

Sermon to the Saints which are at Topeka, Kansas – Sunday, August 3, 2014.

“Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD.” – Ps. 130:1

The expositors that the Lord has left us with often excite our minds to greater illumination of His word, but I believe are left to us also to sharpen our spiritual discernment, that we may be brought into a keener sense of rightly dividing of the word of truth, and that iron should, by their words and our comparing of spiritual things with spiritual, be sharpened upon iron. In my first days as a novice in the faith, I experienced what I believed then and still believe now to be somewhat akin to the depths that the Psalmist describes above. At first frozen in my tracks, like one having all breath knocked out of him from some fall, yet conscious of my helplessness in its midst, I despaired greatly. “What are these depths, why am I consumed under the weight of them?” I asked within myself. Then I got ahold of a little book written by John Owen in the mid-17th Century – alternatively titled: *The Forgiveness of Sin, or: A Practical Exposition of Psalm 130*. At that time, it guided me not only in the right scriptural directions, but opened up scripture to be in a manner that did me a world of good. I returned to it recently, and it provides both solid doctrine and practical remedies that can be a help to any of us who might either find themselves in such ‘depths’ or come upon someone else who seems to be there. My remarks this morning are largely coopted from that text – though truncated, paraphrased and rearranged to suit our timeframe. Let us read and examine the text of Psalm 130:

“Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But *there is* forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul *waiteth* for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: *I say, more than* they that watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD *there is* mercy, and with him *is* plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” – Ps. 130:1-8

‘Depths’ is an expression commonly used for valleys, or any deep places – but especially of waters – as in ‘deep waters.’ Valleys and deep places, because of their solitariness and their darkness, are thought of as places of trouble, horror and helplessness.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:” – Ps. 23:4

The valley of the shadow of death here indicates the extremity of danger and trouble. The moral use of ‘depths,’ as metaphorically expressive of a specific condition of the souls of men – means the great distress, difficulties or pressures, felt by men - attended with fear, horror, danger and trouble. Owen suggests that these depths are of two sorts:

1. Providential, in respect to outward distresses, or trouble and the extremity of it: *“Save me, O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul.” – Ps. 69:1*
2. Internal depths – which is depths of conscience on account of sin. *“Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps; Thy wrath lieth hard upon me.” – Ps. 8:6,7*

Sense of God’s wrath upon the Psalmist’s conscience, on account of sin, was the deep he was cast into. These are the depths that are the awakening of the conscience to a deep sense of sin, and are the principal focus of this talk.

It is a true notion of absolute predestination and the doctrines of election and reprobation that, if a man be chosen of God to be His, and therefore the efficacious blood of the Lamb washes that man’s sins clean – ALL of them, past, present and future, then there is no weight of sin that can cancel or frustrate his election nor rescind his inheritance. God’s love is fixed and sure. If a man is loved of God, he cannot become unloved of God. And there is no man that God loves that will not dwell eternally with him, beholding the beauty of the Lord and inquiring in his temple for eternal ages, praising his holy name. All of God’s elect make up the bride of Christ, and the book of life, penned before man ever lived – in the council halls of eternity, contains the names of every man who has been foreordained to receive a heavenly inheritance – no other names are written, and no name written will be absent from that body. And any of God’s elect are imbued with an ‘earnest of our inheritance,’ or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God – which allows for the exclusive sowing unto the spirit – carnal man cannot sow unto anything but the flesh. It is not only the ‘default position,’ but it is the ONLY position the carnal man has. He cannot sow unto the spirit, not being

spiritual. God's elect are able to sow to the spirit, but can also sow to the flesh, and often do. The fact that finally God does not behold iniquity in Jacob does not erase sin and its effects upon the existence of the godly man, nor does it lessen the need for the exhortation to sojourn here in fear and trembling – for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and it is this godly, reverent fear that guides his actions aright.

“...Be not highminded, but fear.” – Rom. 11:20

“Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” – 1Cor. 10:20

The liberty unto which a man of God is set, having been cleansed of his sin from the standpoint of God's requiting it does not erase the entanglement of sin and its seeming unbearable weight cropping up in his existence and conscience – we must keep a keen awareness of how near, in our greatest peace and serenity, evil and danger may lie, even at the door. Owen points to Noah as an exemplar of this truth.

“Noah was a just man, perfect in his generation and Noah walked with God.” – Gen. 6:9

He did so for a long season, and did so in an egregiously evil time, amidst all sorts of temptations, *“when all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.”* (Gen. 6:12) This gave an eminency to his obedience, and probably made the communion which he had with God, in “walking before him,” most sweet and precious to him. He was a gracious soul, upon the undoubted testimony of God himself. But we know what befell this holy person. On the heels of a tremendously miraculous deliverance, he was brought into inextricable distress on account of sin. His own drunkenness, with the consequences of it, thus leading him to the devoting of that evil son and his posterity to a great curse, must have overwhelmed him with sorrow and anxiety of spirit.

