

The view of the present writer is that the reformed tradition has often failed to be adequately biblical in its theology of the body and has often hidden behind unproven theological presuppositions in its attempt to counter certain modern trends in worship. Sadly, a

failure to be radically biblical has meant that unhelpful practices have developed and remained unchallenged by adequate arguments. It would be encouraging to see those within the reformed movement take up the challenge!

Psalm 130

Out of the Depths

STEPHEN DRAY

This psalm must surely be approached by the preacher with the greatest reserve for in this psalm we tread on holy ground. For, here, we are brought face to face with one of the most glorious mysteries of the Christian faith as God reveals his heart of love to us; the preacher is understandably fearful lest he or she trivialize this message.

Yet it is a message that needs to be heard; for we live in a guilt-ridden age. Around us we witness the tranquilizer and psychotherapy booms as men and women seek to hide their deep sense of alienation in a drug-induced stupor or in psychological mumbujumbo designed to deny the obvious. Sadly (and all too frequently) we also live among members of a guilt ridden church. Few seem to have discovered that profound awareness that grace has stooped even to the gates of hell itself to lift forgiven sinners to the very throne of the holy God. Thus, we seem to find it difficult to believe the very gospel we proclaim!

The consequence of all this is that among any congregation of any size, there will be non-Christians burdened by their sense of failure and (perhaps dimly) aware that they stand condemned by God. There will also be believers troubled by past and present failures (real or imagined) who desperately need to meet God in a new way and hear his reassuring voice (though perhaps convinced that is no longer possible!).

Good news is at hand! For the writer of Psalm 130 began crushed under sin, but ended with the certain knowledge of God's forgiveness and the prospect of a new (renewed) intimacy in his relationship with God. If this is your need . . . read on.

Hellish Suffering (1-3)

The opening verses of this Psalm proclaim the painful truth that it is hell (the word is used advisedly) when we suffer from guilt.

The first words of verse 1 capture this thought well. For the psalmist thoughts of helplessness, despair, terror, a teetering on the brink of Hell are all in mind in the words, 'Out of the depths'.

Some years ago, while working for a government department, my father was partly responsible for sending a dozen people to prison who had deliberately defrauded the authorities of public monies. Expecting a small fine instead of a prison sentence the guilty were furious with their penalty. Angry at their being caught, near relatives of the accused promptly betrayed several dozen others! Accompanying the mixture of anger and remorse at being caught there was self-justification in abundance. Sometimes the shafts of guilt can be deflected in this way. However, the psalmist was experiencing pain where self-justification or self-pity were ineffective to ease his condition. The profound sense of guilt would simply not go away.

Moreover, his condition was exacerbated by the thought that he had failed God (3) . . . as if it were not enough to have failed himself he stands under the greater condemnation! When I lived in London, the local newsagents often had a sign outside the shop with the message, 'Everyone needs Standards'. The purpose of the poster was to encourage the sale of the capital's evening newspaper! However, even the most debauched members of society recognize the importance of standards. Sometimes it is an agonizing experience when we fail to meet our own standards. The psalmist, however, recognized he had failed one who was far greater than himself. Small wonder he feels himself tumbling helplessly downward to oblivion (or, worse, judgement)! Humanly speaking, there was simply no way back. He was doomed!

Have you felt like that? Or, can you identify in some way with the psalmist? Is there some past failure which

keeps coming back to haunt you and leaves you with a sense of shame and guilt which you may hide from others but cannot hide from yourself? So often this is true; not least in evangelical circles!

What, then, is the answer, or, is there one? After all, we too can be as desperate as the psalmist (2)!

Helpless But Not Hopeless (4)

Gradually, the psalmist begins to build upon those truths which God has revealed and not merely upon his feelings. He begins to see that his problem lies with the fact that his God is too small! There are two things, in particular, that he begins to grasp.

First of all, he recalls the character of God. With dawning awareness, he remembers the truth that he has often declared in the midst of God's people. 'With you', he declares, 'is pardon!'. The very God before whom he feels condemned, in the depths of his sin, is a pardoning God!

Secondly, he reminds himself of the purpose of God. He recognizes that God's whole purpose is to manifest his glory in the world through such forgiveness as will leave people 'gobsmacked' into awe-struck love!

It is the chiefest of sinners that God purposes to forgive and save in order to display his beauty more fully to the watching world! Thus, hope begins to throb in the psalmist's heart (as it ought in yours and mine!). His love stoops even to the brink of hell!

The story is told that when John Wesley visited Deptford in south east London and witnessed the depravity of the area, he was encouraged to expect a 'harvest of souls' since, he reasoned, there was no better place for God to demonstrate his merciful glory.

John Bunyan once wrote a book entitled, 'The Jerusalem Sinner Saved'. In the book, he asks the question of why the disciples were sent by Jesus to preach first of all in Jerusalem. His answer; they were the worst of sinners who had been instrumental in nailing Jesus to the cross and it was to them that Jesus wished to first offer his mercy.

It was this profound awareness of the gracious majesty of the holy God which gave the psalmist renewed hope.

Renewed Intimacy (5, 6)

It may be that our sin causes us to echo William Cowper's immortal words, 'Where is the blessedness that once I knew when first I met the Lord?'. Indeed, it may be that the sense of our loss of intimacy with God is greater than (or as great as) our sense of guilt. The true believer does not want to know simply of pardon but the assurance of renewed intimacy (not always but often lost as a result of sin).

Thus, though assured of pardon the psalmist still yearns (note the 'pathetic' character of verse 6) for God, though within this psalm God's return is not described. Within the inscrutable will of God such refreshing experiences of his presence are sometimes delayed (as Cowper and thousands of others can affirm). However, though it is yet to be experienced it is still guaranteed, for the words of hope expressed by the psalmist are those of confident, expectant, assured trust.

A penitent and believing response to God's word in this psalm may well bring renewed intimacy today! But even where God in his inscrutable will delays to shine into our hearts, the psalmist tells us we can be sure of the pardon right now and have the guarantee that though we still feel in the darkness the dawn is as certain to follow the night as day succeeds to day!

A Parting Word (7, 8)!

It is one of the quirks of the human condition that the person who is cast down and depressed always inclines to the belief that what is true for everyone else cannot possibly be true for them!

Wonderfully, this psalm forecloses on such! In words of deliberate and emphatic character, we are told three things. First of all we are given a guarantee: God will pardon. There are no 'ifs' and 'buts' here. God will, he must forgive.

Secondly, this forgiveness extends to 'Israel'; in other words, to all those who are truly God's children and look to him for forgiveness. Again there are no exceptions. In the Book of Revelation we are told that 144,000 enter the great tribulation and 144,000 come out the other side. I am so grateful that the second figure is not 143,999 since there are times when I could easily convince myself that I was the exception! There are, however, no exceptions in Revelation and none in this text. God is committed to forgiving all his children.

Thirdly, we are informed that God will redeem from 'all their sins'. Sometimes Bible versions let us down very badly! The NIV has done that here. The word translated 'all' could be, perhaps, rendered better, 'from each and every'. Moreover the word 'sin' hides away the word that (within the rich vocabulary for sin in the Old Testament) describes sin at its worst.

What a wonderful promise. Each and every failing, even those that have plumbed the very depths, are guaranteed forgiven to the penitent. And to believe anything else is unbelief!

Winding Up

The NT offers us the same assurance (see 1 John 1:8-2:2) but it adds the gloriously additional ground; not only does God's heart (open up here) but Jesus' cross stand witness! There is 'abundant pardon' with our God.