

## Psalm 130

“You’re not eating anything,” said Marilla sharply, eying her as if it were a serious shortcoming. Anne sighed. “I can’t. I’m in the depths of despair. Can you eat when you are in the depths of despair?”

“I’ve never been in the depths of despair, so I can’t say,” responded Marilla.

“Weren’t you? Well, did you ever try to IMAGINE you were in the depths of despair?”

“No, I didn’t. To despair is to turn one’s back on God.”

Marilla Cuthbert, the lady who, along with her brother Matthew, take young Anne into their home at Green Gables, is one who feels that the depths of despair is not something a person of faith should ever enter. Marilla soldiers on through all kinds of trials and tests and never swerves from her faith. But, is she right in saying that to despair is to turn one’s back on God?

If so, the person who wrote Psalm 130 and the people who sang it as they walked through the Judean hills towards Jerusalem were far from God - and I don’t think that’s the case at all. Let’s read:

*From the depths of despair, O Yahweh  
I call for Your help  
Hear my cry, O Lord  
Pay attention to my prayer  
Yahweh, if You kept a record of our sins,  
Who, O Lord, could ever survive?  
But You offer forgiveness,  
That we might learn to fear You  
I am counting on Yahweh, yes I am counting on Him  
I have put my hope in His word  
I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn  
Yes, more than sentries long for the dawn  
O, Israel, hope in Yahweh  
For in Yahweh there is unfailing love  
And an overflowing supply of salvation  
He Himself will free Israel  
From every kind of sin*

The songs of ascents are contained in Psalms 120-134. There have been several theories put out there about what “ascents” might mean. Do the 15 psalms of ascent relate in some way to the 15 stairs the Levites would climb on their way into the inner courtyard of the temple? Does the word signify some sort of spiritual journey, climbing up towards God? The most probable interpretation is that these are songs that were sung as the pilgrims were on their way to Jerusalem for the three annual feasts in the holy city. Judea is hilly and requires lots of climbing for the travellers, especially as they journey up the road leading into Jerusalem.

If there is a common theme to the 15 psalms of ascent, it is that idea of climbing

towards the place of worship, drawing close to God, experiencing His presence. Throughout this group of psalms there is a sense of anticipation at coming to the place of worship as well as a joy and hopefulness at the thought of meeting with Him.

You notice that hopefulness in this psalm, in lines like, “I am counting on Yahweh, yes I am counting on Him. I have put my hope in His word.” Or in Psalm 133, “How wonderful it is, how pleasant, when brothers live together in harmony.” Or in Psalm 122, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of Yahweh!’” These are, by in large, uplifting, joyful songs reflecting a hopeful, faith-filled expectation of meeting with God at His temple.

Strange, then, that this one begins with the depths of despair:

*From the depths of despair, O Yahweh  
I call for Your help  
Hear my cry, O Lord  
Pay attention to my prayer*

People come to God out of a whole variety of life experiences. Sometimes there's great joy, like celebrating a family wedding or welcoming a new child into the world. But very often, in the midst of wonderful circumstances, people are so wrapped up in the happiness of the moment that they forget to acknowledge God and His goodness to them. And for those who don't trust God, who don't depend on Him for help, this seems like the least likely time in life where they would want to cry out to Him or seek His help. But for the person in despair, the person who's tried everything and found only dead ends, this is the ideal time to look to their Creator for the hope they haven't been able to find anywhere else. When a person is most despairing, most at the end of them-selves, they are also most aware of their need for God and most willing to give Him a shot at meeting their needs.

So these people, too, are now on pilgrimage, now searching, now hoping, for the answers to their life challenges. They join the excited crowds on the long walk through the wilderness that ends at the temple of Yahweh and in the presence of their King.

But there are other voices among the crowd, singing their songs of thanksgiving for the greatest gift of all, the wonderful gift of forgiveness:

*Yahweh, if You kept a record of our sins,  
Who, O Lord, could ever survive?  
But You offer forgiveness,  
That we might learn to fear You.*

This is the voice of gratitude, the voice of those who recognize that specific kind of need that is a universal need, not always recognized, but always there - the need to know that every failure, every miss, in life, can be met with forgiveness. And it's not just the grudging forgiveness of someone who you've hurt and who can't really do anything about it - it's the forgiveness of the One who knows all our failures and who can do something about it. He can either choose to punish or choose to show mercy. He can exact perfect justice, or He can pay the price for justice to be accomplished.

