

July 30/31, 2005

## **Where Does A Sinful Soul Find Hope?**

**Psalm 130**

Pastor Mark Kremer

A few months back I watched on the Discovery Channel an account of some climbers who set off to climb Mount Hood on a spring day. It was a complete snow climb from the bottom to the top of this rather well-known landmark cone-shaped mountain.

There were two different groups that were going up the mountain that day. The first group was made up of three or four men. They got a very, very early start and climbed up the mountain. The second group was a group of five, including a father and his teenage son and some people from work who were some distance behind.

As they set off for the mountain it was a beautiful day. It was really smooth climbing all the way to the top. The first group of men got to the top of the mountain, enjoyed the view for some time, and then began their descent.

Somewhere in the middle of the descent, as they were coming down, they just got careless. They started to, perhaps in pride or arrogance, just not do some things that are commonly known to do when you're climbing.

Rather than driving pitons in and running their ropes through it every fifteen feet, they just simply were anchored to each other, which was about 30 feet apart. The man at the very top of this group of 3-4 men that were coming down slipped at one point and fell, and he fell past the first man and another 30 feet beyond. By that time the momentum was such that it yanked the second guy off the mountain and proceeded to yank the following man off the mountain. They went tumbling down the mountain.

The group still coming up the mountain below them had made one mistake as well, and that is they failed to take into account the fall line of those who were climbing above. And so there they found themselves directly in the path of this cascading mass of humanity coming down the mountain. It wiped all of them out and brushed them all the way to the bottom of the mountain into a giant crevasse some 20 or 30 feet deep.

It was a tragedy. Some were rescued. Some were not.

As I thought about that, it seems like a very good picture of sin. Sin has devastating consequences. In the beginning it maybe is just a few things, but left unchecked, it snowballs and cascades until we find ourselves in places like Lydia in the story I want to read to you this morning:

Lydia was a beautiful young girl. She was artistic. She was talented. She excelled in everything she did. She went to Christian schools and was looked up to by her peers. She could do everything right except keep her mom and dad together. They went through a painful divorce after her father acknowledged that he liked men rather than women. But the mother told her daughter, and so she took out her anger on her mom.

She began to experiment with drugs, and that drug experimentation became a drug habit. During her senior year in high school, Lydia was completely out of control. She took her grandmother's car without permission. She parked it several houses down the street and began loading her belongings, intending to stay with a friend. Her mother could tell how drugged she was. When she confronted her daughter, Lydia burst into a rage, attacking her mother like a wild animal. Her mother called the police.

Lydia sank deeper and deeper into the mire of a horrendous life. Finally, after a close encounter with death, she agreed to go to a rehab program. Of course she excelled at the program and was the number-one patient. Her mother and stepfather went to family week, during which the entire family participates in intensive therapy. Lydia's counselors all gave her rave reviews for her work, assuring Charlotte, her mother, and her husband that she had tackled her problem.

Lydia tried coming home to live with her family, but ended up returning to her dad who was dying of AIDS. Within two months of leaving the rehab program, Lydia was back on drugs, hanging out with her old friends. Her father never grasped how serious a problem she had. Lydia had covered up the truth.

Lydia has been in New York ever since, with long periods of total estrangement from her family and friends. They know that she's been hospitalized several times. One of those times she called, and her mother and sister flew there to bring her home. But Lydia wouldn't hear of it. She has been in prison at least three times. Police stations, morgues, hospitals, and the prison are the places her family has had to search to find her. Her outward beauty has succumbed to the scars of needles from her neck to her toes—no surface of her body has been untouched. Some of her teeth are missing due to a diet of candy. She is the epitome of Satan's seeking to devour and destroy.

- Brendan O'Rourke and DeEtte Sauer, *The Hope of a Homecoming*, NavPress, 2003, pp. 122-124.

The question we want to ask this morning is: Is there hope for somebody like Lydia? And what would Lydia have to do in order to be restored to a relationship with God and with her family to get out of the crevasse, the depths into which she has fallen? Is it possible? What would she have to do?

There's a second question I would like you to ponder as we go through this message this morning, and that is: What is the distance between where you are today and where Lydia is? How far is that?

This morning we have the testimony in the Scriptures of someone who is in the place of Lydia. It's in Psalm 130. Psalm 130 was written by someone who was a Lydia, someone who had come to such a deep and dark place, and I believe he will be able to answer the question.

