



In full expectation of forgiveness

Psalm 130

Introduction

Psalm 130 is the 6th of 7 Psalms that have traditionally come under the designation of “Penitential.” We can detect the following pattern in these penitential Psalms—sometimes every element is present, most times not:

- There is a candid acknowledgement by the Psalmist of personal sin.
- There is an expression of concern that such sin represents a threat to the Psalmist’s open and healthy relationship with God.
- There is a plea that God be merciful, or display his mercy such that the Psalmist feels and experiences God’s merciful forgiveness as a reality.
- There is an expression of confidence that God will graciously bestow the desired forgiveness, thus revealing God’s commitment and willingness to participate intimately with the Psalmist.
- There is a heartfelt expression of gratitude for God’s faithful response in forgiving the Psalmist and permitting him to enter once more into a healthy relationship with his God.

Over many centuries—even millennia—many a sorrowful and repentant sinner has found

that the penitential Psalms express, not only the fears and insecurities that their sins produced, but the comfort that flows from the knowledge of God's generosity, so often reflected in his happy and easy willingness to forgive. Psalm 130 complies with our characterization of penitential psalms. It begins with an expression of the sorrow, distress, and even danger that threatens the Psalmist.

Out of the depths

“Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.”

The Hebrew word translated here as “depths” is *ma^amaqqîm*. In the Old Testament, such “depths” are viewed as watery. They are places at the bottom of unfathomably deep waters. Heavy waters pile on top of persons or objects subjected to such depths. They are always a threat or obstacle. Obviously, we avoid such “depths.” They are dark and wet and cold and isolating and intimidating. They are threatening, suffocating, and killing. But, what, exactly, is the nature of the life-threatening danger that confronts the Psalmist? Is he truly in danger of literal drowning? Or is the threat of depths a metaphor for something else?

To answer this, we turn to verses 3 and 4. Here, we are presented with a question and an assertion. First, the question:

“If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities,
O LORD, who shall stand?”

Now for the assertion:

“But there is forgiveness with thee...”

Given the nature and purpose of penitential Psalms, the nature of the question and assertion, and what follows in the remainder of the Psalm, we can confidently conclude that the “depths” represent the Psalmist's sins and iniquities. He calls for help out of the *depths* of

sin. The iniquity that he finds in himself, along with the threat that it poses to his relationship to God, are not trivial. It is not as if there is a little water swirling around his ankles. His sins feel like a flood—an unfathomably deep abyss. The depths rise and flow far, far above his head. They are so many that they create a great distance between himself and his God.¹ There is no thought that he can, on his own, escape his sins, or bridge the gap that they create between himself and God.

İf thou, lord, shouldest mark iniquities

Having identified the nature of the threat, we turn back to the Psalmist’s serious question:

“If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities,
O LORD, who shall stand?”

Now, it seems best to see the Psalmist’s question as rhetorical. He does not ask the question out of uncertainty. He knows that if the Lord “marks” sin, no one “stands.” But, what, exactly, does the Psalmist mean by “standing.” The Hebrew word translated as “stand,” *‘amad*, has a basic meaning of ‘stand upright.’ It can mean ‘to be established,’ ‘to be immovable,’ ‘to be still,’ ‘to rest,’ ‘to remain,’ ‘to endure,’ ‘to serve.’ We could keep going, but the basic idea seems reasonably clear. Whether it is because of God’s actual attitude toward the iniquity of the sinner, the sinner’s perception of God’s attitude toward his iniquities—real or imagined, or the sinner’s inner psychological perception of self, the sinner is unable to see himself standing comfortably, confidently easily, or acceptably before God.

