

God the just and the justifier in Psalm 130

Littlebourne - 20th November 2022 - Psalm 130

■ *A Song of Ascents.*

We're up to the eleventh Psalm of Ascent. As you've all heard many times before, the Psalms of Ascent are thought to be those Psalms that were sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. As they ascended to their destination, the temple, they would sing these Psalms.

This particular Psalm was a favourite of Augustine and Calvin. Luther took this Psalm and turned it into a hymn. John Owen, the great puritan pastor and theologian, was greatly affected by this Psalm. He said this:

■ *I myself preached Christ, some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Psalm 130:4, 'But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared;' from whence I received special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator, and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery."*

We've seen a couple of lamenting Psalms already in Psalm 120 and 129, but this starts with a different sort of lament. This lament is not about being oppressed, like those others. It's not about the author's enemies, calling on God to deliver from external threats, asking God to destroy those that oppose Him. No, this time it's about ourselves.

v1-2

■ *1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!
2 O Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!*

The Psalmist starts with a cry to God. He's desperate, he's urgently calling on God. From the following context, we know what the issue is - the issue is his sin.

From the depths of human experience, from the pit of guilt, he cries out. He's sinking, drowning in his own wrongdoing. Left unresolved, his sins will drag him down. Similarly, in Psalm 69 David says:

*Save me, O God!
For the waters have come up to my neck.
2 I sink in deep mire,
where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.
3 I am weary with my crying out;
my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim
with waiting for my God.*

There is an urgency to guilt. It gnaws at us, it doesn't leave us alone. And this should prompt us to take action, to not let it fester.

The Psalmist is like Jonah - deep under water, unable to survive without God's help. We too should be very quick to turn to God when we are sinking in sin. Self help won't work - we need rescuing.

v3

*3 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?*

This next verse tells us of the seriousness of sin.

First, that our guilt is more than just a feeling - it usually points to real sin that we have committed. We usually don't just *feel* guilty, we *are* guilty.

Second, that sin is against God. If *God* should mark iniquities, who would stand? It's sin against God that matters, it's sin against Him that none would stand up after.

Third, that nobody would stand - we are all guilty. Psalm 143 (verse 1-2):

*Hear my prayer, O Lord;
give ear to my pleas for mercy!
In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!
2 Enter not into judgment with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you.*

Romans 3:23:

for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God

All of us are sinners. If God really did keep a list of all the times you've sinned, how would it go for you? If we are honest with ourselves, we know that our own efforts won't work - our actions don't help us, rather they hinder us. If the perfectly holy, righteous and just God called us to account for our actions, what plea could we give, other than guilty as charged?

v4

*4 But with you there is forgiveness,
that you may be feared.*

Whilst we might come before God, cry out to Him, as guilty persons, we find in Him forgiveness for our sin.

Now forgiveness doesn't mean that God acts like nothing ever happened. No, forgiveness is not free - it comes at great cost. God's holiness, justice, righteousness must be satisfied.

The Psalmist, writing as he was under the laws of Old Testament Israel, would have known that there is no cheap forgiveness. There was, in the laws given to them, forgiveness by shedding of blood - the Passover, the sacrifices in the Temple, the means of becoming right with God were there, pointing of course, to the ultimate sacrifice found in the death of Jesus Christ.

On what basis can we come before Him? On what basis can we cry out to God, when we know that if we are judged rightly, we will be found wanting? On the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The verse says that there is forgiveness *that You may be feared*. What sort of forgiveness is this that it results in fear? We'd expect something like forgiveness that you may be loved or thanked.

From the fear of drowning in our sin, the fear of verses 1-3, to forgiveness, to fear again . It's like the words of Amazing Grace - "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved".

From fear to fear, but different types of fear. Our fears are transformed by forgiveness, from the fear of God's wrath, his judgement, his right punishment on sin - servile fear - to right fear of God - filial fear - the respect, adoration, wonder at the God who would die for us, the fear of disappointing or disrespecting such a God, of in any way clouding the relationship He has with us.

