

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Deal with the baggage

Presented by Steve Cooper

#### Psalm 130

Good morning! Recently my wife and I watched the classic Australian movie Phar Lap. The movie tells the story of the famous race horse that won so many races, including a Melbourne Cup. Phar Lap was enormously strong and determined. The sad part of the movie is that the officials loaded Phar Lap down with weights so the other horses had some chance of catching him. As the weights became heavier, Phar Lap found it hard to bear the strain. He became increasingly tired and weary.

The movie made me think about the lives most of us live. Often we carry weights and burdens we don't need to carry. Sometimes that weight is caused by our own sins and foolish choices. This morning, let's reflect on a psalm from the Bible that helps us deal with the baggage that's often so heavy on our backs. Stay tuned ...

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About 350 years ago, an English preacher, John Bunyan, wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegorical description of the Christian life. Written while he spent time in jail for his convictions, Bunyan described the journey of Pilgrim, or Christian, who left his home in the City of Destruction and headed for the Celestial City. Along the way he met one character after another ... some good, some bad.

One picture in this vivid book that impresses me occurs early in the story, that of Christian carrying a huge burden on his back. Soon it becomes clear that the burden is the accumulation of his sins and his guilty conscience. At one point early in his journey, Christian runs into Mr. Pliable. Pliable is the kind of man we call a pleaser, one who wants to make everybody happy, who is easily convinced, and who will stick with something as long as the way is easy and uncomplicated. He is usually optimistic, even enthusiastic. Pliable finds it difficult to understand why Christian can't move faster as they travel ... perhaps even run a bit. 'I can't run,' Christian says to him. 'This burden on my back is simply too heavy.'

Pliable doesn't understand. He hasn't a similar burden, because he resists looking back to see what's there - his mistakes, his damaged relationships, his failures, his regrets and sins. So Pliable just lives from moment to moment, and he's oblivious to the fact that his inner world has filled up with all sorts of stuff. As long as he can ignore it, he's OK ... for the moment.

Soon the two men - Christian and Pliable - fall into a swamp (Bunyan calls it the Swamp of Despair) into which all the sewage of the surrounding towns drains. Pliable is quick to want to quit the journey. He wants out, so he heads back running to where he came from. But Christian - still loaded down with his burden - presses forward toward the place where, he has been told, his burden will be lifted from his back.

Christian's burden gets heavier, and he moves forward with great difficulty, until finally the road leads to a small hill. Upon the hill stands a Cross, and a little below, in the bottom of the hill, a Sepulchre (burial tomb). Bunyan saw in his dream that just as Christian came up close to the Cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from his back, and tumbled down the hill into the Sepulchre, and he saw it no more.

Bunyan writes: 'Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, "He has given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death."' The he stood awhile to look and wonder, for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the Cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked, and looked again, even till tears rolled down his cheeks.'

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I'm reading from the book by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. When the pilgrim, or 'Christian', comes to the cross, his burden tumbles off his back. Bunyan gives this delightful description of the pilgrim's reaction: 'Then Christian gave three leaps for joy, and went on singing –

Thus far did I come laden with my sin,  
 Nor could anything ease the grief that I was in,  
 Till I came here. What a place is this!  
 Must here be the beginning of my bliss?  
 Must here the burden fall off from my back?  
 Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?  
 Blest Cross! blest Sepulchre! blest, rather, be  
 The Man that there was put to shame for me!

Here is a picture of what should be happening regularly for all of us - this image of Christian gazing at the Cross and the empty tomb, overwhelmed that his Saviour died for his sins, discovering to his delight that the heavy burden has fallen from his back. It's not just a picture of conversion, when we first come to Christ and receive his forgiveness, but an image of the daily Christian life where we keep coming to the cross to deal with our sins and burdens.

These days most of us are so busy we don't have time for self-examination. Yet it was Socrates who famously said the unexamined life is not worth living. For most of us, there is baggage from the past we still need to deal with. There is sin we have not confessed, relationships that need fixing, people we have hurt we need to apologize to, duties we were too lazy to perform, decisions we made that disappointed God. These failures give us an uneasy conscience. We will find the journey into the future more difficult if we do not face these issues and deal with the baggage. Let's not be like Mr. Pliable, who lived superficially and ignored his own sins and guilt.

Today I want us to reflect on Psalm 130. This psalm helps us to face our sin, our guilt, the effects of our failures on ourselves and others, and to find God's mercy and grace. The writer of this psalm is very conscious of his sin and guilt. He writes: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy' (vv.1-2). The psalmist is floundering in deep waters, and he pleads with God to rescue him.

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This morning we're thinking about the baggage most of us carry - the burden of our sins and guilt - which often we don't deal with. The burden weighs us down. The writer of Psalm 130 was courageous enough to admit his own baggage. He was conscious that God is holy and pure, and all humans (including himself) are sinful and twisted. He writes (in vv.3-4): 'If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.' V.4 is a particularly beautiful statement – if we are convicted of sin and despairing, there is hope in a forgiving God. Yet we dare not be presumptuous, for God's forgiveness does not encourage us in our sins, but promotes 'the fear of the Lord' (a reverent awe in his presence), which leads us to depart from sin. Bunyan himself found this verse very helpful in his own long struggles with despair and a guilty conscience.

By the end of v.4 the psalmist is confident of the forgiving mercy of God to sinners. So he decides he can now trust God to forgive him. He writes: 'I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord, more than watchmen wait for the morning' (vv.5-6). His guilty conscience had brought him into the darkness, but now he longs and waits expectantly for the dawn of God's pardoning grace. Finally, the psalm writer turns to the nation of Israel, God's people, and affirms that they can know God's forgiveness in the same way he has been forgiven. He calls out: 'O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins' (vv.7-8).

This psalm leads us straight to Jesus and the New Testament. In the suffering and death of Jesus God did show his 'unfailing love' (v.7), he provided 'full redemption' (release, liberation, rescue) from all our sins

(vv.7-8). In fact, the apostle Paul seems to have this psalm in mind as he pens these magnificent words about Christ: 'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace' (Eph 1:7). The word 'blood' emphasises the costly sacrifice Jesus made in our place. His death 'rescues' us, forgives us, when we turn from sin and trust in Jesus. This all happened because of God's 'grace', his merciful kindness which we don't deserve.

The next song is thoughtful and quiet, giving us a chance to examine ourselves and reflect. This will be a time for each of us to come before the holy God, who knows all about the burdens and sins we carry. This is a chance to be honest before God. We can cry out to him 'out of the depths' (v.1). As we name our sins one by one to him, cry out for his mercy and grace, and gaze at our Saviour who died on the cross in our place, God promises to forgive us. The burden can fall off. We can deal with the baggage.

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Life is a long race to be run. It's important to be free of baggage that weighs us down in the race. Let's not be like the horse Phar Lap, who suffered great strain and slowed down due to the heavy weights he carried. The writer of Hebrews says: 'Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.' As the writer of Psalm 130 did, we can cry out to the holy God who is ready to forgive and deliver us. Like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, we can gaze at Jesus and his cross, and find that our baggage tumbles from our back.

Let me pray: 'Lord God, help us to be honest and thorough about the baggage in our inner lives. We thank you that you are a God who is merciful and forgiving. Help us to gaze each day in wonder and amazed gratitude at Jesus and his cross, and to find that our burdens, sins and guilt are released as we keep on looking with faith and love. In the name of Jesus our Saviour we pray, Amen.'