You'll notice just under the tag line for Psalm 130 it says *A Song of Ascents*. I think we've maybe had one or two of these in the past years when we did psalms, but there's a group of psalms from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134 that are called *Songs of Ascents*. Basically they comprised a song book that the people of Israel would use and they sang from as they would journey up to Jerusalem multiple times during the year for various feasts and festivals—for the Day of Atonement, for Pentecost, and all of those things. And they would sing as they would journey up because it was a long, hard journey. It was no doubt called "Ascents" because of where Jerusalem was.

I have a map on the screen behind me that shows you the topography of the land of Israel, and you will see that Jerusalem is on the top of this mountain some 2,600 feet above the Mediterranean Sea and almost a mile above the Dead Sea. So from almost every place in Israel where you would come from, you would be going up to Jerusalem. And it was a long, hard journey. In fact, the distance between the Dead Sea and Jerusalem is only about 30 miles or so, and so you would think that going from Denver up to the Eisenhower Tunnel and the change of elevation, only in a shorter period of time, would be about the kind of climb up to Jerusalem.

So you can imagine these pilgrims, people coming from all over to worship in the temple. They would sing these songs, and this song was one of the ones that they sang. The psalmist says:

**Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.** (vs. 1-2, \*NASB)

Where is the psalmist when he begins to write this? Well, he's in the depths. He's at the bottom of the sea. The imagery is of someone who is drowning in the sea, someone who is at the very desperate state, at the end of their rope where there is no place to turn, no rope to grab onto, no ladder rung to grab hold of. There is nothing. Very simply he's being swallowed up. It has the idea of chaos, of fear, of darkness, of despair. This is the end of the rope. This is the deep crevasse. There is no hope for someone to climb out of a place like this. That is where the psalmist is.

And as he is in the depths, he does the only thing that he can think of to do, which is to cry out to God. He says, "Lord, from the depths I have cried to you. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications." Verse 2 is used a number of times in the Old Testament, which just signifies the intensity of someone asking God to intervene, to step in, of asking God to give His mercy and to rescue this person. It's used in Nehemiah and Isaiah 37. It's used in Psalm 5. You see the same phrase.

And what it all really comes down to is the fact that the word here for "Lord" is the word for God being a personal God. This is not a cry to a force or a power, or something out there that's unknown, that's not personal. This is a cry to a personal God—a God who has a personality, who has characteristics, a God who can hear, who can see. That's the kind of God that Israel had. That's the kind of God that we have—a personal God who can hear and see and know where we're at.

And so the cry is, "God, open Your ears to hear! Hear my cry for mercy!" That word "supplication" means a desperate cry for mercy. He is asking God to step in, not because he deserves it, not because he has merited God's intervention. It's not like, *God, I've done a whole bunch of things for You, so please step in and do me a favor, and I'll do a favor back*. This is the desperate cry for mercy with nothing to offer in return, but someone who is at the very end of their rope.

Now, through the psalms we've seen various writers of the different psalms be in the depths for a lot of different reasons. What is the source of this particular writer being in the place where he's at? Well, it's in verse 3:

### **If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?**

It's very clear from this verse that the reason the psalmist is in the depths is because of his sin. His sin has taken him down, just like Lydia, to the place where there is absolutely no hope. He is near unto death and despair, and so he cries out to God for mercy, for deliverance. But as he is crying out and he's at the end of his rope, his thinking suddenly becomes very clear and he ponders what is said in verse 3: "Lord, if you would mark [*observe and record*] my sins, who could stand?"

Now that word "if" there doesn't mean, "Lord, if by chance You would do that..." It means "...*Since* you observe and record my sins, who could stand?" The reality is that God does see and know everything we do. Nothing escapes His notice. In fact, we're told in Revelation 20 that at the end of all the ages, every person who has ever lived will be gathered together to stand before God. And it says the books will be opened and every person judged according to the deeds written in the book.

The psalmist at the end of his rope has come to this very dark conclusion: "Lord, because you have observed and seen all of my actions, who can stand?" And the answer is obviously no one can stand. "I can't stand. I have no standing before You." That word "stand" really has two meanings, and I think both could be applied here, and perhaps both were intended. One meaning is to be able to stand before a judge in innocence. So he is saying, "Since Lord, You know, observe and recorded my sins, I have no way of standing innocently before You." I can't stand before God and

say, “Well, God, You know I’m innocent. Let me in. You can accept me on the basis of what I’ve done. My record’s clean.” He can’t do that. In fact, none of us can.

James says that if you keep the whole law yet offend it in one point, you’re guilty of offending the whole law. So every single one of us finds ourselves at some point in our life in the same place this psalmist is, with the stark realization that God sees and knows and hears everything we do, and He has recorded it down and we are without hope. We have no way of innocently standing before Him at judgment and Him saying, “Oh yeah, you’re good.”

