

Key idea: The LORD is the only source of forgiveness for those in the pit of despair of sin.

FCF:

Application:

PRAY

1. 'Woe': the Pit of Despair (vs.1-2)

'The Princess Bride' is a wonderful tongue-in-cheek novel and movie which successfully skewers many of the characteristic fairy-tale techniques and ideas. It is a movie – and a book – that everyone should watch and read!

Our hero ends up, in a crucial moment, in 'the Pit of Despair'. It is an underground dungeon of torture out of which no one can, or has, escaped. No-one but the evil Count and his henchmen know of it, so there is no hope of rescue. It is dominated by a massive machine upon which research is conducted about pain and tolerance.

It is a comic image of something that is so real for so many people, including our psalmist – **look at verses 1-2... READ.**

In 'The Princess Bride', our hero is subjected to the machine, to a point where no-one else has been. As he 'dies' upon the machine – ah, spoiler alert – he lets out an almighty cry that shakes the forest surrounding the castle of the Count.

The psalmist is letting out such a cry here.

We do not know who the psalmist is. We have no indication of when the psalm was composed. But we do know the plight of the psalmist – he has sunk to ‘the depths’, out of which he cries out to the LORD.

‘The depths’ is an image of darkness, loneliness, no escape, even death. It is a picture of a place out of which no human can escape, of their own volition and effort, once they are there. It is described in a similar way at the start of Psalm 69. It raises images of sinking to the deep, deep recesses of the ocean, where there is no life, no help, no sound, just bleak darkness.

There is a need here – a need for anything, for something to raise this psalmist up. Whilst he is surrounded by silence, he is not silent, this psalmist – he cries out. And his need is relational – he cries out to the LORD – the covenantally-faithful and committed God who has chosen to deal with the broken state of this world, through the family of Abraham.

At this point, we could all nod our heads in assent. Many of us have been in a similar situation, a similar place, a similar moment. Many of us have felt the depths, the quiet bleakness of being in the place akin to death, where no-one (least of all ourselves) seems capable of helping us.

This individual, a member of God’s people, has been there. And, without any historical hooks to hang this cry on, we could well imagine such a cry being composed at many times in the history of Abraham’s family, the nation of Israel – you could think of a night in the desert as they wandered for forty years after the Exodus, a moment amidst the madness of the time of the Judges, sometime

during the acrimonious split within Israel into a northern and southern kingdom, and, most clearly, any second of the Exile as reports of the destruction of Jerusalem seeped into the camps in Babylon.

But such a cry of woe and lament and desperate need raises the obvious question of ‘why?’ Why is the psalmist in the depths? Why does the psalmist cry out to the LORD?

2. The weight of sin (vs.3-4)

Look at verses 3-4... READ.

Whilst there is no frank admission, the answer to ‘Why is the psalmist in the depths?’ is clear: sin (REPEAT).

Let me remind you of the definition of sin that we have been working with. Sin is the attitude and action that says, ‘I am God and God is not’. Sin is both inside – the attitude, the mind and the heart – and expressed outside – as behaviour. Sin is part of the human DNA – as descendants of Adam and Eve, we are all sinners. To be human is to be a sinner. To be a human is to desire to be God instead of God. To be human is to be a sinner.

In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve first sinned and so we all sin, sin weighs people down – it produces the shame of rebellion and it causes the sinner to hide from God. Even more than that, sin separates humans – who all bear God’s image – from God. We know this intuitively – I mean, how can any king allow an open pretender anywhere near him? We know this theologically – God

states very clearly that sin brings his judgement – the removal from his presence and so the movement into death.

This reality of sin is captured very clearly in another psalm, **Psalm 51:4... READ.**

Sin is sin because it places 'I' in the middle, it is committed against God alone, and it brings his judgement. It breaks the relationship between the LORD and his people.

This helps us grasp the first truth that the psalmist states here: the LORD judges sin and, by right and justice, no human can stand in his presence (REPEAT). The issue is not fairness here – you know how humans cry out in the face of God's judgement of sin, saying, 'It isn't fair!' Well, that is a wrong category – the issue isn't fairness but justice. By pure justice, when the king is rebelled against for not other reason than we want his throne, he is just in judging that rebellion, in bringing the judgement of death.

But this truth is matched by another truth – the wonder of forgiveness.

