

OUT OF THE DEPTHS: GOD'S FORGIVENESS OF SIN

Study One

OUT OF WHAT DEPTHS?

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PSALM 130

The Puritan pastor John Owen (1616–1683) wrote his study on the forgiveness of sin, considered by many to be his best work, as ‘A Practical Exposition of Psalm 130’:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

What are the ‘depths’ out of which we cry to the Lord? John Chrysostym (347–407) and others supposed this expression to relate to the depths of the heart. Owen counters:

. . . the obvious sense of the place, and the constant use of the word in the Hebrew, will not admit of this interpretation: it is in the plural number, depths. It is commonly used for valleys, or any deep places whatever, but especially of waters. Valleys and deep places, because of their darkness and solitariness,

are accounted places of horror, helplessness, and trouble. Psalm 23:4, ‘when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death;’ that is, in the extremity of danger and trouble.

The moral use of the word, as expressing the state and condition of the souls of men, is metaphorical. These depths, then, are difficulties, or pressures, attended with fear, horror, danger, and trouble.¹

Owen says these can be outward distresses, calamities, and afflictions, that come by God’s providence, as in Psalm 69:1–2:

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

Such were the innocent sufferings of Job, and of Jesus. But there are also internal depths of the conscience that we are brought into on account of sin, as in Psalm 88:6–7:

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves.

It is in this sense, ‘of God’s wrath upon his conscience, on account of sin’, Owen argues, that ‘depths’ is used in Psalm 130. He quotes Augustine of Hippo (354–430): ‘He cries out under the weight and waves of his sins’. This becomes obvious in the rest of the psalm, which is preoccupied wholly with God’s forgiveness (vv. 3–4) and God’s power to redeem from iniquities (vv. 7–8):

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. The doctrine also that he preaches, upon his delivery, is that of mercy, grace, and redemption, as is manifest from the close of the psalm; and what we have deliverance by, is most upon our hearts when we are delivered.²

Interestingly, Owen speaks not so much of unbelievers as of those who have believed and have fallen back into sin. He enumerates ‘some of the depths into which believers may fall’: loss of the sense of the love of God; perplexed thoughtfulness about their great unkindness towards God (such that the remembrance of God is a troubling matter); a revived sense of justly-deserved wrath; oppressive apprehensions of temporal judgments; prevailing fears, for a season, of being utterly rejected by God; God’s secret arrows sent into the soul, that wound it, adding pain to its disquietness; and dullness and disability to duty, in doing or suffering.³ That we should cry to God from these depths of sin, where it is to be expected that we would be most disinclined to do so—and that God should so make it that this cry actually plays a part in a change in His course of action towards us—is a great miracle and wonderful mystery of His grace.⁴

¹ John Owen, *The Forgiveness of Sin: A Practical Exposition of Psalm 130*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1977, p. 13.

² Owen, *Forgiveness*, p. 14.

³ Owen, *Forgiveness*, pp. 16–22.

⁴ See further: Martin Bleby, ‘Out of the Depths’, in *God and Prayer: Our Participation in God’s Great Enterprise*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2005, pp. 77–93.

Questions for Discussion:

- *Why would we want to interpret 'the depths' in Psalm 130 as the depths of our hearts, or the depths of distress, and not the depths of sin?*
- *Do these 'depths' occur only in unbelievers, or in believers as well?*

THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN

None of us comes to this subject, in the first instance, with an open mind and heart. There is such a thing as 'the deceitfulness of sin' (Heb. 3:13). Sin has a way of covering its tracks, and making itself appear minimal. It would be better to say, *we* tend to minimise our sin. Such is the case of the adulteress in Proverbs, and all of us who are like her:

This is the way of an adulteress:
she eats, and wipes her mouth,
and says, 'I have done no wrong' (Prov. 30:20).

The moment sin is committed—or even beforehand, when it is contemplated—we are in self-justification mode. It is our default position. Perpetual resort to this hardens us over time. That is why we are warned:

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin . . . As it is said, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion' (Heb. 3:12–13, 15; quoting Ps. 95:8).

Indeed, if we persist in this hardening of our hearts, the time will come when God locks us into that hardness, with no way out but by His merciful intervention (as with Pharaoh; see Exod. 8:32; 9:7, 12; Rom. 9:17–18; and with Israel in the time of Isaiah, and of Jesus and Paul; see Isa. 6:9–13; Mark 4:11–12; John 12:39–41; Acts 28:23–28; Rom. 11:25–32).

