

Lesson Two: Rescued from the Pit

Focal Text: Psalm 30

Background: Mark 10:46-52

Main Idea: When facing desperate situations, Christians can call on the Lord and know He will answer.

Question to Explore: Do I only wait until the situation is desperate before calling on the Lord?

Quick Read: When the psalmist felt despair and distant from God, the psalmist cried out, praised, and danced, and believers can do the same.

Introduction

Worship can take on all shapes and sizes. Certainly, depending upon the date or event, worship can be a time to remember an event on the church calendar (Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost), or a time to celebrate the seasons of a believer's spiritual pilgrimage (baptism, communion). However, it is easy during the "normal" season of the church calendar to go through the motions of a worship event rather than remembering the perpetual joy of a walk with God.

A humorous example of this comes from the British television program, "Mr. Bean." One Sunday, Bean decided to go to church. He hit a car in the parking lot, came into the service late, tried to remember the hymn that was sung, fell asleep during the sermon, distracted other churchgoers upon blowing his nose, and attempted to stay awake by finding a mint to suck on. Of course, all of it prevented him from hearing the sermon, affirming the final prayer, or singing the final hymn. For all the effort he put into attending the worship service, he ended up with little to show for it. While it is doubtful that anyone has had the same predicament as Mr. Bean, there are times that believers miss the abundant love that Almighty God brings to them. Perhaps if, at the beginning of worship, churchgoers remembered where God had brought them to where they are now, they would be ever grateful and ready to give praise.

Psalm 30 is a reflective psalm that allows the reader to ponder a more fulfilling relationship with God. It reminds the reader of the lengths and depths God has gone to ensure that a personal walk with Him is indeed possible. The psalmist brought this back to mind in his own life, and he called his readers to do the same. When readers remember how far God has brought them in their lives, it will cause them to cast a full and loud song of praise.

Commentary

Although this psalm is easy to read through and understand, there are three difficulties attached to this psalm. First, the superscription of the psalm¹ is puzzling. The psalm states that it is a “song of the dedication of the house.” Most often, the term “house” in Psalms refers to the Temple in Jerusalem (see Psalm 122:1). However, because David’s name is also attached to the superscription, this creates a bit of confusion. David was not alive when the Temple was dedicated. This has caused some to surmise that the title refers to David’s palace. However, nowhere within the psalm does it suggest such a link to the palace. Some also believe that David was the author² of the psalm, but the psalm was used for the Temple dedication later.

A second difficulty lies in the genre of the psalm. Elements of the psalm suggest that the poem could either be classified as thanksgiving³ (individual or corporate), or lament⁴ (individual or corporate). The complexity of the psalm itself has caused some to believe that several poems were combined from other sources, rather than penned as a single unit. However, internal evidence for extolling the Lord (v. 1), singing (v. 4), and giving thanks (vv. 4, 12) is found throughout the psalm. Equally noted are the recollection passages (vv. 6-10), which are well-known in a thanksgiving psalm format.⁵ All of these items indicate a single, unified thanksgiving psalm.

The third difficulty is deciding how best to structure the psalm. Some have attempted to create a chiasm of the psalm, making verse 5 as its center.⁶ Others have simply divided the psalm into two parts: an introductory praise (vv. 1-3) and detailed praise (vv. 4-12).⁷ However, this commentary will divide the psalm into four sections: a short reflection (vv. 1-3), a bridge of praise (vv. 4-5), a long reflection (vv. 6-10), and a conclusion (vv. 11-12).

A Pause to Praise God (30:1-3)

The psalmist opened his poem of thanks by acknowledging the Lord and sharing what God had done for him. He exalted the Lord for two reasons: 1) God had lifted him out of the depths, and 2) God did not let his enemies gloat over him (v. 1). “Lifting out of the depths” is from the word *dalat*, which implies a “drawing up,” as in bringing up a bucket of water from a deep well.⁸ Because God brought him out of a deep, dark place, enemies were prevented from gloating over him.

During this time in his life, the poet cried out to his God for help, and God healed him (v. 2). During this healing, the psalmist compared it to being brought back from *sheol*, and restored from the “pit” (v. 3).⁹ *Sheol* should not simply be understood as simply the “realm of the dead” (NIV), but as a place where no living person wanted to be. It was not so much a place of torment as it was a place where nothing happened. Because little is said about what came after death in the Old Testament, healing was a much better option.