Verses 3 and 4 tackle the two major ways we go wrong about guilt and forgiveness: those that think they are good enough, that they don't need forgiveness, are put in their place by verse 3; those that are presumptuous about forgiveness, easy believe-ism, are put in their place by verse 4. Do we fear God? Do we really understand the great cost that was paid for our forgiveness?

The perception of God's mercy, His satisfaction of His holiness and justice at the cross, the understanding of the full depth of our forgiveness, the cost of it, cultivates right fear of the Lord.

Proverbs 16:6:

*By steadfast love and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for,
and by the fear of the LORD, one turns away from evil.*

Not the fear of punishment - that punishment has been paid on the cross, but the right fear of the LORD.

v5-6

*5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
6 my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.*

Just like in verses 1 and 2, there is repetition for emphasis. Now that he's found forgiveness, He waits on God.

The ground of his waiting, his hoping, is the word of God - it's God's word that secures our forgiveness. We wait because he has promised forgiveness in His word. Without our Bible to tell us of God's promises, we would be lost at sea.

The believer, in the Old Testament, lived in hope that God would do as He said he would, that He would redeem Israel, that everything would be made right. He lived by faith in God's promises, that were not yet clear in Christ, but nevertheless promised. Like the night watchmen waiting for the morning that will bring ease and rest and an end to His anxiety.

We may feel we are in darkest night, but the promises of God will be fulfilled, as surely as the morning will come. Our forgiveness is sure, because it rests not on ourselves, but on Him who is faithful and eternal and unchanging.

v7-8

*7 O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.
8 And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.*

Now the Psalmist finishes with an invitation to others, to Israel as a whole, to trust and hope in God, to come to Him for forgiveness.

Plenty of times in Israel's history, the people were facing destruction, their land, their prosperity, their hope was fading. They have to rebuild and re-commit over and over again, and the psalmist commends them to put their trust in God. Just as the psalmist has experienced God's forgiveness and now waits expectantly for God's promises, he now wishes to tell others of what he has found. This psalm is for the encouragement of the many out of the experience of the one.

Just and the Justifier

Back to verse 3 - the Psalmist uses the word 'If'. **If** you O Lord, should mark iniquities, who would stand?

If God were really to judge us on our own actions, heaven would be empty. But scripture tells us that in the end the amount that are saved are an innumerable multitude. What's going on here? Does God really judge us justly or not? The answer of course is yes and no.

Luther's famous formula for the Christian was 'simul justus et peccator' - at the same time just and sinner. We are at once righteous in God's sight and yet we know ourselves to be sinners. Now Luther wasn't saying that we are righteous and sinful in the same way at the same time - that would be a contradiction. Luther is saying that in one sense we are just and in another sense we are sinners. We are sinners most obviously - we don't need that

explaining. But we are just, we are righteous in God's sight, through the imputation of Christ's righteousness. In our union with Christ, he takes our sin and we are given His righteousness. We are clothed with Christ, in much the same way as Jacob clothed himself with Esau's garment to get the blessing of his father Isaac.

So does God judge us justly? Yes, he satisfies His holy justice fully as Jesus takes our sins and pays the price for them. And no, in that we don't get what we deserve - we are given Christ's righteousness instead.

Paul puts it like this in Romans 3:26:

26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

God is just and the justifier. He both convicts and condemns sin, and gives us the perfect way out. All glory be to Him.

Conclusion

What does he forgive? All of our iniquities.

Why does God forgive? Because of his unending faithfulness and steadfast love, His promise to us.

How does he forgive? Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When you find yourself mired in sin, don't despair, don't turn to other remedies, but put your hope in the Lord. The psalmist hoped in the Lord, ultimately hoped in what Christ would do, though he may not have been able to articulate it like that. What privilege we have today to hope in what Christ has done - the effects of which are sure and steady and enduring.

In Christ we see the love of God expressed most fully, that in spite of our sin, our rebellion against God, He loved us so much that he died for us. Whatever our distress, the redemption that is found in Christ is plentiful and unsearchable, able to deliver us from all guilt and sin.

2 Thessalonians 3:5

May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ.