

Expectant Watchfulness

Devotional Reading: [Matthew 25:1–13](#)

Background Scripture: [Psalm 130](#)

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.



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Key Text

Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.—Psalm 130:7

Hope in the Lord

Unit II: Expressing Hope

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify elements of cause and effect in the text.
2. Define the genre of lament using [Psalm 130](#) as an example.
3. Personalize, in writing, one of the verses without changing the psalmist's original intent.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Out of the Depths
- B. Lesson Context

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- A. God Listens (vv. 1–2)
- B. God Forgives (vv. 3–4)
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- C. Waiting for God (vv. 5–6)

II. Address to Israel (Psalm 130:7–8)

- A. Hope in God (v. 7)
- B. Receive Redemption (v. 8)
The Bridge to Nowhere

Conclusion

- A. The Power of Waiting
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Babylonian	Bab-ih- <i>low</i> -nee-un.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer	<i>Dee</i> -trik <i>Bawn</i> -haw-fer.
Ketchikan	<i>Keh</i> -chuh-kan.
Kidron	<i>Kid</i> -ron.
Psalter	<i>Sawl</i> -ter.
Sheol (<i>Hebrew</i>)	<i>She</i> -ol.

Introduction

A. Out of the Depths

For such a short prayer, [Psalm 130](#) covers a lot of ground. It begins by acknowledging the terrifying possibilities of human life and ends with hope for a different future. Yet, in reading it, we should not skip too quickly to the end.

In this psalm, the focus does not lie on outside, terrible forces but precisely on human sin. The terror that the psalmist faces comes from the human tendency to allow vices to overcome us. That tendency threatens to take over everything we do and are, thwarting our best plans and spoiling our best intentions. What can be done about this problem of sin?

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in *The Cost of Discipleship*, “Together, they [the disciples, the church]

bring their guilt before God and pray together for grace. May God forgive not only me my sins, but us our sins.” That sense that both our sin and the possibility of forgiveness unite us is central to this psalm and to the Bible as a whole.

B. Lesson Context

[Psalm 130](#) is part of a larger cluster, usually called the Psalms of Ascents or, less often, the Pilgrimage Psalter ([Psalms 120–134](#)). The psalms in the group may have originated at different times and places (as would be true of a modern hymnal) but functioned together as songs for the pilgrims entering the Jerusalem temple in the period following the Babylonian exile.

The group of psalms falls into three subgroups ([Psalms 120–124](#); [125–129](#), and [130–134](#)). Perhaps the pilgrims sang them at different stops on the road from the Mount of Olives, through the Kidron Valley, and into the precinct around the temple itself. [Psalm 130](#), in particular, may have served as part of a night vigil as the pilgrims awaited the dawn, which in turn would symbolize the dawning of God’s light in their lives (see [130:6](#), below). Those hypotheses are reasonable but hard to prove. Yet they would explain the varying moods of these psalms and their progressive closeness to the temple itself.

More certain is that the psalms together address a wide range of concerns and moods. Together, they allow the worshipping community to express anxiety and hope, fear and trust, sorrow and joy. That is, they help worshippers bring their entire lives to God, share their lives with each other, and eagerly await God’s transforming work.

[Psalm 130](#) moves the pilgrims from an attitude of despair (v. 1, below) to one of supreme confidence in God’s saving work (vv. 7–8, below). When the one singing focuses on his or her personal suffering, fear and sorrow can overtake faith. But when the focus shifts toward God’s inclination to save and the consequent hope that the entire people may enjoy, the mood may change to hope. So it is here.

The poem, though very short, moves in several steps, from a statement of need addressed to God, to an acknowledgment of God’s mercy and confession of hope, to an address to all of Israel. [Psalm 130](#) begins with a cry to God, as most laments do. Here the attitude is one of deep need and expectation of help. It differs from some psalms of lament by being briefer and jumping to praise without much preparation. In these songs born of distress, the singer either promises to praise God or does so. The promise or the praise is born out of gratitude for God’s generous response to the petition for help.

[Psalm 130](#) seems like a very condensed lament that shades into something different altogether. Perhaps that difference from other psalms reflects this one’s placement in a larger group. It does not have to do all the work a “normal” lament does because it does not stand alone. [Psalm 129](#) describes longstanding attacks on faithful Israelites and expects God’s deliverance, while [Psalm 130](#) expresses contrition before God. Collectively, these psalms together position the one praying as someone in the correct spiritual position before God.

