

The Psalms of Ascents

Calling unto God out of the Depths and Realizing That We are Just Sinners (2)

Week 3 – Monday

1 Sam. 16:5-11

There is a hymn (1137) that says that the chances to suffer for the Lord are so few. Many of those opportunities will soon pass away. That hymn is really good. It mentions that if we suffer for Him today, that suffering is worth remembering until eternity. Sometimes I ask myself, “Why did the Lord leave the mark of the wounds of the nails and spear when He had resurrected.” The resurrected Christ who is in glory still had these wounds when He appeared to people. He told Thomas to stretch out his hand to touch the marks on His hands and put his hand in His side. It seems that the Lord purposely left the marks of His suffering there. In phase three of the Psalms of Ascents, it says, “Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD.” Our normal Christian experience must be in the depths. It is not normal to not have the experience of being in the depths. The Lord will measure many afflictions to those who really want to follow the Lord.

Consider the experience of David; he had many experiences of the depths. He was chosen by God. God told Samuel that He had found a person, David the son of Jesse, who is a man after My heart. At that time David was young; Samuel still had not anointed him. David was the youngest in his family. His job was to shepherd the sheep in the wilderness. The older brothers did not go to shepherd the sheep; they sent the youngest one. When God told Samuel to anoint someone in that household, there were eight brothers. Jesse brought seven of them to Samuel for one of them to be anointed. Where was the youngest one? Out in the wilderness taking care of the sheep. Samuel specifically called Jesse to bring his sons to the sacrifice that he prepared when he came to anoint one of his sons (1 Sam. 16:5), but David was not there. Why? Because his family did not think that he was ready. They thought that it couldn't be David, so they left him still taking care of the sheep. The story in the Bible is very clear. When Samuel saw the oldest one, he said, “Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him!” But God said, “No it is not him.” God said, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (v. 6). Then Jesse had his sons pass before Samuel one by one. God said that none of them were the chosen one. “And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all the young men here?’ Then he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep.’ And Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Send and bring him. For we will not sit down till he comes here’” (v. 11). When David came, God said that he was the one and Samuel anointed David. He was someone whom man despised but the one God had chosen. The whole family did not pay attention to the youngest son. He was sent out to the wilderness to take care of the sheep.

The Psalms of Ascents

Week 3 – Tuesday

1 Sam. 17:28, 37

After David was anointed, it seems like nothing changed; they still did not take him seriously. Then one day there was a war between the armies of Saul and the Philistines. A few of David's brothers were in the army among the soldiers. Then David's father told him to bring some things to his brothers. When he went there to meet them, they immediately rebuked him saying, "Why did you come down here? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your pride and the insolence of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle" (1 Sam. 17:28). It seems that David was never taken seriously by anyone; even David's brothers were still despising him. If any family treats the youngest one like this, it will likely produce a child that is not quite balanced, but David did not grow into an unbalanced person. While he was in the wilderness, he learned to trust in God. He was faithful to keep the sheep that God had given to him. When the lion came to devour one of the sheep, David caught it by its beard and struck it and killed it. Thus he took the sheep back from the mouth of the lion. He was not an insignificant person. He told Saul, "The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (v. 37). All the soldiers in the army were afraid of Goliath but David was able to kill him because from his youth he had been experiencing God's keeping power. He was not stumbled by the fact that his family did not take him seriously; they just sent him out to take care of the sheep. He experienced God and trusted in God, taking care of the responsibility that God had given to him for the care of the sheep. He trusted in God to overcome the lion and the bear. Through God's strength, he was also able to overcome the Philistine.

After he defeated Goliath, David had a little glory only for a little time. The women in Israel were singing that Saul had killed thousands and David killed ten thousands. Before that song, everything was OK, but after that the trouble came to David because Saul became jealous and began to seek his life. From that time, David had many more experiences of the depths. That was the start of years of running away from Saul to save his own life.

