Out of the Depths

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[0:00] Please turn back to page 549 in the Old Testament section of your pew Bibles, back to Psalm 130, we're going to look at together this morning. It's good to have our frolicking rector back, isn't it? I wonder what David looks like when he frolics. The image of the whales frolicking in the ocean is we have a different image of the ocean in this psalm. The water is a place to play, but it's also in the Old Testament a place of fear. The Latin title of this psalm is De Profundis, and these are simply the first words of the psalm in Latin, which begins in English, out of the depths, and the image is of the depths of the ocean. Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord. So this psalm speaks to us this morning, all of us who cry out to God from the deep places, the profound places in our lives. Children, I wonder how many of you have spent some time swimming this summer. Maybe you've taken lessons, maybe you've gone swimming at camp, or in a lake, or an ocean. I wonder if you could remember a time when you felt panicked or scared in the water, worried that you might not make it to the pool's edge or back to the shore. I used to be a lifeguard some years ago, and only once do I remember seeing someone in this sort of distress, somebody that we had to pull out. It was at a summer camp on Vancouver Island, and this little guy panicked during his swim test halfway to the floating dock, and he turned around and he started to go under. And when somebody is actually really beginning to drown, they can't actually cry out. What you see is the eye as big as saucers, and they start to go under. They can't actually even make any noise.

So this guy was panicking. But you know what we lifeguards didn't say to him? We didn't say, just wait. We didn't say, just wait. We've got other things to do. We'll be a few minutes, or we'll be a few days. And so it's sort of odd, in a sense, that one of this psalm's exhortations, implied exhortations, is it says again and again in verses 5 and 6, wait. This fellow's drowning, and he's to wait. Wait for the Lord. Wait. And so, children in particular, I want you to think about why the psalmist would say that. And at the end of my talk, I want to come back around and suggest some reasons for why a lifeguard might say to a drowning person, just wait. The image of the depths of the sea in this psalm are the sort of depths out of which Jonah cried to God as he sank below the waves and was entombed in the darkness of the belly of the fish. Turn back a few pages in the psalms to Psalm 69 on page 510, and you get a kind of commentary on this sort of sense of the depths that the psalmist is using in Psalm 130. In Psalm 69, verses 1 and 2,

And the same imagery is there again in verses 14 and 15 of Psalm 69. So in Psalm 130, when we read, Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord, it's this kind of ocean depth imagery. And this translates well into our common language that we use every day, doesn't it? I imagine many of us in this last year, probably several of us in the last 24 hours, have said that we feel overwhelmed. That's a favorite word in our house that comes up, it seems, almost every day. And the word picture of being overwhelmed is of going under the waves. Or you might say, I'm in over my head. Or you might say, I'm floundering.

I'm out of my depth. You might say, I feel stuck. I feel mired in my problems. De profundis. The deep places. What are the deep places then in your life this morning?

As we turn to scripture, where do you feel as though you are drowning, going under, that you might actually not survive? Are you in touch with those sorts of deep places? What comes to mind?

[4:44] Do you have this sort of deep place in your life? This is one of Martin Luther's favorite psalms. He was wracked so often in his life by doubts, by anxieties. He cried out to God for help on so many occasions. Luther didn't write a large number of hymns, but he did translate this psalm into meter in 1523. In English, the first few lines have been translated this way. Out of the depths, I cry to thee, Lord, hear me, I implore thee. Bend down thy gracious ear to me, I lay my sins before thee.

In the 1520s, Luther was under the ban of the empire. He was suffering acute depression. Painful physical disorders. He was ill. And yet he would gather the servants of the castle of Coburg around him, and he would say to them, come, let us defy the devil and praise God by singing the hymn, Out of the depths, I cry to thee. So much of this hymn become associated with Luther's life and with his faith that when he died and his coffin was led through the city of Halle on its way to Wittenberg, the people lined the streets and spontaneously sang this hymn as a coffin passed with tears in their eyes. Luther had called this psalm a proper master and doctor of scripture. The psalm could wear a master's robe. It could wear a doctoral gown. It's a teacher. He meant that it teaches us the essence of the gospel.