And somehow these pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem know that Yahweh is a forgiving God, that He is a redeeming God who has been looking for way to save His people.

And why does God forgive? The people declare something in their song that is powerful and deep: God offers forgiveness so that we might learn to fear Him. Again, as we've seen before, the psalmist is not talking about learning to be afraid of God, but to be more in awe of Him. The fear of Yahweh that is the beginning of wisdom is a reverent respect for who He is and a willingness to humble ourselves before Him. How does forgiveness cause that to grow within us? For one thing, it forces us to either hide or to admit our sinfulness, our need for forgiveness.

Imagine singing that song along with the other pilgrims and you repeat that line, "Yahweh, if You kept a record of our sins, who, O Lord, could ever survive?" Every time you sing those words, you are reinforcing the idea that God is holy and righteous and good and that you have fallen short of that. That realization alone should cause us to be grateful for His forgiveness and to be in awe of Him because He, the righteous Judge, has counted us worthy of His great grace. You are grateful that He keeps no record of your sin and you are moved by His great love for you. You learn to fear Him by humbly acknowledging His continual grace towards you, His work in your heart that changes you more and more.

But now we hear other voices in the processional choir, the voices of those singing about hope:

*I am counting on Yahweh, yes, I am counting on Him  
I have put my hope in His word.*

There is a reason for hope, now, just as there was then. The character of God includes this attribute of faithfulness - and faithfulness means that He will be true to His word. This is why the pilgrims were singing about putting their hope in the word of the LORD. The history of their nation was filled with examples of God making promises to His people and then following through on His word.

And there's another song that comes out of this one, which also reflects hope and the character of God, but this song is intimate, expressing loving devotion to Yahweh:

*I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn  
Yes, more than sentries long for the dawn*

Here is the voice of someone who is anticipating being in the presence of God. More than the night watchmen look forward to the breaking of day and the end of their long night of watching, the person who sings this song is longing to be in the presence of their God. At the heart of pilgrimage is this deep inner longing to meet our true Father, our Creator, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Lord of love, the One who can and will forgive our sins and give us a new life in Him. And this longing is part of the song of pilgrimage that we're looking at today.

Another part of the song is the recognition that the LORD is a saving God:

*O, Israel, hope in Yahweh*

*For in Yahweh there is unfailing love  
And an overflowing supply of salvation*

Even back in this time period, long before Messiah came and paid the redemption price for lost humanity on the cross, there was this confidence that God's people had a Father who loved them and could be counted on to rescue them. And this also inspires hope. Notice that this is a "no limits" prayer, declaring the generosity and rich resources of a God who offers love and salvation. Put your hope in the God who has no limitations to His love and an overflowing supply of salvation.

And then the concluding declaration from Psalm 130:

*He Himself will free Israel from every kind of sin*

That's an interesting way to phrase the sentence: "He *Himself* will free Israel from every kind of sin, as if He were somehow part of the process of redemption. And that's the way it's always been - God takes the biggest part and pays the greatest price in redeeming a people for Himself. Ultimately, He came to earth to reveal His heart to humanity and the people of this earth decided we didn't want Him - we didn't want the love, the miracles of healing and deliverance, the teaching about loving others and living humbly, the call to be followers - and so He was crucified for our sins. His blood paid the price that our blood should have paid.

But the pattern of history was that God's heart was broken before ours was; He was betrayed before His people began to suffer. As early as Genesis 6 we read that His heart was filled with pain at the great evil that had taken over His creation; and throughout the history of Israel, their persistent desire to be like the nations that surrounded them led them to reject their God and to worship things they had made with their own hands. God is the first to suffer and the last to receive the rewards for the sacrifices He has made.

So, there you have it - a quick run through Psalm 130, a "Song of Ascent", a song of pilgrimage, a song sung by people who are on their way to meet with their God. How does it touch our lives today?

