

The Journey of the Soul

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[0 : 00] Well, now we come to our Bible reading, so please would you turn with me to Psalm 130, which you'll find on page 518 in our church Bibles, page 518.

Now, we've just sung that version of it by Emma Terl, and now we go back to the original. Last week we were in Psalm 127, and we were thinking from that Psalm of the way in which the Lord is building his house, his household, the ongoing work of the building of the church.

Whereas tonight, it's much more personal. It's more to do with the way in which the Lord is doing his work in the heart of each individual Christian. So Psalm 130.

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

[1 : 12] I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. And in his word, I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning.

More than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord. For with the Lord there is steadfast love. And with him is plenteous redemption.

And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. Amen. And may the Lord add his blessing to these words from the scriptures.

Well, friends, do let's turn once again to Psalm 130, page 518. In our church Bibles.

Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. When I was a youngster, aged about 19, I guess, an older Christian friend of mine said to me, Edward, for each look within, take ten looks at him, meaning the Lord.

[2 : 29] Not very good poetry, but very good godly advice. Because after all, 19-year-olds can be rather introspective, constantly gazing inside themselves in the hope of discovering the secret of the universe.

Now, my friend's advice was very sound, and I gladly pass it on to any navel-gazing 19-year-olds who might be present this evening. The Bible does constantly teach us to turn to the Lord and to look at him.

But every so often, it also forces us, for our own good, to look inside ourselves and to think about the inner journey that we are taking from the cradle to the grave.

It is, after all, quite a long journey. It can last up to 100 years. And therefore, it's good for us to have an idea of its general shape and direction and to recognize some of the milestones along the way.

And Psalm 130 is a Bible passage that makes us look inside ourselves. Now, just glance with me at the way it's shaped. I think you'll see that the first six verses there are very personal.

[3 : 35] And you can see that in the pronouns and the adjectives. Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. Listen to my pleas for mercy. My pleas.

Verse 5. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. I hope. My soul waits for the Lord. Verse 6. And it's only when we get to verse 7 that the psalmist turns away from looking within himself.

And he addresses Israel, all his fellow Israelites, with a warm invitation to put their hope in the Lord as well. But his invitation to them is only made because of the journey that he himself has taken between verse 1 and verse 6.

Without that journey of verses 1 to 6, he would have no confident invitation to pass on to his fellow Israelites in the final two verses of the psalm. In other words, the last two verses grow out of the first six.

Now, my title for this evening is The Journey of the Soul. And the soul that we're looking at, at least initially, is the soul of this unnamed author of Psalm 130.

[4 : 43] But the Lord has put his soul's journey into the Bible because it is the universal journey of the believer. It mirrors the journey of every Christian soul.

So I trust it will encourage us this evening as we see a window opened onto the experience of this psalmist, this man. Because it may open a window onto our own experience of the Christian life.

This man lived some 3,000 years ago. But these words could have been written yesterday. There's something very contemporary about them. Well, we'll take the psalm in four sections.

Two verses to each section. First, verses 1 and 2. We see our psalmist crying to the Lord. Crying. Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.

Not I speak to you. Not I chat with you. Not even I call to you. I cry to you. It's a piercing utterance. Now, it's not a cry of despair.

[5 : 41] Because he's going to tell us in verse 5 that he's full of hope. But it's an insistent pleading. Look at verse 2. O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

Now, what kind of a deep place is this man in? What sort of depth is he struggling in? Human experience, after all, knows different sorts of depths.

There are the depths of poverty, where it can seem impossible to climb up to a life of greater comfort and restfulness. There are the depths of depression, when everything in life seems to be impossibly bleak and dark, and life almost becomes immobilized.

There are the depths of illness, physical illness, where you might go almost down to the gates of death. There are the depths of persecution, where you feel the fierceness of people's hostility.

But the depths of Psalm 130 are not any of these. This psalm is speaking about the depths of sin. Now, we know this because of the question the writer asks in verse 3.

[6 : 53] If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness. And then look on to verse 8.

The Lord will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. So the issue in this psalm is sin and forgiveness, not depression or illness or persecution or poverty.

This writer has reached a point in his life where he is so overwhelmed with a sense of his sinfulness that he feels that he is drowning in the depths of it. But his instinct is the right one.

He cries to the Lord from this particular deep place. And that in itself is a minor miracle. Because the natural reaction of the human being to a sense of sinfulness is to go down the route of self-help.

Our natural response is to say, come on, self. You'd better sort yourself out. Get a grip on yourself. Stop being so beastly. Make a few resolutions about your behavior.