The Psalmist’s question also evidences another insight. No one “stands” because, there are none without iniquity. In another place, the Psalmist declares that “there is none that doeth

¹ We ask, but will not address here, whether the Psalmist truly needs God’s attitude and response to him adjusted or whether he needs his *perception* of God’s attitude and response to him adjusted. Perhaps, psychologically, it doesn’t really matter. But it relates to a question that I ask often. Was Jesus’ Atonement intended to adjust God’s feelings about man, or man’s feelings about God? Did the Atonement “create” good feelings in God toward us that he did not and could not feel otherwise, or did it “reveal” God’s natural good feelings toward us that he has always and will always possess?

good, no not one.”² Everyone sins, and, having sinned, none stand, but fall. This the Psalmist clearly understands about the nature of man. Based on his knowledge of man and his knowledge of God’s response to iniquity, the Psalmist has the fear that, because of his sins, the much desired healthy and open relationship between himself and God is in jeopardy. This sin induced suspense is the depth of feeling and experience out of which the Psalmist calls out to God. This is the depth of feeling and experience *from which* the Psalmist asks rescue.³

Yet, it seems that the Psalmist believes in the possibility of man standing. If he cannot stand on the basis of possessing no iniquities, upon what principle can man stand? Here, the Psalmist demonstrates that his knowledge extends far beyond that he has of humans and human weakness. We hear the Psalmist speak after this fashion:

“Enter not into judgment with thy servant:
For in thy sight shall no man living be justified.”⁴

More impressive than the Psalmist’s knowledge of humankind, is his knowledge of God. For the Psalmist knows a thing or two about the character of his God and the magnitude of His generosity. If we seem to find in the Psalmist’s “if thou LORD, shouldest mark iniquities...” a hint, an expectation that in some circumstances, at least, God may, in fact, choose not to “mark” iniquities, our feelings are confirmed in the encouraging words that follow.

“But *there is* forgiveness with thee....”

The Psalmist’s testimony to us concerning his God is that, indeed, God does not always and forever “mark” iniquities. When we read of the Lord’s “marking” iniquities, we may think in terms of his “recording” or “writing down” of sins. This is well enough. But we should

² Psalm 14.³ Used by Paul in Romans 3.¹⁰.

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⁴ Psalm 143.²

further explore this business of the Lord “marking” iniquities.

The Hebrew word used here is *šamar*. This word literally means ‘to keep, guard, tend, watch over, and retain.’ So, given his knowledge of the character of God, what is it that the Psalmist is asking from God? What is it that he expects of God? What is his witness about God?

He asks and anticipates that God will not “tend” to his iniquities. When we tend to something we pay special attention to that something, often with some degree of “tenderness.” The shepherd tends to his flock. He guards and watches over them out of devotion. But the Psalmist anticipates that God will neither give special attention to his sin, nor feel tenderness or a preference for doing so. He is not particularly watchful for sin. This is simply not the kind of Being He is!

Now, in saying this, we do not mean to suggest that God remains unaware of sin and error. He knows all things as they really were, really are, and really will be (the definition of truth⁵). Our sins, being a reality of our existence, do not go unnoticed by a loving God. He cannot be ignorant of them and remain “God.” Yet, he does something different with them than do we. He processes human weakness differently than do we. No great surprise, this. It was through the great Hebrew prophet Isaiah that God informed us a bit about His own response to sin found in the penitent.

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,
saith the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”⁶

We could turn rhapsodic about this profound insight into the character of God. We could talk

⁵ See D&C 93.²⁴ and Jacob 4.¹³

⁶ Isaiah 55.⁸⁻⁹. That God is here specifically speaking of his response to sin and sinners is clear from the context. See verse 6-7.

of the size and distances of the universe and how they pale in comparison to the magnitude of God. But we will have to save this for another time. For now, we wish to remain focused on the question of how God processes human weakness differently than do we.

There is much that could and has been said about the attribute of charity. It is “the pure love of Christ”⁷It is, among other things, a love that is like that of Christ. In both 1 Corinthians and Moroni 7 we are provided with a good sized list of Charity’s attributes. These are, of course, not only attributes that humans might possess and exercise in their interpersonal relationships, but also represent those attributes that God Himself possesses and exercises in his relationships with His children.

Among other things, we are told that charity “keeps no record of wrongs”⁸ and “rejoiceth not in iniquity.”⁹ It does not seem altogether unreasonable to consider that these two syntactical neighbors are in some way related. Is it possible that the diligent observance of wrongs flows from a joy that is found in the discovery?

We could think of the disinclination to “rejoice in iniquity” as the disinclination to rejoice (and thus participate) in wicked things. Maybe. But it could also refer to the disinclination to rejoice when iniquity is identified—in self, to be sure, but also, and perhaps especially in another.

