

“Hard Truth in the Mirror”

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Scripture - Psalm 130

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

²Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!

³If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?

⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

⁵I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

SERMON

Why would anyone begin a monolog by saying, “Out of the depths...”? Is this about some strange creature from the deep ocean? Maybe a sailor overboard? I don’t think so. But it sounds like it has to do with sinking, sinking somewhere, into something.

The Psalmist seems to be in some sort of despair or emotional turmoil. Did he do something wrong? Has someone judged him? Maybe it’s a guilty conscience.

Could be.

Commentaries will tell us that ‘the depths’ means as though from the underworld. Something of pain and alienation makes the psalmist feel much like those who go down into the ‘pit’ which is the lowest of the low in

terms of misery and anguish. You might have heard it referred to as 'Sheol' in Hebrew terms.

Whatever it is, as Prissy said in *Gone With the Wind*, he's feeling 'mighty poorly.' I wonder what's got him down so much?

Over the years, my reading often brings me to the term 'human condition'. I'm sure there are people much smarter than I who have always known exactly what this is referring to. I took the occasion of preparing this sermon to do some serious looking into the subject.

I could not find a specific definition, but I found a list of quotes that all seem to point in one direction. I see no need to read all of them to you, but here are three that seem to jump out at me.

First, Blaise Pascal said, "I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber."

Pascal was never one to say things in simple terms. I think there are numerous interpretations of this quote, but they always would be some reflection of human behavior.

Which led me to the next quote by Cormac McCarthy, an American author and playwright. In his book, *Blood Meridian*, one of his characters said, "A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he don't want to. Best not to look in there."

I wonder what he might find in his heart.

Jesus often spoke of the heart. In the fifth chapter of Matthew, he spoke of hate in one's heart being the same as murder. He spoke of lustful thoughts being the same as adultery. If you look more, you will find many examples of Jesus knowing just what was going on in someone's heart.

I wonder what Jesus sees in my heart? Or your heart?

But back to my list, and this one is my favorite: Ronald Rolheiser, a theologian from Canada said "It is no easy task to walk this earth and find peace. Inside of us, it would seem, something is at odds with the very

rhythm of things and we are forever restless, dissatisfied, frustrated, and aching.”

Sounds like, “From out of the depths.”

Recently, I was sitting in the waiting room of my doctor’s office, running some of these thoughts through my head and it occurred to me that we usually think of sin as specific, circumscribed events. The Ten Commandments points us in that direction of thinking. What if they’re not? What if sin is a smoldering, ever-present state of mind with peaks and valleys? What if it is something we carry around inside us? Maybe, maybe not.

I think I may have had a glimpse of what is meant by the ‘human condition.’ Maybe.

We struggle with what we see in the spiritual mirror. We know we are imperfect, and the longer we look, the more faults we see.

How does the average person deal with this? Psychologists might use a word like compartmentalization. We take the nagging guilt and put it in a box, a box on a shelf, a high shelf where we must struggle to retrieve it. When things are going well, this is not hard to do. In fact, we probably do it without knowing.

But some things in this life can rattle that shelf and all the boxes come tumbling down. They hit the floor and burst open, spilling out all of their vile contents. And we cannot avoid seeing what is in them.

Sometimes the days and nights are not long enough to pick them all up and put them back in their boxes.

And then sometimes, this mighty hand reaches down and scoops them all up with one swipe. And sometimes God sends one of His ambassadors to do it. People like you. Maybe, like Stephen Ministers.

Human condition. The precise definition still eludes me, but we all have it.

Maybe that’s what the Psalmist was talking about.

Jesus said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.' Have you ever wondered about that? Is that part of the human condition?

I think not.

'Poor in Spirit' does not mean we are weak or lacking in courage. It does not mean we say, 'I am nothing, unimportant.' It means we see our own insufficiency in God's eyes. Moses felt that way, as did David and Isaiah. But, none of these men ceased to be bold. They recognized that their abilities came not from themselves only, not from their social status, not from their family lineage. But we are humbled when God chooses us for a task we could not do by ourselves.

Maybe that is what the psalmist speaks of.

Humility.

One thing for sure; when we look at all possible explanations of this psalm, humility rises to the surface each time.

Humility that comes from guilt is not the kind of humility God wants us to have. God's version of humility is turning away from focusing on self and toward focusing on others.

Scholars will tell us that this psalm is a song of ascent, meaning it was one of a collection of songs that were sung by pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem and while climbing up the temple steps. It was probably part of a compilation of psalms gathered together after the return from exile. So, here was a people who knew, historically, where they had gone wrong and did not want a repeat performance.

But the psalm was written earlier than the exile, much earlier. Perhaps by David. The human condition has been around since Eden.

According to this psalm, God doesn't keep score. The thief on the cross certainly did not get there by being an angel. And yet, Jesus promised him eternity in paradise.

When our oldest son was a young teenager, he came home from a bible class and said, "I hope, when I get to heaven, I don't meet an old man with a clip board." Quite a statement from a 13 year-old.

But, he need not worry.

And if God did keep score, none of us would have a snowball's chance. The psalmist is so aware of this.

Hmm.. This sense of awareness; is it more of that human condition business? Did David have a spiritual mirror?

But, the verses speak of forgiveness. They speak of it with conviction and as though it had been around for a long time. I did a word search for the term, 'Forgiveness' and the earliest I could find was when Joseph forgave his brothers who sold him into slavery. But, that story did not use the word as though it was something new.