You see, if God alone is the one sin is committed against, then God alone is the one who can forgive sin. God has displayed this desire very clearly in the pages of history – remember his just mercy in the Garden of Eden, remember his amazing commitment to the whole world through Abraham's family in Genesis 12:1-3. Time and time again, the LORD displays this commitment in this world by forgiving his image-bearers, because only he can.

This forgiveness is driven by grace – the LORD’s showering upon humans what they do not deserve. We deserve just judgement and instead, as we cry out, God extends forgiveness.

This psalmist knows this truth. It seems fairly clear that sin has reduced him to the depths. It is also clear that when he states ‘my cry for help’, and acknowledges that the LORD can forgive, that the sin that weighs him down is his sin, his rebellion, his desire to be God instead of God. He knows that, in such depths of despair, the only one who can deal with his despair, his sin, is the one he sinned against – the LORD. Here is the answer to our second ‘why’: the psalmist cries out to the LORD because his sin was committed against the LORD and the LORD alone can forgive it.

It is worth observing that the cause of the psalmist’s ‘depth’s is not the sin of others, or the oppression of others’ sin. Unlike, say Psalm 69, where the psalmist sinks to the depths under the sin caused against him, this psalmist sinks under the weight of his own personal sin.

And we know what that is like...

Moreover, it is worth noticing the way in which this psalmist has responded. His is not an arrogant cry or demand. It is the cry for help of a man who has come to see that, in his sin, he has no help except the LORD. It is a state of despair, yes, but it is a state of recognition – of sin’s nature, of sin’s effect, of sin’s solution, of human need.

And we need to come to know this...

Again, this cry could have come from any moment in the history of God's people – from the realization after the Golden Calf episode in the wandering, to the state of the Temple as Josiah tidied up the neglected Temple, as the people of Judah stumbled into Exile, as they sat in Exile by the waters of Babylon.

3. 'Waiting'... (vs.5-6)

And then the psalmist waited – **look at verses 5-6... READ.**

It is not a thumb-twiddling waiting. It is not a sit-in-the-dark-and-whistle waiting. It is not a drum-the-fingers-on-the-desk waiting. It is a waiting that has both substance and expectation.

The expectation is clear – it is like a man waiting as the watchman on the city-gates, on the night shift. There is an eagerness, an excitement, about the prospect of the sun coming up. Then, the shift is done, the danger has passed, the light is here. It is the same with the psalmist in the depths – now that the request has been placed before the LORD – for forgiveness – he waits with eager expectation.

And it is not fruitless or without substance – there is tangible, concrete, discernible hope here. There is a certainty that what has been asked for, what has been cried out, will happen. The psalmist states clearly the substance and foundation of his hope – it is 'His word'.

Put simply, it is in the myriad promises that the LORD has stated and which he has fulfilled. And, again, this is from every moment in the history of God's people – from Genesis 15 being fulfilled in the

movement out of Egypt; in the promise in Genesis 12:1-3 of land being fulfilled as God's people take Canaan; in the promise of rest being enjoyed as the LORD gives David and Solomon rest from their enemies; in the promises of judgement uttered by the prophets being fulfilled in 2 Kings; in the promise to Daniel that the people of the LORD will return to Israel being fulfilled under the edict of Cyrus the Persian. It can be seen in the promise made by the LORD through Isaiah in **Isiah 1:18-20... READ...** and many others throughout the prophets.

The psalmist holds onto the account from God's word of who God is, what he commits to, and what takes place. And this is his hope – the utter loving faithfulness and consistency of the LORD. He knows that he will come out of the depths, forgiven and restored, by the LORD, as the LORD sees fit. That is what the LORD has constantly done for those who throw themselves upon his justice and grace. And it will happen this time.

It is hard to avoid the connection with Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 at this point, isn't it?

On the one hand, the man planted in the commands of the LORD knows the committed promise of the LORD to reverse curse and bring blessing – just as the psalmist declares. On the other hand, this psalmist is an expression of the one who takes refuge in the LORD and his anointed One – he has turned to the LORD at the moment of his greatest need and cried out for forgiveness and restoration.

4. The whole community of the LORD's people (vs.7-8)

Having come to grasp this truth personally, the psalmist lifts his eyes and voice to those walking with him up to the Temple – the people of the LORD, Israel – **look at verses 7-8... READ.**

It is one of those moments when the psalm moves from the individual to the communal, from the personal to the community. The psalmist calls the whole community of God's people to find what he has come to know the LORD alone can offer.

