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## My Soul Waits on the Lord

a sermon on Psalm 130

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

Everyday I passed it in the hall, and it fascinated me. Right there in the wall of my school was a long hose, tightly folded, with a nozzle that looked as if it had been stolen off a fire truck. At the other end of the hose was a bright red wheel. I knew, without being told, that if you turned that little wheel, water would blast from the hose with a force too strong for a child like me to control. I always wanted to give that hose a try, but it was protected by a pane of glass. Next to the glass a little metal rod hung down so you could break the glass if you had to. Written there in all capital letters, fire engine red with gold trim: In case of emergency, break glass.

When I bought my computer, I purchased a protection plan. That turned out to be a good idea because of the recent lightning strike. At the time, the clerk handed me a plastic card with a 1-800 number and a contract number. "If you have problems," he said, "call this number and give them your contract number, and they'll take care of you." They did.

A father, leaving his daughter at college after moving her things, hands her a credit card. "Don't use this for everyday, but if you get in a pinch, use it. If you find yourself in need, or in an emergency, use it."

Question: What do these anecdotes have to do with Psalm 130? Each one features something that is given to be used in a time of need: a hose, a card, a credit card. This theme is common in fantasy and adventure literature. The hero is given some object with special powers and is told to use it only when the need is dire and the danger grave. In C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the character Susan is given a horn. She is told to blow it only in times of great need, and that when the horn is blown, help will always come.

I believe Psalm 130 is like that in a way. It is a prayer, *given to us by God*, that we can use when we are overwhelmed and feel lost and helpless. I believe this because of my convictions about the Bible. I believe the Bible is God's Word. Why do I believe this? I'll give you two reasons: First, the Bible is Jesus' book. It bears witness to him. He is the risen and living Lord, and if you know him, you will come to love his book. This isn't a circular argument. You can start out by not trusting the Bible at all. But you read it, and you learn about Jesus, and through his Spirit he encounters you. And so your

trust grows. I don't start with the idea that the Bible is true, therefore Jesus is the living Lord because it says so. I start with Jesus, whom I know to be the living Lord, and then I learn to trust the Bible because it says so. Second, I have come to believe in the Bible because of its explanatory power. The Bible offers a distinct perspective on who God is, who I am, what the world is like, and why. I find its explanations compelling and superior to other views. Therefore, while I acknowledge the Bible as the product of many human hands over a long period of time, I also know it to be the Word of God.

Psalm 130 was originally a song God's people wrote and sang to praise him. Now it has become his Word to us. But if it is a song or prayer addressed to him, how can it be his Word to us? Simple, it is a gift. It is a gift to us from our ancestors in the faith who learned by experience to wait and hope in God. It is also a gift to us from God, as if he said to us, "Here is a special prayer that you can use in time of dire need. When you feel lost, when you feel overwhelmed by troubles, cry out to me; and I will hear and answer and deliver you."

Psalm 130 is a song God's people sang on their way to Jerusalem for holy festivals. We do not make pilgrimages, so it is difficult for us to connect with their experience emotionally, but the concept is easy enough to understand. Every year, at certain times, the Jews celebrated holy festivals in Jerusalem, where the temple was. Passover is one you may be familiar with. The faithful would travel from far and wide to the holy city to take part in the festivities and worship.

Jerusalem sits atop a hill, Mount Zion, and the temple was at the very top. That's why the Bible always speaks of "going up" to Jerusalem. It didn't matter which direction you came from – north, south, east, or west – you always went up when you went to Jerusalem.

You may have noticed a little heading just about the text of Psalm 130, "A song of ascents." There are fifteen of these altogether, Psalms 120 – 134. These were songs pilgrims sang together as they made their way up to the city and the temple. It was all part of the pilgrim experience, and you can imagine how powerful an experience it would be to be joined by more and more people on the road, nearly all of them strangers, and everyone singing these old, familiar beloved hymns you learned as a child – all of you going together to worship God.

The theme of Psalm 130 is our need and God's grace. That makes it a good gospel prayer. Christianity in a nutshell is this: Every human being is so broken that our only hope is God's grace. God's grace comes to us through Jesus Christ. That's the whole thing. Everything else is explanation. Psalm 130 assures us that when we realize our need, we can call on God, and he will answer. I believe this psalm is about our need for saving grace through Christ, but of course it is also about God's help through the trials and storms of a life of faith.