From the words of Psalm 130, Owen suggests that we can deduce, or extract, the following two propositions:

1. That gracious souls, even after much communion with God, may be brought into inextricable depths and entanglements on account of sin.
2. That the inward root of distresses is principally to be attended to in all pressing trials; our sin, as the cause of our afflictions

Given these two propositions, let us take a look at some of the specific depths into which the soul of the believer may fall:

1. Loss of the sense of the love of God – which the soul formerly enjoyed. This love is felt by those who have long had communion with God, and consists in a prevailing Gospel persuasion that they are accepted with God, in Christ. *“Being justified by faith, we have peace with God.”* (Rom. 5:1) This is that love which quickens and enlivens them to duty – it supports them under their trials, gives them peace, hope and comfort in life and death. *“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, **for thou art with me.**”* (Ps. 23:4) A sense of God’s presence in love is sufficient to rebuke all anxiety and fears; and not only so, but to give, in the midst of them, solid consolation and joy. This is a sense of love which even the choicest believers may lose on account of sin. This is one step into their depths – they do not retain such gospel-apprehension of it, as to give them rest, peace or consolation; to influence their souls with delight and duty, or to support in trials.
2. Perplexed thoughtfulness about their great unkindness toward God - *“I remembered God, and was troubled.”* (Ps. 77:3) How did remembrance of God become a matter of trouble to David, and man after God’s heart? All had not been well between God and David; and whereas formerly, in his remembering God, his thoughts were primarily stirred to God’s love and kindness toward him, now they were wholly engrossed with his own sin and unkindness – and this causes his trouble. This is a share of the entanglements caused by sin. Such a soul says in himself: *“Foolish creature! This is how you requite the Lord? Is this how you return all his love, his kindness, his consolations and mercies? Is this your love to him?”*
3. A revived sense of justly-deserved wrath – this is as the opening of old wounds. When men have passed through a sense of wrath, and have obtained deliverance and rest through the blood of Christ, to come to their old thoughts again, to be dealing afresh with hell, curse, law and wrath, is a depth indeed – This often befalls gracious souls on account of sin. *“Thy*

wrath lieth hard upon me" (Ps. 88:7) There is a self-judging as to being deserving of wrath which is consistent with a comforting persuasion of an interest in Christ. The believing soul finds sweetness, as it lies in subservience to the exaltation of grace; but in this case the soul is left under it without that relief. It plunges itself into the curse of the law and flames of hell, without any cheering support from the blood of Christ. This is walking in *"the valley of the shadow of death"* period. No help in the conscience.

4. There are also oppressing apprehensions of temporal judgments. *"My flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments"* (Ps. 119:120) He knows not what the great God may bring upon him; and having a full sense of the guilt of sin, which is the ground of this whole condition, every judgment of God is full of terror to him. Sometimes he thinks God may lay open the vileness of his heart, and make him a scandal and a reproach in the world. *"Oh! Make me not the reproach of the foolish."* (Ps. 39:8) This is possibly part of the fallout of the case with Noah – as the loose lips of Ham and his sons desire to make the shortcomings of God's people into scandal. Matthew Henry suggests of this scene:
 - a. That Ham pleased himself with the sight of his father in a compromising position.
 - b. That Ham had perhaps been drunk himself, and having been reproved for it by his good father, was pleased to see him thus overcome.
 - c. It is common for those who walk in false ways themselves to rejoice at the false steps which they sometimes see others make. But charity rejoices not in iniquity, nor can true penitents that are sorry for their sins rejoice in the sins of others, or even take pleasure in rebuking them for them.
5. There may be added prevailing fears, for a season, of being utterly rejected by God, of being found a reprobate at the last day - *"Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight"* (Jonah 2:4) I am lost forever – God will own me no more. *"I am counted with them that go down into the pit: free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom thou rememberest no more, and they are cut off from thy hand."* (Ps. 88:4,5) This may befall a gracious soul on account of sin. But yet, because this wars directly against the life of faith, God does not, unless in extraordinary cases, suffer any of his to lie long in this horrible pit, where there is no water, no refreshment. But it often

occurs, that even the saints themselves are left for a season to a fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation, as to the prevailing apprehension of their minds.

