

Out of the depths

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[0:00] Now, please open your Bibles with me to Psalm 130 on page 624. We're going to read the whole psalm.

! Psalm 130. Out of the depths, I cry to you, Lord. Lord, hear my voice.

Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can with reverence serve you. I wait for the Lord. My whole being waits.

And in his word, I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

[1:01] 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. Amen. This is God's word. And you will have heard that powerful image.

We sang it in Psalm 140. It begins here again. It's the image, perhaps, of a person who has lost its sea, and they feel like they're drowning. Or they've fallen into quicksand.

And they're kicking and they're scrabbling, but it's only making things worse. Or perhaps, think of someone who's fallen down a mine, or some kind of deep pit, and there's no way back up.

The image is vivid. Somebody who's utterly hopeless and helpless. With a sensation of going under. Trapped.

[2:04] Cannot get their footing. Cannot find stability or security. It's a powerful image, I think, many of us, and many people in our world could identify with.

In our Psalm, we discover that for this songwriter, the cause of his distress is that sense of guilt for sin. He knows God is holy and he is impure.

That God is just and he deserves judgment. And maybe some of us, we think about that image of being in the depths and we relate to the Psalms' experience directly.

John Wesley. Some of you have heard of John Wesley. He was a famous preacher in the 18th century. On May the 24th, 1738, he wasn't a Christian. He visited St. Paul's Cathedral.

And the choir was singing Psalm 130, Lord from the depths. And for John Wesley, in that moment, he said, it mirrored his spiritual distress. And that evening, he went to another church and became a Christian listening to an introduction to the book of Romans.

[3:14] And I wish reminded him of God's grace for guilty sinners. So that may be our relation to this image. But the image, of course, works far more broadly. That somebody can have absolutely no sense of guilt, but can still feel a sense of total despair.

It could be that our circumstances, it create that sensation that we are trapped or we are drowning. It may be that we are facing a particular challenge, a particular kind of suffering.

Or maybe for many, that sense of feeling so hopeless and in the depths is just because we feel ashamed. Because we think there is a standard that we should be reaching.

There are things that we should have achieved by now, and we simply haven't. It's not matching up to the world's standards or even our own. This is an image, I think, that's big enough for all of our circumstances.

There's a Christian writer who was sharing that when his mother-in-law was going through an aggressive cancer treatment, both his mother-in-law and himself, they turned to Psalm 130 day after day to find hope and comfort.

[4:31] It's a wonderful psalm because it's so honest and it's so hopeful. The image of being in the depths is broad enough for all of us to relate to. And the message of hope in Psalm 130 is good

news that we can all cling to.

Because we find even within the psalm this steady climb towards assurance. We go from the depths of despair to hope and rejoicing in God's redemption.

The psalmist personally comes to discover God's grace and goodness in his own life, and by the end, he's confidently inviting all Israel, all the people of God, into that experience.

So we're going to look at our psalm together, and we're going to use that image to frame our psalm.

So we begin in verses 1 and 2 in the depths that we find ourselves in.

Then verse 3 and 4 and verse 7 to 8 we're introduced to the rope that we must grab hold of.

[5:36] And finally in verses 5 and 6, there's a climb that we each need to make. So let's begin in the depths. So we've said this is a vivid image that's used in other psalms.

So we already sang Psalm 140 that reminds us, God lifted me out of the slimy pit, and he set my feet on a rock. We could have gone to Psalm 69.

Listen to how Psalm 69 begins. Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths where there is no foothold.

Some of God's people have related to this in a very literal way. Think of the prophet Jonah.

Remember what happens in the story of Jonah? God tells him to go and preach, and he turns, and he wants to run away from God, and he's thrown overboard, and he's swallowed by a fish, but he's also sinking to the depths.

And in chapter 2, we find a prayer of Jonah, which sounds very like a psalm, where he confesses that sense of going under and being trapped and knowing God's rescue.

