“The Law of Holes”

Psalm 130

What should we do when we’re deep in a hole and our lives are spiraling out of control? The answer might surprise you.

On August 29, 1973, *Pisces III*, a small Canadian deep-sea submersible, sank to the floor of the Irish Sea at a depth of nearly 1,600 feet. Two men were inside this capsule of death: former British Royal Navy officer Roger Mallinson and engineer Roger Chapman. When a rear hatch was accidentally opened, sea water rushed in, causing the tiny sub to plummet like a rock to the bottom of the sea.

It took more than three days to rescue the pair, and when they were finally reached, the two chaps had only 12 minutes of oxygen left. They’d been trapped in the crushing depths of the sea for 84 hours.

The Kola Superdeep Borehole goes even deeper. It is the most jaw-dropping, radical, human-made hole on the planet, and the deepest artificial point on Earth. The wicked shaft, built by the Soviets during the Cold War, is 40,230 feet deep. It is so deep that locals call it the “well to hell,” and swear they can hear the screams of souls writhing in hell.

It was at the bottom of such an abyss that the writer of Psalm 130 fancied himself, and he was just about to lose all hope of ever seeing the light of day.

It’s quite likely that the holes in which we find ourselves are figurative ones, but real, nonetheless. Even in the face of rescue, we instinctively panic, like a drowning victim trying to climb out of the water on top of a lifeguard. We tend to escalate, rather than deescalate, defuse, calm down or lighten up. We’re experts at making bad situations worse.

We try to rationalize this behavior when faced with failure. “Oh, perhaps if I raise my voice and start shouting, she’ll understand.” Or, “Just let me stay in Vegas one more night and I can win it back. Really … I can and I will … I have a system.”

The most pertinent advice for people in situations like this has been attributed to Will Rogers, Bill Clinton, cowboys, Warren Buffett and Pat Robertson — all of whom knew of what they spoke: “The first thing to do when you find yourself in a hole is to stop digging.”

Makes sense. Unfortunately, most people in a hole only stop digging in order to find a bigger shovel.

The aphorism can be traced to page 6 of *The Washington Post*, October 25, 1911: “Nor would a wise man, seeing that he was in a hole, go to work and blindly dig it deeper.”

So, this, we may safely say, is the *First Law of Holes*. When you find that you’ve unwittingly dug yourself into a hole, stop doing what you’re doing, which is exacerbating the situation. We have idioms similar to this First Law, such as adding fuel to the fire, pouring gasoline on the fire, adding insult to injury, and so on.

The *Second Law of Holes* is, “Don’t dig a hole for others.” This is a biblical principle derived from, among many possible citations, Proverbs 26:27, which sounds better in Elizabethan English or King James English: “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him.” Don’t lay traps for your enemies. You’re likely to fall in the hole you dug. Consider Haman’s end in the story of Esther, when he died on the very gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. The psalmist had a similar thought: “Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made” (7:15, NIV).

The author of today's psalm reading is in a hole. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. LORD, hear my voice!" (v. 1). Obviously, the scene is of a person in a pit from which escape is impossible. From the bottom of this pit, he's now hollering for help. "LORD, hear my voice!" The Third Law of Holes, then, is to *cry for help*.

This might seem obvious, but in a culture where independence and "rugged individualism" are seen as virtues, crying in any way, shape or form is tolerated about as much as one might tolerate a preteen who wants an increase in their allowance.

Asking for help might be okay if it is the government we're hitting up. But polite, intelligent and wise persons with strong emotional IQs do not ask people for help, especially financial help. We even hesitate to ask for directions. God forbid we should think of asking for more.

But the Bible teaches us that it is not only okay to ask God for help, it is almost required if we hope to dig ourselves *out* of holes instead of *into* them.

"Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD." So begins the psalm. The psalm-writer, probably a poet languishing in despair during the Babylonian exile, describes his location and situation. He calls it the "depths." We might say, the "pits."

We may not know the full extent of the author's duress, but we can be sure it was considerable. It has the tone of a person who has lost everything in life. It has the sound of a parent who is suddenly grieving the loss of a child. It feels like the anguish of someone whose life and reputation have been destroyed and who now feels there is nowhere to turn.

