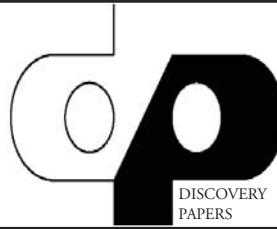


HOPE IN THE LORD

SERIES: ASCEND



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Psalm 130 & 131
9th Message
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If you're a follower of Jesus, do you ever wish you had more passion for the gospel? Do other interests crowd out the interest that you think should be more central? Psalm 130 can help us orient ourselves around the gospel. Also, do you ever feel restless because you don't seem to be living up to your potential? The next psalm in the Scriptures, Psalm 131, can help us with this apparent shortcoming.

The two psalms are linked by a line that appears in each: "O Israel, put your hope in the LORD." Although both psalms deal with different problems, they each offer the same solution. What, specifically, does it mean to hope in the Lord if our passion for the gospel is lacking? What, specifically, does it mean to hope in the Lord if we're restless because we're not living up to our potential?

Out of the depths

Psalm 130:1-4:

A song of ascents

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;
²O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.
³If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
⁴But with you there is forgiveness;
therefore you are feared.

Metaphorically speaking, the psalmist cries to the Lord from "the depths" of the sea, speaking as if he's drowning. What's his predicament, and what does he want from the Lord? He wants mercy, for he's experiencing guilt feelings and other consequences that can proceed from sin. He's drowning in sin, and he cannot rescue himself. Therefore, he cries out for the Lord to rescue him.

The psalmist falls back on what he believes about the Lord. Yes, the psalmist is drowning in sin, but he deduces that the Lord does not keep a record of sins, because if he did so, no person, even the most saintly, would be able to stand in his presence. If the Lord kept a record of sins, he would have no worshipers. Indeed, the Lord, in his covenant with his people, instructed them to make sacrifices precisely so that they would know that he forgives

sins. The psalmist knows that the Lord forgives; therefore, forgiven sinners may enjoy the presence of the Lord.

The psalmist recognizes an intriguing consequence for forgiveness: fear. What proceeds from the forgiveness of the Lord is fear of the Lord. One might think that God would be feared not if he were forgiving but if he were unforgiving. We might be prone to fear a God who only punishes sinners and never forgives them. And wouldn't we be disinclined to sin if we knew that God will not forgive us if we do sin? Clearly, the Hebrew word translated "fear" doesn't translate well. To fear the Lord is not to be afraid of him but to know him, to be in awe of him, and to be in awe that you know him.

The psalmist, having cried to the Lord for mercy, waits for an answer.

Like watchmen for the morning

Psalm 130:5-8:

⁵I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
⁶My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning
⁷O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.
⁸He himself will redeem Israel from all
their sins.

The psalmist doesn't simply wait for the Lord, his "soul" waits for the Lord. Moreover, he twice notes that his soul waits for the Lord. He is waiting while putting his hope in the word of the Lord. What word might that be? Inasmuch as the psalmist has cried out to the Lord for mercy and has observed, based on the Scriptures, that "there is forgiveness" with the Lord, the word of the Lord that the psalmist hopes in is God's promise to forgive sins. However, if there is, in fact, forgiveness with the Lord, doesn't the psalmist already have it? What is he waiting for? He must be waiting not for forgiveness per se but for some sort of experience of forgiveness.

The psalmist compares his vigil to that of city watchmen

tasked with keeping an eye out for intruders at night. Watchmen wait for the morning because when morning comes, they know that danger has passed and the city is safe. The psalmist waits for the experience of forgiveness like watchmen wait for the morning. Twice the psalmist noted that he waits for the Lord; now twice he notes that he waits like watchmen for the morning. This is an intense vigil. Although the night can seem endless, the coming of morning is certain. With the Lord there is forgiveness; therefore, the psalmist expects to experience forgiveness.