In the third chapter of Genesis, the man and woman in the garden are in bad trouble. They hide from God and then claim they did so because they were naked. Their human condition was exposed, and they felt self-conscious, so they made an excuse. In verse 21 of that chapter, God made garments of animal skins for them and clothed them.

So, God recognized the source of discomfort and attended to it. In this verse, we have one of the first examples of God's compassion. As I see it, one cannot give compassion without first giving forgiveness. True, there were consequences, but we cannot ignore the sense of forgiveness.

So, forgiveness has been around for a long time and the psalmist begs for it. The fact that he asks for it implies the assumption that God's love and forgiveness can overcome any barrier erected by humanity's iniquity. No need to memorize any verses for this occasion. Just one thing to remember; forgiveness is yours. Just ask for it.

What if the psalmist had not recognized his sinfulness, his inherent imperfection, his human condition? Do you know anyone like that? You should. Our society is FILLED with people who are like little Jack Horner who stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plumb and said, "What a good boy am I."

Silly little nursery rhyme for children. But one with a strong message to adults and anyone else who thinks he/she is without sin.

Our society today is no different than at the time this psalm was written. The human condition is just as hard to look at as it was thousands of years ago.

And the psalmist has faith. Faith and hope; and lastly he has patience. He knows that God works on his own timetable. He waits like someone who watches for the morning.

Patience. In these days, that is a word like *dinosaur*. You hear about it, you know about it, but you never see it.

One possible explanation that has been tossed around for the decline of today's churches is the lack of patience. Patience while waiting for God's will to be enacted. Patience while our feeble brains sort out the meaning of scripture. Patience while God's flock stumbles through their own interpretations of scripture, all the while getting closer and closer to the truth, but not exactly with crystal clear understanding.

Patience is simply not at the top of the hit list for so many people. What is it we want instead? We want a straight line between two points, more computer memory, faster passwords, smarter smart phones, self-driving cars, satellite relays, microwave dinners, the best I-Tunes, quick loans, and voice and facial recognition. And we want it now!

And what's more, we want total control over all of this!

What happened to humility? Has it been overshadowed by the need for control?

Among other things, control includes people who want to sit back in self-indulgence and be 'FED' during the worship service; what some call the "Spiritual Fantasy" mode. It is done on their terms, on their schedule, at their own convenience, and with their own preconceived outcome. Those who do this are looking to come away with a warm, cozy feeling that costs nothing, is done in total privacy, and creates or accomplishes nothing. Maybe such people have never cried out from the depths.

I have no person or church in mind when I say this, but we have all seen it somewhere, some time. It is something you should be aware of and avoid.

God is someone you cannot tell to hurry up and you cannot control Him.

Our God is a personal God, but also a God of nations.

Typical of so many psalms, the psalmist then turns his attention to God's blessing on his nation. Israel is mentioned twice in the last two verses of today's reading. But God is the Father of all nations. What if we hear these two verses again and we hear America in place of Israel. Let's try it.

O America, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with Him is great power to redeem.

It is He who will redeem America from all its iniquities.

Does America need to clean off its spiritual mirrors?

The human condition is a desperate one. Ignoring it can be contagious, allowing it to spread like a disease. But, God's love for us is ever present and without boundaries. Love and desperation are two things just begging to be joined together. The desperate situation is clearly felt in both the Old and the New testaments. The love of God is expressed in the OT, but not to the extent that we hear it in the ministry of Jesus in the NT.

The human condition is not something God bestowed upon us. We put it there. It happens when we stand alone, looking at our spiritual shortcomings. Alone with no atonement, no forgiveness, just raw guilt. Sometimes it can be so great, we cannot imagine how God could possibly be involved in making this all right again. But, God is there, alright. We just cannot see Him. God's Word is there, but how many people, surrounded and sinking in the misery of self-condemnation, crying from the depths, will pick up a bible and read it?

Who would know even where to begin? Maybe a few would.

When you are in pain, crying from the depths, be it a toothache or a heartache, you just want the pain to go away.

How many of you have a burden in your heart, tucked away in some hidden corner that only God knows about? Something you keep pushing away each time it tries to leave that corner and walk into the circle of your conscious thoughts?

And you will cry out, from out of the depths.

And God always makes the first move. We do not make peace with God, God makes peace with us. That is what Christ died for.

I can only imagine the psalmist saying, "Something is missing. I feel it, I sense it, but I do not know what it is." That's what the human condition sounds like. Christ is the missing piece.

Someone once said, "I don't believe in God, but I do miss Him."

We hear the psalmist begging for God's grace. With Jesus in our hearts, we do not have to beg. Grace is right there, free for the asking. If not free, it would not be grace.

And it doesn't end there. Christ created his church to bring believers together. We should see when others around us are 'crying from out of the depths' and then reach out to them. Quite often, the cry from the depths is a silent one. But, we must tune our ears to hear it. The hard truth is that when we see the human condition in others, we will often be looking in that spiritual mirror. And God steps in, forgives us of our human condition, and tells us to love each other because he first loved us.

God takes a gamble on us.

In doing so, God opens himself, his divine self, to the vulnerability that comes from being in relationship with a weak, sinful humanity. And so, God's sovereignty is the power of committed love, not the power of sheer force.

Second Corinthians tells us that by loving us, God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Therefore, we are empowered by faith and hope and able to say in Paul's words, "Whenever I am weak, I am strong," (2 Cor 12:10).

This is because, in our weakness, we call upon the Lord, and we find strength. He is there, because He knows we need Him.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.