

If you had lived in the early 1700s in Oxford, England, and you happened to be a student at Oxford University, you would know that you were attending a party school. You would also know that there was a group of men on the campus that was known as the holy club. Heading up that holy club were three men, George, Charles, and John.

As a student, you might have looked at these three men and their holy club on campus and thought, "There's got to be more to life than what I'm experiencing." As you saw these men perhaps on the way to a hospital or a prison to minister the Good News of Jesus Christ, you might envy them, maybe saying to yourself, "I wish I had what they had."

According to his diary, John—one the three men—would have sensed your feelings as you watched him walk across the campus. And he would have said to himself, "They think I'm pure and kind and loving and committed and honest. They would think I'm holy." But if you could have gotten inside John's head, you would have seen a picture of a man very different from the one on the outside.

John wrote in his diary, "This morning I prayed for two hours. Tomorrow that will be increased to three hours." You would see his determination as he would go to the hospital to minister to the sick, to the prisons to minister to inmates. But inside, you would have seen the truth: that John Wesley, with all his outward holiness, was inwardly empty, frightened, lonely, and guilty, and he saw his life as meaningless.

Have you been there? If only I pray long enough, if only I'm holy enough, then, only then, if there is a God, will he notice me and condescend to allow me to know him? As far as your own Christian life is concerned, have you ever felt that you are faking it until you make it? I think John Wesley understood what we mean here.

It was with great anticipation that John Wesley knelt before the bishop on the day of his ordination into the Anglican priesthood. It was with great hope that maybe this would make it different; that this was the one thing that would enable him to be noticed by the God of the universe. But as the bishop placed his hands on John Wesley's head there was nothing but emptiness and loneliness and regret.

There was a study done at Harvard University years ago to discover why people went into full-time Christian service. They

found that most of the motivation was guilt. John Wesley felt like he was faking something. His heart hurt. So for John, there was only one stop left—the mission field. You see, the spiritual are Christians, the super-spiritual are pastors, and the super-super spiritual are missionaries. For John Wesley, it was, "I don't have it, but if I go to the mission field, maybe God will notice how hard I'm working, how much it hurts, and how empty I am. Maybe on the mission field, he will condescend to reveal himself to me.

It wasn't that Wesley hadn't heard the truth. He had. Peter Bohler said to him, "Wesley, do you know that Christ died for your sins?" Wesley said, "I know that Christ died for the sins of the world." Bohler said, "But do you know that Christ died for your sins?" And Wesley turned and walked away because he had no answer.

Wesley sailed from England to America to be a missionary, landing in Georgia. Wesley wrote in his diary, "I'm going to Georgia to save the heathen, but, O God, who will save me?" I believe that John Wesley discovered four great truths that transformed his life, and then God used them to transform the world.

As we study Psalm 130, I pray God's Spirit warms our hearts, that during this Lent season, we will look seriously and confront the condition of our hearts. That we would trust God and allow these Psalms to lead us to Jesus, the cross, and forgiveness to find true freedom and peace through God's grace, mercy, and love.

Psalm 130 is one of seven penitential Psalms in the Bible. A Penitential Psalm is a cry out for reconciliation with God. The writers express their soul-searching sorrow over their sins; they confess their sins, renounce their sins, and repent. They look to God to do the heart work necessary to bring true transformation and a deeper understanding of God's holiness and his hatred of sin.

Psalm 130 is called a Psalm of ascent. It describes the way up—the way up from the depths, the way up from guilt, the way up from spiritual darkness and into the light. Psalm 130 was sung by generations of God's people as they made their pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They would sing this psalm as they ascended Mt. Zion to make their way to the temple to offer their sacrifices for their sins. So today, from Psalm 130, we see our road to ascent.

Our Road of Ascent

Cry out honestly to God (Vv. 1-2)

Believe in His promise of forgiveness (Vv. 3-4)

Wait and watch with confidence (Vv. 5-6)

Rest in God's unfailing love (Vv. 7-8)

Cry Out Honestly to God

"Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;" (v. 1). John Wesley came to a healthy place with God when he gave up trying to fake it until he made it. That night in a dark place in his room, his cry from the depths was, "How can I get right with you?"