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!” ... I think most of us can relate to that. “The depths” here might be shorthand for “the depths of the sea.” The idea is, you are drowning. You are sinking in distress, and you no longer have the strength to struggle to keep your head above water. You have no hope. ... This isn’t a prayer for someone having a bad day. This is for someone whose life has fallen apart. What can you do when you are drowning in the depths? You can cry out to God. You can wait for him. You can hope.

Psalm 130 rejects a popular misconception about God. People who don’t know what Christianity teaches, but they think they do because they saw a television show once or knew a guy who went to church – such people often imagine God to be like this: First, God makes a list of arbitrary commandments, most of them aimed at keeping people from having fun. Then, he lays down the rules like a trap and watches carefully for someone to break one. When someone sins, God is almost gleeful in his wrath. Some people believe God likes nothing better than punishing sinners. Psalm 130 says that’s crazy. It slanders God, because he is nothing like that. God loves us. Even his commandments are rooted in love, to keep us from destroying one another and ourselves. Above all, God does not delight in human misery. “With the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.” That’s the truth about God, says Psalm 130. Therefore, you can trust God. You can cry out to him, confident that he will hear you with compassion. God is for you, not against you. You may be against yourself, but God never is.

Psalm 130 has four poetic stanzas. It’s divided into eight verses, but you’ll notice in your pew Bible (and probably your personal Bible) a small gap between every two verses. These gaps indicate the structure of the Hebrew poem. Although, these gaps were put in by the scholars who translated the psalm, and I think some of them have it wrong. I think the first line in verse 7 goes with the line before it, so that the poem should read:

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

More than watchmen for the morning, let Israel hope in the Lord!

Some versions translate it that way. It makes sense to me, because the repeated line becomes a bridge between the individual’s experience and the invitation extended to others to also hope in the Lord.

As we look at the structure of this psalm, I am reminded of two things: worship and conversion. In worship we begin by calling on God, we confess our sins and receive God’s pardon, we profess our faith, and we go out into the world to bear witness. Our order of service is divided into these four basic acts. We see the same pattern in Psalm 130.

I see a similar pattern in this psalm and conversion. When a person comes to faith in Christ, she first realizes her need and cries out to God. Then she repents. Then she professes her faith; she has put her trust in Christ. Finally, she bears witness to others. I detect that pattern going on in Psalm 130. It's not surprising. It was first sung by people going to worship, people who were looking for God's grace.

Psalm 130 promises salvation. It starts with the problems of one individual, but by the end it has a more expansive vision. Yes, God cares about your problems and mine. But most of our problems are symptoms of the brokenness of creation. Psalm 130 takes a big-picture view of human misery and promises God will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

I want you to fix this line in your mind and use your imaginations a little. Imagine generations of pilgrims – generations of God's people, stretching over hundreds of years – going up to Jerusalem, singing this song. "He will redeem Israel from all its iniquities." Until one day, an angel speaks in a dream to a man named Joseph, telling him to marry his betrothed, even though she is with child: "She will bear a son, and you will call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The promise echoed through the ages on the lips of the faithful, until it found full expression from the mouth of the angel.

Now imagine another scene. The faithful continue to sing this song. They continue to go up for the festivals. One day a group of pilgrims is going up for the Passover. They have come from all over. The closer they get to the city, the denser the crowd becomes. As always, they take up the familiar refrain of the psalms of ascent. They are almost to the city. The words, "It is he who will redeem Israel from all its sins," are fresh on their lips. Suddenly they stumble onto a horrible sight. The Romans have sent a message to the people. They have crucified three men outside the city walls for all to see. It is the morning before the Passover. The man in the middle has a sign tacked above his head naming his crime: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

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I have shared with you what I think is important to know about Psalm 130. Now what are you going to do with it? What can you do when you are drowning in despair? I've already told you: Cry out to God. Wait for him. Hope in him. Was that the answer you wanted to hear? Wait?

When you are in the depths, waiting is the last thing you want to do and usually the only thing you can do. Consider a person who is alone, maybe for the first time in a long time because of the death of a spouse or divorce. You sit there thinking, "Why did my life turn out this way? How did this happen? This wasn't supposed to happen." And you don't like being alone.

