

# Psalm 130

*In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*

## 1. Background

Remember that the “Songs of Ascents” were especially significant for the returnees from Babylonian exile – the people of whom Cyrus said, “Let them go up!” (see 2 Chron. 36:23, the words that close the Hebrew OT). Then imagine that Psalm 130 was sung by the returned exiles, and that the psalmist (the “I” who calls to the LORD in vv. 1-2 and who waits on the LORD in vv. 5-6) was their representative (not so hard to imagine – especially if you think of Christ as the Lead Singer of the Psalms who sings them first so that we can sing them after him). Then the “depths” of vv. 1-2 and the redemption of vv. 7-8 are not abstract – they are the concrete, historical experience of the people of God – exiled because of their sin and in desperate need of the forgiveness and restoration which only the God who forgives (v. 4), keeps his promises (v. 5) and maintains his commitments (v. 7) can supply.

Martin Luther considered this Psalm to be one of what he called the “Pauline Psalms” (Pss. 32, 51, 130 and 143). It fits with much of what Paul writes about sin and salvation in, for example, Romans 6. I especially like its resonance with Colossians 1:13-14 (“He [God the Father] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”).

It’s interesting that on the afternoon of the day of his conversion, John Wesley went to a service in St Paul’s cathedral where he heard the choir sing Psalm 130. We can imagine that the opening words – “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD!” – must have resonated with his spiritual condition and been used by God to prepare him for conversion that evening.

## 2. Structure

The Psalm comprises four stanzas of similar length (the final stanza, vv. 7-8 is slightly longer than the others). These stanzas move us from the psalmist’s appeal to God for help (vv. 1-2), to his conviction concerning God’s propensity to forgive (vv. 3-4), to his longing for God’s intervention (vv. 5-6), to his application of this to the community (7-8).

The opening and the closing words of the Psalm form a matching pair, i.e. “From the depths [of sin]”, (v. 1) is picked up in v. 8, “From all his [Israel’s] iniquity”.

The Psalm makes liberal use of repetition to drive home the urgency of the psalmist, e.g. voice (v. 2), wait (v. 5), soul (vv. 5-6), those who watch for the morning (v. 6), hope (vv. 5, 7), Israel (vv. 7-8), redemption/redeem (vv. 7-8). In addition, the word translated “should mark” (v. 3) is the basis for the word translated “those who watch” (v. 6). Note also the repetition of “LORD” followed by “the Lord” in stanzas 1-3, and the doubling of “LORD” in stanza 4.

## 3. Interpretative notes

### (a) The psalmist appeals to God for help (vv. 1-2)

“The psalmist’s troubles are described as deep waters of chaos, which typify the proximity of Sheol and separation from Yahweh... While for the modern reader ‘depths’ suggests despair, in its cultural setting the term evokes the sea of troubles in which the speaker is engulfed, a deathlike situation of separation from the living God” (L.C. Allen).

The crescendo of terms for vocal utterance leaves us with the impression that the psalmist clamours to be heard by God. Perhaps he calls on “the LORD” and “my Lord” because of the former underlines God’s relationship to him and the later his relationship to God.

### (b) The psalmist is convinced that God will forgive (vv. 3-4)

Clearly, if God kept a record of sin, no one could stand. But that is not the nature of the God who forgives. The word “forgiveness” is used elsewhere only in Nehemiah 9:17 and Daniel 9:9. The verb from which the noun is derived is used first in Exodus 34:9 when God forgives Israel’s sin in the incident of the golden calf. By implication, the psalmist places his own sin in the context of almost a millennium of national sin (c.f. “all Israel’s iniquity”, v. 8). The conviction that God will forgive is, therefore, based on the revelation of who the LORD is in Exodus 34:6-7

“The forgiveness of God...is not an end in itself, but makes possible that glorification of God that is the primary end of all human life” (P.D. Miller).

### (c) The psalmist longs for God’s intervention (vv. 5-6)

The psalmist uses repetition of terms (just as he did in the first stanza) to emphasise just how eagerly he desired God’s attention and the fulfilment of God’s promise. Perhaps the “word” for whose fulfilment he waited was the Exodus 34:6-7 revelation of God’s compassionate and forgiving nature.

The “soul” sometimes stands for the seat of desire. So when the psalmist says, “My soul waits with eager expectation” he is making a very strong statement indeed. Perhaps we might liken him to the importunate widow in the parable (Luke 18:1-8).

### (d) The psalmist announces that God will redeem (vv. 7-8)

The scope of the Psalm now widens out from the individual to the whole community. Indeed, the community is in great need because of its iniquity (disobedience and unbelief which began at Sinai and resulted, 800 years later in expulsion from the Promised Land). The psalmist calls this need “redemption” or “ransom” – they needed to be set free from the foreign lords so that they could serve their true Lord.

Only the LORD could effect such redemption. Moreover there was good grounds to wait in hope that he would – because he is the God who is “abundant in steadfast love” (Exodus 34:6). But the redemption God promises is not merely political and national – it is spiritual – the forgiveness of sins that sets people free to serve the true and living God.