

The Gospel in Eight Verses

Psalm 130

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
March 22, 2009

During Lent the focus of our worship on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings is a reflection on various psalms. Like no other body of work in scripture, the psalms provide us with a vocabulary of faith for the people of God.

The 130th psalm falls into two different categories of psalms. It falls into a sub-category of psalms of lament with six other psalms classified as penitential psalms--psalms that bemoan our misery and despair at the breach in our relationship with God due to our sinfulness. And it is also part of a collection of 15 psalms of ascents, psalms which were sung or recited by Israelite pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for one of the three annual religious festivals observed in the holy city.

It has been noted that the 130th psalm has an important place in the history of the spiritual life of the church. The psalm has taken on the elegant title, "De Profundis," borrowing from the first two words in the Latin text, translated in the English as "Out of the depths..." Most Methodists are aware that John Wesley "felt his heart strangely warmed" when he heard a sermon on Paul's message of grace in Romans; the afternoon before his transforming experience at Aldersgate, Wesley heard the 130th Psalm sung in worship. Martin Luther referred to this psalm as a "proper master and doctor of Scripture," meaning that the psalm teaches the basic truth of the gospel.¹

Some people want to discount the Old Testament as less important than the New Testament. To be sure, the Old Testament is incomplete without the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. But the truth is, the basic message of the gospel is found in the Old Testament, for God's plan of redemption has never changed. And so even in the Old Testament we find announcements of the gospel message. The 130th Psalm is one such announcement of the gospel message. What we find in this psalm is a succinct proclamation of the gospel of God's love and salvation, encapsulated for us in just eight verses. This proclamation of the gospel message contains three basic elements.

The first element of the gospel message found in the psalm is an acknowledgement of sin. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord..." "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"² As in so many psalms, the psalmist cries out to God in despair. But unlike so many others, where there is some external cause for the psalmist's misery, or some enemy who has brought misery upon the psalmist, here there is no such accusation pointed outside of the psalmist. The psalmist does not point the finger at someone else; instead the psalmist identifies only one thing as the source of his despair and anguish: his own sinfulness.

In the 1970s there was a book written by renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger. The title of the book was "Whatever Became of Sin?" The premise of the question is that people do all sorts of things to explain away our own sinfulness. The truth is, people don't want to talk about sin. We try hard to avoid the subject; after all, sin is so negative. And so we justify ourselves by blaming our parents, or the environment in which we were raised, or we say we can't help it because that's just the way we're wired, or we come up with our own definitions of sin that still allow us to do some of the things we really like to do.

But make no mistake: there can be no preaching of the gospel that excludes our own sinfulness. A gospel without sin is no gospel at all. We have to accept responsibility for our predicament. I'm not saying that for every misfortune that comes our way we can point to a specific sin that we have committed. Nor am I saying that we

deserve every bad thing that happens to us. But the truth is, sin is at the root of all the mess that our world is in. Sin has crept into every nook and cranny of our being, so that there is no part of our lives that is not in some way or another corrupted by sin.

There is no one for whom this does not apply. When the psalm asks the question, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?" it's not as if the psalmist expects God to name a few choice individuals who somehow have been able to maintain a positive balance in their life ledger. It's a rhetorical question, with the only right answer being "no one." Isn't that what Paul affirms in his letter to the Romans? "No one is righteous, not even one... All have turned away... There is no one who does good, not even one... There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."³

The first element of the gospel message is the recognition of our sinfulness.

The second element of the gospel message found in this psalm is that our hope is directed toward God. It is not on his own merits that the psalmist stands. He knows that on his own he has no hope of redemption. He turns to the One who alone has the power and the desire to save him: the Lord. "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope..."⁴ The reason the gospel is good news is because God does for us that which we are unable to do on our own. When we recognize that we are unable to save ourselves from our sin--when we realize that we are unable to pull ourselves out of the depths--then we must turn to someone who is able. And that someone is God, no other. That's what we confess when the words of the psalm become our own: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits..."

The waiting for the Lord is not the same kind of waiting you experience when you look at your watch and wonder if the plane is late or on time. The waiting for the Lord is a watchful expectation, a deep longing, a hope. That's how the night watchmen waited for the morning. The night watchmen were sentries posted along the wall of Jerusalem. They knew that the greatest danger of invasion, the time when the enemy would have the best opportunity to sneak up and surround the city, was at night. And so the watchmen would constantly scan the horizon, hoping that the time of danger would pass, that the first signs of the new day would quickly come. Their waiting was urgent, their desire for the new day acute.

Is that the manner in which you long for your redemption? Do you have that kind of urgent desire for God to lift you out of the depths, to set your feet on terra firma, to rescue you from your sin?

The first word of the gospel is the acknowledgement of our sinfulness. The second is the recognition that our hope of salvation lies beyond ourselves, in God alone.