This is a person at a crossroads. Have you ever been there? Have you been standing alone at an intersection in the middle of nowhere and realized the choices facing you have been

reduced to just two? “I either end it all now and forever, or I cry out of the depths of my despair to God. I die, or I ask for help. There are no other options.” One would hope you’ve never been in such a deep, profound and dark place, but many people have.

This is where the psalm-writer is: in the depths.

What’s worse, he is not only in the pit of despair, but *it is a pit of his own making*! How often has this happened in our lives? It’s bad enough to be *in extreme duress*, worse if the extremity is self-inflicted. The psalmist readily admits the audacity and borderline hypocrisy. He wants help from the very source against whom he has sinned. “If you, O LORD, should mark my iniquities, LORD, who could stand?” (v. 2). He doesn’t identify his mistakes, but if we were to take a candid inventory of our own choices, decisions, behaviors and ill-chosen words that have landed us in hot water, we’d probably not have too much difficulty determining where we’ve erred.

Would you like it if God kept track of your sins? Well, no. You don’t like it when your spouse or your children remind you of your shortcomings or inconsistencies! How fun would it be to live with someone who kept a file of your mistakes or wrote you up for inappropriate behavior?

Yet, even when staring at the ceiling, while cursing our stubborn nature, we know the one thing we need to do: “I need to ask God to save me from myself.” We know that God alone can lift us out of the depths. How do we know this? Because we agree with the psalmist: “There is forgiveness with you.”

Forgiveness! What a sweet word. There is a repairing and healing balm in forgiveness. We know this from experience, do we not? That’s why it is godlike to offer forgiveness when

we've been wronged. C.S. Lewis noted that "to be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." There is perhaps no greater attribute of God's essential nature than God's willingness, even eagerness, to forgive the repentant and brokenhearted. Perhaps this is why Martin Luther called Psalm 130, along with the other penitential psalms, the Pauline Psalms because of their emphasis on faith and forgiveness. This amazing God is one "who forgives all your iniquities … for … as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us" (103:3, 11-12).

Human beings may take longer to forgive than God, and perhaps some will never forgive or forget. But, after exhausting all avenues of redress, we have to leave it, and be all the more thankful for the amazing grace that God extends toward us in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

So, the writer, in a deep hole, with full knowledge of his own culpability, obeys the Third Law of Holes, as should we. *He asks for help.*

Having stopped the digging and having sent up a cry for help, one must *wait with hope*. "I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word, I hope" (v. 5).

It is incredibly hard to wait. But if one cannot wait, one cannot hope, for one is inextricably tied to the other. Only those who wait upon the Lord, can hope in the Lord. So how do we do it?

We wait by staying in the "now." Going over past problems, reliving old mistakes, or getting a case of the "shoulda, woulda, couldas" is of no help whatsoever. Rather, we focus on the tasks at hand, next steps and positive actions. In a hole, there is no way to go except up, and that is not going to happen without waiting with a clear mind and heart.

We wait with confidence in the One on whom we have called for help. We rang up God; we must let God answer. We reached out to the Creator of the universe. We must let God be God and do what God does and on God's schedule, not ours.

We wait with courage. This is the advice of the psalmist: "Wait for the LORD; Be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD" (27:14). John Wayne reportedly said that "courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway." Our metaphor might work better with a climbing reference: "Courage is being scared to death, but strapping on a harness, snapping in a carabiner and having faith that the rope won't break."

We wait with contentment. We do not wait as though we're standing in front of an elevator door, punching the "UP" button again and again as if it will make the elevator arrive faster. The elevator will come when it comes. We learn to practice peace; we learn to be content with God's timing. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (8:25).

Corrie ten Boom once wrote: "There is no pit so deep, that God's love is not deeper still." When God's forgiving love reaches down to the depths of our soul, it lifts us up to a new place, a fresh start, and it is then that we realize that when we are forgiven, we indeed have a future. This is what the psalmist wanted; it's what we all want. Forgiven with a future.

May the peace of God . . .