The “pit” (*bor*) in verse 3 appears to be a synonym of *sheol*.¹⁰ If the healing is literal, the poet was possibly “at death’s door;” due to a miraculous healing, however, God brought him back to prominence. The illness he felt need not be physical, however. Instead, there could be spiritual undertones (or overtones) to his sickness.

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It would have been easy for the poet's readers to think of someone like Hezekiah in this regard (2 Kings 20; Isaiah 38). God had told Hezekiah that he needed to put his "house in order," for he was about to die. Through the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah implored God to grant him more time. God not only heard Hezekiah's prayer, but he also honored it and extended his life fifteen years.

However, it is also easy to equate physical suffering with sin, as all too often the Old Testament people did. In the book of Job, Job's friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar—believed that Job did something to cause his pain and suffering. For a short time, Job pondered it as well, but later he could find no sinful reason for his plight.

In this case of Psalm 30, the psalmist rejoiced because he had come back from the throes of death (physical and/or spiritual), and back into the opportunities that life brought. This was cause for praise in his life.

A Praise Interlude (30:4-5)

The psalmist called on others to sing to the Lord with him. Those who are God's "faithful people" (lit., "his holy people"¹¹) were called to praise His holy name.¹² Surely the psalmist was not the only one who in his lifetime had felt a "drawing out" from a "pit." Those who would remember their own sorrow and deliverance were also called to give praise and thanks.

If the recollection of their sorrow were not enough of a motive to give pause to praise, verse five provided a reason for all readers to ponder: "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime." The word anger (*'af*) is literally "nostril," as if one's nostrils are flared in rage. God's nostrils, though flared, do not stay so for long. Instead, His favor comes to pass. The word "favor" (*ratson*) is "acceptance," from the verb *ratsa*, meaning "to be pleased with." God's anger, therefore, is short-lived, but his favor is long-lasting.¹³ If this contrast were not comforting enough, the next difference seems to be more so: "Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (v. 5b). Weeping had come to stay (lit., "lodge") for a time, but the time was short. In its place came rejoicing (lit., "a ringing/resounding joy"). These two opposite phrases, found in the middle of the psalm, provide great comfort to anyone who reads them. One might set aside the rest of the psalm, but these two near-proverbial lines echo loudly to the reader.

A Further Time to Reflect (30:6-10)

If the first three verses of Psalm 30 were to provide a short time to ponder God's healing and grace, then verses 6-10 offered more insight into the reason for praise. While it is impossible to know that these verses are an elaboration of verses 1-3, they very easily could be. Regardless, the writer is deeply moved by the recollection, and he is thankful to God for the ultimate outcome.

Verse six notes a time in the poet's life when things were going well, perhaps smoothly. In his state of being,¹⁴ he believed he would never be moved from his current position. Verse seven continued the idea, stating that he was able to stand firmly on his favor alone.¹⁵

Although the poet felt he was a “mountain of strength” that could never be moved, it was short-lived. Somewhere during his assurance, he believed that God had hidden His presence (“your face”) from the writer. When he realized this, he was terrified.¹⁶

What follows, then, in verses 8-10, is honest prayer. The writer knew that God was the only one to address in this situation, and he cried out to God as a petition for rescue (v. 8), asking three questions in his entreaty. First, “What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit?” (v. 9). If his death (lit., “blood”) happens, there would be one less person who would give praise to God. The term used here for “pit,” *shahat*, is used more as a terrifying place for the wicked than *sheol* or *bor*.¹⁷ In his entreaty, he pleaded with God not to allow him to go there, but instead to allow him to live. His other two questions (“Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?”) are rhetorical, like the first question. They all three imply a resounding and emphatic NO as their answer.

While it may be unclear as to the event that the psalmist references, there can be no question as to his intense sincerity. He implored God for a change, that God would allow him more time. For him, this would require less arrogance and self-confidence, and more honesty with God. As a final part of his prayer (v. 10), he invited God to listen, to be gracious, and to be a helper for him. In each request, the three verbs are commands (verbs of entreaty). The writer asked with every ounce of strength that he possessed, that God would help him and return him to be the person he once was.

A Final Praise (30:11-12)

As a final reflection to what God has done, and as an affirmation of an answer to his prayer, the psalmist described the change that took place in his life. God turned his “wailing into dancing” (v. 11) The time for sorrow was over. It was now a time to rejoice and celebrate. God had removed (lit., “loosened”) his sackcloth and girded him with joy. Sackcloth, the official garment used during a mourning period, was no longer necessary. Instead, the joyful clothes would be put on instead.