[6:43] Most often, of course, it's a metaphor. I feel as if I'm going under. I feel as if in my life I can't quite get my footing. I sense that I'm all at sea in a sea of trouble.

Out of the deck. But notice, there is a striking cry of faith here. Out of the depths, I cry to you, Lord.

And notice, Lord is written in capital letters, and whenever we see that, we are reminded, this is God's personal name. This is the name of the covenant God of steadfast love.

And in his distress, this singer turns to his covenant God. He has come to discover in the depths. There is no one else to cry to.

There is no one else to look to for mercy. But faith looks up and cries, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. Verse 3 reveals, as we said, the cause of his distress.

[7:53] If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand? God keeps the record and invites us to give an account of our lives.

If the live stream feed of your life was played before God and we were invited to answer for it, each and every one of us would be condemned as guilty.

And in humility and in need, faith cries out, not for justice, but for the mercy of God, his undeserved kindness and forgiveness.

And this psalm reminds us of something that maybe we've come to know personally. Sometimes it takes our lives hitting rock bottom, as it were, before we look up and cry to God for mercy.

If you know the story of John Newton, who famously wrote Amazing Grace, that happened to him literally. He was caught up in one of those huge Atlantic storms that the boat was taking in water and was beginning to go under and it was at that point that he cried out to God for mercy and for salvation.

[9:07] Maybe you resonate with that. But most of the time, if we are honest, I think our instinct when trouble hits, maybe we find ourselves in the depths, often our instinct and certainly the message that we hear from the world is look inside of yourself for the answers, for salvation.

One way that we saw this in recent years in wider society was when COVID hit. Do you remember when COVID hit and it felt like the window was open just a crack and people were beginning to seek for God and lots of people were tuning in to online services and reading Bibles and it felt like the window opened.

But then, what by and large happened is the window shut because people decided, oh, it's okay, science has the answers. We've got a vaccine so everything is fine.

we tend to look inside of ourselves for the answers. At the level of our own individual lives, we can often think, well, I should be able to handle this so I will handle this.

I'm going to draw on my own resources, my own resilience, maybe my own relationships to get me out of whatever depth I happen to be in. The problem, of course, comes when we discover that there are times when we can't and then we feel that we're really drowning.

[10:39] Drowning under that sense, perhaps, of I'm not achieving my goals. I'm not climbing the ladder of success. I'm putting in all this effort but life doesn't seem to be getting much better.

It's entirely possible that you may be here today and you don't feel you have a sin problem but you can still feel worthless. You can still feel ashamed.

You can still feel a sense of guilt for not measuring up. And you might find yourself in the depths but you don't know where to turn.

Well, this is when the message of Psalm 130, it's where the message of Christianity becomes such good news because it says to us, relentlessly, don't look inside of yourself but look outside of yourself for salvation.

This Psalm reminds us to look away from self and look in faith to the Lord Jesus to find mercy.

That's where hope is found. That's where rescue begins.

[11:48] Sometimes being in the depths can be a very eye-opening experience. A time of trouble can make us reflect on where our life is heading and our priorities.

Just return to the sea for a moment when a boat is sinking. What will a crew do? Well, they'll begin trying to bail out the water, see if they can equalize themselves that way but if that's not working, everything will go overboard that represents extra weight that's just dragging the boat down.

Maybe it's when we get into the depths that we discover there are idols that we cling to. There are things that we look to for salvation that we actually need to let go of because they will not save us and they're only dragging us down.

And it's time to turn instead to the living God for mercy. Thomas Watson the Puritan said this, he said, faith can make use of the waters of affliction to swim faster to Christ.

Our trouble can make us, should make us as Christians certainly, turn to Christ for mercy and salvation. That's where we're going to turn next. We're going to turn secondly to the rope that we must grab hold of.

[13:18] So think about that image that we began within the depths. There's one thing whether we're thinking about the ocean or quicksand or a mine pit, one thing is true.

