

Psalm 130.¹⁻⁸

¹Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.
²Lord, hear my voice:
let thine ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications.
³If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities,
O Lord, who shall stand?
⁴But there is forgiveness with thee,
that thou mayest be feared.
⁵I wait for the LORD,
my soul doth wait,
and in his word do I hope.
⁶My soul waiteth for the Lord
more than they that watch for the morning:
I say, more than they that watch for the morning.
⁷Let Israel hope in the LORD:
for with the LORD there is mercy,
and with him is plenteous redemption.
⁸And he shall redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.

We have utilized Psalm 130 as a reading several times over the course of this site's history. I have written more than one homily based upon it. It is easily in my top-ten favorite Psalms. I read it often. It is one of my favorites for several reasons. But today, I am going to ask you to join me in a thought experiment. I am going to ask you to use your imagination. O.K., here we go. Let's start imagining.

You are an ancient Israelite. You strive to be true to Yahweh's law but know that you are guilty of breaches against it. You fear Yahweh is angry with you. You fear that He might withhold cherished blessings from you, not least among them, His presence in your life. You wish to be relieved of the feelings of guilt and separation from God; feelings that wash over you as deep waters, and leave you with a sense of drowning. What do you do? How do you rid yourself of these thoughts and feelings? How do you regain confidence with God and confidence that He will continue to be present in your life?

As an ancient Israelite, you know that there is but one way to obtain this desired relief and assurance. You must offer animal sacrifice to God. It will mean a bit of a journey, but you commit to traveling to Jerusalem and there offering the animal for the forgiveness of your sins and the return of God into your life.

You have made the journey. You stand in the temple court. You slit the animal's throat, utter a confession of sin on its head, and hand it over to the priest for the sacrificial slaughter and burning. You watch as the priest places your sacrifice on the altar. You smell the roasting meat. You see the fire's smoke rise into the air. You believe that the sweet smell of roasting meat will be carried up to God in the smoke. You believe that your prayer for forgiveness of sin will rise with the smell of roasting meat and the rising smoke up into the presence of God. You pray to God, asking Him to accept your offering and forgive your sins. You assure Him that you will try to do better.

We can't know for sure what the temple setting was for the 130th Psalm. We do not know for sure how and when and why it was used in Israel's temple. But there is general agreement that it was used

in Israel's temple. And we can easily believe that the sentiments expressed in the Psalm are consistent with the hopes of an offering made for the forgiveness of sin. It is in line with the hopes of one who looks to God for forgiveness and restitution.

Now, like the writer of the New Testament Book of Hebrews, I sense that millions of animals were sacrificed over the course of a thousand years. However, these multitudes could never bring the sort of forgiveness and peace of conscience that the devotee wished, and that God is actually capable of granting (See, for example, Heb. 10.¹⁻⁴).

I am skeptical that God ever required a sacrifice—animals, human, or His Only Begotten Son—as a prerequisite for satisfying some idea of justice or alleviating His wounded honor before He would agree to grant merciful forgiveness. Jesus' sacrifice, as I have said so often, did not “create” atonement. It does not possess some form of magic by which forgiveness is granted. Among the many revelations of Jesus' life, suffering, and death is the *revelation* of atonement. It revealed the mercy that was already and always will be a central aspect of God's character and has always been and ever will be available to the sincere petitioner. This revelation made it possible for us to experience forgiveness as we come to believe that merciful forgiveness is simply part of the divine disposition.

But neither my imaging a sin offering at the temple as a setting for this Psalm, nor my skepticism about the efficacy of sacrifice in any way lessens my appreciation for the Psalmist's faith in God and His willingness to forgive. The Psalmist is as sure of God's merciful forgiveness as he is of the sun's rise at dawn. He knows, perhaps, that God forgives because he knows that God is not the type of Being who is on the lookout for sin to begin with. He knows that God often does not even take notice of, “mark,” sin. It isn't that God possesses a giant and magical eraser in the sky with which he wipes sin from his giant and eternal sin ledger. It is that he so seldom picks up pen and paper to record the existence of sin in the first place. This is, for many, a difficult doctrine. This merciful response to sin and error is so unlike our response to sin and error—both our own and others—and so unlike the God whom we have created after the image of our own hearts, that it seems simply too good to be true. But, it is true. The Bible tells me so. All scripture tells me so.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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