

Psalms 129, 130, and 131: A Framework for Trauma Care

 by TODD STRYD

The Bible is about recovery. Yes, you read that correctly. The Bible is about recovery. I know this is probably not the typical way you think about the purpose of God's Word. We're used to describing it with terms like redemption, salvation, and reconciliation. While those are all perfect examples of what the Scriptures are about, a strong case can be made that *recovery* should be among them.

Recovery should be included in the ranks of these descriptors because it's what the Word of God accomplishes. Recovery describes a return to what is supposed to be. But it is a recovery that also looks forward. This is what special revelation revolves around. The good news of Jesus Christ is the joyous proclamation that God is in the business of restoring humanity for an even greater existence with him for eternity.

We see God's mission of recovery in four separate but related ways.

- First and foremost, the Bible is about a recovery of the severed relationship between God and his people. We see this separation manifest already in the third chapter of Genesis when Adam and Eve rebel against God's commands by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

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- Second, the Bible is interested in a recovery from the impaired relationship between individuals, communities, and nations. We see this fracturing of fellowship with Cain and Abel, at the tower of Babel, and also among Joseph and his brothers.
- Third, Scripture champions a less-noticed recovery: the recovery of nature's original state. Because of the fall, the created order was subject to frustration and is no longer able to be what it was designed to be. In Romans 8:19–23, the apostle Paul describes the corruption of the natural world and captures the cosmic scope of its redemption in Jesus Christ.
- And fourth, the Bible is about a recovery from the brokenness and despair that we experience within ourselves—a brokenness *in* our body and soul and *between* our body and soul. *Trauma* falls in this category of brokenness and is accurately described in Proverbs 22:17 as “a crushed spirit [which] dries up the bones.”

Since the Bible is about recovery, it includes healing after a traumatic event or season. It's this fourth category of recovery that will be the focus of this article.

Scripture is no stranger to the fracturing impact of trauma, or to its resolution and repair. In the Old Testament, it doesn't take long to encounter a traumatic event in Israel's history. After being miraculously rescued from 400 years of slavery, the Israelites found themselves wandering in the wilderness for forty more years because of their hard hearts and unfaithfulness. And when they finally do possess the Promised Land, they are quickly divided and scattered due to tribal factions and oppressive leaders. Eventually, Israel regained its stability only to experience an identity-shattering exile to Babylon and finally a humiliating Roman occupation of their own land. This is a people and a nation who seem to perpetually encounter exile, tragedy, defeat, famine, drought, tyrannical and oppressive leaders, wars, sieges, divine discipline, and plagues. Their history seems to be one trauma stacked on top of another.

To zero in on how the Bible is about trauma recovery, we will consider how Psalms 129, 130, and 131 function as a *liturgy of recovery* in the lives of God's saints. A liturgy is a guided and organized practice with a particular goal in mind. The goal of a liturgy of recovery, such

as the one found in these three psalms, is to facilitate recovery from trauma. We will begin our discussion by highlighting three features of this liturgy:

1. the *message* of recovery. Recovery is dependent on hearing God's voice. Contained in these three psalms are God's words—his message—to his suffering and troubled people.
2. the *flow* of recovery. Recovery has a progression. Healing from trauma tends to follow a particular path, and this liturgy wisely shepherds God's people through the sequence.
3. the *inner workings* of recovery. Recovery is the sum of many individual components of healing. The inner workings of recovery describe what is going on "behind the scenes" that makes this liturgy effective. Ultimately, this liturgy works because God knows what we need to heal.

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We'll illustrate these three features using a case study of an individual named Jeff. Finally, we will anchor this liturgy of recovery in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It was only recently that I recognized these psalms form a liturgy. I had seen them as individual, unrelated psalms, but over time I began to recognize that their cohesive relationship to one another constituted a larger and grander liturgy. Not surprisingly, this cohesion is a feature of the text, a result of there being an innate literary pattern that shapes this unit. Psalms 129, 130, and 131 are part of a group of psalms called the Songs of Ascents, which are psalms sung by Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem to attend the annual festivals. These psalms follow a characteristic threefold rhythm with a psalm of distress followed by a psalm of reliance followed by a psalm of resolution. Distress. Reliance. Resolution. This pattern is then repeated over again in the fifteen Songs of Ascents, constituting five groups of three.

Clearly, the liturgical reading of these psalms would have been a good place in Scripture for Israel to take their profound suffering and trauma. The cohesive relationship between these psalms offers God's

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