6. God secretly sends his arrows into the soul, that wound it, adding pain to its disquietness. *“Thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore.”* (Ps. 38:2) These arrows are God’s rebukes. *“When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity”* (Ps. 39:11) God speaks in his word, and by his Spirit in the conscience, things sharp and bitter to the soul, fastening them so that it cannot shake them off. These Job so mournfully complains of (Job. 6:4) The Lord speaks words with such efficacy that they pierce the heart quite through; and what the issue then is, David declares, *“There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; nor is there any rest in my bones, because of my sin.”* (Ps. 38:8) The whole person is brought under the power of them, and all health and rest is taken away.
7. Dullness and disability to duty, in doing or suffering, attend such a condition. *“Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up.”* (Ps. 40:12) His spiritual strength was worn away by sin, so that he was not able to address himself to any communion with God. The soul now cannot pray with life and power; cannot hear the word with joy and profit; cannot do good and communicate with cheerfulness and freedom; cannot meditate with delight and heavenly-mindedness; cannot act for God with zeal and liberty; cannot think of suffering with boldness and resolution; but is sick, weak, feeble and bowed down.

Some, or all of these perplexities occur in even those who, after having much communion with God may, on account of sin and a sense of the guilt of it, be brought into such a state. But how do we fall into any of these depths?

1. From indwelling sin. As it remains in the best of the saints in this life. Though the strength of every sin is weakened by grace, yet the root of no sin is wholly taken away in this life. Lust is like the stubborn Canaanites, who, after the general conquest of the land, would dwell in it still. The kingdom and rule belongs to grace, and when it grows strong, it brings sin much under, but it will not wholly be driven out – not in these fleshly tabernacles. In the flesh of the best saints there dwells ‘no good thing’ (Rom. 7:18). The flesh lusts against the spirit, as the spirit lusts against the flesh (Gal. 5:17) As there is a universality in the acting of the Spirit in its opposing all evil, so there is a universality in the acting of the flesh for the

furtherance of it. Some lusts or branches of original corruption gain such a foothold in some persons, either from nature, custom, employment, society, or other circumstances, that they become like the Canaanites that had iron chariots; it is a very difficult thing to subdue them. Well it is if war be maintained constantly against them, for they will almost always be in actual rebellion.

2. The power and prevalence of temptation – and our being taken off guard by not being prepared at the hurling of the fiery darts of Satan. Being lulled into a lasting sense of peace and rest by our desire to have such – in a world where we know no lasting peace or rest is available – but our portion is Christ! Even if you don't chase a thing – it can be presented to you at the moment where you are the most vulnerable, thinking that peace and rest will continue even without careful watching!
3. The sovereign pleasure of God in dealing with sinning saints must also be considered. Divine love and wisdom work not towards all in the same manner. God is pleased to continue peace to some, notwithstanding great provocations. Love shall humble them, and rebukes of kindness shall recover them from their wanderings. Others He is pleased to bring into the depths we have been speaking of. If they are God's people, they will be exercised in these depths, from whence their way of deliverance is laid down in this Psalm. God deals with his saints in great variety. Some have all their bones broken, when others have only the gentle strokes of the rod. We are in the hands of mercy, and God may deal with us as seems good unto him; but great sins ought to be attended with expectations of great depths and perplexities.

Kinds of sins that bring believers into great spiritual distress:

Sins in their own nature 'wasting conscience' are of this sort. Sins that arise in opposition to all of God that is in us – that is, the light of grace and nature also – such are the sins that cast David into depths. *"Be not deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God."* (1Cor 6:9,10) Certainly true believers may fall into some of the sins here mentioned. Some have done so, as is left on record: the apostle says, not those who have committed any of these sins, but such **sinners**, shall not inherit the kingdom of God; that is, who live in these, or any of these sins, as a matter of course in their lives (without repentance).

There is no provision of mercy made for such sinners. These are sins which, in their own nature, without the consideration of aggravating circumstances, plunge a soul into depths. These sins cut the locks of men's spiritual strength – and it would be vain for them to say "We will go and do as at other times." Bones are not broken without pain, nor great sins brought on the conscience without trouble. But we need not insist on these alone, or even most obviously – no doubt these sins bereave men of all comforting evidence of the love of God and well-grounded assurance of it, but there are sins, which do not rise up in the conscience with such a bloody guilt as these, yet, by reason of their aggravations, God makes them a root of anxiety and trouble to the soul all its days. He says of some sins of ungodly men, *"And it was revealed in mine ears by the LORD of hosts, surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you until ye die."* (Isa. 22:14) And there are such provocations in his own people, that he will not let them pass before he hath cast them into depths, and made them cry out for deliverance. Let us consider some of them:

