to our suffering and troubles, God must forgive that sin. When we acknowledge the universal nature of creation (humans created in the image of God) and the universal nature of sin (all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God), we affirm that all need forgiveness. These statements may be simple for us to theologically affirm but to affirm them practically is what this Psalmist does.

When someone wrongs me, I cry out to God. And I cry out for forgiveness because I affirm, I believe that the one who sinned against me is created in God's image, is a sinner, and in need of forgiveness. It may sound strange, but that allows me to extend compassion and empathy towards the one who has wronged me when I see that person in the same light as me: a human created in God's image, created good, a sinner, and someone who can receive the gift of God's forgiveness.

This is the fierce cry of the one suffering: God help! God forgive! Forgive me. Forgive the one who has hurt me! The Christian believer knows that forgiveness is the heart of God. That is why the cry of the Psalmist is for forgiveness.

So the reality for the human being is that there are troubles and suffering. What does the Christian do? Verses 5 through 8 tell us. In the experience of trouble or challenge or pain or suffering, the Christian waits, the Christian watches, and the Christian hopes. To wait and to watch is to hope.

The Psalmist writes *“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.”* What does it mean to wait for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning?

Let’s consider what the Psalmist implies when writing about watchmen. Many scholars and commentaries describe watchmen as those who stand guard throughout the night and watch for the first ray of morning light. The watchman does not control when the light shall come, the watchman’s only job is to wait and to watch. To anticipate and to pay attention. To expect and to look. The watchman waits for the night to end and knows that the night will end when the first rays of dawn appear.

Why was the appearance of the dawn so important for the Israelite? Because at the moment that dawn appeared, the morning sacrifices were made in the Temple. So the watchman eagerly waits and watches for dawn: for that moment when night and darkness end and the sacrifice can be made. This is the image: that in our watching and our waiting and our hoping, there would not only be release from oppression and suffering and trouble but also a positive blessing from God, with the assurance of his covenant grace and mercy.

But we aren't really inclined towards just waiting and watching and hoping. We're inclined to do something – to try and fix it ourselves, to re-take control of the situation and make it better. We don't like not having the power to do, not being in control, not having certainty about what's happening. Yet we can learn how to be the watchman, we can be content to watch, to wait, to hope, precisely because of who God is and what God does. You see, the posture of the watchman, the posture of the Christian disciple in watching, waiting, and hoping is based on the certain belief and conviction that God is actively involved in his creation and at work in his purpose of redemption and recreation. God initiates. We respond. God calls. We respond. God invites. We respond. We can watch, wait, and hope, because we believe that God is already and always at work.

This doesn't mean that we remain sedentary, lethargic, or passive. It means that we continue to go about our living and working, our playing and sleeping with the confidence and belief and assurance that God is working out all things, according to his covenantal relationship with us. This isn't about developing an illusion or pretending troubles don't exist. It is about allowing God to be God and do things God's way and in God's time.

The last two verses are the Psalmist's exhortation and encouragement for anyone who is in trouble or suffering. When we suffer, we need hope. We need hope more than we need sympathy or advice, we need hope more than therapy or self-care practices. But there are many different ways we can hope; many different things in which to place our hope. Indeed, we can put our hope in sympathy and advice from our family and friends. We can place our hope in therapy or self-care practices.

The Psalmist tells us to hope in the Lord. Why? Because we need to know we are not alone; that we are in relationship with God; we need to know where God is. We need to know that the One who creates and redeems, the one who loves and forgives, the one who judges and shows mercy is in our experience of trouble and suffering.

This Psalm helps us in our discipleship because it pushes against the belief that our cry to God in times of distress means that God will immediately and instantly result in redemption. We must learn to watch and to wait; sometimes the night is very long and sometimes it is not. Yet we can be confident the Lord loves us and will redeem us, just as the watchman is confident the morning light will come. I think the greater challenge for us is not about being confident God loves us and will redeem us, but permitting God to do His work of love and redemption in His ways, knowing that what we envision or desire may not be God's way of love and redemption.

Lastly, note how the Psalmist describes God. Sometimes the Psalmist uses the Hebrew word Yahweh, which is the proper name for God in the Old Testament. Sometimes the Psalmist uses the Hebrew word Adonai which means Lord. Consider the language used in the Psalm. This is language that speaks of a personal, relational God. This is not language used to describe a God who is distant, unaware, absent. It is language that expresses relational closeness, personal intimacy, familiarity. God is described as the personal savior and redeemer.

Eight times in this short, 8 verse Psalm, God is named: Yahweh, Adonai. Consider how the Psalmist describes God: the one who listens to the sufferer; the one who is attentive to the voice

of his child; the one who judges impartially; the one who forgives; the one who is above all; the one who gives hope; the one who pours forth love and redemption.

It is because of who God is that we are able to face suffering. It is because of his attentiveness, his forgiveness, his hope, his love, his redemption that we are able to face suffering. Not too long ago, we were reminded in the gospel of John that darkness does not have the last word. Light overcomes darkness. Darkness does not seize light. Darkness does not take hold of light and make it its own. This is true of suffering. In this Psalm, we are reminded that our suffering and troubles are not the last word. God is the last word. This is not to say that God always relieves our suffering, or that our suffering never feels unbearable or overwhelming or enormous.

Sometimes it feels like suffering has taken over all of us. Like the prologue in John, this Psalm reminds us that suffering does not have the last word: God always does. God is bigger than our suffering.