There’s a second meaning to this word “stand” which means to be able to stand in the company of; in other words, to be able to have a relationship with. And he says again, “Because you have observed and written down my sins, there is no way that I can stand and have a relationship with you.” There is no way I can enjoy God’s company. I can’t live in His presence. I can’t enjoy what my heart most deeply longs for—which is a relationship with God—because of my sin.

Now that’s a place every single person has got to come to in order to experience what follows in this psalm. You’ve got to come to the realization that, *I have no merit of my own, nothing to stand on. I have nothing except the mercy of God to cry out for. I can’t pull myself up. I can’t dig in.* In fact, it was interesting, as these men told the story of falling down this mountain, several of the survivors talked about all of their attempts along the way to dig their axes in and their picks in and their shoes in, and everything they could to stop the fall. But there was absolutely no way. The momentum and weight of what was going down that mountain was too great for any person to stop.

Again, it’s a picture of our sinfulness. There is no solution or resolution that we can come up with in order to resolve the sin issue that I have, that you have. But notice verse 4:

**But** [*which means “even though what I’ve just written is true”*] **there is forgiveness with You.**

That’s one of the greatest truths there has ever been uttered to mankind, that there is forgiveness in you. A simple cry for mercy, a belief that God is a forgiving, loving God; that when we cry out and ask for God’s mercy, because He has taken the punishment for our sin, results in forgiveness.

Now in the Old Testament times, of course the promise of the Messiah, the promise of One who would come to take away sin permanently was still far off in the distance. But God had instituted the sacrificial system, and so even as these people would sing this song coming up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, they are reminded of the fact that God has to intervene in order for their sins to be forgiven. The sacrifice has to be made. A lamb has to be offered. But ultimately they understood and knew that the Messiah would come. They knew that God would have to offer Himself as the sacrifice, the substitute sacrifice for sin, because God could not still be God and just blow sin off. This is not a cheap forgiveness. This is not a God saying, “Well, that’s not a big deal”—because God would cease to be God. He would cease to be good if He ignored evil and sin.

And so they, with longing, went through the sacrifices; and those who had a contrite and broken heart understood it wasn’t just going through the motions. They very much felt the weight of their own sin like the psalmist does here. And they acknowledged their sin and they understood that the blood of that innocent spotless lamb was what was required in order for forgiveness to be received. But ultimately Jesus Christ fulfilled all of that when He Himself bore our punishment on the cross.

Because of what God has done, there is forgiveness, even from the depths. There are people who I think feel like they are too far gone. They feel their sin is too great—that they have so offended God, so done such horrific things that there is no way that God could ever accept them, could ever

forgive them. And yet the cross and its blood and its work is enough to cover every sin, even those like Lydia, who we would think of as in the very bottom of the crevasse.

Notice what the psalmist says:

**But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.** (v. 4)

Now that word “feared” does not mean to be afraid of. It means to hold in highest esteem, or to be in awe of. There is forgiveness with God, that we might be awed by that kind of a God—a God who would be able to take someone who is in the depths because of their own actions, because of their own sinfulness, and wipe the record clean and restore them. It causes us to be staggered, to be in awe of a God who could do that for us.

You know, it’s one of the marks of someone who you know is genuinely repentant of sin. If you really understood your sinfulness and what God offers to you, you are a worshiper. You are a thankful, grateful, worshiping person. You just can’t help but be in awe of a God like that, that He could do what He has done for me...for you...for somebody in the depths.

God wants us to see Him as He really is. He wants us to hold Him in the highest esteem. And when we understand the forgiveness that we don’t deserve but is offered to us, that is exactly what happens in our hearts.

Now what would you expect of someone who has cried out for mercy, asked for God’s forgiveness—what would you expect them to do after that? Once they had found that mercy and forgiveness, what would they do? Well, the next verse tells us what the psalmist did:

**I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait...** (v. 5a)

This word “wait” is repeated here a number of times. It’s meant for emphasis, and it communicates that the psalmist is going to wait and wait and wait, and keep waiting on God. He is going to keep his face now turned towards God. He is no longer going to go run off and do his own thing, but he is going to stay inclined in his heart towards God. That word “my soul” does not mean a part of you as a person (e.g., your heart, etc.), but in the Hebrew mind, the soul represented the sum total of who you are. They didn’t see a person as divided into different parts. They saw it very holistically. So another way to say that would be, “I wait for the Lord; with every fiber of my being I wait for the Lord.

