

Out of the Depths **Psalm 130**

Many people make New Year Resolutions. They think turning over a new year means turning over a new leaf – getting a fresh start on things – putting behind the past and looking to the future. They want that future to be different.

- Perhaps different in terms of the amount of weight they carry around.
- Perhaps different in getting rid of some addiction.
- Perhaps different in simply being more organised.

All sorts of possibilities come up.

About four weeks ago, I decided I'd been getting a bit slack in my reading in the second half of last year. I decided to aim for a book a week this year – not novels, but theological books. Novels are extra. So I sat down to plan which books I'd aim for and when I'd read them. Time will tell if I get there or not – or whether I get to the last week of this year and still have 30 books to read.

What happens when we don't follow through on our New Year Resolutions?

- When you still turn up late for church?
- When you find you can't resist the extra cake?
- When you still waste too much time playing computer games?
- When I don't get my books read?

Would you have the response of verse 1:

Out of the depths I cry to You, O LORD;

Should you have that response? How bothered are we when we break New Year Resolutions? Are we simply like everyone else – it's good to have aims but we know

we won't live up to them?

The Psalmist's Depths

When you hear that phrase in verse 1 – *out of the depths* – what impression do you get? I get a sense of a desperate situation – a sense of misery and desolation. Turn back to the opening verses of Psalm 69:

Save me, O God,

for the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in the miry depths,

where there is no foothold.

I have come into the deep waters;

the floods engulf me.

I am worn out calling for help;

my throat is parched.

That pictures it well. The psalmist is drowning. Water all round him – water beneath him – and nothing to stand on. He's sinking and can't do anything about it. He can't save himself. He desperately needs someone to rescue him.

But what causes that situation? What causes that level of despair? Probably not a few broken New Year Resolutions. In Psalm 69, it was enemies. People who hated the psalmist were out to get him. They outnumbered him. They wanted to destroy him. The psalmist saw no way out unless God intervened. In himself, he was out of his depth.

On other occasions, sickness caused that drowning feeling. So, in Psalm 6 we read:

Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint;

O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.

My soul is in anguish.

How long, O LORD, how long?

Sometimes the illnesses of our bodies threaten to overwhelm us. We feel like we're sinking under their weight.

Other times, it can be grief caused by death – a child, a spouse, a close friend. Our world seems to collapse. We lose our footing. Nothing seems normal anymore. We don't feel like going on.

But in Psalm 130, it appears the cause for the psalmist's anguished cry is his sin. You can pick up that impression from verses 2 and 3:

*Let Your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.*

*If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?*

Now, you've probably noticed I've been a bit tentative in that conclusion. I'm not totally sure.

- I think he's saying: I'm conscious that I'm sinful through and through. Within me dwells this great evil. It infects me at the very depths of my being. I'm drowning in a sea of guilt and there's nothing I can do about it.
- But it's also possible he's saying: I'm in some deep trouble – I know what it is; God knows what it is; but I'm not specifying what it is in this psalm. I know I need God's help in this trouble – but I know my sin means I can't claim God's help. I can't say I deserve it – and God would be just if He simply turned His back on me. I can only appeal to God on the basis of His mercy.

Either way, a consciousness of sin and its consequences in terms of how he relates to God bothers the psalmist.

I want to pause at this point to think about this. Sure, the psalm moves to a positive conclusion – but I think it's important we see the depths of the problem before we move to the conclusion. We moderns – even we modern Christians – have a tendency to skip over thinking too much about sin and simply get to the good part.

- We think sin's normal – everyone's doing it.
- We think sin's not a big deal – most of the time no one gets hurt all that much.
- We even think some sin's good for us – that it adds a bit of fun and spice to life.

We don't see what the fuss is all about. But we won't fully appreciate the good part unless we understand how truly bad the bad part is.

Sure, there's some stuff we object to. We don't know who wrote this psalm. We don't know what his sin was. Psalm 51 is another psalm about sin. David wrote it after God confronted him with his sin of committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah. That's pretty bad. Most people think someone who does that sort of thing should be worried. God ought to call that sort of person to account. But most of us haven't done anything like that. This psalmist may not have done anything like that. Why should he be worried?

He's worried because he understands the nature of sin – all sin. This goes back to the beginning of the human race. Back in the Garden of Eden, what did Adam and Eve do? They ate the fruit God told them not to. So, you say, what's the big deal in that? It's only a bit of fruit. It's not as if there was a fruit shortage at the time. It's not as if God would be bankrupt because they took one measly bit of fruit. That's not the point at all. The point is in

their relationship with God.

