

Psalm 130, “Hope for Those in Deep Guilt”

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Introduction

In the Bible, **worship music begins with the temple** (1000 years before Jesus).

David wrote half the songbook and reorganized the Levites into choirs—all by divine inspiration.

Worship music begins for us when we too are a temple of God.

But what would Jesus find if He were to suddenly visit our temple?

Would it find it full of money-making and tip over the tables?

Would it find it filled with bad music and drive the musicians out?

Would He find space to teach and care for the needs of others?

In church history, **worship music makes a fresh beginning in the Reformation** (500 years ago).

In their own language, Christians received the gospel, the Bible, and congregational singing.

Luther starts this movement with a song based on *this psalm*:

“Aus tiefer Not schrei’ ich zu dir” (Out of Deep Need I Cry to You)

He writes over forty hymns and composes the music for about half of them.

For the next two hundred years, Lutheran pastors write thousands of hymns for their people.

The Reformed churches sing psalms—put to rhyme and common rhythms.

Isaac Watts introduces hymns *in imitation of the psalms of David*.

A great model! Not slavishly bound to sing psalms only, but creatively bound to them as our standard.

Do our songs in church reflect the variety, the depths, and the beauty of the psalms of David?

Psalm 130 appears to be a psalm written in imitation of a psalm of David.

Ps. 130 has some words found in books written after the Exile (500 years after David, 500 years before Jesus).

Ps. 130 has an echo of Psalm 131, written by David (compare Ps. 130:7 with Ps. 131:3).

Both psalms are part of “The Song of the Steps” (Pss. 120-134)—one song (a medley) of fifteen linked songs.

Songwriters perhaps started with four of David’s psalms and one of Solomon’s.

They wrote ten more psalms of the same style to create an overall message.

As a result, “The Song of the Steps” approximately matches Ps. 119 in length,

and complements it as Psalm 2 does Psalm 1—as the Gospel complements and fulfills the Law.

In fact, Psalm 130 itself is so rich in gospel themes, Luther once called it “Pauline” (like Paul’s letters).

Let’s read the psalm and then seek the Lord’s favor for our understanding.

*How many of you enjoy working through **the night**?*

You know the feeling of longing for the sunrise—about 3 a.m., knowing it will come, but it comes so slow!

Or caring for a child through the night—the cough is worse at night, and fears play more on our mind at night.

Longing for the sunrise, knowing it will come, but it seems so slow!

This sunrise is the central comparison (“conceit”) in this poem—please remember it.

Similar to the long night in *time*, the psalm begins with a picture of long *space*: “**depths**” (v. 1).

We all know that the Christian life has mountaintops and valleys, but this word is even deeper than valleys.

Used five times in the OT—all other uses refer to *water depths*, like drowning in a flood or sinking in the sea.

Absolute need—not of needing *help*, but needing to be *saved*—absolute helplessness, imminent danger.

But to make matters worse, the danger is self-inflicted.

According to the rest of the psalm, the floods either represent his sins or the results of his sins or both.

His choices have caught up with him—the lies to cover things up, the relationships broken, the lives lost.

The word “iniquities” (vv. 3, 8) refers to twisted behavior, crooked ways, not straight-dealing.

He has bent the rules, twisted the facts, and misused—even abused—God’s good gifts and is suffering.

Surrounded, caught, with no escape—in desperation he cries out for rescue.

And he has the audacity to call out to the very God whom he has offended!

Not only to call out, but to hope in God and to call on us to hope—and even to write a song about it!

How can this man have hope in God, when God is the very one whom He was offended?

What is the basis of hope for those caught in deep guilt?

For those of us who have lived long enough to reap what we have sown, this scene is **not hard to imagine**:
At first, we feel like our choices are under our control and we can fix any damages they may cause.
But after a while, the choices begin to feel forces and the circumstances begin to catch up to us.
We are overwhelmed by the habits we have, the addictions, the broken relationships, even the loss of life.
Unable to repent, unable to be reconciled—the marriage is lost, people are gone, health is broken.
Surrounded by the deep guilt of our choices and their consequences, we despair of life!
Again, I ask, *what is the basis of hope for those in deep guilt?*
That is the question this psalm presents and answers.