So what then does it teach you and me this morning? Well, like the other psalms of ascents or pilgrim songs of Israel that we have been studying this summer, this psalm teaches us, if we'll listen, it teaches us to pray. And it teaches us to pray real prayer out of the very real human experience of desperation. Not simply polite prayers, not simply prayers of the kind of person we want to be, but real prayers out of where we're really at. Charles Spurgeon said, deep places beget deep devotion. Are you longing for a deeper prayer life? Psalm 130 is the psalm for you.

In the first two verses of the psalm, then, the psalmist prays by crying out to God out of the depths. In verses 5 and 6, the psalmist prays to God by waiting for him in the darkness.

The psalmist cries in the depths and waits in the darkness. But notice that this psalm isn't just a geyser of feeling. It's not just a venting of painful emotions. This psalm is actually profoundly about hope and reasons for hope. Hope that's profound enough to support us in the profound places.

[7:41] The psalmist directs us to a firm basis for hope in our desperation. The words, I cry, that you notice in verse 1, become by verse 5 the words, I hope. So how can our prayers mimic the same transformation, the same movement from I cry to I hope? How do we turn our I cry into I hope?

This is what I think the psalm teaches us this morning. It directs us to a transforming experience of prayer that's based above all on the character of God, upon who God is. So the main exhortation for us is to put our hope in God when we're overwhelmed. To put our hope in God. That's what you find in verse 7. Hope in the Lord. So put your hope in God when you're overwhelmed, the psalmist says, because of three outstanding characteristics that are found with him. Notice three times the kind of phrase like with him or with the Lord comes up. In verse 4, there is forgiveness with thee. There's an awe-inspiring forgiveness with God. In verse 7, we get the other two characteristics. With him is steadfast love. And in the next line, with him is plenteous, full redemption. So these three characteristics are a reason for hope in the depths. Let's look a little more closely at this psalm.

Notice there's four stanzas, four units of two verses each. Each stanza repeats the word Lord, the name Lord twice in our English translations. Though in the first three stanzas, the first three pairs of verses, the psalmist alternates between using the personal name for Israel's God, Yahweh, or Jehovah, or in our translations, it's in capital letters, Lord in capital letters, and a word for Lord that means master or sovereign, ruler. So out of the depths of sorrow, the psalmist cries to the personal deliverer of Israel, who redeemed Israel from Egypt, the personal God of Israel, the God who is also majestic ruler over all. This personal cry of desperation, notice that it's not the same as despair. It's not that kind of abyss. It's desperate enough, but it's not a cry, just a cry, it's a cry to the Lord. It is not out of the depths I cry, but out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord.

It's no less fervent for all that. The psalmist says effectively, Lord, I'm about to go under, and you aren't paying attention. When our deep places are not turned into deep prayers, like this, when they are not cries to the Lord, but just cries, we're in danger of falling into cynicism and into despair. And this is, truth be told, a deeper abyss than the psalmist speaks of. Despair puts us into a very great spiritual danger, since by shutting us off from God and from hope, despair opens the door to every other sin. It no longer matters anymore. The psalmist chooses a different path than this. He shows remarkable boldness, a kind of characteristic Jewish effrontery, demanding an audience with God. But you know, when you're desperate, you don't worry about being polite. You don't beat around the bush. As the Puritan John Owen said about this verse, he says, while I have no rest, I can give thee no rest. Maybe you know some people like that.

We aren't told specifically what the psalmist's trouble is. But in the second sanza, we find out that it's not just that other people are to blame, not just everybody else. The problem is not just evil out there, but it's sin in here. Verse 3 is a rhetorical question. If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, who could stand? Lord, who could stand? The implied answer is, of course, no one.