- God made them. They didn't make themselves. They didn't just pop up out of nowhere. God made them – and so, they belonged to God. They were there for His purposes.
- What's more, God made the Garden. It also didn't plant itself. It didn't just pop into existence. God made it for the man and the woman – but it remained His Garden.

It's important to see who's in charge here – and why He's in charge. Adam and Eve had no rights. They were creatures expected to behave like creatures.

God gave them one rule: don't eat from one particular tree. It wasn't a hard rule – there were plenty of other trees to eat from. It wasn't beyond their capabilities – they didn't have some compulsion that forced them to eat from that tree. It was a simple test to see if they'd submit to their Creator – to see if they'd do what they should do.

They failed the test. As creatures, they tried to put themselves above the One who created them. They put themselves in the place of God – deciding they knew what was good for them better than He did. They refused to live for the purpose God made them for and made up their own reason for living.

It's rebellion. Seditious. Treason. And that's at the heart of all sin.

- When I steal something, I'm effectively saying to God that my decision to steal is a better option for me than His instruction not to steal. I'm making myself out to be more important than Him. I'm putting myself above the Creator of the universe.

- When I'm greedy, I'm effectively saying to God that my desire to have more is a better option for me than what He thinks is appropriate for me. I'm giving more weight to what I think is my purpose than to what my God says is my purpose.

It's when I, the creature, tell God, my Creator, to butt out – that I'm glad He made me and gave me life and put me on a planet with all sorts of wonderful things, but I don't want Him interfering in His creation or in my life – rather, I want to get on with things without Him.

It's like Bill Gates setting up Microsoft and employing me as the cleaner. I go in there and treat the company as my own. I play on the computers. I take home the ones I like best. I take the software and sell it. And I don't do any cleaning. Do you think Bill Gates may be somewhat offended by my behaviour? With God, it's worse than that because God doesn't just enter into some contractual arrangement with me as a fellow human being – He made me and fully owns me. He has a right to expect me to pay attention to Him. And I haven't. I've ignored Him. I've disobeyed Him. I've taken His good gifts and used them for my own self-centred purposes.

That should cause me to feel in the depths – drowning without a lifeline – because that's exactly where I am. My treason offends my Creator and He says He'll hold me accountable. He'll treat my sin with the seriousness it deserves. The only reason I don't feel like that is because I've trivialised sin – and trivialised God.

Sometimes, with some of our sin, something of it breaks through our consciousness.

- Perhaps you've done something of which you're

deeply ashamed and you're plagued with guilt.

- Perhaps you've got some habit or addiction that you want to break and you think you should be able to break but you keep going back to it.
- Perhaps you're plagued with sinful thoughts – that you feel your mind's in the gutter, but you can't seem to get rid of the filth within.

That's how we should feel about all sin. The stuff we accept so readily and sometimes even encourage – the pride, the greed, the gossip, the envy, the focus on self – we should loathe. We should groan under this evil that's part of our very souls.

The Psalmist's Hope

That's the bad news – and it really is very bad.

If You, O LORD, kept a record of sins,

O Lord, who could stand?

But there's also good news. Verse 4:

But with You there is forgiveness;

therefore You are feared.

The psalmist knows that God not only judges – He also forgives. How does the psalmist know that? When God revealed Himself to Moses, He said (in Exodus 34:6):

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

While God goes on to speak of judgment as well for those who persist in their rebellion against Him, there is this strong note of love and compassion and forgiveness in how God identifies Himself.

In addition, the psalmist had the sacrificial system – a

means God provided Israel to deal with her sin. When the nation sinned – when individuals sinned – they could bring an animal to make atonement.

- The system taught the people that sin was serious – it required death to atone for it. It wasn't a trivial thing.
- It taught them this personally. They brought the animal. They put their hand on the animal's head. They killed it.
- Yet it also taught the people forgiveness was possible. God, in His grace and mercy, provided the way for their sins to be covered.

Further, each year, they had the Day of Atonement. Two goats were provided. One was killed. Its blood was taken into the Most Holy Place – the only time in the year anyone was permitted to enter. The other goat had the people's sins confessed over it. It was taken into a desert region to symbolise the removal of all the sin and filth and transgressions of the people.

So the psalmist knew God was a forgiving God. Yet, all these things had no element of finality to them.

- The sacrifices were made again and again.
- The Day of Atonement was repeated each year.

And there was the realisation that the death of a mere animal was insufficient to pay for human rebellion. They knew something better was coming – something God had promised – when God would deal with sin in a more final way.

