

## *“De Profundis”*

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*A Song of Ascents.*

<sup>1</sup>*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.*

<sup>2</sup>*Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!*

<sup>3</sup>*If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand?*

<sup>4</sup>*But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.*

<sup>5</sup>*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; <sup>6</sup>my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*

<sup>7</sup>*O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. <sup>8</sup>It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. (Psalm 130)*

Over the centuries, the Christian church has come to refer to Psalm 130 as “*De Profundis*” (*day pro-foon-dis*), the Latin translation of the first phrase of the psalm -- “out of the depths.” The name sticks because this prayerful cry comes up from a pit of profound darkness and distress. In the world of the Old Testament, the waters of the deep represent chaos and danger, an alien and foreboding place where fearsome sea monsters live. As the words of this psalm were sung, a faithful Israelite might imagine how Jonah must have felt as he sank deeper and deeper into a black, watery grave in the belly of the fish. This prayer is the kind of plea one utters when all but the smallest shred of hope has been lost.<sup>1</sup>

*“Out of the depths, I cry to you, O LORD.”*

From a historical perspective, this psalm is one of the places where Catholic and Protestant traditions have been contrasted over the years. In Catholic contexts, this psalm is most often used as a prayer for the dead, especially for those souls who are feared to be caught in the middle ground of purgatory. In other words, it is a prayer offered on behalf of people who have already died.

Protestants, on the other hand, see Psalm 130 more as a prayer for the living. Although the person crying from the depths clearly felt like their life was slipping away, they had not given up all hope. They were still straining against the current that is dragging them down, still looking for any sign that God has heard their cry and is on the way to save them. To use the words of the psalm, their soul is still waiting for the Lord... they are still hoping in God’s word... and, even as the darkness closes in, they are still seeking any glimpse of God’s light.

Given the debate over whether this psalm is a prayer for the dead or a prayer for the living, it felt like a providential moment when I read for the first time this week about a man who clearly saw both sides of this psalm. He wasn’t a saint, at least not in an official sense. But he was beatified in 1990 by Pope John Paul II, which means that he is just one step below sainthood in the eyes of the Catholic church. His name was Pier Giorgio Frassati.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 130:1, Benson Commentary, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/benson/psalms/130.htm>; John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms, Part V* at <https://ccl.org/ccl/calvin/calcom12/calcom12.xiv.i.html>, accessed March 23, 2023.



Born in Turin, Italy in 1901, Pier Giorgio was a Catholic activist who fought for social justice and battled against the early rise of Fascism. Unfortunately, he died at the young age of 24 from polio, which he almost certainly contracted while caring for the sick in a nearby slum. A man of great faith, Pier Giorgio was known for drawing people into prayer and worship. As a boy, he would lead rosary prayers on the way to school, on trains, even with strangers on the street. He often fell asleep on his knees praying the rosary by his bed.

He was also a man of boundless energy and athletic ability. Pier Giorgio was an avid runner, swimmer, rower, and skier, but his great passion was mountaineering. He was an exceptional and accomplished climber of the Italian Alps. And it was on the mountains near his home where his strong faith and heartfelt compassion tended to be on full display. When members of his climbing party began to slow from fatigue, he would say that he needed to stop and rest. He himself did not need a break, but he did not want to embarrass those who did. If he saw the need, he would even run up or down a slope to lighten the backpack and help bear the burden of a weaker climber. At the end of the day, and often throughout the day, he would lead the climbers in prayer. And he did it all with joyful enthusiasm and warmth.

On what turned out to be his very last climb, Pier Giorgio paused on a rocky outcropping and asked his climbing companions to gather around him. Drawing a little prayer book out of his pack, he turned to the *De Profundis*. A close friend had recently died in a climbing accident, and the loss was weighing heavy upon Pier Giorgio. He asked the group if they would pray with him, and they reverently bowed their heads as he read,

*Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice!*

*Let Your ears be attentive to my voice in supplication:*

*If You, O Lord, mark iniquities, Lord, who can stand?*

*But with You is forgiveness, that You may be revered.*

*I trust in the Lord; my soul trusts in His word.*

*My soul waits for the Lord more than sentinels wait for the dawn,  
more than sentinels wait for the dawn.<sup>2</sup>*

Yes, it was a prayer for the friend who had died, but also one for the living... a prayer for those who were still living, still climbing, still watching for signs of God's light. With reverence and awe, this group of climbers paused in the middle of their ascent to proclaim the eternal truth that Catholics, Protestants, and all other Christians hold – the truth that, in life and in death, we belong to God.<sup>3</sup>

I cannot imagine a better setting for us to understand the deep meanings of *De Profundis*, because when this psalm was first written and used by the Jewish faithful, it was sung by a group on a mountain. Psalm 130, like 14 others in the book of Psalms, begins with a special superscription. In Hebrew, the words are *shir / ha-ma-a-lowt* -- "A Song of Ascents." There is some mystery around the words, but most scholars believe that the songs bearing this superscription formed a songbook for pilgrims who were on their way up to Jerusalem. In Jewish tradition, there was only one way to go to Jerusalem, and that was "up." The temple in Jerusalem was located on the highest ground of the city, known as Mount Zion, and no matter how you approached the temple – be it from the north, the south, the east or the west – your journey to Jerusalem was an ascent. And, as groups of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://frassatiusa.org/prayer-for-the-dead>

<sup>3</sup> *A Brief Statement of Faith*, §11.1.

faithful people made their pilgrimage journeys up to God's house, they would sing these "songs of ascent."

For some of them, life was hard. They were carrying the kind of existential burdens that can make each day a struggle -- problems with health, with money, with strained relationships or broken dreams. Some probably felt like they were drowning, like they were sinking deeper and deeper, like the light was fading, and no matter how hard they struggled, they just kept sinking. Others were in happier, healthier places, but regardless of who they were, or where they were coming from, they were all looking up. They all had their eyes set on the top of the mountain, and with every step, they felt like they were getting closer to God. And on their way, faithful pilgrims looking for signs from heaven would sing these lyrics as a cry out of the depths, a song of ascents.

As I said, that climb when Pier Giorgio led his team in the *De Profundis* prayer was his last earthly ascent. Less than three weeks later, while boating with friends, he began to feel a sharp pain in his back. He figured it was fatigue, or maybe a pulled muscle. But the next day, he developed a splitting headache and a high fever. The next day, he was physically unable to get out of bed. The polio diagnosis was made on that third day, and two days after that, Pier Giorgio was dead.

One of the most precious artifacts from that final climb is a striking photo of Pier Giorgio doing what he loved best. The image shows him making his way up a steep rock face. His gaze is fixed firmly on the summit. And, at some point between the moment that photo was taken and the moment when he took his last breath, Pier Giorgio wrote two words across the print: "Verso l'alto." "Toward the top." After his death, those words became the motto of those who remember the way Pier Giorgio lived his short but amazing life: always looking up... always with his eyes and his hopes fixed firmly on God... always climbing toward the top.

No matter where we are, no matter what struggles we may be experiencing, we remember that, in life and in death, we belong to God. This ancient poem, prayed by pilgrims from many times and many places, can be lifted up out of any moment – from sickness or health, from plenty or want, from a place of hope or a pit of despair. No matter how or where it is uttered, it rises up out of the depths to the God who is with us in every pain and struggle.

*De Profundis, Verso l'alto.*

Out of the depths... and toward the top. May that be our pilgrimage prayer, our song of ascents. **Amen.**