Another person is in the depths because of money trouble. Lots of that going around these days. People are losing their jobs. People are losing their homes. That gives you a drowning feeling. You ask, why? How? And wonder, what if ...? But most of all you want to be back on your feet.

Some of the deepest depths are reached when your children get into trouble. Some of the worst suffering I have seen was the agony of parents when an adolescent or adult child ruins his or her life with drugs.

I don't need to go on, you know the depths. You each have your own depths of suffering: an unhappy marriage, failing health, a serious accident, depression, general confusion about life, a loss of faith, abuse you suffered as a child or even later on. Sometimes other people take you into the depths, and sometimes you have no one to blame but yourself.

When you are in the depths, how can you wait on the Lord? What does that even mean? How does it help? Well, it doesn't. God has to help, and that's the point. You cling to your hope in him no matter what. Even if you are hanging on a cross, and you find yourself screaming, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" you go on trusting and hoping.

Waiting on the Lord means you keep hope alive because you trust God. It is different from doing nothing, because when you are waiting you look for a better day. You anticipate a better future, and that gives you strength to endure. Waiting on the Lord is also different from a blind hope that just goes on from day to day hoping that somehow, some way things will get better. Waiting on the Lord is more real and solid than that because it trusts in God, who is real and solid and full of steadfast love and the power to deliver.

I like to define waiting on the Lord this way: It is faith plus time. It is your faith in God plus however long it takes for God's purpose to work itself out. As God's people know – after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, 70 years of exile, hundreds of years of waiting for the Messiah, and one very long and miserable Saturday before the first Easter morning – God's purposes can take a while. He doesn't work by our schedules. For some reason, he thinks he knows better than we do. Kind of like a parent. In fact, he teaches us to call him our Father in heaven and tells us to come to him with the faith of a little child. We didn't like that I-know-best attitude from our earthly parents when we were children. Ask any parent, and the child doesn't have to be a teenager, even a small child believes he or she knows best – at least sometimes. I was that way as a child. We have an innate resistance to admitting someone knows better than we do. And then one day you find out that although your earthly parents do know a lot, they are not infallible. Half the time they are making things up as they go along! Our Father

in heaven is different. He does know best. If he takes his time and we grow impatient, we can be sure he has a good reason. ... Just don't ask *me* what it is! I have learned to trust God despite the fact that I cannot comprehend his ways.

When you are in the depths, you go on trusting, hoping. You also go on praying. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." Psalm 130 would not exist if God did not hear us even when we are in the depths. Remember Jonah? He tried to run away from God. He was thrown into the sea. He sank down. This was the end ... then a fish swallowed him. You don't get more in the depths than that. What did he do – there in the lowest place he could possibly go? He prayed. "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me." It didn't matter where he was or that he had turned his back on God.

God hears us when we are in the depths. Do you ever feel as if God has abandoned you? As if he is far away, uninterested in your suffering? The Bible has various words to describe God's absence, works like *hide* and *forsake*. Does God ever withdraw his hand from us, at least in some respects? Yes, in some respects, I think, he does. Yet he is always with us. The Bible gives us words to describe the dry seasons of our souls, yet it affirms, with Psalm 139, that there is no place where God is not. We cannot escape him, even if we wanted to. He is there. He is with us. He hears us when we cry to him. And that is why we go on praying.

If you are in the depths this morning, I have only two things to offer you. The first is my witness, for what it is worth to you, that the Bible is right when it says God hears and he is full of steadfast love. The other is Psalm 130 as a prayer you can make your own. I encourage you to do that. Make this prayer your own. It is yours. It is God's gift to you. Pray it. You might begin by praying verses 1-4, then telling God all about your own trouble, and finally ending your prayer with verses 5-8. Or, you could pray the whole psalm, then offer your despair to God, and then pray the full psalm again. Or maybe you are too far gone to tell your troubles to God, and all you can do is pray Psalm 130.

If you are not in the depths, take Psalm 130, and secure it in the back of your mind. Cover it with a thin pane of glass. Mount a little metal rod beside it. Then paint on the glass, "In case of emergency, break glass." It will be there for you when you need it. ... And God will be there for you when you need him. ... Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com