[12:16] If God is keeping a record, if God is keeping track, if he's keeping a book, then we really are in the depths, and all hope is lost. For all that the psalms seems, as you read through the psalms, often the psalmist seems to protest and defend his, the psalmist defends his innocence. This psalm teaches that in the final analysis, any innocence in the psalmist or in any of us, any innocence that we have is only relative innocence. Before God's holiness, the kind of holiness we just sang about, holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, before that holiness, who can stand? I think this is one of the reasons that Luther identified so closely and so deeply with this psalm. His abiding question was how to set his troubled conscience at rest before this kind of a holy God. How comforting, then, it must have been to turn in verse 4 to the first characteristic of God that is offered by the psalmist as a basis for hope. But there is forgiveness with thee.

So first of all, put your hope this morning in God when you're overwhelmed, because with God is an awe-inspiring and awesome forgiveness. I mentioned John Owen a moment ago. Some four centuries ago, this Puritan wrote an exposition of this psalm that in my copy runs to 325 pages.

I thought maybe I should just read it this morning. And actually, he apologizes at the end for not dealing with, you know, things in great detail. Most of it was on the first half of verse 4.

And no wonder, because earlier, John Owen had been in his own deep distress. His biographer describes his affliction, a near-death experience. He was brought to the edge of the grave.

But even worse than this, in the midst of this, was John Owen's spiritual depression. A horror and darkness, he said, that oppressed his soul. This is the way people speak about depression, a kind of heaviness that oppressed his soul. What set him free from this was a powerful encounter with God that drove these words home to his soul. Psalm 130, verse 4, first half of the verse, there is forgiveness with thee. In the creed, we just said, I believe in the forgiveness of sins.

[14:54] This is what carried the freight for John Owen. And so once he got started writing, he could hardly stop. To John Owen's experience, we could add the experience of John Wesley a century later.

Wesley came to a personal crisis when he realized that for all of his striving after holiness, he really didn't have a deep assurance that God loved him, that God had forgiven his sins.

And just hours before his famous breakthrough to faith, the afternoon of May 24th, 1738, he went into St. Paul's Cathedral. And he heard the words of the anthem, like we sang. He heard Psalm 130.

He records the entire psalm in his journal just before he recounts that event where his heart was strangely warmed, he says, the next day. While at a meeting in Aldersgate Street, somebody read from Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans, reading about the profound change that God really can work in the human heart, in the depths, through faith.

So the promise of forgiveness in this psalm is dynamite. It's powerful. It speaks to the depths of our condition. It did for Wesley, it did for John Owen, and it can for you, and it can for me.

[16:10] Verse 4 continues, and it links this forgiveness with fear. This, of course, is not a servile fear, but a trembling sense of awe and reverence.

Like you might feel holding something so valuable, you don't want to drop it. You don't want to make any mistakes with it. Luther said that if we fear anything more than God, then we're really looking more for favor and mercy from this other thing than we are from God.

More than we even care about God. I think this is what David meant when he said, against thee and thee only have I sinned. Really, the issue that's at stake, the fundamental issue is, is there divine forgiveness?

Why this characteristic of divine forgiveness makes us tremble is because it's so serious. All our hopes rest upon it. It's like Peter said, Lord, to whom else shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life. There may be some of you here this morning who have heavy hearts because of a keen sense, like the psalmist, of guilt for sins committed in the past, or habitual sins, addictions that have left you feeling powerless, and perhaps some of you feel like you are drowning in these depths.

[17:32] Perhaps like Luther or John Owen or John Wesley, you wonder how you can set your conscience at rest. Your conscience has never really been settled. Can you find forgiveness?

Well, the first reason for hope in these sorts of depths this morning has to do with God's character. God is not essentially a punitive God who keeps a book and marks down all your sins.

How often do we think of God that way? God's disposition is not that way. The psalmist knows that no one could survive if God was really like that. No, what makes the psalmist tremble is the sure and certain revelation that Israel's God is not like that.