The Psalms of Ascents

Week 3 – Wednesday

Psa. 34:1, 4, 8, 17-18

Many times David found himself in the depths of his troubles and could not save himself. In the end he had to escape to the land of the Philistines because there was nowhere he could hide in the land of Israel. In 1 Samuel 21, David escaped to Achish, the king of the Philistines when Saul sought to kill him because of jealousy. The princes of the Philistines said to Achish, “Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of him to one another in dances, saying: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands?’” When David heard this, he immediately knew that he was in danger because these two nations were against one another. David faced such a desperate situation that all he could do was to pretend to be a madman. He acted like a madman, scratching on the doors and drooling into his beard. What a suffering this was! Then the king of Gath said, “Look, you see the man is insane. Why have you brought him to me? Have I need of madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence?” (vv. 14-15). At those times, David felt he was in the depths and he did not know how to get out from it. Think about this: a man of God needed to pretend to be insane to escape the danger he was in. What kind of suffering was that!

When David left the king of Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam, he wrote Psalm 34. Samuel did not record how David trusted in God; he only recorded the outward events. But David himself wrote, “I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make its boast in the LORD... I sought the LORD, and He heard me, And delivered me from all my fears” (vv. 1-4). This beautiful psalm reveals something completely different from the outward appearance when he was pretending to be insane. Outwardly, he pretended to be insane yet within he completely trusted in God. Even in the environments of great danger, he did not forget the Lord. In verses 8 to 10 he said, “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him! Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him. The young lions lack and suffer hunger; But those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing.” This is a very good psalm about overcoming. It was written by David after he had been going through tribulation. His experience is an example of how God allows us to go through some tribulation and suffering.

When David was suffering in front of king Achish, he did not blame anyone. He only prostrated himself before God. His attitude was, “O God, you are near to those who are broken in heart. Lord, I am a broken person, I dare not speak, I dare not resist and I dare not blame others. I only feel I am not worthy. You put me here in order for me to be a broken person. I bitterly repent; who am I? I hate myself.” This is brokenness. In verse 18 he said, “The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.” His heart was broken before God. His spirit before God was contrite. The outward situation pressed him to the point that his inward parts were also broken. This caused him not to be whole anymore, no longer self-justified and without self-pride.

The Psalms of Ascents

Week 3 – Thursday

1 Timothy 1:15-16

Philippians 4:12-13

Knowing Our Own Sins

Besides these psalms, David wrote Psalm 51 after he had committed a great sin and God had rebuked him. He descended into the depths because of his sin. He said, “Against You, You only, have I sinned.” He continued, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts.” He realized, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit.” Again he declared, “A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise.” He surrendered both outwardly and inwardly. His spirit was a broken spirit. This kind of person will no longer stand up for himself. He has lost himself entirely in God.

We need to clearly see that God gives us many difficulties and allows many blows to come to us to cause us to descend into the depths. The purpose of all these is to bring us to our end so we can clearly see ourselves and repent in the presence of God.

These kinds of experiences are what Psalm 130 is speaking about when it mentions the depths. Verse 3 says, “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” When David went through the experience of the depths, then he started to know himself. After he went through the experience of the depths, then he realized that he was a sinner, even to the point that he was sin. Nothing that came out from him was good; nothing was acceptable to God. The experience of the psalmist here denotes that though we feel we are perfect and stronger and better than others, God is bringing us into the depths of despair for us to learn a new lesson. God wants us to see that our very self-righteousness is our sin and that our very person is sin. Everything that comes out from us is despicable. Everything belonging to us is disgusting.

We may be able to boast in our past spiritual experiences, spiritual knowledge, spiritual revelations, and spiritual achievements until the day when God brings us into the depths. At that moment we say to God, “O God! None of these can stand in your presence and none of these can be counted.” If God appeared to us, we could only bow our head and say, “O God, I hate myself and I will shut my mouth.”

The true oneness with God is the result of a person knowing the self through sufferings. He dares not boast and he sees that there is nothing in him of which to boast. Paul said, “...that no flesh should glory in His presence... that, as it is written, ‘He who glories, let him glory in the Lord’” (1 Cor. 1:29; 2 Cor. 10:17). He also testified, “...sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16). He said again, “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-13). This is the response of a person who has gone through an experience of the depths and knows himself.

