

## HOPE

*“I Pray to GOD . . . and Wait  
for What He’ll Say & Do”*

*Help, GOD—the bottom has fallen out of my life!*

*Master, hear my cry for help!*

*Listen hard! Open your ears!*

*Listen to my cries for mercy.*

*If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings,  
who would stand a chance?*

*As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit,  
and that’s why you’re worshiped.*

*I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—  
and wait for what he’ll say and do.*

*My life’s on the line before God, my Lord,  
waiting and watching till morning,  
waiting and watching till morning.*

*Oh Israel, wait and watch for GOD—  
with GOD’s arrival comes love,*

*with GOD’s arrival comes generous redemption.*

*No doubt about it—he’ll redeem Israel,  
buy back Israel from captivity to sin.*

*Hope is a projection of the imagination; so is despair. Despair all too readily embraces the ills it foresees; hope is an energy and arouses the mind to explore every possibility to combat them. . . .*

*In response to hope the imagination is aroused to picture every possible issue, to try every door, to fit together even the most heterogeneous pieces in the puzzle. After the solution has been found it is difficult to recall the steps taken—so many of them are just below the level of consciousness.*

THORNTON WILDER

**T**o be human is to be in trouble. Job's anguish is our epigraph: "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." Suffering is a characteristic of the personal. Animals can be hurt, but they do not suffer. The earth can be ravaged, yet it cannot suffer. Man and woman, alone in the creation, suffer. For suffering is pain *plus*: physical or emotional pain *plus* the awareness that our own worth as people is threatened, that our own value as creatures made in the dignity of God is called into question, that our own destiny as eternal souls is jeopardized. Are we to be, finally, nothing? Are we to be discarded? Are we to be rejects in the universe and thrown onto the garbage dump of humanity because our bodies degenerate or our emotions malfunction or our minds become confused or our families find fault with us or society avoids us? Any one of these things, or, as is more likely, a combination of them, can put us in the state Psalm 130 describes as "the bottom has fallen out of my life!"

A Christian is a person who decides to face and live through suffering. If we do not make that decision, we are endangered on every side. A man or woman of faith who fails to acknowledge and deal with suffering becomes, at last, either a cynic or a melancholic or a suicide. Psalm 130 grapples mightily with suffering, sings its way through it, and provides usable experience for those who are committed to traveling the way of faith to God through Jesus Christ.

## Giving Dignity to Suffering

The psalm begins in pain: “Help, GOD—the botton has fallen out of my life! Master, hear my cry for help! Listen hard! Open your ears! Listen to my cries for mercy.” The psalm is anguished prayer.

By setting the anguish out in the open and voicing it as a prayer, the psalm gives dignity to our suffering. It does not look on suffering as something slightly embarrassing that must be hushed up and locked in a closet (where it finally becomes a skeleton) because this sort of thing shouldn’t happen to a real person of faith. And it doesn’t treat it as a puzzle that must be explained, and therefore turn it over to theologians or philosophers to work out an answer. Suffering is set squarely, openly, passionately before God. It is acknowledged and expressed. It is described and lived.

If the psalm did nothing more than that, it would be a prize, for it is difficult to find anyone in our culture who will respect us when we suffer. We live in a time when everyone’s goal is to be perpetually healthy and constantly happy. If any one of us fails to live up to the standards that are advertised as normative, we are labeled as a problem to be solved, and a host of well-intentioned people rush to try out various cures on us. Or we are looked on as an enigma to be unraveled, in which case we are subjected to endless discussions, our lives examined by researchers zealous for the clue that will account for our lack of health or happiness. Ivan Illich, in an interview, said: “You know, there is an American myth that denies suffering and the sense of pain. It acts as if they *should* not be, and hence it devalues the *experience* of suffering. But this myth denies our encounter with reality.”<sup>1</sup>

The gospel offers a different view of suffering: in suffering we enter *the depths*; we are at the heart of things; we are near to where Christ was on the cross. P. T. Forsyth wrote:

The depth is simply the height inverted, as sin is the index of moral grandeur. The cry is not only truly human, but divine as well. God is deeper than the deepest depth in man. He is holier than our deepest sin is deep. There is no depth so deep to us as when God reveals his holiness in dealing with our sin. . . . [And so] think more of the depth of God than the depth of your cry. The worst thing that can happen to a man is to have no God to cry to out of the depth.<sup>2</sup>