Our original tempter, 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan', is 'the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12:9), 'a liar and the father of lies' (John 8:44). Sin begins in the acceptance of the lie, and so an inability to see clearly or think truly characterises all who opt for it: 'they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened' (Rom. 1:21). What we think is clever wisdom is in fact nonsensical foolishness: 'Claiming to be wise, they became fools' (Rom. 1:22). So we will never be able to give a right estimate of our sin, or see it as it is, as long as we remain in this flesh, with sin dwelling within us (see Rom. 7:14–25). This makes it all the more important that we accept the Bible's testimony regarding our sin and ourselves as sinners.

One result of this will be that, when we hear of the forgiveness of sin, we immediately react: 'Why all this fuss about the forgiveness of sin? I haven't got anything that really needs to be forgiven'. Such was the reaction of Simon the Pharisee, when he saw the extravagant love relationship between Jesus and the sinner woman who was forgiven happening in his own home. The sad and sorry thing about Simon, and all who take this stance, is that their capacity for love is likewise minimised: 'the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little' (see Luke 7:36–50).

Questions for Discussion:

- *What is the connection between sin and deceit?*

- *How does that affect our ability to appreciate the need and reality of forgiveness?*
- *How does it affect our capacity for love?*

NO LIGHT THING

Another result of this attitude is that sin can be easily dealt with and dismissed. Such was the case in Jeremiah's day, when the serious issue of national apostasy, and its rapidly approaching judgement, were treated by the false prophets as a light matter of little consequence:

For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, 'Peace, peace,'
when there is no peace.
They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
yet they were not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the LORD (Jer. 6:13–15; compare 8:10–12).

Similarly in the days of Micah and Isaiah:

Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
'Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.'
Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height (Micah 3:11–12).

The dogs have a mighty appetite;
they never have enough.
The shepherds also have no understanding;
they have all turned to their own way,
to their own gain, one and all.
'Come,' they say, 'let us get wine;
let us fill ourselves with strong drink.
And tomorrow will be like today,
great beyond measure' (Isa. 56:11–12).

Jeremiah needed to warn against taking God lightly:

They have spoken falsely of the LORD,
and have said, 'He will do nothing.
No evil will come upon us,
and we shall not see sword or famine' (Jer. 5:12).

A light view of sin gives rise to a cheap or perverse view of forgiveness. In one crossword puzzle in the daily newspaper the clue was given, 'Forgive'. The answer? 'Condone'! That God could ever condone evil, or come to some compromise arrangement with it, is unthinkable. We could never rightly respect Him if He did. But we, it seems, are prepared to do that. Indeed, not knowing the 'total, radical, cleansing, redirecting judgement of Christ in the cross that is our only true forgiveness',⁵ we may see no other way by which sin may be overpassed. God in His forbearance does overlook sin for a time, but this is always with a view to bringing us to repentance in His mighty act of forgiveness through the atonement of the cross (see Acts 17:30–31; Rom. 3:23–26; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Questions for Discussion:

- *What parallels can we see between the days of Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah and our own days?*
- *What is the difference between forgiving and condoning?*

HUMAN INGRATITUDE

Imagine a person of our time, who sees roads and footpaths that have been made, and drives and walks on them, with not a thought for the fact that these have been provided by the hard work of others over time, but rather complains to the government or council about their condition, and ends up suing them? Or who goes to shops he has not built to buy food he has not grown, and complains about the service? Or who turns on a switch and naturally expects electricity to flow at his convenience, and is narked when it does not? Some of us have been to parts of this country or places in the world where some of these things cannot be taken for granted or have not been put in place. Ingratitude is the most chilling of human propensities:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude . . .

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
Thou dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot:
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remember'd not.⁶

We live in such ingratitude every day. Paul the apostle says that it lies at the root of all sin:

for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him (Rom. 1:21).

The Scriptures highlight the gross unnaturalness of human ingratitude, especially towards God:

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;
for the LORD has spoken:

⁵ Martin Bleby, *The Vinedresser: An Anglican Meets Wrath and Grace*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1985, p. 20.

⁶ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii, ed. W. J. Craig, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, London, 1943, p. 227.

I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.

