

FAITH AND REPENTANCE

by Doug Goins

A few years ago a young woman called the church and made an appointment with me. I'll never forget her first words to me after she was seated in my office. She said, "I'm twenty-three years old, and my life is ruined. I feel helpless. I have no idea what to do. I'm in total despair." And then she told me the heartbreaking story of her life. She had been promiscuous throughout high school. She had gotten married at eighteen but was divorced by her husband two years later because he had caught her in an affair with his best friend. She remarried a year later and now had a beautiful fifteen-month-old son, who played on the floor of my office that morning as we talked. She confessed to me that at that moment she was secretly carrying on affairs with two men. "My life is out of control," she said. "I don't know what to do. I've tried therapy and any number of other things." She was frightened to death that she would lose her husband, a good man who was totally committed to her and to their son. She sobbed out shame, guilt, humiliation, and finally an admission of what had brought her to my office: the realization that the only place she had left to turn to was God. But she didn't know how to get to God.

This young woman in her pain and despair personified our whole culture. Whether we spend our days in the home or in the work place, if we are listening, and I hope we are, all around us we can hear men and women who, like her, are suffering the consequences of desperate choices. Some of their choices were totally intentional and some they were driven to by forces they didn't even understand. Some of their desperation comes from the realization that the problem is greater than any specific individual act of sin. As humans we are not just occasional sinners; we are habitual in our rebellion against God. We have a disease called sin. It is frightening and can be overwhelming to acknowledge that your nature to the very core is sinful. Some people, like the young woman I talked with, feel as if they have messed up their lives up so completely that there is no hope for the future. They fear that because of the past record they have piled up, God won't have anything to do with them, that he won't hear their cry for help.

Psalm 130, another of the Songs of Ascent we are about to look at together, is a desperate cry for help. It is a psalm of repentance. This prayer offers hope for anybody who finds himself in a pit of despair. We will find that it describes the process of salvation as we read it.

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O LORD!
LORD, hear my voice!
Let thy ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities,
LORD, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared.

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 [abundant salvation].
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

The organization is very clear and simple. There are four stanzas or sections containing a four-step progression. We start in the first two verses in the pit of hopeless despair, weighed down by guilt and shame, a position resulting from the consequences of choices that we have made. In the second step, verses 3 and 4, we move to an experience of personally knowing God's forgiveness for sin.

Then in verses 5 and 6, there is an experience of hopefully resting and waiting, of peace and optimism that we have never known before. And then the final result of that wonderful process of spiritual transformation is in the last two verses: There is an overwhelming desire to tell everybody around us about the Savior God who has entered our life, forgiven us, and changed us. This is a process that all of us must go through if we want deliverance from the depths of guilty despair.

Out Of The Depths

Let's look at the first two verses. In the depths of our guilty despair we have to cry out to God as the only solution. The psalmist has done some very honest soul-searching, a realistic appraisal of his situation, and it's really grim. We have already talked about the kind of anguished distress that this call for help represents. He feels buried so deeply that he can't even see any way out.

A few weeks ago I saw on television the movie *The Abyss* about underwater exploration on the edge of a very deep canyon in the Pacific. At the climax of the movie the hero was out of control; he had lost the mobility to come back to the surface, and he was falling into the abyss. Nobody on top could help him, and he couldn't help himself. My heart was in my throat as I watched the terror from which he couldn't be saved.

The psalmist clearly establishes in these eight verses personal responsibility for being in the pit of despair. The problem, he says, is iniquities, a word that is repeated. First it is used in verse 3: "If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities...." Then it is used at the end of the psalm in verse 8: "...he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." The word is very precisely chosen by the psalmist. The literal definition of iniquity in the Old Testament is the conscious choice to twist or bend something physical; or in the moral sense, the choice to pervert or distort something that is true. It is used to mean much more than just the guilt we feel as a result of sin. The word also includes the idea of circumstantial consequences that we suffer because of the sinful choice. It is what Paul called the wages of sin, which is death.

The psalmist is confessing living death. He is admitting that in the depths of despair he is receiving the natural consequences for his own perverted choices. He can't blame anyone else. In our attempts to deal with a problem like that, we often try to figure out who else we can blame. I like Jimmy Buffett as a songwriter. You may remember his song *Margaritaville*, which is about irresponsibility and alcohol abuse. He confesses, "I'm wasted away again in Margaritaville...and it's my own damn fault." That's what the psalmist is admitting in this prayer: "It's me." And salvation has to start with an honest confession of guilt---no cover-ups, no rationalizations, and no blame-shifting.