1. When God hath given unto anyone expressive manifestations of his love, convinced him of it, made him say, in the inmost parts of his heart, this is undeserved love and kindness; then, for him to be negligent in walking with God, it is an aggravation that shall not be forgotten. It is a remark upon the sins of Solomon, that he fell into them after God had appeared unto him twice; and all sins under, or after special mercies, will meet, at one time or other, with special rebukes. God will make Him sensible of abused light – of neglected love. Undervaluations of love are great provocations – "hath Nabal thus requited my kindness?" saith David – "I cannot bear it." And the clearer our convictions of such sins, the more severe will be our reflections upon ourselves.
2. Sins under or after great afflictions. To take so little notice of his hand, as under it, or after it, not to watch against the workings of sin has unkindness in it. *"I smote him: I hid me, and was wroth – and he went on frowardly in the way of his own heart."* (Isa. 57:17)
3. Returning to the self-righteousness of any previously-held moral standard prior to being convicted of one's sin and the efficacy of the blood of the Lamb, or even refusing greater light given by God in favor or darker, more comfortable or usual, habits. God can, and often does put forth the greatness of his power for the recovery of such a soul; but yet he will deal with him about this contempt of his love and the excellency of his Son, which had been manifested to him.

4. When God at any time draws nigh to a soul by his Spirit, in his word, with gracious words of peace and love, giving a sense of his kindness on the heart by the Holy Ghost, so that it is filled with joy unspeakable and glorious; for this soul, on a temptation, a diversion, or by mere carelessness and neglect, to suffer this sense of love to be, as it were, obliterated, and so lose that efficacy to obedience with which it is accompanied; this is also full of unkindness.
5. Great opportunities neglected and great gifts not improved, are often the occasion of plunging the soul into great depths. Gifts are given to trade with for God. Opportunities are the market-days for that trade. To hide the one in a napkin and let the other slip, will end in trouble. Disquietness and perplexities of heart are worms that will certainly breed in the rust of unexercised gifts. God loses revenue of glory and honor by such slothful souls, and will make them sensible of it.
6. Sins after special warning. When a soul is wrestling with some lust or temptation, God by his providence, causes some special word, in the preaching of the gospel, in the way of rebuke or persuasion, to come nigh and enter the inmost heart. The soul cannot but take notice that God is near to him, and dealing with him, and calling on him to look to God alone for assistance. If this care and kindness be neglected, his reproofs can be more severe.
7. Sins that bring scandal seldom suffer the soul to escape depths. Many professors take little notice of their worldliness, their pride, their passion, their lavish tongues; but the world takes keen notice, and the Gospel is dishonored by it.

“I have cried unto thee, O Lord; Lord, here my voice, let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications.” - Ps. 130:2

The only avenue or pursuit of a sin-entangled soul for relief lies in an application to **God alone**. Depths of sin-entanglements will excite a gracious soul to intense and earnest supplications unto God. “Lord, hear; Lord, attend.” Dying men do not usually cry out slothfully for relief – of a sudden, they are energized at the terror imminently apparent to them. A drowning man needs no exhortation to endeavor his own deliverance and safety – and spiritual troubles, in like manner, put men on attempt for relief. There are several things that sinning believers apply themselves to for relief in their perplexities, which prove as waters that fail:

1. The comfort of another soul, especially one who is disposed to like weaknesses.
2. Focusing on Business or work – as a way to barter down the despair.
3. Diversion from their perplexing thoughtfulness – fixing on something that cannot cure their disease, but may certainly make them forget that they are sick. (even religious diversions – or work). Cain, under the terror of his guilt, departed from the presence of the Lord and sought inward rest in outward labor and employment – he *“went and built a city.”* (Gen. 4:17)
4. Seeking relief from sin by sinning (as in the case of drunkards).

A man of God knows, though, that it is God alone against whom he hath sinned; and God alone who can pardon his sin. *“Unto thee do I cry.”* Here a sin-entangled soul is to fix itself. Trouble excites it to look for relief – many things without present themselves as a diversion; many things within offer themselves for a remedy. Forget thy sorrow, say the former; ease thyself of it by us, say the latter: the soul refuses both, as physicians of no value, and to God alone makes its application. He has wounded, and he alone can heal. And until any one that is sensible of the guilt of sin will push back from all of these impotent remedies to deal immediately with God, it is in vain for him to expect relief.