If you're in that situation you need a rescuer to come with the right equipment. So whether that's you, you need the coast guard to throw out a life belt or whether you need a friend on dry ground to throw out a solid branch to drag you back out of the quicksand, whether you need somebody with the winch and the rope and the harness to come and bring you up.

You need rescue, you need the right equipment and Psalm 130 describes both for us. It describes in a sense the rope that God drops down to us.

It's a rope made of two strands. We need to cling hold of two things that God provides, only God provides. First of all, a new record and secondly, a new redeemer.

So look with me at verses 3 and 4 and let's think about a new record. If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness so that we can with reverence serve you.

[14:36] Now, in case you hadn't noticed, we are just at the beginning of Edinburgh Fringe Festival season and there are hundreds of shows available to watch but I have not yet seen one where the star of the show as his solo show would put on public display all of their deepest, darkest words, thoughts, actions and desires.

Imagine if you walked into that show. Imagine how uncomfortable it would be in the audience.

Imagine how uncomfortable it would be if you had to perform in that show.

Psalm 130 is facing the reality, the knowledge that God sees everything and so he's very honest and he says if God kept a record, if God kept a watch over every single detail of my life and if he was to hold me account for those, if he wrote it down as public record and I had to answer for those, knowing God is holy and pure and he hates sin, any lack of love, any pride, any anger, any lies, who could stand?

This is why he's in the depths. He knows his guilt before God and truly we would all be law for the ways that we have treated one another, for the ways that we've treated God himself.

But then there's that wonderful verse 4, but with you, Lord, there is forgiveness. That God has made provision to meet the problem of human need, that sin that destroys relationships that ruins God's created order.

[16:32] It's this wonderful explosion of God's undeserved grace. We saw something of the same gospel contrast in the book of Romans.

Let me remind you of verses 23 and 24 of Romans 3. Verse 23, all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. So there's the depths.

And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. So there's the rope, there's the new record.

How can we have this new record? Well, the Bible tells us it's only through Jesus. Because Jesus came on a mission to become one of us, ultimately to take our record of debt, all our wrongdoings, and to pay that price in full, and in exchange to give us his record of perfect righteousness.

So that by faith in Jesus, you and I can stand because of God's grace shown to us through the sacrifice of Jesus at the cross.

[17:41] And so faith takes hold of Jesus and that new record that he provides. Because God now deals with us and our sin according to his steadfast love and mercy towards us in Jesus.

He doesn't deal with us according to our sin anymore. He deals with us according to his love and his mercy in Jesus. And that can make such a profound difference to how we live.

As we understand that God's eyes are the only eyes that matter, and that when God looks on us, he looks on us with love. Not seeing us in our sin, but seeing us in his son.

And he loves us fully and completely. So now it's no longer what other people think of me that matters. Now it's not even what I think of myself that matters.

Now it's what God says of me. That's what counts. And when we are justified, when we are declared righteous, that's where we find the secure foothold.

[18:57] That's where we find stability for life, even in the depths. It's in God's steadfast love. So that's the first strand, a new record.

The second strand is this. We need to cling on to a new redeemer. Look with me at verses 7 and 8, and you hear some very focused and very emphatic language.

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. Hear the emphasis. He wants us to hear the only redeemer is the Lord God, and he himself has promised he will redeem his people from all of their sins.

Now, why does that emphasis matter? Here's one reason it matters, because God's people are often prone to forget. It was absolutely the case for Old Testament Israel.

[20:08] Think about the amazing privileges they had. You know, God had acted in such power to save them from slavery. God gave them such wonderful promises to be their God, that they would be his people.

They enjoyed his presence. They saw his shining cloud of glory. He lived among them. They witnessed his miracles, but time and time and time again, they chose idols.

They chose other nations to be their allies in war that they would trust in. They forgot God was their redeemer. As Christians, we might say, I trust in Jesus as Savior, but when it comes down to it, we might find ourselves looking to our work perhaps, a relationship, our money, to be our rescuer.

