

BETWEEN THE DREAMING AND THE COMING TRUE

The Way of Faith

Story number 1

John Newton, by the age of 11, was accompanying his father on sea voyages. At the age of 18 he was press ganged into the Royal Navy aboard the ship HMS Harwich. He didn't like it and deserted only to be caught and flogged. Newton wanted an easy and creditable way of life and so became part of the transatlantic slave trade as a sailor aboard several ships involved in it.

In 1747, Newton was aboard the slave ship, The Greyhound, when a storm struck. Fearing for his life he cried out to God to save him. This was his moment of conversion, although he later admitted, "I cannot consider myself to have been a believer, in the full sense of the word."

Continuing in the slave trade as both a mate and a captain, Newton worked to restrain the industry from its worst excesses. In 1764 Newton became an Anglican clergy man and his growing and maturing faith caused him to become more and more disgusted with the slave trade. His remorse for his own actions galvanised him, and in 1785 he met with William Wilberforce to encourage him to remain in politics.

For the next twenty years Newton remained a spiritual mentor and supporter for Wilberforce, and he helped Wilberforce found the anti-slavery society in 1787. The following year he wrote a pamphlet about his own experience of the slave trade, which included a repentant confession of his actions. The second edition went to every member of parliament. He went on to testify against the slave trade at parliamentary hearings.

John Newton died nine months after parliament abolished the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807. In his parish in Olney, he wrote a hymn each week for his congregation to sing. Newton penned the words: 'Amazing Grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.'

Story number 2

Charles Colson was an American attorney and a political advisor to American president Richard Nixon. In 1972 Colson boasted that he would 'walk over my own grandmother' to get Nixon re-elected. He called himself Nixon's hatchet

man. Colson was part of what became known as the Watergate Scandal: the wire tapping of phones and the stealing of documents from the Democratic party's headquarters at the Watergate building. Where others pleaded their innocence to the charges, Colson chose to please guilty.

Although at the time of the scandal, Colson professed no faith, he subsequently had an experience of God born out of his crisis of guilt over his actions. Other conspirators in the scandal continued to say they were unjustly accused. Colson though, chose to please guilty to obstruction of justice. He served seven months in prison and was the first member of the Nixon administration to be incarcerated for Watergate. Nixon resigned as President in 1974, the only US president to resign from office.

Charles Colson, as a result of his faith and his time in prison, went on, in 1976, to found Prison Fellowship which became an international ministry to prisoners.

Story number 3

Psalm 130

A song of ascents.

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;

² Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, LORD, kept a record of sins,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness,
so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins

Psalm 130 is the story of the lived experience of those who choose to follow God. It seems to me that both John Newton and Charles Colson lived the truth that Psalm 130 speaks. And the truth is, so can we.

The Psalm begins in pain: 'Out of the depths, I cry!' Eugene Peterson translates those words this way: "Help, God, the bottom has fallen out of my life!"

I'm wondering, friends, if that's ever been a cry that you have known?

We've talked before about living in 2nd choice worlds. Second choice worlds are circumstances we wouldn't choose or plan. 2nd choice worlds are difficult and challenging. We live in a world that chooses to despise 2nd choice worlds. We are bombarded with messages that want to tell us we can, in fact, have the world as we would like it to be. We are invited to believe that we can, in fact, be in control of our destiny.

The Psalms are nothing, if they are not honest, and Psalm 130 confronts a truth that we really want to avoid and believe isn't true, even though we know it is. Psalm 130 confronts the truth that sometimes the bottom falls out of our world.

Psalm 130 confronts the truth that life involves suffering. Psalm 130 gets out into the open the truth that even the people of faith suffer and have really tough times. Psalm 130 teaches us that, as people of faith, we do not have to cover up the truth that life can be tough. Psalm 130 shows us that we don't have to pretend that life is other than it is! Psalm 130 encourages us to live honestly in front of God in the midst of how life really is.

How are you doing, friends?

Psalm 130 invites us not to get lost in our suffering, but to immerse it in God. God is addressed eight times in Psalm 130. It is in the context of God, and who he is, that we live our suffering. Psalm 130 invites us to know the truth about us in the light of the truth about God. The truth about us (in verses 3+4) is that we cannot get ourselves out of the depths. The truth about us (in verses 3+4) is that we cannot save ourselves. The truth about us (in verses 3+4) is that we don't have the answers to life's sufferings. The truth about us (in verses 3+4) is that even the best of the best of us can't do this on our own.

