

## Twilight Prayer

### Psalm 130

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Sunday, March 9, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Every once in a while I will come across a particular passage that seems to have all the elements of God's good news for us within itself — confession, forgiveness, hope, redemption, and love. We all have favorites from Scripture that really speak to us in a personal way. I bet you can call to mind one or two passages that somehow speak the whole of God's good news to you in just a few verses.

For example, when I read the parable of the prodigal son I think to myself, this story has it all, from rebellion to restoration. There are some proverbs that really stand out, and I think, "Boy, if everyone took this one saying to heart, they would surely be led to God." When I read some passages from the Apostle Paul, I think, "This is the essence of the Gospel."

I've found over the years that the more I read and study God's word, the more those gems jump out at me from the page. The more we read Scripture, the more we see the continuities and connections between passages, so a reading of one passage can be blessed with a fuller appreciation and understanding for what God is saying to us through the whole of Scripture.

My experience in the church has filled me with the assurance that God has done and continues to do something special when we turn to his Word together, building on those continuities and connections by the power of God's Spirit. As a whole, Scripture speaks to the core of our human experience and speaks to God's power to imbue our lives with hope and meaning, to shed light in dark places.

Let us pray:

*Lord, there are plenty of dark corners in our lives in which we need your light. There are many matters that weigh us down, from which we need relief. From the depths of our very human troubles, we cry for help. Hear our cry from the deep, and grant us wisdom to accept your gracious hand for help. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

Psalm 130 is one of those says-it-all passages with many continuities and connections throughout the history of Christian witness. Read any commentary on this psalm and it will tell you that it was a favorite of reformers like Martin Luther, who no doubt recognized the Gospel in verse 7, *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.* John Wesley also fell in love with the words of this psalm when he heard them sung in church, and soon after, with the influence of Luther's teachings, his heart was "strangely warmed" for the Gospel. Eugene Peterson, in his translation of verse 7, writes that with the Lord there is *generous redemption*.

It is a psalm of ascent, meaning it is one of pilgrims traveling to the Holy City of Jerusalem, reflecting on their need for God's forgiveness, verse 4, *But there is forgiveness with you.* And the need for patience, verse 5, *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.* It is a prayer of almost there, but not yet. I imagine the pilgrim longing to dwell in God's presence, having traveled from far away, asking him or herself, "Am I there yet?" No. I'm not.

Remember how in Psalm 121, the writer offers assurance to the traveler? *Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.* Well here the psalmist picks up on that idea of waiting through the darkness of the night for the dawn of his redemption, *my soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.* Perhaps the psalmist's words ring true for you?

I'm almost there. But I'm not there yet. I'm waiting. I don't want to wait any more. But I am waiting because I have a promise from God. Yet in this moment I can only see my troubles. I'm running out of

options. I admit it. I'm one of those sunshine followers. I love it when God's blessings shine in my life, but when it's dark, I scurry into a hole of despair. I may say, "Lord, I believe," with my lips, but in truth deep down my heart is saying, "Lord, give me patience and I want it....yesterday!" Am I the only one in the room who lives like this?

Folks, one of the things I love about the psalms is that they speak an unvarnished, and dare I say "un-pious" truth. It is the kind of truth I live in day to day, a nitty-gritty truth, in which my own faith isn't so shiny and pure. In fact some moments it's just downright poor. But for some reason that makes no human sense, God has decided to take my case, smile in the face of my ingratitude, and feed me when I have spit out his assurances on more than one occasion when they didn't suit my tastes, or I couldn't make the time. What kind of Lord is this, who loves the followers that reject him, followers who will not wait through the night? Verse 3, *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.*

I've come to realize Psalm 130 is a twilight prayer, as is the Christian life. Twilight is that diffuse light across the sky just before the sun rises or just after it sets. Most people think only of the twilight just *after* sunset, because more folks are awake during that time than during the twilight *before* sunrise. But that is precisely to the point. Here the Psalmist is waiting for his Lord throughout the night. *More than watchman for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.*

It is a time when the light of God's kingdom is starting to transform the darkness. The stars of that night sky are starting to fade. *Thy kingdom come. Thy kingdom come.* The sun hasn't quite appeared. Its tip has yet to touch the water you sit at, the field you stand in, the line of the fence outside your kitchen window. But the light of that sun, even before the orb appears, is already touching the darkness.

It used to be that when I suffered from insomnia I did so in the middle of the night, meaning I might stay up ruminating on my troubles until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, then finally fall asleep until I woke with the alarm. But I've noticed in the last few years that pattern has started to change. Now, if I'm not at an evening meeting a church, I might get to sleep by 9:30 or 10:00, then wake up by 5:00 or so while it is still pretty dark. At that early hour I'm in a kind of foggy wakefulness, no longer sleepy, but not quite ready to do anything productive. I might pick up a magazine, but my eyes aren't yet quite focused to read it.

Eventually I stagger from my covers to the bedroom window. As I pull aside the curtain, I notice the color of the sky. In the winter it's a blackish blue. As summer approaches, it turns a yellowish gray, sometimes with a touch of orange. No sun to be seen yet, but its light is trespassing on the night. Perhaps some birds are singing against a backdrop of quiet. Planes are not yet overhead.

Some concern will come to my mind in that moment—a pastoral call I need to make, an email I haven't responded to, regret over some comment I made, a problem I need to fix. But because I am not quite there yet, I release that trouble, trusting it will return to me if it needs to. I let that worry go, not so much from decision, but because I am not in a place to do much about it. I am in a receptive state. It is a time of expectation for something external. *More than watchmen for the morning.*

In that moment I am not driven from within; I'm vulnerable for what comes. Those moments don't last long but they are God-given. Spiritual writers call them liminal moments, your time on the threshold when God has you between two places. It could last for minutes, or it could last for years. You know the old is gone, but the new has not yet arrived. You trust that God will provide, but not all the signs have been revealed. One moment you wonder, the next you believe. *More than watchmen for the morning.*

What makes that moment poignant is that you really do not know what's coming next. But for reasons beyond your power to understand, you turn to God by default. It is what you're created to do, like a toddler that lifts her hands to her mother, or an elderly man in bed who, without realizing it, reaches to hold the hand of a visitor who has come to pray. Your body and your soul are inclined to turn to God, even when your mind is occupied with other things.

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.* In his word I hope. From the depth of my troubles, I have hope that morning will come. The thing about waiting for God is that it doesn't come with

a consolation prize, or with updates on the progress, or assurances that the work is almost done. It's just waiting.

What does it mean when God gives you his word? I don't think it means that you just wait and everything will be okay, that it is going to work out as you planned. I do think it means that God is trustworthy and what he does provide will draw you closer into his heart of redemption and fill you with greater forgiveness and compassion for those you love, and for those whom you are called to love. For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and generous redemption.

Each twilight is a reminder, a sign, an assurance that his kingdom is advancing on your life. Morning by morning, new mercies come. *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.*

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*