To answer this question, please consider the **structure** of the psalm:

Illus. Each psalm has a floorplan—and like houses, some are orderly and some appear haphazard.
This psalm appears to have a very orderly floorplan (four pairs of verses), but really there are only three rooms:
vv. 2 and 6 have elongated lines → the rooms are vv. 1-2, vv. 3-6, and vv. 7-8

Simple **Outline** of the Psalm:

vv. 1-2 – The Introduction: tells us what type of psalm it is
Technical term: “supplication” (request for grace), i.e. “I need a big favor from you. I’m in deep trouble.”
vv. 3-6 – The Message: tells us what is true about God and our relationship with Him
vv. 7-8 – The Conclusion: tells us what to do, based on the message

Therefore, vv. 3-6 are the heart of this psalm and where we will seek the answer to our question:

Problem (vv. 3-4): **Forgiveness is found in God alone.**

Solution (vv. 5-6): **Forgiveness is made certain by redemption.**

The Problem: Forgiveness is found in God alone (vv. 3-4).

Ironically, this fact—that forgiveness is found in God alone—at first seems like good news, not a problem.
However, listen to the psalmist present a “what if” argument:

“If you, O LORD, should keep iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (v. 3)

*What if God should use His **infinite presence** and **infinite knowledge** to keep record of our every fault?*

“The eye of the LORD is in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Pr. 15:3).

“Before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (Ps. 139:4).

Yes, “the inward mind and heart of a man are deep,” but “God shoots His arrow at them” (Ps. 64:6-7).

And not just keep record, but “be on the watch for” (Leupold) and “guard” and “watch over”?

If God should hold tight to all our guilty acts, then *who could stand?*

In this song, it means to stand in His city (Ps. 122:2), to stand in His house (Ps. 134:1).

Even to stand in the day of judgment—to stand in the assembly of the righteous and not perish (Ps. 1:5-6).

Who could stand?!

Now this certainly a statement of **universal guilt** (cf. Rom. 3:23).

Even those who would deny the seriousness of this situation affirm its fact: “Well, no one’s perfect.”

And yet there are many who either ignore this fact or deny that God is there or if He is, that He matters.

Illus. Such individuals remind me of a **defiant child** who looks and says, “I’m not afraid of you.”

And if I’m angered by this look and attitude as an adult, how much more is God??

Illus. For those of us who have grown up in the **cold country**, we have a ready-made feel of this state?

Last winter, it was 29 below Celsius air temperature—frostbite in a minute or so.

Will anyone defy God then and say, “I’m not afraid of You”?

When the Lord gives snow like wool and scatters frost like ashes and hurls crystals of ice:

“Who can stand before His cold?” (Ps. 147:17).

And if men cannot stand before His cold, what will they do when heaven and earth flee away?

We know what they will do:

When the sky is rolled up like a scroll and heaven and earth have no place to hide,

both the great and the small will call on the rocks to hide them...

“...from the face of the Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb,
for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev. 6:16-17).

“You, even You, are to be feared;

and who may stand in Your presence when once You are angry?” (Ps. 76:7; cf. Mal. 3:2).

So, what if God keeps our faults and does not let them go?
What hope does the sinner have? How can he possibly stand?

At this point most of our **translations** in English relieve the tension:

e.g. “But with You there is forgiveness, that You may be feared” (ESV).

Oh good! There is *forgiveness* with God. I will be safe!

And surely the *is* good news—that God would forgive.

The Puritan John Owen despaired in perpetual sin and was delivered by this thought.

Challenge: *But how does that explain the purpose clause, “that You may be feared”?*

Certainly there is a reverence that comes with the experience of forgiveness (cf. Luke 7).

Certainly there is a mercy in God that makes Him unique and holy (Hosea 11; e.g. 2 Samuel 24).

So there are ways of explaining this clause, but it remains an awkward and surprising purpose.

In response, the statement “there is forgiveness with You” is truly a truth, but it is also a **truth balloon**.

It is true, but it is not the main point of this text.

The emphasis is not on there is *forgiveness* with God, but on there is forgiveness with *God*—and *God alone*.

In Hebrew, verse four begins not with “but” (as if it were a contrast with v. 3), but “for” (giving a reason for v. 3).

The logic is: If *You*, O Lord, keep our faults, we’re doomed, because *You alone* have forgiveness.

In other words, if *God* is determined not to forgive me, then I’m doomed, because no one else can help!

Three things confirm this interpretation:

1. Grammar: The pronoun “with you” is emphasized first in the line (cf. v. 8, “And he...”).

2. Purpose: Fearing God is the proper response to His holiness—aspects that He alone possesses.

Again, the emphasize is on “*You alone*.”