**And in His word do I hope.** (v. 5b)

He’s saying, “In God’s promises do I hope.” And what are the promises of God? Well, the promise of God to His people was that if they confessed their sin, if they acknowledged that they lived as broken and contrite people, that He would step into their lives, that they would have fellowship with Him, that He would heal their land, that He would restore them, that He would bless them. And so the psalmist says, “I’m keeping my face, my heart, my mind inclined towards God. I’m waiting for God now! I’m not going off to do my own thing, which was what got me down the slippery slope into the crevasse. Now I’m waiting on God. I’m waiting for His word because I believe His promises are true. I believe He is going to restore what has been lost. I believe His forgiveness.”

He says in verse 6:

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

Again, we have a hard time understanding the whole watchmen thing. In our day and age, our defense of our city is not dependent on walls and watchmen. It's satellite surveillance and radar and those kinds of things. But in this day, the only defense a city had was the wall and the men who stood on the wall all night long to guard against, during the most dangerous time of the night when enemy attacks could come suddenly upon a city. And the watchmen who had to stay up through those long, dark nights of fear, of anguish, of wondering whether something bad was going to happen, longed for and waited for the morning light. They couldn't wait to see that first ray of dawn coming across. "Oh, the night's going to be over, the light is going to shine, the danger is passed. It's going to be morning. It's going to be light. We're going to be able to see and defend ourselves."

Really, the psalmist is saying, "You know, I've been in the depths. I've been in this dark period of my life, but I'm longing for the morning. I'm not hoping the morning will come; there's no question the morning is going to come!" The watchman didn't stand on the wall and say, "Man, I hope the sun comes up tomorrow... this is going to be a long night." No, there was an expectation of the morning light. You could count the hours until it came. And that is what the psalmist is saying. "I know God is going to show up in my life again. I know He is going to restore what has been lost. I have all the confidence in the world because of His promises, because of His word. He is going to involve Himself in my life again. He is going to restore what has been lost!"

Again, one of the great evidences of whether or not we have genuinely repented of our sin is: Is our heart inclined towards God? Do we just confess our sin and then go on about our way? Or do we come to God and confess our sin and then say, "I am going to wait for You, God. I'm going to long to rebuild my relationship with You. I'm going to wait for restoration. I'm going to seek relationship with You"?

Now, go with me here—this is going to be a stretch—but if I would sin against my wife, offend her in some way (yeah, I know it's hard to believe), but if I were to do that and then come to her and say, "Donna, I am so sorry for what I've done; I need you to forgive me," what would she be looking for as an evidence that was sincere? Well, one of the evidences would be, do I want to be with her? Did I just confess and run off out the door again to go about doing my own thing, or did I re-incline my whole life towards her? Do I say, "I want to spend time with you, I want to know you, I want to live in intimacy with you, I want to understand you, I love you and so I want to be together"? That is the mark of my genuine repentance and confession. It's the same as the psalmist is saying here. The mark of the genuineness of his confession and repentance is that he has re-inclined his entire life towards God and he is waiting on God, and he is longing for the full restoration of what has been lost because of his own sin.

Now, I have to tell you that I have been in a place very similar to the psalmist. Unless you think that the depths is only when you're in a place like Lydia is in the story (on drugs, estranged, etc.), oh no, there are depths that aren't like that. Probably about a dozen years ago in my life I decided that I was going to basically set off to prove some things, to make my mark in the world, to do it my way. And frankly, it was not a conscious choice to leave God out of the picture. In fact, I remember in the early days of that I asked God to bless what I was doing. You know, I didn't say, "God, what do You want me to do?" I said, "God, here is what I'm going to do, and I want You to bless it." That's sin.

But I began to do that. And of course, as you begin to do that, things don't work out. God had his hand firmly on my life; and one thing would lead to another thing and one sin would lead to another sin, and I found myself after a few years very much in the depths, at the end of my rope, all the options having run out. And I did exactly what the psalmist did. I cried out to God for mercy. I

know the exact spot and place. There's a basement in a building in Aurora where I had this conversation with God, and I re-inclined my life towards Him.

But I want you to understand something; that even today, some seven or eight years later, I am still waiting for full restoration. Now, I am not hoping that some day the damage that I caused because of my sin will be restored. I'm not wishful thinking. I believe it. I know it. It's God's promise. But when you have offended God and you have hurt people because of your sin, don't demand of them that they get over it just like that. *"Well, I confessed it. I mean, come on, God, pour out the blessing again! Get over it! Forgive me!"*

No, the process of restoration is just that: a process. But I can tell you today that without a doubt God is going to do His full work of restoration. And if you have found yourself in the depths far from God, estranged from Him, and if you have genuinely come in confession and repentance and cried out for mercy based on the work of Jesus on the cross for you, He is doing a work of restoration in your life. And He will take all of the misery and the pain and all the struggle that has been a part of your experience, and He will renew it and restore you and rebuild your life. You can count on it, just like the sun coming up tomorrow morning.

