



CHURCH of  
the SAVIOUR

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## “Who Could Stand?”

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*Psalm 130*

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<sup>1</sup> Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

<sup>2</sup> Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my supplications!

<sup>3</sup> If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?

<sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with you,  
so that you may be revered.

<sup>5</sup> I wait for the LORD; my soul waits,  
and in his word I hope;

<sup>6</sup> my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

<sup>7</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.

<sup>8</sup> It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.

Jacob was on his way to meet his brother, Esau. Jacob – the son of Isaac and Rebekah, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, the one who had deceived his father, plotted against his family, and stole his brother’s birthright. He had been gone for almost fifteen years. Now, he was about to meet his brother face-to-face for the first time since cheating him out of his inheritance and skipping town. And Jacob was afraid for his life.

Night fell before Jacob and his entourage could reach Esau and his men. Jacob, the conniving, manipulating trickster, sent his herds, his servants, even his wives and his children ahead to make camp, while he pitched his tent behind them on the other side of the river. He wanted to put as much of a buffer between himself and Esau as possible, hoping to mollify or at least delay his anger. That night, in a spiritually foreshadowing moment, a mysterious figure appeared and wrestled with Jacob in his tent. All night this went on, with neither gaining the upper hand. As dawn began to break, they remained deadlocked. It ended with Jacob receiving a blessing, a dislocated hip, and a new name: Israel, which means “struggles with God.”

The next day, Jacob limped to his meeting with his brother, expecting the worst. But instead of a sword, he was met with an embrace. Esau, who had every right to seek retribution – or at least turn his back in scorn – welcomed his brother with open arms. Instead of getting what he deserved, Jacob received mercy and love and a new identity he would carry with him and pass on to his descendants forever.

People sometimes have the misconception that the God we encounter in the Old Testament is vengeful and angry. True, there are descriptions of God’s wrath to be found in the Hebrew scriptures: the banishment of Adam and Eve, the Flood, punishment of unfaithful Israelites in the wilderness, unheeded warnings of the prophets and the defeat and exile of Israel and Judah. But the Hebrew scriptures also provide for us some of the most stirring descriptions of God’s grace and forgiveness: the redemption of Jacob, manna in the wilderness, words of comfort from prophets like Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea, the restoration of Jerusalem. It is, after all, the Old Testament that offers this description for

God: “the LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” That phrase is so often used throughout the Hebrew scriptures that becomes almost a nickname for God. Scripture bears witness that God’s nature is compassion and forgiveness.

Our text for today, Psalm 130, centers on that nature. The psalmist is at a low point in life: *Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. The Message* renders it this way: “Help, God – I’ve hit rock bottom!” We’re not told why, but the surrounding context suggests that some sin or transgression is the cause. The psalmist cries out to God, counting on God’s compassionate nature to intervene. Still, we have the sense that the writer is not altogether assured: *my soul waits for the Lord...more than those who watch for the morning.*

If you’ve ever had to keep an all-night vigil, you know the feeling of waiting for the sun to rise. Whether it’s wrestling with a difficult decision, struggling with illness, or tending a colicky child, the night seems to stretch on forever as you watch for the first signs of dawn on the horizon. *Will this night ever end?* The psalmist evokes that image, waiting to experience God’s mercy yet not entirely certain whether God will grant it. *I’ve confessed my sin and asked for mercy, but will God forgive me? Have I done enough?*

There was once a preacher who told the parable of the Prodigal Son. But instead of ending in reconciliation and forgiveness as Jesus told it, he changed the ending. “The father, furious at the way he’d been disrespected and dishonored, slammed the door in his son’s face. That night, he threw a big party for his older son as a reward for his hard work and loyalty, roasting the fatted calf and inviting all his son’s closest friends. The miserable excuse for a younger son was never seen or heard from again.”

From the last pew, a grim-faced older woman commented, “That’s the way the story should have ended!”

One reason we may find it so difficult to extend grace to others is that we haven’t really learned to accept it for ourselves. We carry around our guilt, even for things that happened long ago. Sometimes that’s because we haven’t atoned for the wrongs we have done. Until we’ve made an honest confession and changed our behavior, we can’t really experience forgiveness. But even when we have, sometimes we struggle to let go of the past. We wait and watch, suspicious that we haven’t really been forgiven, waiting for the other shoe to drop, expecting God (or someone else) to show up and give us the punishment we really deserve. So we stagger through life under the weight of guilt and shame instead of embracing the freedom and joy God offers us through Christ.

