

## Hope

### Psalm 130

Ninth of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

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Sunday, March 13, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

We come to you, gracious God, in the depths of our struggles, our mistakes, our turmoil. We cry out to you; we now trust that you will speak your Word to us, of forgiveness and love. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

In the wake of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, we have heard many stories of what happens to people in the midst of tragedy. This past week, we have seen, in typical American fashion, our focus on a super model on the front of Sports Illustrated and her tragedy in Thailand. Petra Menkova invited her boyfriend, Simon Atlee, and the two of them went to this wonderful resort to enjoy life together. The tsunami caught them right before they left. It swept them away, almost destroying her body and her being; and it swept Simon away to death.

The water came rolling and rolling over her like a flood; she went down several times. It was miraculous that she came up because she had no use of her legs. She was swept away to a place where she could grab hold of a palm tree and hold on for dear life until the water subsided. There she was in the top of the palm tree, praying and in great pain. She had grown up as an atheist in a Czech home. Never praying and not believing in God, she prayed out for the first time in her life, not knowing if there was a God who would hear her. And eight hours later she was saved. In the midst of that, she had glimpses of what she called hope, that she would begin to see her boyfriend, Simon Atlee, again. That hope was not fulfilled; his body was discovered just this past week.

Psalm 130 is about people who have built disaster deeply into their lives. It is a psalm of hope in the midst of our own self-destruction. It is hope that God is present, that God speaks a word of kindness to us when we have pretty much done ourselves in. It is drowning in a deep sea of trouble. It is when I am in over my head... I have buried myself... and I'm going down. It is out of the depths that I have created because of my own foolishness and stupidity – the trouble in life that we have created. And this psalmist is crying out to God to make life right. It is a lament for a person who has caught himself in the depths of death out of his own doing.

The psalmist cries out to the Lord, because without the Lord's intervention at this moment, frankly, there is no help. We can do things to ourselves and to one another that build such darkness and deprecation between relationships that there is no way we can climb out of them. And so we turn to God, we cry out, we pray, we confess that we have blown it saying, "God, if you can't get us out of this mess that we created, we're in deep trouble." We plead with God to rescue us, to redeem us, to make things right – because we believe that God is essentially a God of forgiveness, goodness, lovingkindness; of graciousness and mercy. God does not keep a record of wrongs. As I often kiddingly say, 'God is listless when it come to sin.'

1 Corinthians 13, which we hear at many weddings, affirms that love keeps no record of wrongs. God does not mark, point by point, what we are doing that is evil or sinful. God is willing and ready to wipe all of that out if we will confess it and let it go. God is not the reincarnation in our own minds of the theology of Santa Claus. He's not keeping a list, checking it twice or going to make sure who's naughty or nice. Santa Claus is coming to give punishment or reward. That is not the nature of God; that is not the nature of real hope.

1 John, the New Testament theology of this Old Testament psalm, says it clearly: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, all iniquity. If we say we have not sinned, we make God a liar and God's Word is not in us. If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not our sins only but also for the sins of the entire of the world.

This psalm moves from the declaration of one's personal sin:

Lord, I've blown it, and you need to help me.

to an exhortation of the individual to the rest of the community that you see what God does: God will redeem an individual life; God can redeem an entire nation; an entire world.

Desmond Tutu in his book, *No Hope without Forgiveness*, writes a reflection of what happened after apartheid in South Africa—all the brutality, the terror, the murder, the abuse. The creation of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee allowed people to confess their sins and tell the truth about the worst of the worst that destroyed a nation. And it is out of those ashes that forgiveness impacted an entire nation that continues the healing process today.

The psalm calls us to call on God when we have made a deep mess of our own lives. To keep calling on God... to continually, incessantly, tenaciously and relentlessly call upon God. Keep calling until we get a response of forgiveness, until that forgiveness cuts to the heart and the depth of our being and we are cleansed of the mess that we have created. We will not sleep, we will not leave, we will not give up until we get an answer. That's the point of the psalms. We wait, we look, and we watch for God to show up in the darkness that we've created. There's a clear poetic teaching that this waiting can go on for extended periods of dark time. It will not go away quickly, through all the watches of the night. And it's repeated through all the watches of the night: as if the sentinel, looking out over the darkness to protect the city, is waiting and waiting... through all the watches of night... for there to be daylight and protection, so that darkness does not overcome the city.

In tremendous angst, fear, anxiety, and grief – the waiting; the watching; the turning; the spinning; the sleeplessness; the straining and the stirring – are all a part of us learning to hope for God in the midst of a terrible time.

John Ortberg in his book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Gotta Get Out of the Boat*, reflects on the core illustration of this in the New Testament. They had just fed the five thousand, and Jesus sent the disciples on a boat out across the lake. It was just sundown, and he said, "I'll be along directly." The disciples were rowing all night into the ninth, tenth and eleventh hour. They were rowing more and more against the wind, and things were getting tougher and darker out there – and there is no Jesus. Jesus came along in the fourth watch. That's about nine, ten, eleven hours later. And you can almost see and feel the disciples saying, "Why did Jesus send us out into this dark, miserable stormy mess?" And Jesus came along and said, "Why are you afraid?" Suffering produces endurance, according to the Apostle Paul. Endurance produces character and character produces hope.

There is a tight connection between waiting and hoping. If we can wait diligently for God to show up, God will come and intervene. God will redeem and restore. God will make our mess better. God will heal our sins.

The Hebrew word for hope literally means: to suffer for a long period of time. This psalm is about a person who realizes that unless God intervenes, they are in it for a lifetime of misery; and they experience much of that misery before God intervenes.

Louis Smedes says that waiting is the hardest work of hope. Hope in the Lord because the Lord is the focus of that hope. It is not by chance; it is not by luck; it is not because we feel good one time and not so good the next. It is, in fact, all about God's presence in the midst of our disaster.

Richard Mouw in his book, *Calvinism in a Las Vegas Airport*, talks about the difference between two kinds of hope. He gets on an airplane with a family consisting of a husband and wife, and the wife's mother; the wife is very pregnant. They are not looking very happy after being in Las Vegas. So he asked the question, "How did it go for you in the city?" "Well, frankly we're sad. Mom here lost six thousand dollars we had hoped to invest in the baby. The good news is the baby is coming, and we have hope in that." It triggered in Richard Mouw's own mind, his own experience – a memory of his grandmother who lost a son and put her faith in the baby that was born in Bethlehem. The one about which the carol says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in you tonight." That's where the hope centers for the possibility that we can be redeemed; it is not in the birth of a child because we've just blown the family fortune.

There is only one source of hope, and that is the living God in Jesus Christ who comes to live amidst our trouble. Hope is not optimism, wishful thinking, avoiding negative thoughts, or being positive. These are all our human actions. Hope is all about what God does when we cry out. If there is no God who loves us, there is no hope, pure and simple.

Jurgen Moltmann, who is known for his theology of hope, discovered his theology of hope when he was in a concentration camp – a prisoner of war camp – when things were as bleak as they could possibly be. All he had to read was Fyodor Dostoevsky. If you've ever read Dostoevsky, you know that's not a very bright light. While reading Dostoevsky amid all the drudgery and darkness of his work, he discovered that God was in the midst, and there was hope in the bleakest times. He said, "I discovered hope when absolute darkness prevailed."

Jesus Christ descends into hell. He touches us at our deepest, darkest place when we have totally blown it. And he can bring us out. That's hope out of the depths. In Jesus Christ, no matter how you have blown it, you can be forgiven if you confess it.

Amen.