[7 : 57] So, for example, a man might say, I will from now on become more truthful and honest. I'll be truthful with Her Majesty's revenue and customs. I'll be truthful with my colleagues at work rather than slightly devious and misleading.

I'll be kinder to my wife. I'll be more interested in my children's homework. I will stop being grumpy with strangers in public places. And I will be less lazy and more helpful at home on Saturdays.

Et cetera, et cetera. Now, that, you might say, is the route of self-help. My life is in something of a moral mess, but I will make big efforts to improve my performance. But that approach to our moral disorder doesn't begin to address the real problem.

Because the heart of the problem of sin is not to do with our relationship with other people. It's to do with our relationship with God. You remember the episode that showed King David at his very worst.

David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. And he then arranged to have her husband murdered so as to cover his tracks. It was the lowest point in David's life.

[9 : 06] It was a deeply shameful and wicked episode. But he repented of his sin. And soon afterwards, he wrote the 51st Psalm. And in that Psalm, he said to God, against you, you only, have I sinned.

Now, at one level, he had clearly sinned against certain people. He'd sinned against Bathsheba by forcing her to break her vows of marriage. He'd sinned against her husband, whose death in battle he had callously arranged.

But he expressed the heart of the truth about sin when he said to God, it is against you, you only, that I have sinned. Nathan the prophet had to say to him, by this deed, this episode, you have utterly scorned the Lord.

So to sin is to treat the Lord with contempt, to scorn his holy majesty. And that's why self-help cannot begin to address the problem.

It's the scorning of God's holy majesty that needs to be addressed. And only God himself has the power to solve such a profound problem. And the author of Psalm 130 knows this.

[10 : 18] And that is why in verses 1 and 2, he cries out to the Lord. And what does he cry for? He cries for mercy. Look at verse 2. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy.

He's pleading for mercy like a condemned man falling at the feet of a great king and begging the king not to carry out the capital punishment which he deserves. Now there's something about the human heart that does not want to look candidly and steadily at its own sinfulness.

And I guess we have two characteristic responses to our own sinfulness. The first way is to treat it as if it's not usually there in our characters. As if it's just an infrequent visitor.

An occasional trespasser on the normally pure and shining inner life of our hearts. So we'll say, but I'm not normally like that. That's not who I really am. It was a moment of madness when I behaved like that.

Meaning pure and squeaky clean is really what I'm like. So that's the occasional trespasser view of our sinfulness. And the other typical response is to blame somebody else.

[11 : 33] And this is what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. The Lord came to meet them in the evening. Do you remember after their rebellion and disobedience? And once he had found Adam and brought him out of hiding. He said to Adam, have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?

To which the right answer would have been, yes, I have. But what did Adam say? The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate.

So he passes the blame onto his wife. Then the Lord God speaks to her and says to her, what is this that you have done? And she says, the serpent deceived me and I ate.

So Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent and neither is willing to say, Lord, I have sinned. But the writer of Psalm 130 is not like Adam and Eve.

He's deeply conscious of what he needs. And that is why he cries out to God, not for encouragement, not for happiness, not for guidance or direction in life, but for mercy.

[12 : 41] Out of the depths, he lifts up his voice. It's a cry. And he cries to the only one who can help him. Now, second, from verses three and four, we see him fearing the Lord.

But before we get to the fear in verse four, we need to look at the force of verse three. Verse three is a question. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

Now, that word mark means notice or make note of, weigh up and remember. If you, O Lord, should remember and record what?

Iniquities. Now, iniquities really means inequities, things which are unequal. The idea is that God's law is a standard of perfection, but our behavior is unequal to it.

It doesn't match it. It falls far short of it. As the apostle Paul writes, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So iniquity means shortfall.

[13 : 53] There is a profound mismatch between our behavior and God's law. And the question of verse three is an agonized question. If you, O Lord, should make a note of the full reality of our moral shortfall, who could stand?

None of us. None of us could remain on our feet with our head held high. If you, O Lord, were to keep an indelible and accurate record of every iniquitous thought, word, deed, emotion, inclination, and attitude of our hearts.

Now, friends, there is good news as the psalm progresses, and we'll come to that in a few minutes. But we need to stay a little bit longer with this subject of iniquity. A remarkable feature of the Bible is the way in which it holds our human sinfulness in front of us in all its sordid and painful detail.

If I can use the old expression, the Bible calls a spade a spade. It doesn't treat sin lightly, as we will always do if we're given half a chance. The apostle Paul is very detailed in describing human sin.

And the Lord Jesus also goes into great details. Let's think of Paul first. In his first chapter of the letter to the Romans, he begins a sustained passage which runs from the middle of chapter one to the middle of chapter three.