This weekend, the Kairos Prison Ministry team is inside Trumbull Correctional Institution, sharing the Good News of Christ’s love with thirty men who’ve signed up to participate – some seeking a word of hope, others just looking for a break from the prison food and the daily grind of doing their time. One of the most important gifts team members share is this truth: *you are more than the worst thing you’ve done.* Many of those who are incarcerated are held captive by more than just the bars of their cell, believing the lie that this is all they will ever amount to, all that they have a right to hope for. But some come to accept that they, too, are children of God created in God’s image, and they begin to experience a kind of freedom, even while remaining in prison. What’s more, those who volunteer come to experience grace more deeply in their own lives because of the ministry they share.

*If you kept a record of wrongs, Lord, who could stand? Who, indeed?*

As an undergraduate in the Glee Club at Miami University, I sang a Latin motet based on this verse from Psalm 130 by Samuel Sebastian Wesley, grandson of Charles Wesley. *Si iniquitates observaveris Domine, Domine quis sustinebit?* “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?” The music and the text made a lasting impression on me, one that has informed my understanding of God’s grace throughout my life. If God keeps a ledger listing every sin we’ve ever committed, every mistake we’ve ever made, how could we ever hope to stand in God’s presence?

The psalm goes on to say, *But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.* This is the good news. God isn’t waiting to catch us in the act of committing a sin, eager to smite us. That’s the *opposite* of God’s nature. God doesn’t want us to languish in a state of sin and guilt. That’s why God came to us in Christ and gave his life for us. There

is no length God will not go to redeem us. We find that assurance in our Bibles, affirm it in our prayers, sing about it in our hymns. So, why do we so often act like God is watching us with a lightning bolt ready to strike? I'm not talking about people *outside* the church who may have very little direct encounter with our practice of faith. I'm talking about the people who make up the church. We, the very ones who should understand God's compassion and mercy the most, so often choose to focus on judgment instead of mercy. Doing so not only harms our witness, but is unfaithful to the Gospel we claim to believe. Who wants to be part of a movement that renders people joyless and sullen, moping around in guilt, reminding ourselves and everyone else how unworthy we are of God's love? Would Christ recognize our lives as the abundant life he came to bring, the freedom from sin and shame he gave his life for?

After waiting and watching, the psalmist comes to this assurance: *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.* I wonder, 28 days into our Lenten journey (and however many years into our own faith journey), can we affirm the words and experience of Psalm 130? And can we begin to receive it for ourselves?

I encourage you to pray Psalm 130 – not just today, but throughout the week. Mark your Bible or print it from the internet, keep it open on your phone, whatever you need to do to display it someplace you won't miss it. It would be a great way both to begin and end the day. I believe that if we make Psalm 130 our prayer, three things will happen:

First, we'll better comprehend the mercy and compassion God has for us. We can learn to place our hope in God and in God's word, not in ourselves or our goodness or our accomplishments. Those aren't the things God measures, anyway.

Second, we'll recognize that God's mercy isn't just for individuals, but for everyone who hears and responds to God. Psalm 130 begins with a very personal longing for mercy and forgiveness. But as the psalmist comes to deeper understanding, it becomes a word of encouragement for all of Israel. It offers the same promise today for all who follow God's way. Faith isn't only about personal salvation, but about God's hope for all the world.

And third, if God doesn't keep a record of wrongdoing, who are we to harbor resentment and anger toward others? In his model prayer, Jesus taught us to ask God to forgive us "as we forgive those who sin against us." That wasn't so we could remind God how stingy we are when it comes to forgiving others, but so we would be reminded of God's limitless capacity to grant us mercy, even when we don't deserve it. God, in Christ, shows us the way of love and grace. We are given the gift of love and grace so we can, in turn, offer it to the world.

*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?  
But there is forgiveness with you  
so that you may be revered.  
Hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and great power to redeem.  
It is God who will redeem us  
from all our sins.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.