At the end, the psalmist, like many of the other psalmists at the end of their compositions, sees his experience as relating to Israel as a whole. The psalmist, who hopes in the Lord, urges all Israel to hope in the Lord. Earlier, he found reason to hope because there is forgiveness with the Lord. Now, he urges Israel to hope in the Lord because there is “unfailing love” and “full redemption” with the Lord.

The word translated “unfailing love” (*hesed*) is connected with the Lord’s covenant, or partnership, with his people. His promise to forgive comes from his unfailing love, his covenantal love, his commitment to his people. Redemption implies action. Put it all together, and it looks like this: the Lord, in his unfailing love, acts on that unfailing love, in redemption, to forgive his people. In this case, especially inasmuch as there is full, or unlimited, redemption, Israel can expect not simply to be forgiven but to experience forgiveness—if it, like the psalmist, hopes in the Lord. Indeed, the psalmist promises that the Lord, with whom there is limitless redemption, will redeem Israel from all its sins, regardless of their number or severity.

Pray for a deeper understanding of sin

John Wesley, who along with his brother Charles Wesley and George Whitfield, spearheaded the so-called Evangelical Awakening on the British Isles in the 18th century, was drowning in guilt as he cried out to God for mercy. In fact, he felt that his life was slipping away. But it wasn’t as if he was guilty of what we might call grievous sins; no, he felt as if he was dying because he was not able to live up to God’s holy standards:

I purposed to keep His whole law, both inwardly and outwardly. By this would I be accepted by Him, and therefore saved. . . . Accordingly, in all, I aimed at the image of God by doing His will, not my own. Yet after continuing some years in this way, I found myself near death. All my holiness brought me no comfort or assurance of acceptance with God. I was very surprised at this.” Wesley felt that he was “in imminent danger of death, which made me very uneasy. I was strongly convicted that the cause of my uneasiness was unbelief and that gaining a true, living faith was the one thing I needed.”¹

On the afternoon of May 24, 1738, John Wesley, at the age of thirty-four, attended a meeting at which Psalm 130 was sung. That evening, it seems, the Lord answered his cry for mercy:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”²

We modern believers might want to tell John Wesley, “Yo, Johnny, lighten up! Don’t you know God forgives you?” While John Wesley, Charles Wesley, and George Whitfield were caught up in the Evangelical Awakening in the British Isles, across the ocean, in the colonies, the so-called Great Awakening was underway, spearheaded by Jonathan Edwards and his sermon on July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Connecticut, titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he told sinners that God was holding them over the pit of hell “much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire.”³ Yo, Johnny, lighten up! On the one hand, perhaps we have a better understanding about what the Scriptures teach about God’s love. On the other hand, perhaps Wesley and Edwards had a better understanding about what the Scriptures teach about sin.

It’s hard to imagine someone today being wracked with guilt before God and teetering on the edge of death without having committed any grievous sin. It’s also hard to imagine a revival sweeping the land the way it swept the British Isles in Wesley’s day or the colonies in Edwards’ day. Could it be that Wesley and Edwards’ appreciation for the gravity of sin played a part in the revivals that they helped to spread? Certainly, passion for the gospel played a part in both revivals, and in Wesley’s case, his passion came not from being forgiven little but for being forgiven much, even though we might look on his life and say he didn’t need to be forgiven much.

There was a woman, a so-called “sinner,” who knew that she was forgiven much and therefore barged into the house where Jesus was dining, bathed his feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them with her lips, and anointed them with perfume. The host, Simon, a Pharisee, was aghast. Jesus told him, “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little” (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus is not saying that the woman’s love earned forgiveness; he’s saying that her love was a result of forgiveness. Simon, despite his outwardly righteous appearance, also needed

to be forgiven much, but because he didn't recognize it, he loved not much but little. By and large, we are more comfortable today with language around addiction than we are with language around sin. Unlike "sin," "addiction" doesn't necessarily imply offense against God.