He says, But there is forgiveness with thee. I believe in the forgiveness of sins. Or as Psalm 86, verse 15 says, But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

In the words of absolution we hear in our morning prayer service, that we heard this morning after we made our confession, we hear similar words about God's disposition that actually quote from Ezekiel when our ministers remind us that God desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live.

[18:51] God's disposition is to forgive, and that's a reason for hope. When it feels like the waters are closing over your head, when you know that you're implicated, you know that you're culpable and guilty, where do you turn?

There is forgiveness here. Notice, too, that it's clear from verses 5 and 6 that the psalmist is not only wanting to get off the hook, not just wanting to escape punishment.

In the first four verses, we're eavesdropping on the psalmist at prayer. But now in verse 5, it's as though we hear the psalmist speaking to himself, strengthening his resolve, fortifying himself, making the resolution, I wait for the Lord.

My soul waits, and in his word, I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchman for the morning, more than watchman for the morning. He has not just resolved to wait for forgiveness, but to wait for the Lord himself.

It's reconciliation he wants, a relationship. He's waiting for the word of the Lord that will restore communion, that word that establishes fellowship. And notice, this is not just a formal waiting.

[20:01] This is not just a passive waiting. He says, My soul waits, my innermost being, my heart longs for God to appear, that the separation, the engulfing sense of separation, might be bridged.

So the psalmist pictures himself like a watchman on the ramparts of the city, desperately waiting for the messenger to come. He waits, and he says, In God's word I put my hope.

He's waiting for God's word, like a city under siege, waits for their messenger to return with a response from their allies to their cry for help in their desperation.

This was exactly how Habakkuk pictured his situation, when he cried out to God, asking why the righteous suffer. Another sort of depth situation. Habakkuk asked God for answer, and then waited, quote, I will stand, watch, and station myself on the ramparts.

I will look to see what he will say to me. And when God's answer came, it was described in Habakkuk as something written on tablets so that a herald may run with it.

[21:08] The messenger comes. It had the quality of a message. It was good news. It was gospel that he was waiting for. This, I think, is the same picture here in Psalm 130 in verse 6, as the psalmist resolves to wait for God in his state of day profundis.

My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning. And then, as if to emphasize the waiting, he says it again, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Perhaps, perhaps with the morning light, the watchmen will see a runner on the hills in the distance, bringing good news.

But finally, in the last two verses, the voice changes again. The psalmist had been praying in the first few verses, then making his personal resolve in verses 5 and 6, but now he turns and speaks to the community.

He speaks to you and to me if we take our place alongside Israel in this psalm. O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous, or full, redemption.

And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities. It's here in these verses we get the last two characteristics of Israel's God that are a basis for hope in the deep places.

[22:31] With the Lord is not only this awe-inspiring forgiveness, but also a steadfast love and a plenteous redemption. First, this love.

This love is the sort of love Hosea had for his wayward wife. Remember, the prophet Hosea commanded to marry a prostitute, and he remains faithful and long-suffering in his love.

This is the sort of love of the long-suffering father for the prodigal son in Luke 15, the waiting and watching and faithful love.

This is the sort of love that is unfailing, that endures. Maybe you've been let down by people in your life, maybe people close to you, people you should have been able to trust, hurt by those whose love did fail, didn't last.

God's love throughout the Old Testament is characterized by fidelity, faithful, unfailing. The forgiveness makes you tremble. The love is characterized by faithfulness.

[23:34] It's a reason for hope in the deep places. But also, thirdly, God is a Redeemer God. Plenteous redemption is with him, or full redemption.

This is no matter, then, of half measures. The trembling, almost timid forgiveness of verse 4 that the psalmist can barely believe has been broadened now to a proclamation of full redemption.

This is the depths of God's capacity speaking now to the depths of our human need. The Baptist writer Anne Dutton in the 18th century in her autobiography put this tersely, saying, Out of the depths of misery I cried under the depths of mercy.

Our deep places matched by the deep places of God. Israel's God, then, above all, was a Redeemer God. The God who acted in history to redeem Israel out of Egypt.

