

We are our own greatest danger and only Lord can rescue us from ourselves. The world, the flesh, and the devil have their part to play in a broken and sinful world, but ultimately I am to blame for me. The second psalm in the fourth triad is an anguished cry for mercy and a desperate plea for forgiveness. The psalmist's raw emotional appeal is deeply personal and transparent, proving that "even the deepest depths of sin constitute no barrier to praying."¹ There is no hint of self-defense. It is the poetry of honest confession and utter dependence on the Lord for his mercy, forgiveness, unfailing love and redemption.

Self-Betrayal

*Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
 Lord, hear my voice.
 Let your ears be attentive
 to my cry for mercy.
 If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,
 Lord, who could stand?
 But with you there is forgiveness,
 so that we can, with reverence, serve you.*

Psalm 130:1-4

There comes a time on life's journey when we cannot go any lower. We hit bottom. We come to the end of ourselves, and from our fox hole we raise a white flag. We cannot hide the fact that we are sinners, that we are broken, addicted, sin-twisted miserable offenders, and we know deep down that this is true. John Calvin railed against "the barbarous ignorance of the Papists" because they "mumbled" Psalm 130 over the dead and refused to pray this psalm for the living.² Calvin was right of course. Psalm 130 does not apply to the souls of the dead, but it does apply to the dead souls of the living. For we are all dead in our transgressions until we are saved by the grace of God. We all gratify the cravings of the flesh and follow its desires and thoughts until we are made alive in Christ (Eph 2:1-5). And even then the struggle persists because of the dogged nature of our sinful human condition. Those of us who have experienced God's great love and rejoiced in the richness of his mercy over many years yet find our way back to Psalm 130 time and again. We use this psalm to utter our heartfelt plea for forgiveness. The apostle John wrote, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10).

One of the greatest preachers in the early church, John Chrysostom, ended his ministry focused on the danger of self-betrayal. His controlling thought was simple: nothing can destroy you but yourself. Your own worst enemy is not the devil or disease, but your sinful self. Your greatest danger is self-betrayal. Your greatest weakness, littleness of soul. John held that any and all sins

¹ Motyer, Journey, 110.

² Calvin, Psalms, 128.

perpetrated against a follower of Christ, no matter how evil, must never become an excuse for believers to sin. John contended that “no one who is wronged is wronged by another, but experiences this injury at his or her own hands.”³ Nothing can ruin our virtue or destroy our soul, that is not self-inflicted. John argued that poverty cannot impoverish the soul. Malignancy cannot malign the character. The lack of health care cannot destroy a healthy soul. Famine cannot famish one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. No! Not even the devil and death can destroy those who live sober and vigilant lives. The devil robbed Job of everything but could not rob Job of his virtue. Cain took Abel’s life, but could not take away his greater gain. Only those who injure themselves are injured. “Don’t confuse the argument,” John insists, “I did not say that no one injures, but that no one is injured.”⁴ John drove his message home:

“No one will be able to injure one who is not injured by himself, even if all the world were to kindle a fierce war against him. For it is not stress. . .nor circumstances. . .nor insults. . .nor intrigues. . .nor catastrophes. . .nor any number of ills to which humankind is subject, which can disturb even slightly the person who is brave, and disciplined, and watchful. . .”⁵

John Chrysostom’s warning drives home the truth of our personal responsibility before God. Sin requires redemption, not excuses; forgiveness, not finger-pointing. This brings us to the main focus of the psalm which is on the Lord’s mercy, forgiveness, unfailing love, and full redemption. The psalmist insists on dwelling on God’s grace, but he does so without minimizing his sin. His rhetorical question implies his grave spiritual state and his need for God’s mercy. “If you, O Lord [Yah, the abbreviation for Yahweh], should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?”⁶

Within the first four verses of the psalm there is a dramatic shift from crying out to the Lord for mercy to a settled and confident embrace of the Lord’s forgiveness. The adversative “but” in verse four pivots the pilgrim from supplication to service. There is a similar dramatic transition in the apostle Paul’s description of salvation in Ephesians. Paul pivots from dead-in-our-sins realism to the positive, powerful reality of the gospel with an adversative “but:” “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (2:4-5). In Ephesians 2:1-3 Paul describes the fallen human condition, but in the next six verses, God is the subject of love and salvation. The stark contrast between sin and salvation heightens our appreciation for the gift of God’s grace.