Let's start with our context, the journey that we're on, and then we can look at the lyrics to the songs we're singing. Our context is that we're a people who are on a journey to know God and to make Him known in whatever sphere we could call "our world". That's at the heart of the day-to-day - the decisions, the relationships, the dealing with stress, the focus, the lack of focus that make up our daily lives. We're a people who want to know God, to hear His voice, to keep in step with His Spirit, to honour His Son Jesus, to live in a way that pleases Him. That's the people of God and so it makes sense that the songs we sing reflect that inner heart desire to know and to love Him better.

Here are some lessons from Psalm 130 to help us:

1. We cry out to God in our times of deep need, when we're grieving, when we're broken, when nothing makes sense, when we are losing hope. God is ready to hear us no matter what we're experiencing. He's not waiting for people to get their

act together before He responds to our cries for mercy. His nature is compassionate and He moves to meet the needs of those who are fully dependent on Him, who trust His character and who wait for Him to help. So, don't hesitate. When you need help, call out to the faithful God of love, then wait in hope.

2. The Lord's Prayer has a simple line which Jesus wants us to offer to our Father in Heaven: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us", or, "Forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who wrong me." It's an amazing offer, that we could be forgiven for every rebellious and unkind and self-centred thought and action, just because our heavenly Father chooses to show mercy. If we take the time to reflect on His high standards relative to our level of performance, we should learn the fear of the LORD. It is an awesome and wonderful gift to know forgiveness - complete and whole - from the Judge of all things in all places. What a gift! What a God!
3. Number 3 on my list of lessons is one of the big ones from this passage: "I am counting on God". Hope is essential to our lives. Without hope we can easily be overcome by difficult circumstances or give in to depressing thoughts about our future. Hope is the antidote to the despair that the psalmist reveals in the first verse and hope becomes the main theme in the rest of the psalm. Notice what he hopes for:
  - a. "You offer forgiveness". That's the word of hope that we just looked at and it becomes the strong word of hope at the end of the psalm: "He Himself will free Israel from every kind of sin!" That's a powerful declaration of confident hope in the goodness and mercy of their God.
  - b. The second expression of hope is in verse 5: "I have put my hope in His word." This is hope in the promises of God, the word that reveals the past goodness of God, the present steadfastness with which God relates to His people, and the future promises of blessing and joy that God has spoken through His prophets. "I have put my hope in His word" is a declaration that the writer of Psalm 130 has heard and believed that God is faithful to His people and that He promises to be with them and to bless them.
  - c. The next verse doesn't use the word hope, but it is a response to one of God's promises to Israel - namely, that He would be with them. "I long for the Lord more than sentries long for the dawn", expresses that hopeful longing that responds to God's presence, His promise to be with His people, His history of drawing close, being there.
  - d. And, finally, the appeal of the last two verses: "O Israel, hope in Yahweh, for in Yahweh there is unfailing love and an overflowing supply of salvation." This is the great reason for hope - His love never fails; His salvation is without limits.

Add to that the promise of forgiveness which has come earlier and is now repeated at the close of the Psalm and you have a complete picture of the secure and strong love of God towards us.

Here's what I'd like to suggest as an application for daily living from Psalm 130. Choose to be a person who lives in hope, if for no other reason than you have a relationship with a God who keeps His promises, who forgives your sin and whose love

for you never fails. I know that all of us have times when we feel beaten down, defeated, but those times don't have to last. We don't have to stay down, because our God is able to pick us up and place our feet on a rock.

This is a psalm that shows us why and how our lives can be so different from the lives of people who have no real foundation for hope. God is real and His love for us is real. Believe it ... and then live like you believe it! God offers forgiveness and freedom from every kind of sin. The things that torment us, that frustrate us, about ourselves are not unknown to God and not beyond His compassion. Believe it ... and then live like you believe it! We long for relationship with our Creator and He longs to pour out unfailing love and an overflowing supply of salvation - exactly what we needed and longed for. Believe it ... and then live every day, every hour, in the confidence that this is really true, that God in heaven is really like this, that His love will never fail you, that He has stored up for you an overflowing supply of His salvation. Walk out your days with peace, knowing the joy of His grace and love towards you. And make it a regular practice in your daily life to meet with Him, knowing that He wants to - and will - meet with you.