Left to himself, the psalmist says, there is no hope, and this hopelessness even comes through in the way the first two verses are crafted. There is a crescendo of urgency that builds up as he calls out to God as his only hope of salvation. First he says, "...I cry...." Immediately he follows that with, "...Hear my voice!" Then finally he says, "Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!" There is a building sense of near hysteria in the words of the psalmist. He says, "Lord, I must have your attention because of the desperation of my circumstances!" The phrase "the voice of my supplications" suggests the basis on which he is making the request. The Hebrew word supplications comes from the same root as the word gift or grace. He is saying to the Lord, "My appeal to you is based solely on your graciousness." He doesn't claim any right to ask for help other than God's gracious, receptive nature.

You see, often when we find our lives out of control in a mess that we can't clean up, we come to God to try to somehow bribe him, coerce him, or manipulate him. We're often tempted to bargain when we're in trouble: "Lord, if you will just get me through this tax audit, I will never cheat again." Or, "Lord, if I can sober up without getting stopped by the police, I will never get drunk again."

Sometimes we're tempted to try to impress God with our past record: "This is an aberration, Lord; this doesn't normally happen to me. I've never been unfaithful to my spouse; this is the first time I've done it. Please get me out of this mess." But the psalmist doesn't try any of those approaches. He prays, "Lord, hear the voice of my supplications; my salvation depends completely on your free grace."

God's Amazing Forgiveness

Now we move to the second step in verses 3 and 4: From the depths of our guilty despair we cry out to a God who offers the assurance of forgiveness.

"If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities,
LORD, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared."

Verse 3 tells us very clearly that we don't have to worry at all that we may come under the scrutiny of some record-keeping God when we approach our Lord. Sometimes we're reluctant to cry out to God because we're afraid that he will reject us because we have failed him so many times, repeatedly disappointing him. We know our sins aren't accidents---they have been high-handed rebellion against God---and we feel like hypocrites coming one more time to say, "Lord, please save me, help me." We almost have a fear that we'll walk into the presence of this record-keeping God, and with arms crossed and toe tapping he'll say, "So it's you again! Well, let's get your ledger out...My, that's a disturbingly creative list of iniquities that you've piled up! What do you want me to do about it?"

But the psalmist in his prayer admits that no one could stand before that kind of God; nobody could endure that kind of scrutiny or examination. We wouldn't even bother to show up before a God like that. No, verse 4 says that we can count on the love of a forgiving Father. That's who waits for us. Forgiveness is a radical word in the Old Testament. This word is never used to describe how we human beings forgive each other; only how God forgives us. What we consider forgiving one another is categorically different than the forgiveness that God offers people who turn to him in repentance. His forgiveness is his response to a heart that is broken, to a person who is honestly sorry for their sin. God's forgiveness is complete and unconditional. It is also undeserved; the word means unmerited pardon. Isaiah 55:6-9 uses the same word:

"Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous [evil] man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon [forgive].

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so my ways are higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."

God's forgiveness is so amazing that we can't even think of forgiveness and pardon in this way; we are too limited as human beings. We can't understand how complete and thorough God's forgiveness or unmerited pardon of our sin is. No prior sinful lifestyle can disqualify us from this gift. No matter how much the sinful failure has been repeated, the only condition of receiving this gift of grace is that we be honestly broken over consequences, genuinely sorry for the sin, and really wanting God to transform our life of rebellion and self-will into a life that is submissive to him and controlled by him.

That morning a few years ago the young woman who had sobbed out her guilt and hopelessness experienced God's loving forgiveness. I had the joy of praying with her as she was born again, as she turned her life of despair over to this loving, forgiving Father. She didn't find a God who rubbed her nose in the history that she had created for herself. She found a gracious, accepting, forgiving heavenly Father.

Hope For the Future

That brings us to the next step in the process. Out of a hopeless past we cry out to a God who offers incredible hope for the future. Look at 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."

It is very difficult to wait and not do anything after something like that young woman's past. It is difficult to be hopeful when we have known very little but hopelessness in the past. Part of the despair that I heard in her voice---even after we had prayed together, and she had affirmed that she knew she was a new creature in Christ and that she had experienced forgiveness for sin---was this feeling that she had ruined so much of her life, hurt so many people, and been so destructive that there just wasn't a possibility of her rebuilding her life. It was a hopelessness that said, "My life is too fractured. If there is any glimmer for restoring spiritual life and health, the work is too hard; there is too much to undo." The burden of responsibility that she felt to rebuild her life was too overwhelming for her. She asked, "What if my husband won't forgive me? What if he divorces me? What if he takes my baby?"---all the questions that were really understandable. You see, she experienced God's loving forgiveness, but then immediately she felt the need to try to fix everything, in a sense to create her own new future that she had just entered into, to run around and repair the broken relationships and rebuild the things she had destroyed.