[15 : 18] And in that long passage, he brings together evidence after evidence for the universality of human sin. He talks first of the universal human desire to suppress the truth about God and to replace God with idols, with substitutes.

He then speaks of sexual sin, and in particular, he details both male and female homosexual activity as indicating a rebellion against God's will and purpose.

And having spoken of truth suppression and idolatry and sexual sin, he writes this, and do note how detailed he is. And since men did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

[16 : 33] Now, when you hear that detailed list in which Paul leaves no stone unturned, you want to cry out, Paul, dear brother, have mercy on us.

Do you have to rub our noses in all our filth? To which he replies, yes, I do. Because if I don't teach you the truth about the human heart, nobody else is going to. No one else will be so faithful and honest and loving in showing you why you need a savior.

That list is meant to bring pain into our hearts because if we don't see ourselves as we really are, we shall never cry out to the Lord to have mercy upon us.

Now, let me ask, if you've been a Christian for some time, perhaps even for many years, are you in danger of forgetting what the human heart is really like? People who have been reading the Bible and serving the Lord for a long time can become forgetful.

But if we forget our sinfulness, we may begin to forget how much we need our savior. Jesus also, like Paul, is insistent on telling us the truth about ourselves.

[17 : 43] He says, Out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within and they defile a person. Now, it's because he loves us that he tells us these things.

It's because he doesn't want people to go sleepwalking into eternal danger. It's because he wants us to see why we need to cry out to the Lord for mercy. As we keep on reading the Bible, we need to keep allowing it to hold before us the detailed record of the iniquities which are so deeply rooted in our hearts.

Now, back to our verse 3 in the psalm. If you, Lord, should mark, if you should note down and record all that our hearts are capable of, O Lord, who could stand?

Who could stand? Nobody. All would be condemned. But, now do you see that first word in verse 4? It's the word that speaks of the great turning point in this psalm.

[18 : 58] In the deep waters, the depths of the knowledge of his sinfulness, the psalmist knows that there is a truth about God even greater than the fact that he can mark our iniquities.

And this is it. But with you, there is forgiveness. Now, I wonder if you share the psalmist's sense of relief and joy at this point.

Forgiveness is what he needs. In verse 2, he pleads for mercy. And in verse 4, he receives forgiveness. And the forgiveness is the outflow of the mercy.

It is because he is merciful that God is willing to forgive. There are a number of moments in the four gospels when Jesus told some individual that his or her sins were forgiven.

And they're great moments. For example, in Luke's gospel, chapter 7, there's the woman who is described as a sinner from the city. We're not told in so many words that she was a prostitute, but that may be the implication.

[20 : 01] Anyway, this woman made her way one evening into a Pharisee's house. I guess the doors were open and access was easily obtained. But she came into this house of the Pharisee who was holding a dinner party.

And Jesus was at the table. And the woman approached Jesus from behind. And she burst into tears. And she knelt down and she wetted Jesus' feet with her tears.

And then took her long hair and wiped his feet with them. And then she rubbed his feet with some expensive ointment. And Jesus said to her, your sins are forgiven.

Now, the Pharisee who was giving the dinner party, well, he thought it was an outrage for this wandering rabbi to pronounce forgiveness on a woman who was so well known for her immorality.

But that's what Jesus said to her. And she wasn't the only one who heard those glorious words, your sins are forgiven. Now, when the Bible speaks of God forgiving sins, it doesn't mean that he just sweeps them under the carpet.

[21 : 10] It doesn't mean that he pretends that they never happened. What it means is that he deals with them. What it really means is that he bears the consequences of our sins himself.

That is why Jesus is called Jesus and not William or George. Before Jesus was born, the Lord's angel was sent to Joseph. And the angel said to Joseph, Mary will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.

For he will save his people from their sins. And that's what the name Jesus means. God saves, saves from the penalty of sin, saves from the condemnation and sentence of death that would come if the Lord were to mark iniquity.

Jesus went to the cross to bear in his own body the punishment for sin that should have fallen upon us. He stood in for us. He died in our place.

And if he has taken our punishment, that means there is no punishment left for us to have to take. Our forgiveness has been won for us at very great cost.

[22 : 17] And that's why it's so precious. If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, who could stand? Nobody. All are guilty. But you have provided a savior.

And that's why there is forgiveness with you. With what consequence? Well, look at verse 4. That you may be feared.

Is that rather surprising? We might expect the consequence of forgiveness to be relief and joy. And there is relief and there is joy. But our psalmist mentions this other thing.

Why does he speak of fear? Well, what he means, I think, is a sense of awed wonder. A trembling sense of wanting to shout out hallelujah, but hardly daring to think that God could be so astonishingly kind or prepared to go to such great cost.