At the close, the psalmist shared one final moment of praise: “That my heart¹⁸ may sing your praises and not be silent” (v. 12). Because of God’s wonderful salvation—physical, spiritual, or both—he has resolved forever to give thanks to him.

Conclusion

During the normal season of the church year, it is easy for believers to lull themselves into a “lethargic liturgy.” Sunday service can become mundane. So often, life, and therefore church, simply moves from one boring item to the next. If everyday life can sometimes have that “everyday feeling,” it stands to reason that worship to God can suffer the same fate.

However, there are times that life has a way to draw individuals out of that stupor. A physical ailment, either in their lives or in the lives of a loved one, might just be the jump start to a better prayer life. A difficult situation within the family or the workplace might be the “come to God” moment that is necessary. While no one would wish such plights to happen to themselves or

anyone else, these moments have a way to touch with the divine, to realize or be reminded that life is short, and only what is given to God will eternally last.

John Goldingay noted that the life of the believer is filled with “poles of experience:”

- Put down/brought up
- Going down to the Pit/being restored to life
- Instant/life
- Anger/delight
- Evening/morning
- Tears/resounding
- Delight/hiding of the face
- Strength/terror
- Sackcloth/joy
- Making music/wailing¹⁹

Instead of waiting for those “poles” to come in life, perhaps it is best to see today as a good day to set aside and worship God. It is important to be thankful for the life God has given, and the lives each person can touch. It is vital to share in mutual respect, and to understand that it is only due to God’s grace that life continues.

As all believers know, their lives were once filled with spiritual dry-rot. At times they were full of physical illness and spiritual sin. However, their lives have changed for the better, as God pulled them out of their pit of despair and brought them to a life of healing. Because God’s favor lasts longer than his anger, and rejoicing goes on longer than weeping, that should, indeed, give pause to praise in all seasons of worship.

1. As is often the case with psalms throughout the collection, verse one of Hebrew Psalm 30 is the same as the superscription in the English versions. Consequently, the Hebrew version has 13 verses. For the sake of simplicity, this study will follow the NIV numbering of the verses.

2. That David was the author of the psalm is up to debate. Although the phrase *lēdāwid* could mean “of David” (as in authorship), it need not mean this. The preposition before the name could mean “of,” “from,” “to,” “about,” or “for,” to name a few possibilities. However, Hans-Joachim Kraus was convinced that the phrase meant authorship (*lamed auctoris*). See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, A Continental Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 22–23.

3. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 251.

4. Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 514.

5. Craigie, 251, provides good reason why “thanksgiving” is the preferred genre. He also noted that the key of the psalm is the word *yādā* (“thanks”), found in verses 4, 9, and 12.

6. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 280.

7. Craigie, 252.

8. Craigie, 253.

9. The Masoretic Text (MT) displays a difference between the *Kētīb* (“what is written”) and the *Qērē* (“what is read”) regarding the term “descend.” Here, it is probably best to stay with the *Kētīb* (“those who descend”) rather than the *Qērē* (“my going down”).

10. For a detailed analysis of *šē’ōl*, *bōr*, and other terms about death, an excellent source is Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 69–85.

11. The term “holy people” translates the plural noun *ḥāsīdīm* (חֲסִידִים), derived from the adjective *ḥāsīd* (חֲסִיד), meaning “faithful one” or “pious one.” It is related to the root *ḥesed* (חֶסֶד, “steadfast love” or “lovingkindness”), but not derived from it.

12. Literally, “to the remembrance of his holiness.” Elsewhere in the psalms, it implies “name.” See Craigie, 251.

13. John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 428.

14. The word “secure” is difficult to translate, since it is only used here in the entire Old Testament. It comes from the Hebrew verb *šālēw*, meaning “ease.” It probably conveys the idea that all was well with the writer’s life.

15. The phrase “my royal mountain” might refer to Zion, but if so, it would be out of context with the psalm (except for the superscription). Instead, it implies that the psalmist is firm in the Lord due to the favor of God.

16. While the term *bāhal* can mean “dismayed,” the implication of being out of God’s presence leaves the psalmist terrified. See Wilson, 518.

17. The term *šaḥat* is most often used in Job, when Elihu told Job that someone could rescue him out of the “pit.” Elihu used the term, it seems, as a tactic to get Job to listen to him, and to ask for God’s forgiveness. See Job 33.

18. “Heart” is the NIV translation of *kābôd* (“glory”). However, the term might be rendered *kēbûdî* (“my liver/kidney”), hence the difference in translation.

19. Goldingay, 433.