We, who live after Jesus, know what that is. He Himself became the sacrifice for human sin. God became man for the sole purpose of paying the price for our sin.

- It teaches us the seriousness of our sin. This was the price paid to deal with it – the death of God Himself in our place.
- It teaches us the extent of God's desire to forgive us – that He'd pay such a price to satisfy His perfect justice.

For some, it leads to a careless attitude towards sin. They think: the price is paid so it doesn't matter any more. I don't need to worry about sin too much. Whatever I do, it'll be forgiven. It's a wrong attitude – a sinful attitude – an attitude that trivialises what Jesus did for us.

God's gone to these extraordinary lengths not just that we may be forgiven – as great and magnificent as that is – but also that we may be freed. God sees sin for what it truly is: damaging, demeaning, corrupting, debasing, shameful, enslaving, wicked. It's not good for us. It makes us less than He intended us to be.

- The depths aren't simply because of the judgment of God – that I'm in despair because I face God's judgment and can't get out of it by myself.
- The depths are also the realisation of bondage to evil – that I recognise my sin as evil and yet realise that, in myself, I don't have the power to stop. I do the wrong I don't want to do – and it damages me and enslaves me and I can't get free.

God wants to restore us to what's right. He doesn't want us to remain in the filthy, miserable state we were in – He wants to lift us to goodness and purity and love. And so a careless attitude to sin is to be resisted as evil.

With God there is forgiveness, therefore He's to be feared. It looks unusual at first. You'd think the fear

should come in if there were no forgiveness with God. For, if there were no forgiveness, only judgment would remain – and then it'd be appropriate for us to be terrified of God and what was in store for us. It's like the child who knows they did the wrong thing big time and the lies they told to cover it up are discovered and all that remains is to endure their parents' punishment – except the wrong is much greater and the punishment is much worse.

But here, the psalmist's *fear* stems from God's forgiveness. How are we to make sense of that? Often the word *fear* in the Bible refers, *not* to terror or dread, but to awe and respect and admiration and reverence. Proverbs 9:10

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.*

It's the idea of recognising who God is.

- That God's Creator of all.
- That God's powerful beyond our imagination.
- That God knows everything.
- That God directs history towards His purposes.

And recognising that – and recognising that I'm a very finite and weak and ignorant creature in comparison – should lead me to pay attention to what God says. If God made me and made me for His purposes and knows what's right and what's best for me, why wouldn't I want to pay attention to Him? Why wouldn't I realise that He's got a far better idea of things than I have? Why wouldn't I want to fit into His perfect and good plans? The fact that I don't simply indicates the depths of my bondage to sin – and of my need for Him to deliver me from that.

And so the psalmist waits. Verse 5:

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in His word I put my hope.*

*My soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

The watchman on duty at night has a difficult task. He faces a distinct possibility of danger. Night's the time for criminals to be active. Night's the time when enemies launch sneak attacks. He also faces the distinct possibility of boredom and falling asleep at his post. The hours passed slowly. Tedium set in. No distractions to break the monotony. He longed for the morning.

In that way, the psalmist waits for God.

- He puts his hope in God's word.
- He waits for God's word of forgiveness.
- He waits for God's deliverance from the depths.

He knows he has no claim on God. He can only appeal for God's mercy. But, because God reveals Himself as a merciful God, it's more than just wishful thinking. Because God shows Himself gracious and compassionate, he waits with confidence.

And he likewise encourages others to join him. Verse 7:

*O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with Him is full redemption.
He Himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins.*

Yes, if God kept a record of sins, no one could stand. All would be found guilty. All would be condemned. But our God loves. Our God forgives. Our God rescues His people from their sins. So hope in Him.

And it doesn't change once you turn the pages of the New Testament. Rather, it becomes even clearer because of

what God did in Jesus. God intervenes to deliver us from judgment. God acts to rescue us from bondage to sin. God clearly takes the initiative to help those who were helpless. With Him, there is forgiveness.

And so Paul writes in Romans 7:24

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Christ Jesus our Lord!

And in Romans 8:22

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.

As you read this psalm, does it resonate with you? Perhaps at this time of year it resonates more strongly than other times. You've reviewed the past year. You've noted dissatisfaction in some areas – even failures – maybe even repeated sins. Maybe at this time you feel your bondage to sin more keenly. It's easy to forget that in the modern world – we fill our lives with so many things and so much entertainment that the inner struggle in the depths is blocked out. But this is what's important. This is why Jesus died – to deliver us from our bondage to sin; to enable us to grow in godliness; to experience God's goodness working its way out into how we live.