But the conviction of the psalmist, if you look at verses 4-6 carefully, is that this sort of activity could be presumptuous, that somehow waiting on God is better in the long run. Most of us probably choke on an idea like that. We think of words like restitution and repair partly because we're products of a culture that is very much committed to activism, self-help, self-rehabilitation, self-vindication, and self-effort. Words like wait sound very strange to us. But the psalmist is not advocating passivity or irresponsibility. Twice he says in verses 5 and 6 that he waits and that somehow the God who offers hope honors that waiting. He waits because he knows there is hope.

Both these words, wait and hope, are connected to the image of a watchman in verse 6, which is repeated, emphasizing its importance. This connection gives insight to anybody who is anxious to build a new life in Christ and is tempted to immediate activity on God's behalf---the "new creation" is wondering, "Well, what is it I'm supposed to do now?" But in these three verses the answer is more exactly that there is something for us to be, not to do. We must be watchmen.

One of my favorite Christian authors is Eugene Peterson. He has written a wonderful description of his experience during his seminary years as a night watchman at a building in New York City:

A watchman is an important person, but he doesn't do very much. A massive turning of the earth, the immense energies released by the sun, all that goes on apart from him. He does nothing to influence or control such things. He is a watchman. He knows the dawn is coming. There are no doubts concerning that. Meanwhile, he is alert to dangers. He comforts restless children or animals until it is time to work or play again in the light of day.

I was once a watchman. I worked from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. at a building in New York City. My work as a night watchman was combined with that of an elevator operator, but the elevator work petered out about midnight. After that, I sat and read, dozed, or studied. There were assorted night people in the neighborhood who would stop in through the night hours

and visit with me; strange, bizarre people with wonderful stories. I will never know how much of what I heard from them was fact and how much fiction: a failed millionaire obsessed with communist plots responsible for his demise, a South American adventurer now too old to tramp the remote jungles and mountains, a couple of streetwalkers who on slow nights would sit and talk about God and the worth of their souls.

I did that for an entire year. I stayed awake, I studied, I learned, I visited and gossiped, and I waited for the dawn. Dawn always came. The people who employed me thought it was worth several dollars an hour for me to wait through the night and watch for the morning, but I never did anything, never constructed anything, never made anything happen. I waited and I hoped. If I had not known that there were others in charge of the building I might not have been content to just be a watchman and collect my pay. If I were not confident that the building had an owner who cared about it, if I didn't know that there was a building engineer who kept it in good order and repair, if I did not know that there were hundreds of people in the building who were going about their work every day quite capably, if I had not known these things, I might not have been so relaxed in making idle gossip with women of the night and old men of storied pasts.

The psalmist is convinced that the Savior God of the universe is totally in charge of his life and his future. The newly forgiven Christian's waiting and hoping is based on the conviction that God is actively involved in the continuing process of redemption, that he really is vigorously at work rebuilding their life. This is a beautiful picture of waiting for the Lord and his work to be expressed in our lives, certain that God will be cleaning up the mess we have made of things.

"The Lord," and "his word" were totally focused in Jesus, the living Word, who came to earth, lived among us, and told the truth. He became the message, and on Good Friday he was crucified; his life was poured out. After a long night of darkness and anguish, the angels, the watchmen, announced on Easter morning, "He is risen! Your sins are forgiven. You have the hope that eternal life is to be created in you right now." Those are the implications of resurrection. God is holy, and he will make us holy. He is faithful, and we know he is going to make us faithful. There is hope out of despair, and that hope is not of our own making. God will complete our salvation by his word.

Sharing God's Love

That brings us to the fourth and final stage in the process of healing. We become a witness to others, speaking a message of hope to them. The last two verses, 7-8, are not a prayer anymore, you'll notice. The psalmist shifts his focus from God and looks at all those gathered around him. And he calls out to them:

"O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plenteous [abundant] redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities."

Now we cry out to others on behalf of the God who is a loving Redeemer. The psalmist is overwhelmed at the grace of God at work in his own life, and he can't keep quiet about it; he has to tell other people about the hope he has been given because he wants them to experience it, too. Redemption, healing, and restoration are not really complete in our lives until we can minister to other people. If we are not eager to share this glorious hope that has transformed us with others around us, I wonder whether we have fully understood the depths and the implications of our own forgiveness.

There was a young woman converted in our college ministry several years ago, and her conversion is an amazing story. BJ and Shirley Fregly were at Chili's talking about John 3, which BJ was going to teach, so he was practicing on Shirley. This young woman eavesdropped and asked whether she could join their

conversation. Her name was Shirley Carmichael, and through that introduction, they led her to faith in Christ. She had been seriously involved in Mormonism. Three weeks later, as a baby in Christ who was very excited about this new life, she was at the De Anza College bookstore and noticed a young man reading a book on Mormonism. She went over and asked him, "Why are you reading that?" For five hours she talked with this young man about what he was really looking for in terms of spiritual reality. She was so overwhelmed by the forgiving nature of God that she had to tell people that she ran into about what God had done!