Think of the prodigal son. Remember Jesus' story of the prodigal son who returns to his father. The prodigal son is very far from home and his life has fallen to pieces.

[23 : 23] He's ended up in poverty and rags and misery. And he says in the end to himself, I must go home. I must return to my father. But what drives him back to his father?

Is it the near starvation and the rags and the wretchedness? Isn't it rather that he knows what his father is like? And as he goes back home, he keeps rehearsing the speech in his own mind that he's going to say to his father.

And when he meets his father, he says, Father, I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants. But does his father treat him as one of the hired servants?

Not for a moment. He rejoices over him. He bursts into tears. He weeps over him. He welcomes him home with a great party. They kill the fattened calf. They have a terrific homecoming.

That's what God is like when he welcomes back a forgiven sinner. That's why it is a fearful and wonderful thing to be forgiven. And when we remember what it cost our Lord Jesus to win our forgiveness, that is a great incentive to us to turn from our iniquities in the future and to walk hand in hand with him and to love him and serve him and to fear lest we offend him.

[24 : 40] So crying to the Lord, then fearing the Lord as he realizes forgiveness. Now thirdly, waiting for the Lord.

Verses 5 and 6. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. And in his word, I hope, my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning.

More than watchmen for the morning. And the repetition of that phrase there in verse 6 gives you a sense of how deep the longing is for the morning to come.

Now the original readers of Psalm 130 would have been very familiar with the figure of the night watchman as he prowled along the city walls, keeping a lookout, ready to sound the alarm if enemies came to threaten the city.

But this illustration of the night watchman is a very appropriate one because however long the night may be, however cold and rainy and uncomfortable the night is, you know for certain that the morning is going to come.

[25 : 47] It always does. Now there are some things in life that you might wait for without any certainty that it's going to happen. When I wait for a Scott rail train at Dunlop Station to take me to Glasgow, I don't always get what I'm waiting for.

But morning always comes to the waiting night watchman. It's a waiting with a sure and certain outcome. That's why it's such a good illustration, because it makes the point that the one who waits for the Lord will not be disappointed.

If you were asked to choose ten verbs to describe the attitudes of a Christian towards the Lord, I wonder what verbs you might pick.

Perhaps ones like this. Loving the Lord, listening to the Lord, obeying the Lord, trusting the Lord, fearing the Lord, proclaiming the Lord, speaking to the Lord, praising the Lord, honoring the Lord, rejoicing in the Lord.

I think that's ten. Would you include waiting for him? Is that a word which has got into the vocabulary of our hearts as we think of the way we relate to him?

[26 : 54] Or is that word a bit of a stranger to us? It is an important part of the Christian's mental furniture. We wait for him. And verse five, it is him that we wait for.

I wait for the Lord. The psalmist is not waiting for peace or blessing or prosperity. That's not what he mentions. He's waiting for the Lord himself. Now we find this attitude in the Gospels.

Do you remember those two saints, those two elderly saints in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel, Simeon and Anna? Luke describes Simeon as righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.

But when Simeon came into the temple and he saw the baby Jesus in the arms of his mother, he knew that the waiting was over. He wasn't just waiting for consolation. He was waiting for the Lord.

And then Anna, that very ancient and godly woman, she too comes in. She sees the baby Jesus there in the temple. And when she sees him, she thanks God and begins to speak about Jesus to everyone there who is waiting for the redemption of Israel.

[28 : 06] So she and Simeon were not the only waiters. There were others around them as well. Now Simeon and Anna predated Jesus.

You and I post-date his first coming, but we predate his return. He might come tomorrow. He might not come for a thousand years, but we're waiting.

And as surely as the morning comes for the weary night watchman, so surely will the Lord Jesus come to his waiting people. And there's something else in verse 5 that strengthens our assurance that we shall not wait in vain.

Look at verse 5. The psalmist says, in his word I hope. He has given us his word. The psalmist means my hope, my expectation is based upon his word, his word of promise.

Now friends, let me show you something. I have a piece of paper here in my hand and it contains a written promise. You see that piece of paper? Can you see it at the back? Do you know what it is?

[29 : 11] Here's the promise. You'll know what it is in a moment. The Royal Bank of Scotland, PLC, promised to pay the bearer, that's me, on demand, 20 pounds sterling at their head office here in Edinburgh by order of the board, 23rd of May, 2012.

And it's signed by somebody. Now, is that a reliable promise? If I were to take this piece of paper tomorrow to Edinburgh and present it, and myself, at the head office of the Royal Bank of Scotland, would I be given 20 pounds worth of gold?