I. Address to the Lord ([Psalm 130:1–6](#))

A. God Listens (vv. 1–2)

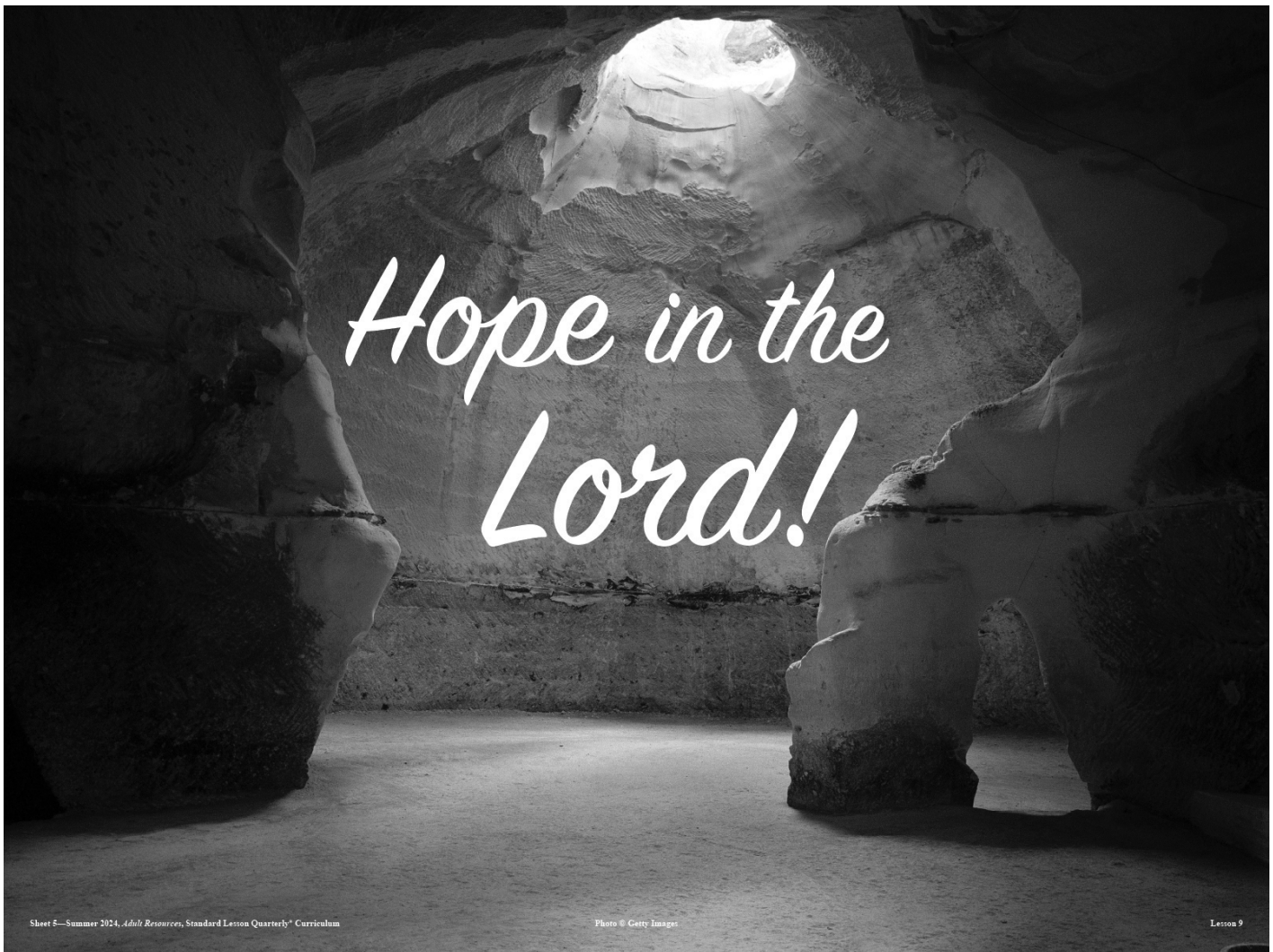
1. Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD;

The phrase *out of the depths* might be a shorter form of the phrase “the depths of the waters” (Ezekiel 27:34; compare Psalm 69:2, 14). Isaiah 51:10 speaks of “the depths of the sea.” While the Hebrew word here translated *depths* only occurs in these instances in the Bible, images of the watery deep were frequently used as an image of danger or chaos, especially the horror of drowning (examples: Exodus 15:5; Psalm 69:2).

