

When Prayer Goes to Voicemail

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Prayer: A Journey to Intimacy

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Heavenly Father, we thank you now as we turn to the Scriptures, to this Psalm that you are the Author of all of Scripture and all Scripture is given by the outbreathing of God and profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. So furnish us with your word we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now turn with me to Psalm 130. You'll find it in your Pew Bible on page 518 and in the Children's Bible on page 886.

What do miserable Christians sing? That's a very important question. Some of us don't come to church on a Sunday morning particularly happy and joyful because of trials and difficulties and perhaps we're like this Psalmist, weighed down. Yes, weighed down by a load of care because of our own sin. Arvo Part in that piece of music, of course, was very dark, very somber but so is Psalm 130 upon which it was based and let's read this Psalm together.

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! 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? 4 But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared. 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. 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.

So far, God's holy and inerrant word.

This is part of a short little series on prayer. We're not covering all of the bases, by any means, we're looking at just a few aspects of prayer and this morning prayer that comes from a very dark place; prayer when God doesn't seem to be listening; prayer when you're

not assured that God is hearing you; prayer from the depths. I liken it a little bit to voicemail. I love voicemail when I'm in control of having to answer the telephone, but when I'm making a telephone call, I expect somebody to answer it. How many of you have yelled at the phone? "Answer why don't you!" Or something similar. Sometimes prayer is like that. Your prayers don't seem to be answered immediately. They go to voicemail, or so it seems.

Psalm 130 pictures a watchman on guard on the city walls of Jerusalem, pacing along the walls. In the English translation, it almost sounds like a man pacing, "more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning." And so he's plodding along the wall. He's waiting for dawn to come. He's looking to the eastern sky to see the signs of light and dawn and he can go home to his family. And it reminds the Psalmist here of prayer can be like that. You're plodding along the walls of the city and you're waiting for dawn, you're waiting for light to come. This is one of the ascent Psalms, one of the 15 Psalms of ascent from 120-134, and probably depicting a journey that pilgrims made from far off lands and diaspora Jews especially making their way perhaps to Jerusalem.

"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning." This is a Psalm of lament. I'm sure you wouldn't want Dr. Cole to have us listen to such a plaintive and dramatic piece of music every Sunday; that would certainly not be right. But it set a mood, didn't it? It captured something of your spirit; it captured something of your heart. There is something very solemn here. There is something almost eerie about it as there is in this Psalm. It's coming from a very dark place. Well, he's singing the blues.

It's one of the seven so-called penitential Psalms. It's a Psalm based in the realm of experience. He knows, as we shall see, he knows who God is, he knows what God is like, but he doesn't feel it. He doesn't experience it in his own soul. It's almost as though he's in a great deep, de profundis, in a great deep.

You needn't turn there but in Psalm 69, "Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting," same word, "waiting for my God." This waiting is like being in a quagmire. It's like being in a bog of some kind and the waters are up to my neck and I'm sinking into the mud and he's waiting. He's waiting, changing the metaphor, he's waiting for the dawn to come.

Oh, some of you know all about that. Long nights. Restless nights. You suffer from insomnia. You wake up at 2 o'clock and you can't get back to sleep. You get up, you make a cup of tea and you sit in your favorite armchair, you long, and then you look at the clock and we've all been there. You look at the clock it's 4 o'clock, there's no point going back to bed now and you long for the dawn to come and you can, as it were, say goodbye to that night and the day has dawned again.

John Owen wrote a 350 page, as only John Owen could, a 350 page exposition of this Psalm. He tells us that he experienced something of what this Psalm is saying. He knew what God was like, he knew God's attributes, he knew God's character, he knew God was full of grace and mercy and love and so on, but he didn't feel it in his own soul. He didn't experience it. He felt as though he was in a quagmire, in a great deep.