Israel teaches us to respond to suffering as reality, not deny it as illusion, and leads us to face it with faith, not avoid it out of terror. The psalm in this way is representative of Israel, which

took a supremely realistic view of life's sufferings and dangers, saw herself as exposed to them vulnerably and without defence, and showed little talent for fleeing from them into ideologies of any kind. Rather, concepts of her faith directed her to bring these actual experiences of her daily life into connexion with Jahweh. In her older period, indeed, she lacked any aptitude for the doctrinaire: she possessed, rather, an exceptional strength to face up even to negative realities, to recognize and not to repress them, even when she was spiritually unable to master them in any way. It is to this realism, which allowed every event its own inevitability and validity, . . . that the narrative art of the OT, especially in its earlier form, owes its darksome grandeur.<sup>3</sup>

And so we find in Psalm 130 not so much as a trace of those things that are so common among us, which rob us of our humanity when we suffer and make the pain so much more terrible to bear. No glib smart answers. No lectures on our misfortunes in which we are hauled into a classroom and given graduate courses in suffering. No hasty Band-Aid treatments covering up our trouble so that the rest of society does not have to look at it. Neither prophets nor priests nor psalmists offer quick cures for the suffering: we don't find any of them telling us to take a vaca-

tion, use this drug, get a hobby. Nor do they ever engage in publicity cover-ups, the plastic-smile propaganda campaigns that hide trouble behind a billboard of positive thinking. None of that: the suffering is held up and proclaimed—and prayed.

Not that Christians celebrate suffering—we don't make a religion out of it. We are not masochists who think we are being holy when we are hurting, who think personal misery is a sign of exceptional righteousness. There is some suffering in which we get involved that is useless and unnecessary; but there is adequate commonsense wisdom in Christian ways which prevents us from suffering for the wrong reasons, if only we will pay attention to it. Henri Nouwen wrote:

Many people suffer because of the false supposition on which they have based their lives. That supposition is that there should be no fear or loneliness, no confusion or doubt. But these sufferings can only be dealt with creatively when they are understood as wounds integral to our human condition. Therefore ministry is a very *confronting* service. It does not allow people to live with illusions of immortality and wholeness. It keeps reminding others that they are mortal and broken, but also that with the recognition of this condition, liberation starts.<sup>4</sup>

George MacDonald put it with epigrammatic force: "The Son of God suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their sufferings might be like His."<sup>5</sup>

The second important thing Psalm 130 does is to immerse the suffering in God—all the suffering is spoken in the form of prayer, which means that God is taken seriously as a personal and concerned being. Certain sentences in the psalm show specific knowledge of the character of God as a personal redeemer: God is personal so that we may have an intimate relation with him; God is redeemer so that we may be helped by him. There is

*meaning* to our lives and there is *salvation* for our lives, a truth summed up by Forsyth when he said, "Our very pain is a sign of God's remembrance of us, for it would be much worse if we were left in ghastly isolation."<sup>8</sup>

Eight times the name of God is used in the psalm. We find, as we observe how God is addressed, that he is understood as One who forgives sin, who comes to those who wait and hope for him, who is characterized by steadfast love and plenteous redemption, and who will redeem Israel. God makes a difference. God acts positively toward his people. God is not indifferent. He is not rejecting. He is not ambivalent or dilatory. He does not act arbitrarily, in fits and starts. He is not stingy, providing only for bare survival. Karl Barth describes God in this regard:

The free inclination of God to His creature, denoted in the Biblical witness by grace, takes place under the presupposition that the creature is in distress and that God's intention is to espouse his cause and to grant him assistance in his extremity. Because grace, the gracious love of God, consists in this inclination, it is, and therefore God Himself is, merciful; God's very being is mercy. The mercy of God lies in His readiness to share in sympathy the distress of another, a readiness which springs from His inmost nature and stamps all His being and doing. It lies, therefore, in His will, springing from the depths of His nature and characterising it, to take the initiative Himself for the removal of this distress. For the fact that God participates in it by sympathy implies that He is really present in its midst, and this means again that He wills that it should not be, that He wills therefore to remove it.<sup>7</sup>

And this, of course, is why we are able to face, acknowledge, accept and live through suffering: we know that it can never be ultimate, it can never constitute the bottom line. God is at the foundation and God is at the boundaries. God seeks the hurt, maimed, wandering and lost. God woos the rebellious and con-

fused. If God were different than he is, not one of us would have a leg to stand on: "If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings, who would stand a chance? As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit, and that's why you're worshiped." Because of the forgiveness we have a place to stand. We stand in confident awe before God, not in terrorized despair.

### Employed to Wait

Such are the two great realities of Psalm 130: suffering is real; God is real. Suffering is a mark of our existential authenticity; God is proof of our essential and eternal humanity. We accept suffering; we believe in God. The acceptance and the belief both emerge out of those times when "the bottom has fallen out" of our lives.

But there is more than a description of reality here, there is a procedure for participating in it. The program is given in two words: *wait* and *watch*. The words are at the center of the psalm. "I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—and wait for what he'll say and do. My life's on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning." *Wait* and *watch* add up to *hope*.