Additionally, the concept of depth is linked to Sheol, the place of the dead. Depths and Sheol should not be conflated, but neither should the possible link between them be neglected. Like Jonah crying from the belly of the great fish (Jonah 2:2–5), the psalmist here speaks metaphorically of having descended to the realm of death, to Sheol. Though not an equivalent of the place we would call hell, Sheol was under the earth and generally considered far from God’s presence (Numbers 16:30–33; Psalm 6:5; contrast 139:8); no one worshipped God there (88:10–12). These characteristics of Sheol give insight into what death entailed to ancient Israelites’ way of thinking. The cry from the gates of the realm of death, Sheol itself, points to the many sorts of problems humans may face, including our mortality and proneness to sickness, as well as the hostile attitudes of wicked people or the irresistible power of some historical or natural events. The depths may take many forms.

From there, the psalmist now addresses God in hopes of being heard and saved (compare Psalm 49:15). A call asking God to listen comes early on in many of David’s laments (examples: 4:1; 55:1–2; 61:1; 86:1; 141:1). The psalm before us is not attributed to David, nor is the request to hear repeated word for word. But each instance shares the idea that God will be inclined to listen, that the human being ought to seek God’s attention, and that each supplicant may do so freely and in the company of others (see 130:7–8, below).

The psalmist is not in danger of drowning (or how could he write?) and may not literally be about to die (see commentary on Psalm 130:3). But many different forms of suffering can feel like a death—from physical ailments to relational estrangements and beyond. In all circumstances—even as far from God as Israelites could imagine, at the bottom of a body of water—we can still call on the *Lord*.



Visual for [Lesson 9](#). At the end of class, allow one minute of silence for learners to cry to God, no matter what depth they are experiencing.

2. Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

The opening address to the *Lord* continues with a petition to listen. These two clauses express essentially the same thing, repeating both the sense of the verb *hear* and the direct object *my voice*. This poetic device of synonymous parallelism reinforces the importance the psalmist places on receiving God's full attention.

The second clause asks for tangible but unspecified expressions of God's favor. His care begins with listening attentively to the content of the *cry* and acting to alleviate those specific concerns. As is common in psalms, we do not know the specific occasion for writing—a feature of the poems that invites us to consider our supplications.

Similar language appears several times in psalms of lament (examples: [Psalms 86:6](#); [140:6](#); [143:1](#)). [Psalm 28:6](#), for example, offers a counterpart to the request for God to hear by celebrating that God already had heard (compare [31:22](#); [116:1](#); etc.). All these psalms expect that God desires to listen to sincere requests for help and will respond with speed and compassion. We do well to remember, however, that God's timing is not our own ([2 Peter 3:9](#)), and a perceived lack of an answer from God

does not mean he has not heard or has no intention of acting (examples: [Habakkuk 1:2–5](#); [John 11:21–22](#)).

What Do You Think?

What situation might you describe as “the depths” from which you call to God?

Digging Deeper

What gives you confidence that God is attentive to your cries?

B. God Forgives (vv. 3–4)

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

The psalmist affirms God’s mercy in the form of a question, as if to remind him of his choice to exhibit mercy. God could obsess over human sin to keep meticulous tabs on every stray thought, word, and deed. A similar use of the verb *kept a record* appears in [1 Samuel 1:12](#), which says that Eli “observed” Hannah’s mouth when she prayed for a son. In the context of 1 Samuel, the verb suggests close attention, as it does here. If God decided to tally *sins*, no person could be counted as righteous ([Psalm 14:2–3](#); [Ecclesiastes 7:20](#); [Romans 3:10–12](#)).

Furthermore, a God who rigorously punished all evil immediately would leave no space for human survival (compare [Genesis 6:5–7](#); [7:21–22](#)). But a God who ignored evil doing altogether would cause great harm to humanity; we might consider the fear of God’s abandoning his people as exemplified in Lamentations. The God of Israel, however, engages with human beings to reform their lives (example: [Ezekiel 11:19–20](#)).