Ah, sinful nation,
people laden with iniquity,
offspring who do evil,
children who deal corruptly,
who have forsaken the LORD,
who have despised the Holy One of Israel,
who are utterly estranged! (Isa. 1:2–4).

Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
says the LORD,
for my people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water (Jer. 2:12–13).

There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me' . . .

'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you . . .'

'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours' (Luke 15:11, 29, 31).

At certain times in Israel's history, God gave a sharp reminder:

'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him' . . . Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house . . .' (2 Sam. 12:1–4, 7–11).

O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,
and redeemed you from the house of slavery . . . (Micah 6:3–4).

And Ezra said: 'You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you. You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans . . . And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea. You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land . . . And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you

threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments . . . For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them. But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments; they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt (Neh. 9:6–7, 9–10, 11–13, 15–17).

In each of these instances, the abundant generosity and provision of God, and His mighty saving works, are contrasted with the forgetful ingratitude and defiance of His people. Many more examples could be given, such as Ezekiel 16, where Israel as a young bride owes her very life, as well as her beauty and prosperity, to her God, and then proceeds to expend all He has given her in rampant unfaithfulness to Him; or even the story of the garden of Eden, where every good thing, even the breath of life itself, was given to us, and we wanted something else (see Gen. 2; 3).

In the New Testament, Paul needs to remind his pagan hearers:

Friends, why are you doing this? . . . we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them . . . he has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy . . . The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth . . . he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things (Acts 14:15–17; 17:24–25).

No less may believers be prone to ingratitude, and its terrible effects:

. . . those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away . . . Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over (Heb. 6:4–6, 7–8).

What is it that enables us to see through the hardness and come to appreciate the truth? Certainly God constantly addresses us in all sorts of ways to bring us to the repentance of a new heart and mind. But the full action will take more than that.

Questions for Discussion:

- *What awareness of our own ingratitude do these words awaken in us?*
- *What is the relationship between inner ingratitude and the outward offences of sin?*

EVERY KIND OF WICKEDNESS

Sin begins with ingratitude, but it does not stop there. Almost as if to prove a point, it insists on coming out in flagrant acts of defiance. Or in underhand stubborn resistance. Paul calls this ‘all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth’ (Rom. 1:18). Hating God, we will take it out on each other (Rom. 1:30; 8:7; Titus 3:3).

To give one example, that lies at the foundation of our life as a nation. Here is a ‘South Australian’ instance of it:

On 28 December 1836, British settlers began the dispossession and subjugation of our traditional ancestors who had lived since the Dreamtime in the land now named 'South Australia'. On that day invaders from England made a proclamation at the place our people had always called Pattawilya, but which the newcomers named Holdfast Bay. They made a public declaration to their own satisfaction of power and control over the lands. Without treaty or recompense, they proceeded to survey and sell for their own use and profit the land which our people had occupied for countless generations.⁷

So continued, in this region, the decimation of population and destruction of indigenous society that has been happening in this country now for over two hundred years.

Last year we visited the ruins of Lilimooloora station, in the Kimberley region of north-west Australia, and the police station where the armed resistance of the local Banuba people began in the 1890s with the murder of a policeman. The British settlers pleaded with the Western Australian government for a period of 'open season' on the indigenous people, who were officially 'British citizens' under the protection of the law. The brief time in which that protection was removed saw the widespread massacre of men, women and children. Like Port Arthur in Tasmania, where brutality against our own kind matched that against the original inhabitants, Lilimooloora is a place of beauty and great sadness. Nobody really 'won'—we were all the losers. We still find it too much to bear or face: on the recent sign that told the story, someone had felt constrained to scratch out the word 'invasion'.

Out of the ingratitude and disregard of the human heart, Paul says, comes idolatry—the worship of created things rather than the Creator. With that comes the abuse of our bodies in impurity, and in sexual perversity (see Rom. 1:23–27), and giving way to 'a debased mind and things that ought not to be done':

They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Rom. 1:29–32).

None of this can be dismissed simply by decree, or by a wave of the hand. When we consider these things not just as personal but as national or global sins—is there any hope that this can be dealt with and finally settled?

We begin to see the dimensions of what God must deal with if He is truly to bring forgiveness of sins. What was John the Baptist saying when he pointed to Jesus and said: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world*'!