The third word of the gospel found in this psalm is the assurance that God does indeed redeem us and set us free. It is a promise that is repeated several times in the psalm. The first indication is in the simple word, "if" in the third verse: "If you, O Lord, kept a record of our sins..." The implication of that word is that God does not, in fact, keep a record of our sins--such is the nature of his deep and abiding love. It is a truth that is repeated elsewhere in the psalms, where we are told that God does not treat us as our sins deserve, nor does God repay us according to our iniquities.⁵

Isn't that amazing?! God doesn't count our sins against us--what a powerful image of forgiveness! How many times have you had someone do something to you, so that no matter how many times you say you forgive that person, still there is part of you that holds the offense against that person? You know how difficult it is to forgive in the way that God forgives, refusing to hold our sins against us!

The eight verses of this psalm are peppered with the assurance that our hope, our longing for redemption, is met with God's love and forgiveness: There is forgiveness with you, [O Lord]... Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is steadfast love and plenteous redemption... It is [the Lord] who will redeem his people from all our iniquities.⁶

The one word that is missing from the psalm is the word of Christ. But as people who stand on this side of the resurrection, we know that it is Jesus Christ who fulfills these verses. Jesus Christ is the one through whom God

has satisfied the requirements of the law and atoned for our sin; Jesus Christ is the one who took our sins upon himself so that we would no longer have to; Jesus Christ is the one who makes it possible for God to wipe the ledger clean, so that in Christ God no longer needs to keep a record of our sins. As Paul says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."⁷

My friends, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and plenteous redemption. That's the gospel in eight verses. That is the language of our faith. Amen.

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It has been noted that the 130th psalm has an important place in the history of the spiritual life of the church. The psalm has taken on the elegant title, "De Profundis," borrowing from the first two words in the Latin text, translated in the English as "Out of the depths..." Most Methodists are aware that John Wesley "felt his heart strangely warmed" when he heard a sermon on Paul's message of grace in Romans; the afternoon before his transforming experience at Aldersgate, Wesley heard the 130th Psalm sung in worship. Martin Luther referred to this psalm as a "proper master and doctor of Scripture," meaning that the psalm teaches the basic truth of the gospel.¹

Some people want to discount the Old Testament as less important than the New Testament. To be sure, the Old Testament is incomplete without the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. But the truth is, the basic message of the gospel is found in the Old Testament, for God's plan of redemption has never changed. And so even in the Old Testament we find announcements of the gospel message. The 130th Psalm is one such announcement of the gospel message. What we find in this psalm is a succinct proclamation of the gospel of God's love and salvation, encapsulated for us in just eight verses. This proclamation of the gospel message contains three basic elements.

The first element of the gospel message found in the psalm is an acknowledgement of sin. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord..." "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"² As in so many psalms, the psalmist cries out to God in despair. But unlike so many others, where there is some external cause for the psalmist's misery, or some enemy who has brought misery upon the psalmist, here there is no such accusation pointed outside of the psalmist. The psalmist does not point the finger at someone else; instead the psalmist identifies only one thing as the source of his despair and anguish: his own sinfulness.

In the 1970s there was a book written by renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger. The title of the book was "Whatever Became of Sin?" The premise of the question is that people do all sorts of things to explain away our own sinfulness. The truth is, people don't want to talk about sin. We try hard to avoid the subject; after all, sin is so negative. And so we justify ourselves by blaming our parents, or the environment in which we were raised, or we say we can't help it because that's just the way we're wired, or we come up with our own definitions of sin that still allow us to do some of the things we really like to do.

But make no mistake: there can be no preaching of the gospel that excludes our own sinfulness. A gospel without sin is no gospel at all. We have to accept responsibility for our predicament. I'm not saying that for every misfortune that comes our way we can point to a specific sin that we have committed. Nor am I saying that we

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There is no one for whom this does not apply. When the psalm asks the question, "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?," it's not as if the psalmist expects God to name a few choice individuals who somehow have been able to maintain a positive balance in their life ledger. It's a rhetorical question, with the only right answer being "no one." Isn't that what Paul affirms in his letter to the Romans? "No one is righteous, not even one... All have turned away... There is no one who does good, not even one... There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..."³

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The second element of the gospel message found in this psalm is that our hope is directed toward God. It is not on his own merits that the psalmist stands. He knows that on his own he has no hope of redemption. He turns to the One who alone has the power and the desire to save him: the Lord. "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope..."⁴ The reason the gospel is good news is because God does for us that which we are unable to do on our own. When we recognize that we are unable to save ourselves from our sin--when we realize that we are unable to pull ourselves out of the depths--then we must turn to someone who is able. And that someone is God, no other. That's what we confess when the words of the psalm become our own: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits..."

The waiting for the Lord is not the same kind of waiting you experience when you look at your watch and wonder if the plane is late or on time. The waiting for the Lord is a watchful expectation, a deep longing, a hope. That's how the night watchmen waited for the morning. The night watchmen were sentries posted along the wall of Jerusalem. They knew that the greatest danger of invasion, the time when the enemy would have the best opportunity to sneak up and surround the city, was at night. And so the watchmen would constantly scan the horizon, hoping that the time of danger would pass, that the first signs of the new day would quickly come. Their waiting was urgent, their desire for the new day acute.

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