The psalmist’s question is not merely a theoretical discussion of divine mercy. Mentioning sin also likely touches on the psalmist’s reason for writing: to repent of sinful behavior and seek God’s forgiveness. The psalmist assumes that God delights in forgiveness and the repair of human life that it makes possible (compare [Ezekiel 33:11](#); [Acts 2:17–39](#)). By appealing to God’s mercy, the person praying also commits to reform (see [Romans 2:4](#)).

What Do You Think?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how aware are you of your own sinfulness?

Digging Deeper

What benefit is there in being more aware of your own sin? less aware?

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

But ties this verse closely to verse 3, implying a sequence of closely related events. The experience or even observation of God’s forgiveness and its consequences for human life create a sense of awe in the impressionable human. Here the psalmist’s knowledge of God’s inclination toward mercy becomes clear.

But the sequence of thoughts may seem odd at first. How does the reality of *forgiveness* create an

awe-filled sense of fear? Contrary to the possible view that God’s hatred of sin or ferocity toward evil will so terrify people that they will live better lives, this verse suggests that God’s mercy toward sinners inspires them to honor him more. Instead of being mired in sins and paralyzed to choose or do better, forgiveness creates a new path (example: [Isaiah 42:16](#)). Divine gentleness with the people inspires awe in part because it seems so different from human inclinations toward one another. In contrast to the pitiless ways in which we often respond to mistreatment or wrongdoing, God exercises mercy.

The phrase *serve you* is absent in older translations. Still, the idea that fear of the Lord leads to service to him is appropriate (example: [Ecclesiastes 12:13](#); compare [John 14:15](#)).

Records of Wrongdoing

I took the carpenter at his word and paid him \$5,000. He had the plans for the custom cabinets my wife and I hired him to build for our new home; the down payment would cover materials so he could begin work. When months later we still had neither updates nor cabinets, I drove three hours to his shop—only to discover the carpenter had gone out of business and left town.

Like a detective, I gathered evidence and built my case to get our money back. For years, I saved all my records of the man’s crimes, getting angry every time I saw the growing pile on my desk. It wasn’t until I threw the paperwork in the garbage that I could forgive him for wronging us.

God could pile up the evidence of our guilt too. But he chooses instead to throw out the evidence against us and forgive us ([Hebrews 9:11–15](#)). Are there any wrongdoings that you continue to keep records of? What prevents you from throwing out these records, as God did for you?

—J. M.

C. Waiting for God (vv. 5–6)

5a. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits,

The Hebrew word translated *whole being* can more concisely be translated “soul” (as in the *KJV*). But as the *NIV* translation suggests, this Hebrew word has a more robust meaning than we might consider in English. Ancient Israelites did not believe in a soul that merely inhabited a body (like Greek thinking). Instead of a divide between body and soul, the Israelites thought of the human being as an integrated whole, a body-and-soul unity. The soul was the animating force, the piece of the body that made a person alive. This integration of body and soul remains central to Christianity, which rests on the hope of our bodily resurrection ([1 Corinthians 15:50–57](#)) rather than the immortality of a disembodied spirit or soul.

In saying *my whole being waits*, then, the psalmist claims to anticipate God’s saving work with every fiber of his being. The psalmist’s faith involves an orientation to a future in which the problems of the moment find a solution (see commentary [Psalm 130:5b–6](#), below).

5b. and in his word I put my hope.

To *hope* here is a synonym for waiting on God (see [Psalm 130:5a](#), above). We never hope in vain when we place our hope in his promises. God’s *word* refers here, not to the law as it might, but to his promise of salvation given first to Abram ([Genesis 12:2–3](#)), which becomes the focus of the faithful

person's life. Having confidence in that promise shapes behavior for a lifetime as well.

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

This verse repeats *more than watchmen wait for the morning* for rhythmical purposes; we might recognize this convention in our hymns. The repetition also expresses the intensity of waiting for God's saving act. The waiting involves a person's entire being (see [Psalm 130:5a](#), above, regarding the Hebrew concept of the soul).