It is almost as if he is calling God's people to come and meet the LORD and his 'travelling companions' – 'faithful love', 'redemption' and 'forgiveness of sins'. These three great comforts are only 'with' the LORD because it is the LORD, first and foremost, who is sinned against by individuals and his own people.

What the individual member of the LORD's community hopes in, so too the whole community of the LORD's people can hope in – that the LORD will display mercy by forgiving the community its sins.

And, again, such a moment could have happened at many moments for the LORD's people – from the snakes in the wanderings, and the Golden Calf, through to the time of Josiah's restoration.

5. The wait is over – Jesus (Matthew 1:1, 21; 9:1-8, 12-13; 11:28)

I suspect that this was a psalm composed after the return of the exiles to the land of Israel, to the diminished Second Temple, to the ridicule of the nations. It was certainly compiled into this place in the Psalter at that time. But it is not hard to imagine it being

composed then, too, as the weight of individual and collective sin weighed heavily upon God's people.

They would have sung this song on their annual walk to Jerusalem and the Temple. They would have waited... waited... waited... waited...

And then – **listen to Matthew 1:1 – READ... listen to Matthew 1:21 – READ... listen to Matthew 9:4-6 – READ... listen to Matthew 9:12-13 – READ... listen to Matthew 11:28 – READ...**

We know that Jesus himself is the substance of the hope that God's word that he will deal with sin and brokenness, replacing it with forgiveness and restoration – that Jesus is the fulfilment of such hope, waiting and crying out!

But, I think more is going on here.

Listen to what Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians in **2 Cor.5:21... READ.**

Did you catch that?

So that our sins might be forgiven, Jesus took our sins on himself – a perfect man shouldering the judgement for our sins, sinking to the depths of the pit. In doing this, he cried out that he was 'forsaken', and he called out to the LORD from the cross (cf. Matthew 27:46).

Can you see the connection?

Jesus himself became, in a way that is stated in the Bible but which I struggle to wrap my mind around, Psalm 130: the man in the depths crying out to the LORD, knowing that the LORD would answer him and restore him. And, as we saw last week, this did happen – God raised him from the dead, restored him, just as his word said he would.

In this, we have the forgiveness we do not deserve – **listen to Romans 5:23-24... READ.**

The LORD has done what he promised: he has dealt with sin, brought blessing, and provided the forgiveness that only he can, and could, through Jesus alone. And sinners can be lifted out of the depths by what the LORD alone has promised to do.

5. Us... the wait...

This is now granted to us, as we wait on what the LORD has achieved in Jesus. That means, we too can pray this prayer, knowing the word of the LORD which is our hope.

It is important to recognize this truth, individually and communally.

Individually, we are often in the depths because of our sinful natures. We know what the LORD has done in Jesus, and we know what we persist in doing – and it drives us down into the depths. And so we are given this prayer to cry out to the LORD!

We know he will forgive us constantly, as we recognize our need and throw ourselves upon him, calling out to him. He can, and will, do this because Jesus IS Psalm 130.

So, let me suggest three areas of application:

First, recognize the seriousness and reality of sin. Sin breaks the relationship between the LORD and his image-bearers, humans. Sin is relational – and so its consequences are relational, both vertically and horizontally. And sin weighs us down to the depths because it creates dysfunctional life, a life where we try to be God and we are not equipped to be God, nor meant to be God.

Is this how you understand sin? We cannot have our sins forgiven if we do not know the reality of sin.

Second, dealing with sin must be relational – it must, must involve turning to the one sinned against and crying out to him.

Dealing with sin cannot be achieved through anaesthesia – through alcohol, drugs, indulgence. Dealing with sin cannot be achieved through denial – either ascetic denial or denial of sin. Dealing with sin cannot be achieved through good deeds. All of this are individual approaches to sin, and they ignore the fundamentally relational core of sin – it is against the LORD!

To deal with your sin, the invitation is clear: come to the LORD and he will deal with your sin by forgiving it, because Jesus took his judgement for you.

Is that how you deal with your sin, by calling out to the LORD and asking his forgiveness? In that alone, is all the forgiveness of sins we need!

Third, as we wait for Jesus to return, to wipe all residue and reality of sin away forever, we must wait well. The psalmist gives us some hints – we wait with ‘eager expectation’, looking forward to the day. We wait with our hope firmly ‘in his word’, reading/knowing/living in God’s word. We wait, praying Psalm 130 individually and communally.