I have to say, I'm slightly doubtful. Slightly doubtful. I might be given an old-fashioned look. Let's try another promise from a different piece of paper.

In my father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also.

Now, that is a better promise because it has a better origin, the best origin of all, the mouth of the Lord Jesus. In his word, I hope, I place the full weight of my hope and expectation in his word of promise.

[30 : 37] And this waiting is a lovely part of the Christian life because we wait for one whose word we can trust. That doesn't mean we just sit back. We're active as we wait.

We get on with the work that he's given us to do. But we are waiting. Our eyes are constantly on the horizon. We wait for his sure coming even more than watchmen wait for the sure coming of the morning.

We're now fourth and last. Let's look at verses 7 and 8 where we see our psalmist inviting others to set their hope also on the Lord. Oh Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love and with him is plentiful redemption and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Now those last two verses grow out of the first six. Our friend the psalmist is only able to invite others to hope in the Lord because of the journey that he himself has taken.

He starts in the most deep and difficult place. But from that overwhelming sense of his sin he cries in the right direction not for self-help but to the Lord for mercy.

[31 : 53] And having cried for mercy he comes to see with fear and trembling that there is forgiveness held out to the repentant sinner. He then grows bolder and more assured and he proclaims that the Lord's word of promise can be relied on.

And now with his fearfulness quelled his forgiveness assured and his trust made firm he turns to all of God's people and he says to them Israel do as I have done place your hope in the Lord as I am doing.

And in verse 7 you'll see he brings in two new phrases to describe to his friends how good the Lord is. He's already mentioned the Lord's mercy back in verse 2 and his forgiveness in verse 4 and his word of promise in verse 5 and now he says to everybody put your hope in the Lord because of his steadfast love and his plentiful redemption.

His steadfast love is his sure and certain love promised to Israel in the covenant where he commits himself to be Israel's God. I will be your God and you will be my people.

And his plentiful redemption that is his power to rescue them. Redemption really means rescue from danger or deliverance. And the classic Old Testament example of redemption is when the Lord rescued Israel at the Red Sea bringing them through those overwhelming waters making the waters stand up like a wall to left and right as he rescued them and saved them.

[33 : 25] But there's something here for all of us to notice particularly about redemption or rescue. First of all verse 7 it is plentiful and secondly from verse 8 it is rescue from all iniquity.

God's power to rescue his people is big enough it's plentiful enough to save us from the consequences of all our iniquities. Now this is very good news but it's not always believed.

sometimes a person might say yes I can believe that God can rescue me from all the sinful things that I've done except for one thing.

There is one thing in my past which is so deeply awful so deeply shameful that I feel it must be unforgivable. Can God rescue me even from that thing?

Many years ago I used to I met I met this man quite by accident but I used to visit an elderly man who lived on his own and he was lonely very lonely he was in his 90s his wife had died some years before they'd had a large family but the old man didn't see much of them so he welcomed visitors and as I got to know him better I discovered that when he was a young man he'd been a member of parliament and a junior government minister but he had done something wrong I never discovered what it was I didn't like to press him to tell me but he'd committed a crime of some kind and he was sent to prison for a year now that was the end of public life for him in those days you couldn't recover from that kind of lapse and when I used to go and see him he liked to sing hymns and he would say Edward can we sing some hymns together and he would pull his old hymn book down from a shelf and we'd open the hymn book up and start to sing and on one occasion we began to sing the hymn praise my soul the king of heaven to his feet thy tribute bring we got to the next line ransomed healed restored at which point he stopped singing and he looked up at me in distress and he said is it possible that I could be forgiven he was in his 90s that crime had been committed 60 years previously and it still deeply troubled him and look at the final words of this psalm with the Lord is plentiful redemption and he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities all of them that includes the worst we all start in the depths but we cry to the Lord for mercy this is the journey that all of us must take self-help is no help but we discover and it's a fearful discovery that with the Lord there is forgiveness and as we wait for his return we learn to put our hope in his word of promise and then we begin to turn to our friends and we invite them to share the same road with us because we want them too to discover the plentiful redemption that the Lord brings the redemption from all our iniquities let's pray together how we thank you our dear heavenly father that you hold out to us this sure promise of complete forgiveness as we turn to you and put our trust in the one whom you have sent for our salvation the Lord Jesus Christ indeed we place our hope and our trust in your word your word of promise we wait we look forward more than watchmen to the morning for your coming for the coming of the Lord Jesus and we pray that in the meantime you will give us joy and peace and help us to work for you to commit ourselves joyfully to the work of the gospel so that we like the psalmist will turn to our friends and say oh Israel put your hope in the Lord and we ask it in Jesus name

[37 : 48] Amen Amen