"Out of the depths" is imagery used throughout the Psalms. We see David crying out to God for help because his enemies had surrounded him and had dug a pit that he had fallen into. It's a picture of a deep dark space of being trapped. The image of watery depths comes to mind. We think of Jonah trapped deep in the sea in the belly of the whale because he ran from God. We read of the Psalmist crying out because the waves and breakers of life are overwhelming and crashing over him and drowning him.

But the Psalmist's cry here in 130 is not a case of his enemies digging a pit and throwing him in or of being trapped under the waves and breakers where the world seems to bury you. The Psalmist here is describing the horror and darkness of being buried by his own sin and guilt. He is crying out of a self-made hole. And this place of darkness is a necessary place to enter and remain for a while. For us to understand the seriousness of our sin, to grieve our sin, to contemplate our need for God, to reflect on God's sacrifice of his Son Jesus—and to have time to do this in a way that we don't skim over reflection and repentance and go right to Easter. Lent and our Lenten preaching series is God giving us time and space for the serious heart work that needs to go on in us.

The depths are dark places so deep and dark that no sunlight can reach the depths. The only fish that swim in the depths are blind fish. Our Psalmist is seeking God because he is crying out to Jehovah, the one true God. He knows the sun is shining up there someplace, but he can't feel its warmth. He knows about forgiveness, but he is still in the cold dark hole in the depths of his sin and guilt. He cries out loudly. It's passionate; it's desperate; it's loud. Literally, he is accosting God. He is going after God, begging, bothering, and imploring God.

"Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy" (v. 2). The word for Lord he uses here is "Adonai." He is the master and sovereign over all things, over all of his creation. I think of Jesus and his disciples on the boat on the sea of Galilee when the winds and waves were about to capsize their boat, and the disciples were afraid and panicked. And where was Jesus?

He was asleep in the stern of the boat. They cried out to Jesus, afraid they would drown in the depths. "Here our cries, Jesus, and save us!" Jesus awoke, and the first thing he did was challenge their faith in God. Why? Because the disciples had already

seen more miracles from Jesus than they could count, and yet they still questioned his power and mercy.

So he stood up and yelled at the wind and waves, "Quiet! Be still!" and the wind died down, and it was completely calm. Then the disciples asked, "Who is this man that the wind and waves obey him?" Well, we know who it is. It's Jesus Christ, The Adonai, who calms storms, hears our cries, and rescues us from the depths.

Let's not brush over this: The psalmist cries out for mercy. In the depths, he is looking inside himself, and what he sees is not okay. His heart is dark and guilty. So he does the right thing. He then looks outside himself, and he looks up. Out of desperation, he pleads with God for one thing.

If you could ask God for one thing, what would you ask for? We ask God for lots of different things, but Psalm 130 is a reminder that our biggest problem is our sin and our greatest need is for God's mercy. And God reveals his mercy through his promise of forgiveness.

Believe in His Promise of Forgiveness.

"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?" (v. 3). In verses 1 and 2, we see the Psalmist crying out. In verses 3 and 4, we see him thinking. Like Wesley, the Psalmist looked inside and saw he had tried and failed to be good. He saw the blackness of his soul.

Here in verse 3, we can identify his problem. "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, If you God marked my public and secret sins, who could stand?" It is an important question. If God kept a record of all your sins, could you stand before God? The Bible tells us that one sin is enough to keep us from heaven. The truth is that none of us can stand before God in our sin. We have been talking about crying out to God from the depths, but when it comes to our sin, we are way over our heads.

Again, if I was to stand before God and enter a plea on my own, the only plea I could enter would be guilty as charged. So the only thing I could do was cry out for mercy. I can't look inside and do something myself. I need to look outside myself to something done by someone else—something done for me, something done by our Lord Jesus Christ.

This makes me think about Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector located in Luke chapter 18:9-14.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven,

but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

Who can stand? The person who is honest about his condition. A person who humbles himself, a person who sees himself correctly. As unworthy and undeserving of any favor from a holy God. A person who knows he can't make it right for himself but needs God to act in order to justify him before God. May we all know God today the way the psalmist knows God.

"But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you" (v. 4). Verse 3 is an "if" statement. "If you kept a record of my sin, who could stand?" Verse 3 is assurance of God's grace to those, like the tax collector, who feel buried in their guilt, condemned to have to stand on their own record.