In this application to God alone the soul is intense, earnest and urgent. It is no time now to be slothful; the soul’s all, its greatest concerns are at stake. Dull, cold, formal applications to God will not serve the turn; ordinary actions of faith, love and fervency, usual seasons, opportunities, duties, answer not this condition (or, business as usual). To do no more than ordinary now, is to do nothing at all. He that puts forth no more strength and activity for his deliverance when he is in depths ready to perish, than when he is at liberty in plain and smooth paths, is scarcely likely to escape. Some in such conditions are careless and negligent; they think in ordinary course to wear off their difficulties; and that, though at present they are sensible of their danger, they shall have peace at last (or time heals all wounds), in which mindset there is much contempt of God. Some despond and languish under their distresses. Spiritual sloth influences both of these classes. But the steadfast soul resolves, by whatsoever means, public or private, of communion with others, or solitary retiring, Christ ever was or may be found, or peace be obtained, I will seek him, and not give over until I come to an enjoyment of him. And this frame of mind, this resolution a soul in depths must come unto, if it ever expects deliverance. For the most part, *“men’s wounds stink, and are corrupt, because of their foolishness.”* (Ps. 38:5) They are wounded by sin, and

through spiritual sloth they neglect their cure; this weakens them, and disquiets them day by day; yet they endure all rather than they will come out of their carnal ease and deal effectually with God.

Not only the default position, but the only position available to the natural man, is sowing to the flesh. Only God's people have been given a capacity, through God's giving of the earnest of our inheritance, that being the indwelling of the Spirit of God in each of us, to discern, through that capacity, the true nature of sin and the terror of the Lord. For though they may now have lost the comforting, they lose not the sanctifying light of the Spirit, the light whereby they are enabled to discern spiritual things in a spiritual manner. This never utterly departs from them, no matter how deep the depths have become. By this, they see sin to be 'exceeding sinful;' by this they 'know the terror of the Lord;' by this they know that it is 'a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' By this they discover the excellency of the love of God in Christ, which passeth all knowledge, the present sense whereof they have lost. By this they are enabled to look within the veil, and to take a vow of the blessed consolations which the saints enjoy, whose communion with God is never truly interrupted (though the mind of the despondent might try to convince).

Using a metaphor that limps quite a bit (so please forgive), a daughter can talk to her mother, sisters and brothers about her father, trying to understand him better – trying to understand what her relationship is to him, but the most meaningful dialogue that can happen in strengthening that relationship is strictly between the daughter and the father – no other dialogue will do there. The mother can try to help (and probably will try) all day, and the daughter can seek all kinds of advice, but the relationship exists between the father and the daughter. The Lord our God is the only rest for our souls. It is the pressing after forgiveness that is the very life and power of earnest shame and humiliation toward God – for we know that:

“there is forgiveness with Thee, that thou mayest be feared.” – Ps. 130:4

The meaning of these words, in connection to the revealing of an attribute of God, and in relation to the state of the soul here mentioned, could be stated like this:

“Although, O Lord, no man can approach unto thee, or stand before thee, if thou should mark his sins and follies according to the tenor of the law, nor could he

serve so great and holy a God; yet because I know, from thy revelation of it, that there is also with thee, on account of Jesus Christ the propitiation (or the regaining of favor), pardon and forgiveness, I am encouraged to continue with thee, waiting on thee, worshipping thee; when, without this discovery, I should rather choose to have rocks and mountains fall upon me to hide me from thy presence. But THERE IS FORGIVENESS WITH THEE, and therefore thou shalt be feared.”

Owen suggests that from these words, the following propositions become clear:

1. That faith's discovery of forgiveness in God is the great support of the sin-perplexed soul.
2. That such forgiveness speaks to the gracious heart or good-will of the Father, **the God of forgiveness**; the propitiation made by the blood of the Son; and free pardon, according to the covenant of grace.
3. That faith's discovery of forgiveness in God is the sole foundation of adherence to him, in acceptable worship and reverential obedience (which is pleasing to God).
4. That there is not the least encouragement for a sinner approaching God without this discovery. All else is covered with a deluge of wrath – this is the only ark where the soul may repair and find rest. All without it is darkness, curse and terror.

The perplexed and anxious soul, plunged into the depths on account of his sin is only truly comforted by the discovery of forgiveness in God and by earnestly seeking it; not through some surrogate activity, or busy-ness, or the hope of assuagement by the passing of time, or merely by getting words from others, no matter how good (as the best words would include an exhortation to earnestly seek the forgiveness of God), but by earnestly seeking forgiveness from **the God of forgiveness**, upon thy bed (that means when the din of all other parts of life are not pulling at your conscience – just you and your God, who knows every detail of your thoughts), in thorough recognition of the propitious blood of the Lamb, giving the matter no peace or rest, as Jacob wrestling with the man in the desert all night, with great striving to receive a blessing. The only peace or rest will for the soul plunged into such depths will come directly from **the God of forgiveness**.

I love you all. Amen.