The truth about God (in verses 3+4) is that his love reaches to us even in the depths. The truth about God (in verses 3+4) is that in his love, God is always ready to forgive. The truth about God (in verses 3+4) is that, in whatever

circumstances we have managed to get ourselves, God reaches to us and embraces. The truth about God (in verses 3+4) is that in the midst of whatever circumstance the world has thrown at us, they will not separate us from God's great love.

Forgiveness, friends, is relational. God forgives because he wants to know you and be known by you. Psalm 130 speaks of the deep truth that in God's eyes, you are special and precious, honoured and chosen, longed for and accepted. The truth about God (verses 3+4) is that God does not abandon us to our suffering. The truth about God (in verses 3+4) is that God has no desire to leave us alone in the depths. Psalm 130 invites us to hold firm to the character of God – the one who loves us because he loves us because he loves us....

Psalm 130 invites us to remember that whatever sufferings or challenges we may experience and live through – they are never the ultimate thing. Psalm 130 invites us to embrace the truth that God is bigger and that God is at the foundation of our lives and it is God who sets the boundaries to it. Psalm 130 invites us to stand on the truth that we can be confident in God.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,
and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord
more than watchmen wait for the morning,
more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins (Psalm 130 v 5-8)

Story number 4

Jeremiah had an encounter with God in which God invited Jeremiah to be a prophet. Jeremiah was hesitant and came up with excuses as to why he shouldn't be a prophet. Jeremiah probably expected to be a priest. It was a job he knew about, knew what was expected and knew how to do it. Becoming a priest was certainly a safer and easier option than becoming a prophet! God, perhaps, is inviting Jeremiah to live a life in which there will be suffering. Jeremiah is teetering on the edge of a choice that will determine how he lives

and what he gives his life to. Because God loves Jeremiah he gives him a vision. It is the vision of God that changes Jeremiah's mind.

¹¹ The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

¹² The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled." (Jeremiah 1 v 11-12)]

In Anathoth, where Jeremiah was born, the almond blossom was the first sign of spring; it was always the first to blossom. When God spoke to Jeremiah there was blossom on the almond tree. Spring brings the promise of summer. In his response to Jeremiah, God uses a play on words to teach Jeremiah something important that will sustain him through his ministry as a prophet: Jeremiah the weeping prophet!

The words for watching and almond in Hebrew sound very similar. They come from the same word: the word for watching or waking. The almond tree is the waking tree – the first to wake after winter. It was also the watching tree - the tree you watched to see the coming of spring.

God's point to Jeremiah: God is wide awake, he is not asleep; he does not slumber; he never goes into hibernation; he is still on watch; he is wide awake; watching and waiting. God is watching to ensure that everything he promised comes to pass. God is watching to make sure his word is fulfilled. God is saying to Jeremiah that the words God speaks will not get lost or wonder off. Not one. He will bring each word to some kind of living completion.

God is saying he is doing everything he promised to do, and even when it looks like he is doing nothing, he is waiting for his word to burst into flower. His word is not dead, never dead, it is alive. God is saying you can no more prevent God's word being fulfilled than you can prevent an almond tree blossoming in spring. And every spring, when he saw the almond tree blossom, Jeremiah would be reminded of that deep truth.

In Psalm 130 it is we who are watching and waiting. Eugene Peterson translates verses 5-8 this way:

⁵⁻⁶ 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.
7-8 O 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 (Psalm 130 v 5-8) The Message

Watching and waiting, watching and waiting. When the bottom has fallen out of my world it is the truth about God, who he is and what he does, that sustains me.

Just as God used a play on words to speak to Jeremiah, I think I'm employing something similar here. I think it's valid.

When God speaks to Jeremiah it is God who is watching and waiting. In Psalm 130 it is we who are watching and waiting. I believe they go together. Jeremiah is encouraged that God is faithful to everything he says and everything he does – he is always watching and waiting to bring his words and promises to fulfilment. Psalm 130 invites and encourages us to be watching and waiting precisely because God is faithful to all he says and all he does and because he is watching and waiting.

Story number five

Bill McLellan gave me a mirror. He left me to figure out why – eventually I did. It was to remind me to see myself the way God sees me... that I am loved, special, precious, honoured, accepted. And that, God is awake, never asleep, watching and waiting, always at work in me, through me and around me. It is a visual, tangible reminder of Psalm 130. When I choose to use it, it helps me live the truth of Psalm 130.

Story number six

Story number six is your story. You are writing your story, and you can live your story in the truth lived in Psalm 130. Psalm 130 is the story of the way of faith, and it can be your story.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, and Livestreamed on Sunday 29th May 2022, by Rev. Ian Phillips.