The God who redeemed the exiles from Babylon and returned them to their homeland. But the promise here goes even deeper. That with God is the hope of full redemption from the spiritual exile of sin.

[24:45] Sin leads to exile throughout the Old Testament. Here is the hope of full, complete redemption. This would be enough in itself, wouldn't it?

We could stop right here. Seven verses. It's a kind of perfect number. We could stop right there. We have a firm basis for hoping established in the character of God as forgiving.

It's awesome forgiveness. loving, this faithful love, redeeming, this full redemption. Our I cry in verse 1 has become I hope or I wait in hope with the character of God that we're directed to.

But verse 8 goes even further, remarkably, even further. It is emphatic. Literally, he himself, emphatically, he himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Not just that there's forgiveness with him, but all their sins. Remember I asked about the lifeguard waiting? The picture of the lifeguard waiting?

[25:56] Well, the lifeguard isn't just waiting and thinking to go for coffee. The reason what the lifeguard is really saying to the drowning person is, wait, I'm coming.

You can just hang on for one more minute. The message of wait isn't just wait because I'm not interested. It's wait, I'm coming. And that's what God is saying here to us at the end of this psalm.

He's saying, wait, in hope, I'm coming. And so this psalm points marvelously forward prophetically to the coming of Christ as the one who pitched his tent among us took on our flesh, the one in whom God came himself among us to fulfill this promise of divine forgiveness, the one who experienced all the depths of our human condition and triumphed, the supreme expression of God's condescending love beyond what we could have hoped or imagined.

The mourning that the watchman is waiting for in verse 6, Augustine, St. Augustine, took to be ultimately the great mourning, the mourning of the first Easter day, the mourning of resurrection, the day when all our hopes are fulfilled, when the message really does come, that the depths of death, sin that leads to death, when that has finally been destroyed.

When the Apostle Paul turns to the same theme of waiting upon God in the depths of human suffering, the Apostle acknowledges in Romans chapter 8 that as Christians, even on this side of the resurrection, we still wait and groan, along with all creation for our final redemption.

[27:40] Christ has come. We recognize Christ as the Christ of the psalm, the Christ who has come for our redemption. But like the psalmist, we still wait patiently for the final fruition, knowing, as Paul says, that nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

So we too wait in hope. This psalm has been very important to me personally, and I've been praying it almost every day for about the last 10 years.

I began praying it in a season of crisis in my own life, when it seemed that all I could do was cry out to God out of the depths and out of the darkness. I remember many, many days in Oxford, cycling up Headington Hill in the dark, and the rain, panting out the words of this psalm under my breath.

I was hanging on to God by my fingernails. I wait for the Lord. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits. That particular crisis passed, but I still pray this psalm daily, often now, not just for myself, but for friends and loved ones, whom I know are themselves crying out to God out of the depths, who are in over their heads.

This psalm is a good teacher of prayer, a master and a doctor. The world is not yet as it should be. We all experience the effects of sin in our lives.

[29:10] We are all finally culpable. None of us can stand. Before God's holiness, who can stand? If we only knew it, we are all in the depths.

But I know this morning that some of you know this only too well. The experience of depression or relational brokenness, the experience of loneliness or illness or addiction, all of these human experiences and realities expose our deep places.

May I commend this psalm to you, recommend this psalm to you, as something you could begin to pray for yourself and others. Take out the psalm, turn to the psalm day by day and pray the words of this psalm, asking God for a deeper prayer life.

As you pray the psalm, you will take your place with the psalmist and with all Israel and all the pilgrim people of God, waiting, not just waiting passively, but waiting in hope for the herald who comes with the dawning of the day to announce the victory of God.

He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. Here's an English translation of the last verse of Luther's hymn.

[30:27] My soul is waiting for the Lord as one who longs for mourning. No watcher waits with greater hope than I for His returning. I hope as Israel in the Lord.

He sends redemption through His word. We praise Him for His mercy. Amen. Amen.