The message that the psalmist proclaims in verses 7 and 8 and that we share has three points. First of all is the issue of steadfast or loyal love, the Hebrew word *hesed*. This is love that is based on commitment, an oath that God has sworn. God initiated the relationship, and his love toward us is tenacious and stubborn. Our hope for the future is not based on our commitment to God but on his loyal, committed love to us. You may have talked with people who were considering the Christian faith but said, "You know, I can't be a Christian because I'm not any good at keeping commitments. I'll disappoint God; I won't be able to follow through." But the testimony of the psalmist is that our hope is based on the God who initiates covenant love. God will not break his word. So we're assured that for the rest of our lives we will experience a steady overflow of that *hesed* love.

The second half of verse 7 suggests that we hope in a God who has already provided salvation: "...with him is plenteous redemption." God not only initiated this relationship and stirred up hope in us for the future by promising loving faithfulness, but he has actualized that hope in redemption, another great theological word in the Old Testament. This responds to the concern of the person who says, "Well, God may promise things, and he may even initiate a relationship, but how do I know that he is dependable to follow through, that he will keep his word?" Well, we know because of redemption. The word means the transference of ownership from one person to another after payment of a purchase price. And throughout the whole Bible, it is always God who pays the price for our redemption. Ultimately Christ paid the price in his blood shed for us on the cross. He redeemed us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into this new kingdom and this new family or community. So how do we know that God is committed to giving us hope? He has already paid the bill.

Four years ago when my son Trevor began the university, I made a promise to him. Because I'm his father and I love him, I promised to send him a check every month to help pay for his university education for four straight years. My promise was fulfilled. I wrote and sent a tuition check every month. And that's what God did for us at the cross. It was completed, fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He paid the price for our sin.

These two verses also tell us that we hope in a God who provides abundant salvation that is going to go on as long as we live.

"And he will [future tense] redeem Israel
from all his iniquities."

Redemption is much more than just forgiveness, just dealing with our past and present sins. This addresses the concern the young woman expressed in my office: "I've gone too far, God can't redeem me, my sins are too terrible." Because of this transfer of ownership of our life to God, he is committed to eventually eradicating the disease of sin, that original sin that dwells within us, from our lives. That is the lifelong process of sanctification. Although the disease of sin is deep, powerful, and controlling; the redemptive work of Jesus Christ will continue in the healing, restoring, rebuilding process in our lives. His redemption is much more powerful, much more comprehensive than even our own destructive sinful nature. We have nothing to be afraid of in the future. The apostle Paul expressed this in Ephesians 5, talking about Jesus' commitment to work in us to finish our sanctification. We're going to be presented to his heavenly Father, Paul says, "...in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that [we] might be wholly without blemish."

Now I would like to take you through the same process that I had the joy of sharing with that young woman a few years ago as she turned her life of despair over to the Savior God of the universe through faith in Jesus Christ. You may never have called out to God to be your Savior. You may have been sitting on the fence for a long time. You may have drifted around the perimeter of a solid, Biblical church like PBC. What a great opportunity this is for you to work through this process of salvation with your Savior God!

Are you in the depths? Can you identify with where this psalm began? Has your sinful life finally caught up with you? Can you admit to yourself that you're enslaved by any number of things---jealousy, lust, self-pity, arrogance, or dishonesty? Perhaps there is some kind of chemical dependence in your life. Maybe you're addicted to material possessions. Maybe you're lazy or irresponsible. Maybe you're driven by ambition. You have to start where the psalmist did: Admit that your situation is grim, and don't blur your vision of reality with some strategy of positive thinking. Right now in the privacy of your own thoughts, you can cry out to God to save you. Let him hear your anguish. Confess your sin and ask him for forgiveness. He is your only hope.

Then ask God for an assurance of his complete and total forgiveness of your sins, knowing that he is not a scorekeeper but a forgiving heavenly Father. Ask him to give you the patience to wait in hope for his renewal of your future. Ask him to overwhelm you with the enormity of his redemption, his eternal commitment to love you and change you into what you really want to be anyway, one who has been saved from the disease and from the penalty of sin. Thank him for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross to save you. Tell Jesus you want him to live inside you, filling you with his very life, ruling your thoughts and your actions. Tell him of your honest desire to make him the Lord of your life.

If you are working through this process, tell somebody about it, perhaps somebody who brought you to church with them or a pastor or some other leader. We would love to talk with you and pray with you. Let somebody know about this supernatural process of transformation that God is working in your life!

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