Verse 4 connects to verse 3 with the conjunction "but." The "but" is used to contrast verse 3 and verse 4 with the "but here is very good news." "But with you there is forgiveness..." Let this enter your soul.

Notice the logic of verse 4. Forgiveness from God comes first, then our reverence for God comes next as our response. And out of our reverence for God, we want to put hands and feet to our reverence. What does this look like? It looks like service.

I love Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8-9. *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."* So what do we do with this free gift of justification? We serve. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul goes on to say, *"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

The word we see translated as "reverence" in our Bibles is the Hebrew word for fear. One way is fear of God's judgment. The psalmist had fear. He cried for God's mercy, and God heard his cry, forgave his sins, and saved him the judgment he deserved.

If we are forgiven by Christ, we no longer need to fear God's judgment. So why did the psalmist use "fear" here in verse 4? This is awesome. He is saying that God forgiving his sins changed everything. The type of fear here is a reverential fear that I might do anything that robs me of this wonderful intimate relationship I have with God because of forgiveness. A fear that the passion burning inside would grow dim. A fear that, God forbid, he might look upon his forgiveness and one day presume he deserves it. His fear that he would lose his high view of God in worship. His fear that he would one day take a lesser view of sin than God does. His fear that he might lose the fire in his heart to serve God. A fear that he would lose the awe and wonder he has for God, and his worship and prayer would become ordinary.

So let me ask a question for all of us. If we believe we are forgiven, are we responding with reverence to God? And does our reverence lead us to serve him? Proverbs 16:6 says, *"... through the fear of the Lord evil is avoided."*

Wait and Watch with Confidence

"I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope" (v. 5). Waiting... The phrase "wait upon the Lord" means waiting with expectation, to wait for the perfect outcome while under the tension of enduring. In the Hebrew meaning of waiting is a sense of being stretched as we wait, even twisted. Why would God stretch and twist us like this? Because there is something spiritually formative that happens when God has us wait.

He repeats the word "wait." It's unusual to do this. He is repeating for emphasis. God is saying to us, "Wait—yes, I really mean it; there is a purpose for waiting in the darkness." Why would he do this? Shouldn't it be that once we are forgiven, there is no more pain?

There are likely many reasons God has for us to wait on Him. But in our Psalm today, God wants us to know the depth and darkness of sin. Not in some theoretical way, but in an experiential way. To know the depth and darkness of the sin in our hearts may require us to wait in dark, uncomfortable places for a season.

Suppose you hurt someone badly. Not a casual hurt that happens every day, but when we really hurt another person deeply. You get convicted about it, you confess, you think. "Well, that's taken care of; I feel pretty good now!"

But what if the Spirit convicts you about a longstanding sin, some darkness that has gripped your heart for a long, long time. Maybe he helps you see yourself as a bully who wounds people all the time. Maybe God wants you to feel the darkness of this sin for more than a minute or two, an hour or two, or maybe for a Lenten season. Maybe waiting is a natural consequence of sin.

If we grasp what the psalmist is teaching us here, maybe we will go deeper. Instead of thinking, "Oh well. Yes, I sinned, but thankfully there's confession, and confession isn't so bad. God likes to forgive." We'll say instead, "God, as bad as sin is, as deep and dark as it is, I can hardly believe that you're willing to forgive. In fact, my guilty conscience tells me my sin shouldn't be forgiven. Let me pause and wait in the darker place because I need to reflect on that amazing grace this Lenten season."

"And God, your law tells me that sin isn't to be overlooked. Let me pause and wait in a darker place because I need time to reflect on how seriously you take my sin. And God, your forgiveness means I am worthy to serve you. Let me pause and wait. I need time to reflect and tell you how grateful I am that I am not disqualified to serve you and am still useful to you to do good works."

And look what he gives us to hold us up as we wait in darkness. Look at where our hope comes from. It's the Word of God. In that tunnel of waiting, we have genuine expectations and confidence, why? Because it's grounded in God's Word. How do we know? Because he promised. In his Word, he promised.

"I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning" (v. 6). I love this verse. The idea here is a watchman, a night watchman. As soon as dawn comes, they clock out; they are done. When the sun rises in the morning, the darkness recedes.

If you are like me, you might wake up at 3:00 am with all kinds of anxious thoughts on your mind, and you can't go back to sleep, so you get up to pray. I think there is a beautiful message for those of us here today who weep in the night. The promise you can cling to is that the sun rises, darkness fades, and there is joy in the morning.