The words *wait* and *hope* are connected with the image of watchmen waiting through the night for the dawn. The connection provides important insights for the person in trouble who cries out, "But surely there is something for me to do!" The answer is yes, there is something for you to do, or more exactly there is someone you can *be*: be a watchman.

A watchman is an important person, but he doesn't do very much. The massive turning of the earth, the immense energies released by the sun—all that goes on apart from him. He does nothing to influence or control such things: he is a watchman. He knows the dawn is coming; there are no doubts concerning

that. Meanwhile he is alert to dangers; he comforts restless children or animals until it is time to work or play again in the light of day.

I was once a watchman. I worked from 10 p.m. until 6 a.m. in a building in New York City. My work as a night watchman was combined with that of elevator operator, but the elevator work petered out about midnight. After that I sat and read, dozed or studied. There were assorted night people in the neighborhood who would stop in through the night hours and visit with me: strange, bizarre people with wonderful stories. I will never know how much of what I heard from them was fact and how much fiction: a failed millionaire obsessed with communist plots responsible for his decline, a South American adventurer now too old to tramp the remote jungles and mountains, a couple of streetwalkers who on slow nights would sit and talk about God and the worth of their souls.

I did that for an entire year. I stayed awake, I studied, I learned. I visited and gossiped. And I waited for the dawn. Dawn always came. The people who employed me thought it was worth several dollars an hour for me to wait through the night and watch for the morning. But I never did anything, never constructed anything, never made anything happen. I waited and watched. I hoped.

If I had not known that there were others in charge of the building, I might not have been content to just be a watchman and collect my pay. If I were not confident that the building had an owner who cared about it, if I did not know that there was a building engineer who kept it in good order and repair, if I did not know that there were hundreds of people in the building who were going about their work everyday quite capably—if I had not known these things, I might not have been so relaxed in making idle gossip with women of the night and old men of sto-

ried pasts. Nor would the psalmist have been content to be a watchman if he were not sure of God. The psalmist's and the Christian's waiting and watching—that is, hoping—is based on the conviction that God is actively involved in his creation and vigorously at work in redemption.

Hoping does not mean doing nothing. It is not fatalistic resignation. It means going about our assigned tasks, confident that God will provide the meaning and the conclusions. It is not compelled to work away at keeping up appearances with a bogus spirituality. It is the opposite of desperate and panicky manipulations, of scurrying and worrying.

And hoping is not dreaming. It is not spinning an illusion or fantasy to protect us from our boredom or our pain. It means a confident, alert expectation that God will do what he said he will do. It is imagination put in the harness of faith. It is a willingness to let God do it his way and in his time. It is the opposite of making plans that we demand that God put into effect, telling him both how and when to do it. That is not hoping in God but bullying God. "I pray to GOD—my life a prayer—and wait for what he'll say and do. My life's on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning."

### **An Eye Specialist and a Painter**

When we suffer we attract counselors as money attracts thieves. Everybody has an idea of what we did wrong to get ourselves into such trouble and a prescription for what we can do to get out of it. We are flooded first with sympathy and then with advice, and when we don't come around quickly we are abandoned as a hopeless case. But none of that is what we need. We need hope. We need to know that we are in relation to God. We need to know that suffering is part of what it means to be

human and not something alien. We need to know where *we* are and where *God* is.

We need an eye specialist rather, than, say, a painter. A painter tries to convey to us with the aid of his brush and palette a picture of the world as he sees it; an ophthalmologist tries to enable us to see the world as it really is. In George MacDonald's novel *The Princess and Curdie*, when Curdie reaches the castle, he sees the great staircase and knows that to reach the tower he must go farther. The narrator takes the occasion to note that "those who work well in the depths more easily understand the heights, for indeed in their true nature they are one and the same."<sup>8</sup>

For the person who suffers, has suffered or will suffer, Psalm 130 is essential equipment, for it convinces us that the big difference is not in what people suffer but in the way they suffer. ("The same shaking that makes fetid water stink makes perfume issue a more pleasant odor.")<sup>9</sup> The psalm does not exhort us to put up with suffering; it does not explain it or explain it away. It is, rather, a powerful demonstration that our place in the depths is not out of bounds from God. We see that whatever or whoever got us in trouble cannot separate us from God, for "forgiveness is your habit." We are persuaded that God's way with us is redemption and that the redemption, not the suffering, is ultimate.

The "bottom" has a bottom; the heights are boundless. Knowing that, we are helped to go ahead and learn the skills of waiting and watching—hoping!—by which God is given room to work out our salvation and develop our faith while we fix our attention on his ways of grace and resurrection.