Hope

*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.*

³ Chrysostom, 272

⁴ Chrysostom, 273

⁵ Chrysostom, 279

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 713.

*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.*

Psalm 130:5-8

The psalmist's two definitive statements, "I wait for the Lord with my whole being" and "I hope in his word," emphasizes the psalmist's personal commitment as a motivation or inspiration for the people of God. The psalmist is speaking not just for himself alone but for Israel as whole. His waiting and hoping embodies and emboldens the spirit of the people of God. The individual is never sacrificed for the sake of the community and the community is never sacrificed for the sake of the individual. What is good for the individual is good for the body and what is good for the body is good for the individual.

The psalmist uses the image of watchmen to describe the collective identity of the people of God. All who wait on the Lord and all who hope in the Lord are like watchmen stationed on the wall eagerly waiting sunrise. Their responsibility is limited but important. They are to stay alert and pay attention. The image captures the believer's faithful presence and willed passivity. This special waiting measures life's meaning not in what is achieved through self-effort, but by what is received at the hand of God. Mercy, forgiveness, hope, unfailing love, and full redemption are all received by grace. Waiting is no claim to fame; waiting is the eager anticipation of the Lord's promise.

The psalmist exhorts the whole body of believers: "Israel, put your hope in the Lord." The reason given for putting our hope in the Lord is threefold. For with the Lord there is unfailing love, full redemption, and the forgiveness of all our sins. The arch of faith is dramatic. The psalmist has gone from crying for mercy to exhorting the people of God to put their hope in the Lord. The psalmist's theme corresponds well with the apostle Peter's description of salvation. By God's great mercy we have been given new birth into a living hope, a lasting inheritance, and a coming salvation (1 Peter 1:3-5). And like the psalmist, Peter weaves together redemption's provision with redemption's purpose. We are never very far from the "reason for the hope [we] have" in Christ (1 Pet 3:15), which is always best revealed in a transformed life – a holy life. We are forgiven "so that we can, with reverence serve" the Lord.

Full redemption captures the fullness and completeness of salvation and recalls Jesus' promise, "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Psalm 130 reminds pilgrims "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). John Calvin wrote, "God not only begins, but conducts to the end, the work of salvation, that his grace in us may not be useless and unprofitable. As he opens up the way, so he paves it, and removes obstacles of every description, and is himself the leader during the whole journey."⁷

⁷ John Calvin, Commentary on Isaiah, vol. 3, "Isaiah 35:1-10," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom15.iv.i.html.

Full redemption comprehends all that we have been given in Christ. We are saved from “sin and death; guilt and estrangement; ignorance of truth; bondage to habit and vice; fear of demons, of death, of life, of God, of hell; despair of self; alienation from others; pressures of the world; a meaningless life.”⁸ We are saved for a purpose, to love God, others, and ourselves. We are saved for freedom, mission, and community.

Salvation changes our relationship with God giving us acceptance with God, forgiveness, reconciliation, sonship, reception of the Spirit, and everlasting life. Salvation changes us emotionally giving us confidence, peace, courage, hopefulness, and joy. Salvation changes us spiritually giving us prayer, guidance, discipline, dedication and service. Salvation changes us personally giving us new thoughts, convictions, horizons, motives, satisfactions, self-fulfillment. Salvation changes us socially giving us a new community in Christ, a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”⁹

⁸ White, “Salvation,” 968. (This entire section on “salvation” is dependent on R. E. O. White’s article).

⁹ White, *Ibid.*, 968.