The salutary thing is that this sin-riddled state of affairs does not just happen, nor does it happen just by human will, or even by diabolical scheming. Over it all is God. Paul says that the outworking of evil in all its vileness is itself a manifestation of the righteousness of God in His wrath against sin. All this happens because:

God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity . . . God gave them up to degrading passions . . . And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

While it appears that evil is having an unstoppable free-for-all, God is in charge here. None of this happens outside His control. It appears that if God is going to bring forgiveness to bear, He is prepared not to take any shortcuts, but to take the long way round if need be, and go the distance all the way. That God is in charge of the process, however tortuous, gives us confidence that God will determine the outcome. Meanwhile, sin will be shown to be sin, and

⁷ Christobel Mattingley and Ken Hampton, eds, *Survival in Our Own Land: 'Aboriginal' experiences in 'South Australia' since 1836 told by Nungas and others*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 1988, p. 3.

sinful beyond measure (see Rom. 7:13). Psalm 38 gives a grievous depiction of a sinner under the wrath of God:

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger,
or discipline me in your wrath.
For your arrows have sunk into me,
and your hand has come down on me.

There is no soundness in my flesh
because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones
because of my sin.
For my iniquities have gone over my head;
they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.

My wounds grow foul and fester
because of my foolishness;
I am utterly bowed down and prostrate;
all day long I go around mourning.
For my loins are filled with burning,
and there is no soundness in my flesh.
I am utterly spent and crushed;
I groan because of the tumult of my heart (Ps. 38:1–8).

Any deliverance from that will be no light thing. It will be truly ‘out of the depths’.

Questions for Discussion:

- *When have we had any awareness of sin as ‘a burden too heavy for me’?*
- *What difference does it make to know the outworking of sin as a manifestation of the sovereign wrath of God?*

CAN GOD FORGIVE SIN?

It would appear that the job is too massive. Even if God could forgive sin, should He? Would not that be letting us get away with murder?

There is a passage in the Old Testament that says that God will not forgive:

Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good’ (Josh. 24:19–20).

It is true that under the terms of the covenant with Moses, Israel would forfeit its place in the promised land and its life as a nation if it forsook the worship of God (see Lev. 26:1–39; Deut. 28, 29). This actually happened in the exile of 597 and 586 BC. Joshua knew prophetically that this unfaithfulness was in the people’s heart (see Deut. 32:1–44)—hence his dire warning. John Owen claims that there was no forgiveness under the old covenant,⁸ and in this sense that is true. Yet we shall see that this is not strictly true—God’s forgiveness operates mightily within the Old Testament. But its operations, as we shall see, were anticipatory of

⁸ ‘Under the first covenant there was no mercy or forgiveness provided for any sin. He made man upright, and it was necessary that he should be preserved from every sin, or that covenant could in no way benefit him. But it is not so in the covenant of grace: there is in it pardon provided in the blood of Christ’—Owen, *Forgiveness*, p. 23.

the forgiveness that would be accomplished once for all in Christ. For Israel, as for all of us, forgiveness would not come without the working through of all the necessary judgements (see Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 30:1–14).

The revelation of God given to Moses set out the dimensions of God’s mercy and love:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children’s children,
to the third and the fourth generation (Exod. 34:6–7).

While this sets forgiveness of sin at the very heart of God, it is also clear that forgiveness cannot come as long as human guilt persists. If forgiveness is to come, something must be done to remove guilt. That is something we can do nothing about ourselves—once sin is committed, guilt is there. If it is to happen at all, the removal of guilt and the coming of forgiveness, if at all possible, will have to be something that God does. It is to this that Psalm 130 appeals:

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered . . .

O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities (vv. 3–4, 7–8).

Question for Discussion:

- *‘Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty’— what does this tell us about the nature of forgiveness?*

THE DEPTHS OF GOD

We begin to sense that if God is to deliver us out of the depths of sin, it will tax the very depths of God. Is it legitimate to speak in this way? Paul the apostle says:

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him’—
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:9–10).

The Spirit joins us to Christ (see Rom. 8:9) and in so doing communicates to us in the depths of our sin, through his mighty saving action, the steadfast love that is in the depths of God.

As Corrie ten Boom discovered in concentration camp: ‘there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper’.⁹

⁹ Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*, Hodder & Stoughton, Sevenoaks, 1976, p. 202.