"Out of the depths, I cry to you." I want you to know, my dear friend, God hears the prayers that come from the depths, those plaintive cries that come from the depths, from some dark cavern somewhere. God hears them. They're not pointless prayers. He may make you wait, that's going to be the lesson of this Psalm; he may make you wait until you experience the full joy of the Gospel. It begins in a great deep.

The problem here and it's a very specific problem here, it's not everybody's problem when they're in a deep. People are in a deep for all kinds of reasons, some for reasons not of their own making like Job, but this particular Psalm is in a deep because of sin. He talks about it in verse 3, "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities." He's become very conscious of his sin. He uses a very specific word, "iniquities." He uses it in verse 3 and he uses it again at the very end in verse 8 and it leaves him without, well, a foothold. Who can stand? His sin trips him up.

I was out walking the dog Thursday evening about 6 o'clock or so. It was still light, it must have been about 5 o'clock or so. And I veered off the usual path and I was in some woods and there was a little creek, it was only 2-3 feet wide. I thought I could jump over it but I had two dogs and I couldn't jump over it and I fell flat on my face. The dogs loved it. But I lost my footing. The ground from which I tried to spring was not firm, it was slippery and I lost my footing. It wasn't a pretty sight.

The Psalmist feels like that. If God should mark iniquities, if he should take a record of iniquities. This word "iniquity," it's a very particular word. It's a Hebrew word that occurs 200 times. It's a very special word. It means "twisted." It means "bent out of shape." It says something about what we are, that we are bent out of shape. It speaks to disposition. It speaks to sometimes we refer to fallen human nature, that's what we are. Well, this word would cover that. Crooked. Twisted. Out of shape. We're not what we were meant to be. Sin has twisted us, distorted us, given us a certain bent in a certain direction and the Psalmist is discovering that he can't change himself like a leopard can't change his spots or the Ethiopian his skin. He's in the depths because he's become very conscious of his iniquities, that he is a sinner. He is bent out of shape.

You can experience this at the beginning of your Christian life but you can experience this throughout your Christian life. You can have been a Christian for 20 years, 30 years, 40, 50 years and you've become conscious of your iniquity, of how great a sinner you are. And a cloud comes over, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Jonathan Aitken, who was the chairman of the London City Bank in the 1980s, 1990s, he was a career politician. He was an MP, member of Parliament for 24 years. He was

Defense Minister. He was Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Then in 1999, he fell catastrophically. The Guardian newspaper, fairly left-wing newspaper, sued him. He was a conservative member of Parliament and the Guardian newspaper sued him for libel and won the case and he was sent to prison for a year and a half. In the short space of a few months, he went through bankruptcy, a divorce and imprisonment in one of the most high security prisons in Britain. He talks in a book that he wrote on the Psalms which includes this particular Psalm, he wrote of the first night in that prison. We won't go into details but he's in a cell. He's a well-known politician. Everybody knows him. He's been on tv every night for months and months and months. That night when the lights go out in the prison, he could hear prisoners calling out his name, saying all kinds of terrible things, threatening all kinds of terrible things.

He was in the depths and he thought of Psalm 130. Somebody had given it to him as he went into prison, a friend, a little pocket book of devotional material. And they stripped him, stripped him naked and then they handed this little thing back to him when they gave him his prison uniform and there in the cell that night, he read Psalm 130. It spoke to him in the depths, "Out of the depths I cry to you!" A Psalm written 3,000 years ago spoke to him. His iniquities had found him out and if God should mark iniquities, who could stand?

And the Psalmist is crying here. You notice, verse 2, he talks about his voice. On two occasions, "my voice." And later he talks about his pleas at the end of verse 2, "the voice of my pleas for mercy!" The problem, you see, is God. It's God's holiness. It's God's righteousness. It's God's integrity. That's the problem here. He can't face his sins and say, "Well, everybody is a sinner and I'm no different and God will forgive because that's what he does." His sins have overwhelmed him. His iniquity has overwhelmed him. A darkness has descended. A cloud has come. He's in a quagmire. He's pacing along the wall waiting for the dawn to come and he's watching. He's watching and waiting. He's watching and waiting.