3. Wording: In the entire OT, the Hebrew verb “forgive” (סָלַח) refers to God alone.

No one else is ever said to “forgive” (*this* word), just as no one else is ever said to “create” (בָּרָא).

The concept is a holy concept, describing something that God alone can do.

Yes, there is a form of forgiveness that we extend to each other (e.g. Mt. 6:14-15).

But this *holy* forgiveness matches the profound sense that “against You and You only have I sinned” (Ps. 51:4).

We may have “done evil” (as David certainly did!) but it is strictly said to be *sin against* God.

Whenever we do evil, we disbelieve His goodness and break His laws.

We sin against *God* and *God* must forgive. Forgiveness is found in *God alone*.

Think then of the **implications**:

1. We cannot forgive ourselves.

Yes, we will have to accept what we have done and learn to live with ourselves.

But the idea of *forgiving myself* is strange, as if somehow, I am the authority and the judge.

As if being true to *myself* is the standard to keep.

As if harming *myself* is the great crime of the universe.

This is odd! When all along, I’ve been sinning against *God!*

2. We cannot forgive each other.

So many of us, when we have done something wrong, look for comfort in someone else.

We explain the situation—even gossip about it—then seek the reassurance of being without blame.

And while we must seek reconciliation from each other, no one can truly remove the guilt.

Illus. It would be like your spouse breaking your valuable on purpose

and then your *neighbor* steps in to “forgive” and to declare that the matter is now be dropped.

Clarif. Now, it is true, talking to others (or even to ourselves) can often remove **the feelings of guilt**.

But the *feelings* of guilt are not the same thing as guilt *itself*.

Just as there are Christians—truly forgiven in Christ—who still struggle with guilt feelings,

so there are many others not forgiven who yet feel fine—guilty but unaware of their cancer!

The successful removal of guilt feelings is merely a bandage over a deep wound (cf. Jer. 6:14).

No! We are talking about true guilt—an objective state and status of *being* guilty before the law.

When you sin, to whom do you turn?

Do you turn inwardly and reason your way through the situation?

Do you turn outwardly and seek the reassurances of others?

Or do you go to God?

But that brings us back to our **original problem**:

What is the basis of hope for those in deep guilt?

We cannot give Him anything. He already owns all our possessions.

We cannot make it up with obedience. We already owe Him all our obedience.

Therefore, we must seek forgiveness, but what gives us the hope that He will forgive us?

It feels a lot like owing a rich man so much money, he alone can lend to us to make another payment!

We now know the source of forgiveness, but we are left *uncertain* about whether God will give it.

Again, what is the basis of hope for those in deep guilt?

The Solution (vv. 5-6): Forgiveness is made certain by redemption.

In verse 5, something has happened to **change his tune**:

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits...” (v. 5).

Both this word “wait” and the word “hope” speak of confident expectation—delay, yes, but certain to come.

Not a wish, not a “hope so”, but a firm expectation of a future reality.

That is why the **sunrise** is the perfect comparison:

It certainly will come, but in the long nights of our lives it seems so long in coming.

Yet the hopeful sufferer waits expectantly for that most certain deliverance—longs for it, looks for it.

This is the attitude here of the one in deep guilt.

In fact, he is so confident, there is no division within his being.

Both the “I” and the “soul” (the seat of desire)—both thought and emotion—are united in this wait (v. 5).

What has given this man such a remarkable change of attitude?

First, he has a *word* from God Himself (v. 5).

Not relying on speculation or wishful theology, his thoughts and desires are squarely based on God’s own word.

And God alone has the right to define what He is doing and to tell us what He will do.

Specifically, the psalmist has a *promise* (in Psalm 119, e.g., “word” often indicates a promise).

The future now has at least one point of certainty to him because God has spoken.

In fact, he is so convinced of the future, he boldly compares himself to those who wait for the sunrise:

“My soul waits for the Lord *more than* the watchman for the morning” (v. 6).

Remember, what is more basic to reality—the word of God or the world caused by the word?

Remember, what will last longer—the sun above or the word of God?

It is actually more certain that God’s word will happen than that the sun will rise tomorrow.

“Heaven and earth will pass away but My words will not pass away?” (Mt. 24:35).

Second, he has a promise of future redemption (vv. 7-8).

The content of the promise is given to us when he tells Israel to hope even as he hopes in God’s word:

“O 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” (vv. 7-8).

Here we learn of God’s heart: “steadfast love.”

Here we learn of God’s ability: “plentiful redemption.”

Both of these are potentials, ready for God to act upon, but then we receive the promise:

“And He *will* redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

Now here is the basis of hope—a firm word from God about what He *will* do in the future.

Instead of waiting for them to change, God will act *freely* in loyal love—and *that* is the basis of real hope.

The idea of **redemption** had lasting significance to any Jew at that time.

Verbally, the word “redeem” literally refers to freeing someone on the basis of a payment (e.g. a slave).

While the word can speak of deliverance in general, the specific context can bring out the idea of payment.

Historically, the word “redemption” spoke of God’s deliverance of His people from the Egyptians (often in Dt.).

Perhaps the payment for freeing Israel, God’s firstborn, was the Egyptian firstborn and the Passover lamb.

Together, this word spoke of *national independence* and *religious allegiance*—of God, their new Owner.

Which word of promise did the psalmist have in mind when he spoke of this coming redemption?

Perhaps it was the promise of the new covenant (Jer. 31:34):

“They shall all know Me...for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

Perhaps it was the promise of the temple itself:

“If they sin against you...then hear from heaven...and forgive your people” (2 Chr. 6:36-39).

Certainly, the promise of the temple fits the context of The Song of the Steps (cf. Ps. 132 and 2 Chr.).

Whatever the specific promise, it was guaranteed by the character of **God’s name**—especially His *loyal love* (v. 7).

It was God’s name that twice grounded Moses’ prayer for forgiveness in the Exodus (Ex. 34; Num. 14).

It was God’s name that grounded the prayer of Daniel for a new Exodus from exile (Dan. 9:9-19).

It was God’s name that grounded this specific hope in an even greater Exodus.

What makes this psalm unique is that it is the only time the OT speaks of redemption from *sin*.

God would redeem Israel from the real source of all his miseries—his iniquities!

A new Exodus! A spiritual exodus from the “depths” of iniquity that was drowning them!

A final Day of Atonement, when the scapegoat carries “all the iniquities” of Israel away forever!

The **verbal links** “with” and “iniquities” (vv. 7-8) draw our attention back to the original problem (v. 3):

If God was going to redeem *all* the people (“Israel”) from *all* their iniquities, then forgiveness was *certain*—as long as you were reckoned as part of “Israel” through abiding faith in God (Ps. 125:1, 5; cf. Gal. 6:15-16).

In this way, personal forgiveness found its certainty in redemption of God’s people—

something we find in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 25:11, 22) and the prophets (Isaiah 55:7 based on Isaiah 53).

As Christians, **we know** that this promise has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

We are freely justified as a gift by God’s grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24-25).

Paul even echoes this psalm in one of his last letters:

Jesus “gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness” and to make us His own (Titus 2:14).

As Christians, **we can easily lose sight** of the wonder of this psalm’s hope for personal forgiveness:

One word of promise in future redemption gave this man deep in guilt a certain hope for forgiveness.

He wrote this poem five hundred years before Jesus Christ came!

When he called upon his fellow Jews to hope in God for forgiveness, there was no cross yet—no Christ.

All they had was the word—all they needed was the word.

Even 500 years later—Anna, Simeon, and Joseph of Arimathea—still waiting for the redemption of Israel.

Christian, do not be surprised if God makes you wait before He fulfills His promises to you.

If they had to wait five hundred years, can we wait five years? Fifteen years?

One word is all you need. Hold tight.

Illus. Like a man I recently heard about sinking in a bog, screaming for help (a great picture of vv. 1-2!), they threw him a rope and he was rescued.

Do you think he held tight to that rope?!

If God has given you a verse, rooted in the historical work of redemption, hold on tight.

I know what it was for me. It will be different for each person.

Whatever that verse is for you. Hold on tight and believe *expectantly*, until God delivers you!

Just think! If they could hold tight to the *promise* of redemption, how much more can we who have it fulfilled?

We have the prophetic word “made more certain” in the good news of Jesus Christ (2 Pt. 1:19)!

And remember: *Redemption is stronger than mere forgiveness.*

Mere forgiveness simply drops the matter.

Redemption pays for it.

Then it becomes a matter of God’s justice and righteousness.

Because Jesus *redeemed* us from our sins, it is now a matter of justice to let that payment stand.

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and *just* to forgive us our sins...” (1 John 1:9).

Those who have “washed their clothes...white in the blood of the Lamb” are able to stand (Rev. 7:9-14).

Forgiveness is made certain by redemption.

Will you not call on the Lord today and wait expectantly to be saved?