There is a sense in which we are all still waiting for that restoration because ultimately we still live in a sinful world. We still battle the flesh. But one day, the Scripture tells us, at the very end, life is going to be made brand new. We are going to be in a new heaven, a new earth. Every tear will be wiped away. We will be freed not only from the power of sin but from the very presence of sin, and there will be a full restoration. Everything will be made right. And there is a part of each and every one of us that longs for that day when that will happen.

That is the heart of the psalmist. Having been in the depths and cried out for mercy, he is longing for, he is waiting for God. He is seeking relationship with God. He is counting on God to show up in his life and restore what has been lost.

He begins this psalm by turning from himself and his own story to exhort his brothers and sisters, all of Israel, all of God's people.

**O Israel, hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption** [*overflowing deliverance*]. (v. 7)

Again, we go back to this understanding that some have that feeling of, *I've sinned too greatly; I can't possibly find forgiveness in God.* And he says, "No, there is very great deliverance available to us through God. There is not a sin, there's nothing that you've done that God cannot abundantly forgive and free you from." If you are in bondage to sin today, God has the ability and power to deliver you from it. You simply need to cry out and ask for mercy and allow Him to begin that restoration process in your life. There is abundant redemption.

**And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.** (v. 8)

He will ultimately free His people from all their sins. That is our hope, and the psalmist says, "I exhort you. Don't go to where I've been, but hope in the Lord."

Perhaps you're not in the depths. Maybe you're still up at the top of the mountain. But understand that it's not a very far distance from the top to the bottom, and the only thing that will keep you from sliding down the slippery slope of sin is a broken heart—a heart that understands and sees its own sinfulness and confesses it and asks for God's mercy as a regular part of your experience.

For those of you who find yourself in the depths, whether in a deep dark place like Lydia or whether in some other place, but you're at the end of your rope, you are in bondage in sin, you understand there is no way to get yourself out, there is no human hope in this whole thing, no ladder rung to grab hold of, no rope to pull yourself up by. Then God exhorts us in this psalm to cry out for mercy and find forgiveness in Him.

But for those of us who are not at that point, we must be aware of the slippery slope of sin, how easy it is for us to see sin in other people, how difficult it is to recognize it in ourselves. A broken and contrite heart is a heart that daily goes before God and says, "God, show me the error of my way. Show me the sins that are part of my life. Show me where my attitude, my motives, my heart, my tone, my actions—whatever those things are that are offensive to You and hurtful to people—what is it that's sin in my life?" And the only hope that you and I have of not sliding down the slippery slope of sin is confession—repentance and confession as a way of life. It is not just for those who are in the depths. It should be a way of life for us.

I keep in my Bible (in Bryan's this morning) a couple of little things that help remind me on a daily basis. Both of these were laminated by Donn Stoner, and I keep them and just pull them out every single day. One is the contrast between proud people and broken people. The other is a little list of traits of the self-life. Because you know what? I know myself, and I may not be out stealing, committing adultery, doing all kinds of things that we think of as sin. But I know the ugliness that can come up out of my own flesh and the things that I can do out of the wrong reasons, the wrong motives that are selfish. And I understand that every day I have to make confession a part of my life. You see, the distance from the top of the mountain, a safe and secure place, to the depths is one step—one sin left unconfessed that festers and grows, that leads to another and another and another. And the momentum picks up, and we find ourselves hurtling down the mountain, wondering, *How in the world did I get here? I mean, I just took one step.*

The contrast between those men hurtling down the mountain who had nowhere to turn, nothing to grab hold of, no hope at all until they hit the bottom, the difference between them and what happens in our life is that all over the face of the mountain that we're on is the hand of God—the strong, rescuing hand of God.

And whether you're just at the very top taking that first step, and you realize, *Man, I sinned*, and you reach out through a cry for mercy for God's hand, He's there; or whether you're hurtling down the mountain in increasing speed, He's there. His hand is there. All you have to do at any point along the way where you may be sliding away is to reach out, call out for God, and His strong rescuing arm will lift you up and place you back on a rock that is solid and secure. And He will restore your life and your relationship with Him, and He will restore even your relationships that have been hurt because of your sin.

*Our Father, use these moments to speak into our hearts. Peel back the blinders. Take away the deception. Lord, help us to shame the shame and come clean with our sin, to acknowledge before You this morning, that we might find the forgiveness and mercy You so long to pour out. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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