That's where we instinctively turn to fix what's broken, to give us the sense of life and joy. And so even as Christians, we can find ourselves utterly crushed if we miss a promotion or if we don't get recognition, if our relationship fails, or if someone else sees our flaws.

Now, why is that? Could it be that we so easily turn to trust in other redeemers besides Jesus alone? And so Psalm 130 invites us to reflect, is all my hope in the Lord Jesus alone?

[21:51] Will I place all my weight on this rope? Do I trust His word, His promise, His salvation? So one reason for the emphasis is that we're prone to forget.

The second reason for the emphasis is that the new Redeemer who's promised is the Lord Himself. prophecy there's an element of prophecy here.

And what the singer is seeing in shadow, we see in the full light of day, in the coming of Jesus.

Because with the coming of Jesus, what do we have?

We have the Lord Himself, the eternal Son of God, becoming one of us. And why does He become one of us? So that He Himself can redeem us. So He takes on human flesh so that He can bear our human sin.

So that He can act for us to secure our redemption. So the Lord Jesus, He left the glory of heaven and He came down into the depths.

[22:59] Into the depths of suffering and forsaken and enduring God's wrath on our behalf to raise us up to life with God.

And so He is the rope we must grab hold of by faith. There is no other way back to God and to life. So we've seen the depths, we've seen the rope.

Very briefly, let's think about the claim. And the surprise about the claim, so when you think about claiming, you think about action. And so you might expect an active word.

But look with me at verses 5 and 6. This is an active word, but it kind of sounds passive as well. I wait for the Lord. My whole being waits, and in His word I put my hope.

I wait for the Lord. More than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. And this is such a helpful word because it, again, is reminding us we need to look out inside ourselves for salvation.

[24:07] Faith waits, faith trusts in God. And it also reminds us that this is a process. This is a long and steady claim of trusting in Jesus day by day.

There's a new image in verse 6. So the psalm pictures the watchmen of the city. So picture them either stationed at the gates or maybe on the city walls, and it's pitch black and they're there all night.

And they're checking to see if there's enemies, they're checking to see if there's any danger. And when they see dawn, there is relief, there is rest for them.

The night was long, but the morning come. Even more so, the psalmist says, the Christian waits on the Lord sometimes, maybe often in the darkness, but knowing the light will dawn.

Mercy comes in the morning. And so we wait patiently. I wait, notice this, I wait for the Lord.

[25:20] The longing isn't just, I really want to get out of this trouble in this dark situation. The longing is for God himself. So this waiting is active because it's also worship.

We're told to wait expectantly. My whole being waits and in his word I put my hope. I know he will be faithful to his promise.

I know that day will break, that darkness will give way to light. And we wait together. We wait corporately.

Israel, notice he summons the whole people of God. Israel, put your hope in the Lord. So there's this powerful picture of the whole church locked together, summoned together to wait with faith on the God of unfailing love and full redemption.

And so we find good news even in the depths of sin, of suffering, of shame. There is good news because God in Christ is ready to meet us there.

[26:36] There is good news because the Lord Jesus promises a new record and to be our new and true redeemer. So that you and I can live day by day waiting with hope in God's mercy and God's love.

So let's pray and give thanks to God together. Lord, we thank you. Thank you for the honesty of the Bible because so often it reflects our human experience of feeling and being in the depths.

But Lord, we thank you that the Christian faith offers us such deep hope in your character, in your word, and in your salvation because you've given us Jesus.

Thank you that he was willing to come into the depths in order to raise us up to glorious new life.

And so we pray that you would enable us to wait with hope, to summon one another to place our hope in the Lord Jesus, to be a source of help and encouragement to each other in the various things that we go through in life, that together we might lift our eyes and lift our voices to Jesus, our great redeemer, as we pray in his name.

Amen.