If the Psalm begins in a great deep, well, it ends in a great confidence, or at least it speaks of a great confidence. There are three things, three companions, if I can borrow a phrase from Alec Motyer's wonderful little commentary on this Psalm. When he thinks about God, God comes with three companions. In verse 4 he says, "But with you there is forgiveness,." Forgiveness. Sin is more than a nuisance. God hates it. We cannot imagine the hatred God has in his being for sin. He cannot look upon sin. It is contrary to his very nature. He is absolutely holy. He is absolutely righteous. He is repulsed by it. The verb for forgiveness occurs 46 times and it's always in reference to God. God is a forgiving God. He forgives. What an amazing thing that is. Are you ready to be caught up with the amazing thing that that is, that God is a forgiving God? He forgives. There is forgiveness with God. He knows that. He knows that in his head. There is forgiveness with God. It's an attribute of God. He forgives.

And then in verse 7, he talks about steadfast love, "with the LORD there is steadfast love." This is one of those huge big words in the Old Testament, chesed. It's a very particular word with a very particular meaning. It's a covenant love. It's a love that is

bound by promises. It's a love that is bound by covenant. Last night there was a wedding right here and two young people, one of our own. I've said those extraordinarily moving words, "For better or worse. For richer or poorer. In sickness and in health. Till death us do part." They made a covenant. They made a promise, a solemn binding promise in the presence of a company of people and in the presence of God. A covenant. And God makes a covenant, a covenant of love. A covenant of love and it's described here as steadfast, or you might render that unfailling. It's a love that never fails. It's always there.

And then a third companion and you find that in the end of verse 7 and then again in verse 8, a noun and a verb, redemption, redeem. Forgiveness, steadfast love, redemption. He redeems. He pays the ransom price, that's what the word "redeem" means. You were in bondage, you were in captivity. That's what iniquity does, it holds you in captivity. It's a disposition of our natural Adamic hearts that renders us unable and incapable of responding to God as we ought and we're held captive. We're like slaves to sin and God redeems us. He pays the ransom price and sets us free. Emancipates. Liberates.

Now do you see what the Psalm is saying? This is a Gospel Psalm. Luther called it one of the Pauline Psalms along with numbers 51, 32, and 143. A Pauline Psalm. Why did he call it a Pauline Psalm? Because he found in this Psalm the doctrine of justification by faith alone. What's the answer to iniquity? What is the answer for this gloom? What is the answer for this inability that the Psalmist feels because of his iniquity? That there is forgiveness with God. That there is steadfast love, covenant love with God. That with him is plenteous redemption; he's paid the ransom price to set us free. Hundreds of people sang this Psalm at Luther's funeral. He loved it so much. They sang it at his funeral.

So the Psalmist is waiting. Notice in verse 5, "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope." I wait and I hope. A waiting hopefulness. A patient hopefulness. A hopeful waiting. It's almost as though he's saying he's busy waiting. He knows God in his mind. Intellectually he knows the character of God. He knows that God is a forgiving God. He knows that God is a God of steadfast love. He knows that God is a God who grants redemption and liberation. He knows that in his head but he doesn't know it in his heart. He doesn't know it in his soul. He doesn't have the assurance of it.

Is that where you are this morning? You come before the Lord in prayer and your sin weighs you down. Your unworthiness weighs you down and you're burdened with guilt. What is the answer, my friend? Well, let me tell you what the answer is not: the way to assurance is not to give up something for six weeks. It seems to be all the rage at the minute. Christians are getting involved in it, to give up something for six weeks. Well, there may be a value in giving up certain things for a certain season of time, but if you think that that's going to give you assurance at the end of it, my dear friend, you are sadly mistaken. There is only one sure way of ridding yourself of this burden of iniquity and that is by casting yourself again and afresh on the merciful forgiving character of God, his steadfast unfailling love; that with him is plenteous redemption.