Might, therefore, our relative indifference to the gospel, in comparison to Wesley's passion, have something to do with our relative indifference to sin? Surveys routinely report that most Americans believe that there is a God but that they also believe, contrary to Psalm 130, that he is essentially a scorekeeper and that he will, contrary to Psalm 130, give them a passing grade. Might we benefit from recovering something of Wesley's sense of the gravity of sin? Might we then find passion for the gospel that we heretofore haven't known? And might we, as a result, see men and women, boys and girls, turning to Christ in larger numbers in our day?

Perhaps our desperate need is not, first of all, to experience forgiveness but to experience the gravity of sin. As I reflected on Psalm 130, I realized, that when I confess my sins to God, I am immediately drawn to how I might be able to improve instead of how God forgives me. That tells me that I believe that the problem isn't that bad, that I believe not that I've been forgiven much but that I've been forgiven little. If you don't find yourself crying out to experience the forgiveness of God very often, you might instead cry out that God might grant you a deeper understanding of sin—and then wait for the Lord like watchmen for the morning. Hope in the Lord: Pray for a deeper understanding of sin.

Perhaps we don't experience so much what the composer of Psalm 130 experienced. More often, we experience what David, the composer of Psalm 131, experienced.

Great matters

Psalm 131:1:

A song of ascents. Of David

**¹My heart is not proud, O LORD,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.**

The words translated "proud" and "haughty" would be literally translated "high." Literally, David says his heart is not high and his eyes are not high. The NIV rightly translates the words "proud" and "haughty," but in that David is saying that neither his heart nor his eyes are high, he's saying first that he doesn't see himself high, like God, and second that he doesn't see himself as being above anyone else. He sees himself, in this case, as having

a correct assessment of himself—as being below God and equal to others. Therefore, he doesn't see himself in competition with God or with anyone else. In other words, he's humble—at this moment, anyway.

As such, David does not concern himself with "great matters" or "things too wonderful" for him. Isn't he the king of Israel, or at least the king in waiting, and aren't kings high, or exalted, men who sit on thrones and concern themselves with great matters and wonderful things? Well, yes, of course. David is simply acknowledging his proper place, as a king not above the Lord or equal to the Lord but below the Lord. In Revelation 15:3, the victorious people of God sing, "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God almighty." David doesn't compete with the greatness of the Lord. As king, he does not take the place of the Lord; on the contrary, he serves the Lord.

On the other hand, evil beasts in the visions of the prophet Daniel and the apostle John boast of their greatness (Daniel 7:8, 8:11; Revelation 13:5). Many kings and leaders, throughout the ages and down to this day, boast of their greatness over against, or to the exclusion of, the greatness of God. Like the king of Tyre, they proclaim, in so many words, "I am a god" (Ezekiel 28:2). In the United States, you can't get elected unless you boast of your greatness and of the great things you will do once in office.

How has David arrived at his current disposition toward greatness?

Like a weaned child

Psalm 131:2-3:

**²But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.**

**³O Israel, put your hope in the LORD
both now and forevermore.**

How has David arrived at his current disposition toward greatness? He has "stilled and quieted" his soul. This implies, of course, that his soul needed to be stilled; it needed to be quieted. Before he stilled and quieted his soul, his heart was inclined toward pride, his eyes toward haughtiness. He was prone to concern himself with great matters and things too wonderful for him—the matters and things of God. His soul was restless, for however great he became, he would never be great enough—certainly not greater than God. Not only did he recognize that his soul was restless, he also did something about it: he stilled and quieted his soul.

Note the imagery that David employs. He sees himself

not as a power-hungry king but as a content child. His soul within him is now like “a weaned child with its mother.” His soul has been weaned from fretting about great matters or things too wonderful for him. He no longer feels the need to compete with others or with God. Instead, having been weaned from these things, he is content simply to be with the Lord, like a child who has been weaned is content to be with his mother.

How did David still and quiet his soul? Inasmuch as he urges Israel to hope in the Lord, he stilled and quieted his soul by hoping in the Lord. Instead of feeding on the milk of greatness, so to speak, he has fed on the meat of hope so that he no longer needs the milk of greatness. The milk of greatness: that’s kids’ stuff. The meat of hope in the Lord: that’s a feast fit for a king.

Lay down the burden of greatness

Many of us want to compete with others and—unwittingly, perhaps—with God to establish our sense of self. We want to rise to heights beyond the place where we need God. We aspire to greatness, and as a result, like David, we’re restless, for no matter how great we become, we will never be great enough. The modern sense of guilt, then, is not so much guilt before God as it is guilt that we’re not living up to our potential.

We moderns are not so much like John Wesley, tormented with guilt before God, as we are like writer Ann Voskamp, who at one point described her life this way:

*Yesterday morning, the morning before, all these mornings, I wake to the discontent of life in my skin. I wake to self-hatred. To the wrestle to get it all done, the relentless anxiety that I am failing. Always, the failing. I yell at children, fester with bitterness, forget doctor appointments, lose library books, live selfishly, skip prayer, complain, go to bed too late, neglect cleaning the toilets. I live tired. Afraid. Anxious. Weary. Years, I feel it in the veins, the pulsing of ruptured hopes. Would I ever be enough, find enough, do enough?*⁴

What should we do? It’s not as if we can simply command our hearts to stop being proud or our eyes to stop being haughty. We can’t simply turn off the pride and haughty switches. Following David, we should “still and quiet” our souls. To still and quiet our souls, we need to separate ourselves periodically from everything that is busy and loud. David did this quite regularly; otherwise, how could he have written so many psalms? What do we do when we separate ourselves? We hope. That’s what we do: we hope. We hope not for greatness, not that we might live up to our potential, for that kind of hope makes us

restless. No, we hope in the Lord. We hope in the Lord and we lay down the burden of greatness.

Does laying down the burden of greatness mean we then stop striving to do great work? Of course not! No, it means we stop striving to do great work for the purpose of establishing our sense of self, for as Dallas Willard observes, “Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.”⁵ Effort, then, quite naturally proceeds from grace. Remember the woman in Luke 7: because she was forgiven much, she loved much. She did something—something quite extraordinary.

Confession: I aspire to greatness. Against my will, seemingly, in my mind I compete with others and even with God for my sense of self. I fear that I am not living up to my potential. I’m restless. I wonder, like Ann Voskamp, will I ever be enough, find enough, do enough? Last year, I attended a two-day contemplative retreat. One of the reflection questions given to us contained these words: “God made you good.” The leader was trying to be encouraging, but at that moment, I didn’t find his words to be thus. “Yes, God made me good,” I thought. “But he didn’t make me great.” What might I be able to accomplish with greater gifts? Or, really, what I’m asking is: Wouldn’t my sense of self be greatly improved if God had made me not good but great? I prayed, “Okay, Lord, here’s what I’m thinking. What do you think?”

At the end of the retreat, before we came to the Lord’s Table, the leaders afforded us the opportunity to pick up a stone, representing a burden, and set it next to the bread and the cup. I picked up a stone, and it felt like greatness. As I came forward to partake of the meal, I released the stone. What does God think? I surmised that he wanted me to lay down the burden of greatness and let him be great. For the moment, anyway, after two days of prayer and reflection, I hoped in the Lord and laid down the burden of greatness. But it’s not as if the burden is gone for good, so I need to continue to separate myself from busyness and loudness to hope in the Lord.

To learn about ways to separate yourself from busyness and loudness, consider attending the PBC fall retreat to listen to our speaker, John Hanneman, a pastor at PBC Cupertino, who has been transformed by approaches that have connected him to God in deeper ways.

Hope in the Lord

Do you ever wish you had more passion for the gospel? Hope in the Lord: Pray for a deeper understanding of sin. Do you ever feel restless because you don’t seem to be living up to your potential? Hope in the Lord: Lay down the burden of greatness.

NOTES

¹George Weakley Jr., editor, *The Nature of Revival* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1987), 25-27.

²Weakley, 29-30.

³John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, editors, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 88.

⁴Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 26-27.

⁵Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006).