What this particular phrase means, however, is less than obvious. The emphasis could be on waiting at a specific time—during the night. Or it could be emphasizing the sentinels who are watching. In either case, an analogy is drawn. Just as nighttime sentries eagerly await the dawn and the relative safety of daytime, so does the one praying wait for a new day in which God will act. Once again, the psalmist's faith requires hope in God's future action.

What Do You Think?

What metaphor would you use to describe what it feels like to wait on the Lord?

Digging Deeper

How is waiting on God different from other kinds of waiting?

II. Address to Israel (Psalm 130:7–8)

A. Hope in God (v. 7)

7a. Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love

In the last two verses, the psalm shifts focus from an individual psalmist to the whole community. This sort of shift frequently occurs in psalms of lament (see [Lesson Context](#), above). But this one lacks any transition, as the psalm turns from the address to God to the address to the people. The *hope*, especially in God's *unfailing love*, that the psalmist expressed for his personal circumstances is prescribed for the gathered community.

7b. and with him is full redemption.

The Hebrew behind this phrase is difficult to understand and translate. One reason for this is the scarcity of biblical uses of the precise Hebrew word translated *redemption* ([Psalm 111:9](#); translated “deal differently” in [Exodus 8:22](#) and “deliver” in [Isaiah 50:2](#)). However, the related verb is more common, which gives us confidence that redemption is the appropriate translation here.

While we don't often think of it this way, redemption is a legal metaphor. In ancient Israel, the term often applied to the purchase of slaves to free them. The language is prevalent in texts describing God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage (examples: [Deuteronomy 7:8](#); [9:26](#); [15:15](#); [2 Samuel 7:23](#); [Micah 6:4](#)). Here, however, the liberation does not involve political oppression (or at least not just that), but the oppression of human sin in all its forms. The psalm anticipates God acting

to free Israel from sin's power. This redemption is the ultimate fulfillment of God's ancient covenant with the ancestors (see commentary on [Psalm 130:5b](#), above; compare [Luke 1:46–55](#)).

B. Receive Redemption (v. 8)

8. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

As laments often do, the psalm ends with an expression of deep trust in God (example: [Psalm 22](#)). This ending repositions the whole poem because it moves readers from focusing on the individual to God's care for the whole people. In God's great mercy lies hope for *Israel* and everyone within it. This psalm probably lies behind the promise of the angel to Joseph in [Matthew 1:21](#): "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." For Matthew, Jesus became the sign and instrument of God's redemption of Israel and to the larger world.

There is a tight connection between the individual's experience and the community's proclamation. The people of Israel were the community whom God rescued from evil in all its manifestations, of which we are the spiritual descendants. The people announced and celebrated the good news that such deliverance had occurred (example: [Exodus 15](#)), and they sought more of it. And, of course, that understanding also applies to the church, the community grafted into Israel ([Romans 9–11](#)). We also experience, both as individuals and as a community, the power of God's forgiveness, which we imitate in our dealings with others.

What Do You Think?

Imagine you were the psalmist anticipating God's redemption. What would you think of Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How has studying the Psalms deepened your appreciation for Christ?

The Bridge to Nowhere

Like many Alaska towns, Ketchikan is not connected to the rest of the state by roads, but instead by air. The phrase "off-the-road system" describes towns like this. The unique thing about Ketchikan is that its airport is situated on a small island. A ferry shuttles travelers between the airport and the town.

Between 2006 and 2015, Alaska policymakers discussed the construction of a bridge to replace the ferry. Twenty-eight million dollars were spent constructing a road to the bridge. But in 2015, it was determined that the financially responsible decision was to cancel the bridge project and upgrade the city's ferries. This project became known as the "Bridge to Nowhere," though what actually exists is a *road* to nowhere.

The work of God in our lives is not a road to nowhere or an abandoned bridge project. God does not enthusiastically begin to transform us only to neglect his work later. We experience full redemption and restoration because of his work in our lives. Is there a bridge-to-nowhere project in your life

that you need God to finish? Or would it be wiser to repent of your misguided work and start over?

—J. M.

Conclusion

A. The Power of Waiting

Psalm 130 speaks to faith that involves waiting for God's grace to make itself known. During such a time, the person may doubt God's ability or willingness to save, question the integrity of other human beings, and even lose self-respect. Waiting for salvation challenges every fiber of a person's being.

