

# **“Out of the Depths”**

## **Psalm 130**

**Lent 5**

**April 7, 2019**

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On this Fifth Sunday in Lent,

We conclude the Lenten sermon series,  
“Praying the Penitential Psalms”

With the sixth of these seven psalms-Psalm 130.

People who have extensively read and  
studied the psalms notice that the  
psalmist tend to get briefer as they  
approach the end of the 150 psalm Psalter.

Psalm 130 also is included in a collection  
of fifteen psalms known as the “psalms of ascent.”

Psalm 130 stands as the eleventh psalm  
in Psalms 120 through 134 bearing the  
inscription “A Song of Ascents.”

Scholars believe that they were recited or  
sung by pilgrims making their pilgrimage  
to one of the three annual festivals  
observed in Jerusalem.

The verse “go up, ascend” pertained to the  
journey up to the city itself along with  
the procession into the temple which stood  
on Mount Zion- the highest of Jerusalem’s  
seven hills.

After David’s Psalm 51, today’s subject psalm  
is probably the most well known of  
the Penitential Psalms.

It is often referred to by its opening words  
In Latin, De profundibus, meaning  
“From the depths”.

These words set the tone for the entire psalm.

This psalm was also significant for  
Martin Luther, who put this psalm  
to music in the form of the hymn

which we just sang as the Hymn  
of the Day.

Luther loved this psalm.

Along with three other Penitential Psalms  
(32,51,143), Luther called it one of the  
“Pauline Psalms” because of its offer of  
forgiveness by grace as art from human works

Most of us know the story of John Wesley’s  
conversion on the evening of May 24, 1738,  
when he attended a meeting in a little  
nonconformist chapel on Aldersgate  
Street in London and heard someone reading  
aloud from the Introduction to Martin Luther’s  
commentary on Romans.

It was the occasion on which he described  
His heart as being “strangely warmed.”

What is not so well known is that on  
the afternoon of that same day,  
Wesley attended a Vesper service at  
St. Paul Cathedral, in the course of which  
Psalm 130 was sung as an anthem,  
like our Sanctuary Choir will soon offer.

Wesley was greatly moved by the anthem  
And it became one of the means he attributed  
to God opening his heart to the gospel of salvation.

Psalm 130 begins in the lowest depths of  
despair and rises upward until the  
promise of “plenteous redemption”  
as “God the LORD shall redeem  
Israel from all their sins” (v.8).

In this sense Psalm 130 is itself  
a literal Song of Ascents, for it climbs  
from the abyss of depression to the  
high ground of steadfast hope.

We see this progression mirrored in  
each of the psalm’s four stanzas  
as they deal in turn with sorrow over sin,  
forgiveness, faith in God, and hope.

This psalm begins with the speaker of  
singer in “the depths” or, as the Latin says,  
de profundis.

It is native Hebrew Language, being in  
“the depths” referred specifically as being  
caught in dangerous and deep waters,  
a powerful image for a people who were  
largely land-based and not at all seafaring.

This image occurs many places in the  
Hebrew scriptures such as in the writings  
of the major prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel.

But nowhere is it more powerfully expressed  
as in the beginning of Psalm 69:1-2.

“Save me, O Lord  
for the waters have come up to my neck.  
I sink in the deep mire  
where there is no foothold;  
I have come to the deep waters,  
and the flood sweeps over me.”

What is it that has brought the writer of  
Psalm 130 into this life-threatening situation?

Is it pain and suffering that is engulfing  
the psalmist?

What is troubling the writer here is sin

The psalmist writes a record of sins  
in verse three, forgiveness in verse four,  
and redemption in verses seven and eight.

When I was pursuing a master’s degree  
at Rutgers in American history, while  
researching a paper on the Puritans,  
I came across an English Puritan Theologian  
by the name of John Owen, whose  
theological and pastoral writings impressed me.

Listen to what John Owen wrote about Psalm 130:

“He (psalmist) cries out under the weight  
and waves of his sins... Desiring to be  
delivered from these depths out of which  
he cried, he deals with God wholly about  
mercy and forgiveness, and it is sin  
alone from which forgiveness is a deliverance.”