Now, before any of us ask, “What kind of person would be happy to find iniquity in another?” let us just say out loud and honestly that most of us have done this. It may, in fact be the principle human motivation for identifying error in others—as unpleasant, discouraging, and ugly as this may sound. Upon identifying weakness in another, we are sometimes gladdened. We are gladdened because the discovery often makes us feel just a bit better about ourselves. It really has little to do with the other, their actions, or feelings. In our insecurity, we often use perceived error in others to “generate” ourselves.

⁷ Moroni 7.⁴⁷

⁸ 1 Cor. 13.⁵ (NIV)

⁹ 1 Cor. 13.⁵⁻⁶

But no such inclinations exist in God. While he observes and knows the error, he does not find personal generation there from. First, he loves us better than that. Secondly, no insecurities reside within His Being. He need not tear another down in order to build Himself up. Oh, how very effective and affective can such a secure Being be in the life of another! Oh, what unfathomable depths abound in Him whom we call “Father,” so loving and secure!

This, then, is the Psalmist’s witness. God is not the kind of Being who, watching us moment by moment from His throne divine, remains diligently watchful and on the hunt for what is wrong with us. He does observe error—who could not, it is everywhere!—but in observing it, He does not pay it inordinate attention. He does not guard it, locking it up somewhere in his soul. He certainly does not feel personal satisfaction in it. He chooses not to be controlled by our sins when it comes to His personal relationship with us. Indeed,

“He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.”¹⁰

If all of this sounds just a bit too good to be true, well, many have so thought. Ammon could not express, let alone grasp the “great power... mercy, and... long-suffering” of God.

“Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest part which I feel.

Who could have supposed that our God would have been so merciful as to have snatched us from our awful, sinful, and polluted state?”

“Oh then, why did he not consign us to an awful destruction, yea, why did he not let the sword of his justice fall upon us, and doom us to eternal despair?

Oh, my soul, almost as it were, fleeth at the thought. Behold, he did not exercise his justice upon us, but in his great mercy hath brought us over that everlasting gulf of death and misery, even to the salvation of our souls.”¹¹

The Psalmist has nothing on Ammon when it comes to expressing the awe he feels for his God! He, like so many of us, stands “all amazed, *confused* at the grace the so fully he

¹⁰ Psalm 103.¹⁰

¹¹ Alma 26.^{16-17, 19-20}

proffers [us].”¹²

My soul waiteth for the lord

The Psalmist has acknowledged his iniquities. He has given voice to the depth of sorrow and uncertainty that he feels as a result of them. In such straits, he has called upon God for mercy and forgiveness. He has given expression to much the same feelings as Alma would do some years later.

“O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.”¹³

Having so said, there is nothing to do now, but wait. There are no divine strings he can pull, no arm twisting of Deity, no irresistible formulas. And what does the Psalmist wait for? He waits or hopes for “his word.” And what “word” or message from the Lord, exactly, does he hope; expect to hear? Far away on another continent during a very different time, another supplicant, Enos was his name, heard the hoped for and pleasing “word.”

“Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed.”

But our Psalmist has not yet heard this pleasing word—this revelation of divine forgiveness. And so, again, we say, “He waits.”

“My Soul waiteth for the Lord
more than they that watch for the morning.”

Now, this can, it seems, be read in two different ways. Perhaps the Psalmist, intimidated by the dark of night and the dangers lurking in the shadows, wrings his hands waiting, waiting,

¹² Hymn #193, “I Stand All Amazed”

¹³ Alma 36.¹⁸

waiting for the morning. “Will it never arrive? The suspense of the night is killing me.” But I, for my part, think of it differently. For me, the Psalmist’s wait is no hand-wringing exercise in fearful impatience. In addition to waiting for the Lord, the Psalmist is “hoping.” He is “expecting.” And so, I ask, “How expectantly do you wait for the morning?” How sure are you of its arrival? Do you go to bed each night wondering, “Will the sun come up tomorrow?” Probably not. Probably you go to bed fully expecting the morning to come.

It is with just such certainty that the Psalmist expects to hear the word of God speaking comfort and healing and forgiveness to his soul. What makes him so sure? Is he sure that he has “done all that he can do”?¹⁴ Probably not. I have yet to meet such a person. There seems always to be this nagging thought in the back of the mind, “I could have done more.” “I should have done better. I have not yet done enough.”