Yet, that challenge itself strengthens faith in the long run. As this psalm makes clear, trust in God does not come without some doubts. Will God listen? Biblical faith is not a Pollyanna attitude about life. It is realistic and honest about hardship. Yet it does not remain there. The spiritual challenges we face—the depths—become opportunities for grace. Therefore, learning the discipline of waiting is part of learning to live with God and all others who are also awaiting God's help. This psalm, in short, exposes an important truth about human beings: our profound need and desire for God's presence.

As part of a community of pilgrims seeking God's presence, the faithful person can speak to God even in the most desperate moments of life. The communal worship of the Israelite community acknowledges that fact. God does not skimp on acts that will benefit human beings but rather frequently engages in them. Worship in the community still reminds us of God's mighty acts. May we, in our darkest moments and in the grasp of the sins that don't want to let us go, cry out to our God and heed the call to hope in his saving works.

What Do You Think?

What key idea will you take away from these three lessons in the Psalms?

Digging Deeper

How will you continue to seek knowledge and wisdom from the Lord?

B. Prayer

O, God who hears the cries of broken people and sees our tear-stained faces, who sutures broken hearts and shattered relationships, hear every cry from the depths of us as well. Do not forget us in our day of distress, and help us not forget to be thankful when you have rescued us with one of the many methods at your disposal. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Faith celebrates our hope in God's forgiveness and calls others to do the same.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Ask for volunteers to share about a time when they had to wait for something as a child or young adult. Were they waiting for something they needed or just wanted? What made it easier or harder to wait? Did they display patience as they waited? Then ask the same questions but from a more recent example. Follow up by asking whether waiting has become easier with age. Why or why not? *Option.* Have learners pair up to answer the prompts.

After hearing from several people, talk together about what made waiting hard in those situations. Then discuss what factors make waiting easier or harder. Answers might include who they are waiting on (someone trustworthy or not, for example), whether they need or only want what they're waiting for, and how guaranteed it is that they will eventually receive what they desire.

Transition to the next portion of the lesson with the statement, "We're going to read [Psalm 130](#) now, in which the psalmist waits hopefully for God's answer to his prayer for forgiveness."

Into the Word

Distribute to the class handouts (you create) of [Psalm 130](#), along with pens. As you read the psalm aloud to the class, ask them to mark phrases that stand out by underlining them and any that seem unclear or confusing with a question mark. After hearing from volunteers about what they marked, start by addressing any questions with information found in the commentary. Then discuss together why the underlined phrases stood out in particular.

Finally, ask how the psalmist's experience of waiting on God is like or unlike the personal stories that were shared in the previous exercise. What phrases suggest that the psalmist found waiting difficult? Do any suggest he found it easy?

Alternative 1. Have learners work in pairs to identify several themes found in [Psalm 130](#). These should include the psalmist's need for God to hear and act on his behalf, the psalmist's awareness of his own sin, and the psalmist's hope for his own redemption as well as that of Israel. Then ask the pairs to compare and contrast [Psalm 130](#) to [Psalms 71:12–21 \(lesson 7\)](#) and [119:73–80 \(lesson 8\)](#). They should focus on themes found in these three psalms. After calling time, have the class come back together to discuss what they found. What do the common themes suggest about waiting for God then and now?

Alternative 2. Distribute copies of the "God's Response" exercise from the activity sheet, which you can download. Ask pairs to complete as indicated.

After any of these activities, bring the class together to consider the following questions: 1—Does God make us wait a long time before he answers our petitions? 2—How can [Psalm 130](#) help one con-

tinue to hope when our sins seem insurmountable? 3—What should we do as we wait on the Lord’s answer to the longings of our hearts?

Into Life

Have students reread [Psalm 130](#) from the handout you distributed (above). Ask them to circle the verse that speaks to them the most and write a brief note in the margin explaining their choice. Then have them paraphrase that verse to personalize it without changing the psalmist’s original intent. Allow volunteers to share their answers.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Expectant Watchfulness” exercise. Have learners work individually for one minute as indicated. Encourage learners to refer to the exercise throughout the week as they wait on the Lord.

Finally, lead the class in a closing prayer, including elements of praise, requests for help, confession, and thanks.