You notice that he's not only speaking about the individual or himself, in the end he's talking about Israel. He's talking about the whole company of the Lord's people. He's talking about the covenant community itself. God isn't just able to do this for you, he's able to do it for all of his people.

When John Wesley returned from his trip to America, to Georgia, he became very conscious on that trip that although he was on a trip as supposedly a minister of the Gospel, he wasn't converted. He wasn't regenerate. He really didn't know the Gospel. He didn't understand the Gospel. So when he was back in London and he experienced that extraordinary warming of his heart and so on in Aldersgate in London, but just a few hours earlier, he had been at St. Paul's Cathedral and he had heard the choir sing Psalm 130, this Psalm, "How can I get rid of this burden of sin? How can I get rid of this burden of guilt?"

This isn't a Psalm on how to become a Christian so much. Yes, it answers that question, but this is a Psalm for every Christian who along the path of their Christian life get all caught up again in their sinfulness and wretchedness and inability. They're looking and maybe this is you, you're looking to yourself and it's become clear to you again in a fresh season of God's dealings with you that you are after all just a poor sinner, bent out of shape, twisted out of shape, unable in and of yourselves to do anything about it and you cry out, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!" The bottom has fallen out of your life perhaps. Sometimes God allows that to happen to us to make us aware of our sinfulness and his mercy.

You remember that poem of John Newton's,

"I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,
And seek more earnestly his face."

I want to be a better Christian. I want to follow the Lord Jesus more closely, love him more dearly.

"'Twas he who taught me thus to pray;
And he, I trust, has answered prayer:
But it has been in such a way
As almost drove me to despair.

"I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once he'd grant me my request;
And, by his love's constraining power,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

"Instead of this, he made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart,

And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

"Yea more, with his own hand he seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this? I trembling cried;
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
'Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

"These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free,
To break thy schemes of worldly joy,
That thou mayst seek thy all in me."

Well, that's what this Psalm is saying. "Out of the depths I cry to you!" Is that where you are this morning? In the depths? In a dark place? Your mind and soul tormented by the knowledge of your own unworthiness and inability? And you know because you know the Scriptures, you know the character of God, you know about his forgiveness, you know about his unfailing love, you know about his redemption in Christ and you're waiting. You're waiting. The way back is the Gospel way, waiting upon him to come in his mercy and grace and by the power of his Spirit to give you an assurance that the one who trusts in the Lord Jesus and in him alone, their sins are wiped away. No matter what they are, no matter how great they are, no matter how many times they've been committed. Yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's sins, all of them wiped away and we're set free. He's paid the ransom price. Jesus has died and risen again. He's borne the punishment that our sins deserved and borne it to the full and cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" For us. For our salvation so that once again we can come to him over and over, listening to the cry that comes from the lips of the Lord Jesus, "Come unto me all ye that are weary and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

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 and he will redeem you, my dear friend. Pray on hopefully. Wait upon him. Pace up and down the walls of that city until you see the sun rise. And don't stop. Don't stop. Don't give up. Keep looking to the eastern horizon for that sun to rise and renew within your soul once again that glorious assurance of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ that sets us free. I pray this morning that that would be the case for every single one of you.

Father, there are times in our Christian experience when we know all too well the plaintive cry of the Psalmist, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!" You make us feel the hidden evils that lie within our hearts and you open the door of opportunity and we have walked in and done what we should not have done and said what we should not

have said and there is no health in us, but with you there is plenteous redemption and we look to you again. "Nothing in our hands we bring, simply to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ we cling." Grant, Lord, that Gospel, Holy Spirit confirming assurance in our hearts that we are yours and you are ours and a peace that passes all understanding and a joy that fills our souls once again with happiness and the desire to praise you. Lord, speak to us, we pray, as we wait upon you. In Jesus' name. Amen.