Fortunately, our Psalmist is less myopic, more faithful. He knows what Paul demanded of the believer: “Think God true, though every man be false.”¹⁵ He knew what the Apostle John knew: “If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart.”¹⁶

The Psalmist has learned of God’s faithfulness to his children through his own long experience with God and through God’s own testimony of Self:

“For the oppression of the poor,
for the sighing of the needy,
now will I arise,’ saith the LORD;
‘I will set him in safety from him that puffeth at him.’
The words of the LORD are pure words:
as silver tried in a furnace of earth,
purified seven times.”¹⁷

On this night, the Psalmist is just such an oppressed and needy man. But he has heard the

¹⁴ See 2 Nephi 25.²³

¹⁵ Romans 3. 4; author’s translation

¹⁶ 1 John 3.²⁰

¹⁷ Psalm 12.⁵⁻⁶

Lord's promise: "I arise... I will set him in safety." And he knows that these words are as sure as silver that is put through the hottest purifying furnace seven times!

Now, this certainty—a certainty based upon the character of God, not of himself—produces another kind of waiting and expectation. It is the kind that many of us experienced as children on Christmas eve: You see, again, we did not spend Christmas night in worried "hand-wringing." Rather, we were excited by the joyful prospects of the following day. We couldn't wait! It is just such a wait in which our Psalmist is involved. He knows what is coming in the morning because he knows the generosity of his God.

No wonder he exclaims:

"My Soul waiteth for the Lord
more than they that watch for the morning."

It is important to the Psalmist that he be heard and understood. His certainty about God and his excitement in God must not be missed. And so, just in case we missed it, he says it again.

"I say, more than they that watch for the morning."

Let Israel hope in the lord

With this invitation, the Psalmist reveals his desire that we do more than hear and understand his words. He wants us to join him. He wants us to experience the wonder of God as he has. The Psalmist is an evangelist, a missionary. He so often is.

"I will shew forth all thy marvelous works."¹⁸

"That I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving,

¹⁸ Psalm 9.¹

And tell of all thy wondrous works.”¹⁹

“My soul shall make her boast in the LORD:

The humble [oppressed] shall hear thereof, and be glad.

O magnify the LORD with me,

And let us exalt his name together.”²⁰

“I will give thee thanks in the great congregation:

I will praise thee among much people.”

“My tongue shall speak of thy righteousness

And of thy praise all the day long.”²¹

“I have preached righteousness in the great congregation:

lo, I have not refrained my lips,

O LORD, thou knowest.

I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart;

I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation:

I have not concealed thy lovingkindness

and thy truth from the great congregation.”²²

Well, we could go on and on. The Psalmist goes on and on. He cannot contain himself. He would have gotten along very well, I think, with the great Book of Mormon missionary who exulted,

“Therefore, let us glory, yea, we will glory in the Lord; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, we will praise our God forever. Behold, who can glory too much in the Lord? Yea, who can say too much of his great power, and of his mercy, and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you, I cannot say the smallest

¹⁹ Psalm 26.⁷

²⁰ Psalm 34.²⁻³

²¹ Psalm 35.^{18, 28}

²² Psalm 40.⁹⁻¹⁰

part which I feel.²³

The Psalmist knows as well as Ammon that no matter what he might say about his God or how often he speaks of Him, he will never say enough. He will always sell Him short. Never do him justice. But in concluding this 130th Psalm, the Psalmist declares these three final thoughts:

“With the LORD there is mercy.”

“With him is plenteous redemption.”

“He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

We could double the length of this discourse by examining each of these in order. Perhaps we shall have occasion to do so at a later date. For now, perhaps it is enough to send the reader off with the admonition to ponder and pray about these three truths.

We will conclude by expressing gratitude for the Psalmist’s inspiring, comforting, and hopeful witness. We marvel at his gifts of language. We wonder at the depth of his revelation of God. But more than that, we express gratitude and marvel and wonder at the God about whom he writes so enthusiastically. He deserves every word of praise spoken by the Psalmist, and then some. May we feel as he feels and speak as he speaks. May we be in the life of those around us, what the Psalmist is in ours.

“While I live will I praise the LORD:

I will sing praises unto my God while I have any being.”

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

²³ Alma 26.¹⁶