There is a song we have sung, "In the morning when I rise give me Jesus." It was in the morning when Jesus was born and the angels praised God. It was in the morning when the women saw the folded grave clothes and heard the angel say, "He is not here; he has risen." "When I rise, give me Jesus." But however long the night seems, the morning will surely come. How do I know? Because he promised. It always comes.

Maybe his depths of God's mercy will answer your depths of sorrow over sin. And when that happens, sunshine will breakthrough for you again. Let the darkness be a place of examination and growth. But the darkness won't last for any child of God. It won't last one hour longer than God knows best.

As Psalm 30:5 says, *"...weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."* Trust that the morning does come. Trust God. God does not ignore or neglect his children who wait for him and watch for him and hope in him.

Rest in God's Unfailing Love

And the psalmist has these final words for the people of God. The question is not "Is there a God?" The question is, "What is he like? Does He care? Does he love? Does he love me?" *"Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption" (v. 7).* Why should you put your hope in the Lord? First of all, because with the Lord is unfailing love. The word translated "unfailing love" in verse 7 is the Hebrew word for God's covenant love. God will never break his covenant with his people.

"But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Psalm 86:15). God is not only abounding in love but in faithfulness. He is faithful to his covenant, faithful to his people, unfailing in his love.

"He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins" (v. 8). "All their sins," did God get it all? Anyone who has survived cancer

understands follow-up tests. Always in the back of their minds, "Did they get it all?" Patients go in for blood tests. Every blood test is having to endure the question, did they get it all or not?

So for the believer today, you don't have to keep asking, "Did God get all my sin?" Yes, he did get it all. There is not the tiniest percentage that is left outside his amazing grace, his amazing, unfailing love.

On Wesley's voyage to America, a great storm arose, and Wesley cowered in the corner of the ship, crying out to God for mercy. A group of Moravians were on the ship, and they joined hands and sang hymns of praise to God. When the storm died down and Wesley realized he might live, he approached the leader of the Moravians with a simple question:

"How come?" He replied with a simple answer that magnified the darkness and emptiness of John's soul.

"Why," said the leader, "because we believe in God." When you don't have it, and you're faking it, and you meet someone who's really got it, it hurts.

So Wesley landed on some islands off the coast of Georgia, and he worked hard, but it didn't go well. The mission shut down, and rumors of scandals followed him. Soon he boarded another ship and made his way back to England, totally broken, a failure, and miserable. According to Wesley's mother, it was May 23, 1738, and John was in his room weeping before a God who was silent to him. I know we are pretty sophisticated, and it might be hard to accept this, but Wesley later described in his diary that he reached for his Bible, and in the candlelight, let it fall open to Psalm 130.

The next day, John Wesley went to a meeting of Christians, and he heard Martin Luther's *Preface to Romans* being read for the first time. His mind came alive with the reality of the gospel, and he heard that it didn't have to do with what you do, but with the blood of Christ; that salvation was to be found in Jesus Christ and faith in him alone.

Wesley wrote in his diary that night, "My heart was strangely warmed." It was only a spark, but that spark became a fire, and the gospel spread through the world. John was no longer faking it. God met him in the depths of his sin as he cried for mercy. He waited for God to make it real and meet him in his guilt. And when God led him to receive personal forgiveness, his guilt was removed. And his gratitude led him to serve Jesus as a powerful preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ and start a movement of churches in America.

Some of us might be thinking that Lent seems to be all about guilt. You might think, "I'm not sure I like this. I didn't come to church to feel guilty. I can feel guilty anywhere; I don't need the church to help." I want to leave you with this thought. The pain of guilt can't be removed unless we bring our guilt to God. In Psalm 32:5, David says, *"...you forgave the guilt of my sin"*

The Holy Spirit uses guilt to produce Godly sorrow in us so that it might lead us to the cross, where Jesus paid the penalty for our sin and removed our guilt. If your guilt is leading you away from the cross of Jesus, that is not from God. That is from Satan. He is the liar and the accuser. And if you believe the lies, you will never find relief from the guilt. Let your guilt lead you to the cross. Cry out for mercy to God who loves you with an everlasting love, so much so that he bought you at a high price, the sacrifice of His Son Jesus.

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7).

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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