Our problem today, especially in appreciating  
a psalm like this, is that most of us  
do not have much awareness of sin.

We live most of our lives with very little  
awareness of God, and where God is



no longer recognized an awareness of sin  
is inevitably abolished also, because  
sin is defined only in relationship to God.

This phenomenon was addressed by the  
famed psychiatrist Karl Menninger  
in his 1973 best- seller book,  
whatever Became of Sin?

In this book, Dr. Menninger wrote:

"The word 'sin' which seems to have  
disappeared, was a proud word.  
It was once a strong word, an ominous  
and serious word."

The clinical mind of Dr. Menninger connects  
sin and guilt.

He postulated that regardless of what  
sin is called on a personal basis  
it still erodes one's emotional being  
On a national scale, he said it corrupts  
culture and leads to moral decay.

Imagine a prominent political figure today  
saying as President Abraham Lincoln  
once did and calling on this nation  
"to confess our sins and transgressions  
in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope  
that genuine repentance will lead to  
mercy and pardon."

An Old Testament prophet said if people would  
do that God will "forgive their sins  
and heal their land"

What a novel concept!

God! Whatever happened to him?

Oh yes, God has been replaced by karma,  
luck, good fortune, fate and Mother Nature.

Suppose you are aware of your sin.

Suppose you are one of those apparently  
rare persons today who are truly troubled  
by their wrongs and transgressions

Suppose you are in "the depths"

Where can you turn for help?

You will not find it in yourself. Certainly,  
any more than the writer of this psalm  
found it in him or herself.

The only source of help for you is God,  
and in God's mercy and forgiveness.  
The psalmist knew he needed God,  
which led him to call out;  
"O Lord, hear my voice!  
Let your ears be attentive to the voice  
of my supplication" (v.s).

Luther himself argued that Psalm 130 is  
the prayer of one who feels the misery  
brought about by sin.

Luther wrote of this psalm: "These are the  
noble, passionate, and very profound words  
of a truly penitent heart that is most  
deeply moved in its dishes. In fact,  
this cannot be understood except by those  
who have never felt or experienced it."

Luther says that Psalm 130 speaks not simply  
to the need for rescue from challenging  
circumstances of life but for the ultimate  
need for deliverance from sin.

In his lament, the psalmist prays for  
the promise of an answer for his  
despair and distress.

In Thesis 18 of his marvelous, Heidelberg  
Thesis, Luther argues: "It is certain that  
a person must despair of one's ability before  
one is prepared to receive the grace of God."

Here Luther also says we should keep in mind  
the distinction between "utter" and  
"ultimate" despair.

Utter despair is to despair of self.

Ultimate despair is to despair of God.

In utter despair, we recognize our inability  
to save ourselves; we are brought to  
the recognition that the only place  
to look to for rescue is the Lord  
whose steadfast love and plenteous redemption  
are sufficient (v.7).

Luther goes on to say about this psalm,  
if God were to act as an accountant  
and keep record of sin, no one could stand.

That is the same argument Paul makes  
early on his letter to the Romans.  
No one stands before God without sin  
All fall short.  
No person can forgive sins  
Only God can.  
As Paul states in the eighth chapter to  
his letter to the Romans, it is God alone  
who is for us.  
Like Paul and Luther, the writer of our psalm  
waits in hope for redemption which  
can only come from God.

Beloved people of God  
this psalm is a model prayer for those  
seeking a restored relationship with God  
in the aftermath of the consequences of sin.

The psalmist exudes a confidence which  
is based on God's forgiving nature,  
and he calls on his community  
to rest their hope in God.

We Christians look to Jesus Christ  
for confidence that God will indeed  
forgive us and restore our relationship with God

Jesus, who offered himself in our place,  
gives us certain hope that God will hear  
our pleas for forgiveness.

As Paul reminded the Christians at Colossae:  
God "has rescued us from the dominion  
of darkness and brought us into the kingdom  
of the Son he loves, in whom we have  
redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14).

That my friends is the gospel.  
Believe it, hope in it, and live it.