The Psalms of Ascents

Week 3 – Friday

Psa. 130:4-6

Experiencing the Forgiveness and Fear of God

Psalm 130:4 says, “But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.” After we have gone through experiences of the depths, we will know ourselves to a deeper extent. Then we see that God has the authority and grace to forgive sins. The forgiveness of sins here in nature is the same as when we first believed, but it is different in degree. At this stage, the psalmist is completely devoid of hope in himself. He sees himself degraded to the uttermost. He sees himself as sin. That is the reason that he says, “If You, O Jehovah, marked iniquities, Who, O Lord, would stand?”

At this time, he experiences forgiveness from God. God forgave us in order for us to fear Him. Many do not understand God’s forgiveness. They say that it does not matter if they sin a little because God will forgive them. Those who utter these words do not know God. A man who truly has been enlightened by God will see his sinful condition. When he receives the forgiveness of sins from God, the result is that he will fear God for the rest of his life. He will not dare to offend God and cause God to be sorrowful in heart. He will learn to love God and desire to please God in all things. Fearing God comes out of our love for Him. Those who know God also know that God’s forgiveness is to lead us to fear Him. When we see our real condition and repent of our sins before God, the result is that we will fear God for our whole life.

Waiting for God and Hoping in His Word

Verses 5 and 6 say, “I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, And in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the LORD More than those who watch for the morning—Yes, more than those who watch for the morning.” These verses begin the second section of this psalm. This section shows us that a person who knows God will cease his struggling when he has been brought into the depths; he will commit himself to God entirely. The only attitude he has is to wait for God. When a person receives mercy from God and sees and learns from his condition, his first spiritual reaction is to wait.

A fleshly person is always in a hurry. A broken person is a person who waits. He says, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits.” He does not have any demand. He does not ask for his troubles to be reduced. He does not hope for the time to be shortened. He only hands himself over to God entirely. He trusts that all things are in the Lord’s hands and that whatever the Lord does is righteous. He only waits and hopes.

The Psalms of Ascents

Week 3 – Saturday

Psa. 130:7-8

A person who waits is one who knows himself and sees God. He knows that when God is ready to reveal Himself, everything will be resolved. His waiting is not without basis. He waits on God on the one hand and hopes in His word on the other hand.

When he waits and hopes like this, God will give him His words. When he has God's words, he can rest. Isaiah 30:15 says: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength." When we return and rest, when we remain in quietness and in trust, and when we give up our struggling and rest in God's words, we will be saved and our strength shall return. This response is the result of going through the depths and experiencing God's forgiveness.

Waiting for the Lord More than Watchmen for the Morning

Psalm 130, verses 7-8 say, "O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is mercy, And with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel From all his iniquities." When we know ourselves, we will cease our struggling and give ourselves to the Lord; we will wait for Him. This kind of person really waits for the Lord; he is a watchman. Someone who waits for the Lord will bring others of God's people to also wait for the Lord like he does. Seemingly our spiritual experiences are personal, but ultimately their purpose is invariably for the building up of the corporate body of Christ. There is not one spiritual experience that is only for oneself. Even when we are plunged into the depths, and it seems that we are being broken, we realize that the result of our brokenness is to bring God's people to desire God, to see His redemption, to experience His lovingkindness and His abundant love and mercy.

This is what the church needs today. Those who can help the brothers and sisters the most, who can build the church, who can bring in the most blessing, and who can bring others to God's love and mercy and his abundant redemption, are those who experience being broken and know they have nothing. They humble themselves and hope in the Lord. This kind of person will bring the people of God to experience God's great blessings.

This psalm is in the Psalms of Ascents. The Psalms of Ascents are not easy to grasp but they are very rich. This is our experience of our Christian life. It is presented in very concisely in all these 15 Psalms. May the Lord give us wisdom and revelation to receive and understand God's Word like this.