



# Assurance







# Assurance

Overcoming the difficulty  
of knowing forgiveness

*John Owen*

CHRISTIAN  
**HERITAGE**



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## CONTENTS

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THIS EDITION	13
INTRODUCTION	15
TO THE READER	23
PSALM 130—A PARAPHRASE AND INTRODUCTION	27
General Scope of the Whole Psalm	30
I OUT OF THE DEPTHS	33
Sin Brings Saints into the Depths	36
Experiencing the Depths	37
When Believers Fall into the Depths	43
The Provisions of the Covenant of Grace	43
Why Believers Fall into the Depths	49
The Sins that Cast Believers into the Depths	51
Great Sins Bring Great Distress	51
Aggravating Circumstances	52
Guilt Intensified	56

CONTENTS

The Behaviour of a Believer Under Distress 58  
    He Comes to God Alone 60  
    He Cries to God with Great Earnestness 63

2 LORD, WHO SHALL STAND? 73  
    Apprehensions of a Sin-Perplexed Soul 76  
        Dread as God Marks Sin According to the Law 78  
        Weighing up Grounds for Hope? 81  
    The Attitude of an Awakened Soul 85  
        A Sincere Sense of Sin 85  
        Acknowledgment of Sin 91  
        Self-condemnation 93  
    Self-condemnation Is not the Goal 95  
        Sinful Despondency Provokes the Lord 96  
        Conviction Is not Conversion 98

3 BUT THERE IS FORGIVENESS WITH YOU 101  
    No Approach to God without Forgiveness 107  
    Forgiveness—A Rare Attainment 109  
        Conscience Opposes Forgiveness 111  
        The Law Opposes Forgiveness 113  
        Human Thinking Rejects Forgiveness 116  
    False Notions of Forgiveness 118  
        ‘God Is Like Ourselves’ 119  
        ‘God Will Forgive Me; That’s His Job’ 120  
        How to Identify False Notions of Forgiveness 120  
    True Gospel Forgiveness 125  
        Its Relation to the Gracious Heart of the Father 126  
        Its Relation to the Blood of Christ 133  
        Its Relation to the Promise of the Gospel 137  
        Only Faith Discovers Forgiveness 141  
    The Benefit of Discovering Forgiveness in God 144  
        Assurance of Forgiveness Is Possible 144  
        Forgiveness without Assurance Is Possible 147  
        Forgiveness without Assurance not to be Despised 149  
        Discovering Forgiveness in God Nurtures Assurance 153  
        Supports to Spiritual Life 155

	The True Concept of Believing	161
	Many Pretend to Believe	161
	Many Have not Laid the Foundation	162
4	‘THERE IS FORGIVENESS’—THE EVIDENCE	165
	The Wrong Place to Look for Proof	165
	The Light of Nature	165
	Inbred Notions of the Acts of God	166
	God’s Dealing with Sinning Angels	169
	The Law God Gave to Adam	170
	Preliminary Considerations	170
	Forgiveness Is a Rare Discovery	170
	The Foundation of Our Communion with God	171
	A Matter for Serious and Diligent Enquiry	171
	How God Dealt with Our First Parents	173
	The First Sin—the Greatest Sin	173
	Man Knew What He Deserved	174
	God Had Declared How He Would Deal with Sin	174
	Nothing Without God Could Halt His Wrath	174
	The Institution of Sacrifices	175
	Appointed by God	176
	After Sin Came into the World	176
	The Greatest Part of Old Testament Worship	178
	The Prescription of Repentance	179
	True Repentance Lays Hold of Forgiveness	180
	The Call to Repent is Founded on Forgiveness	181
	Why So Many Arguments?	185
	God’s Pleasure with His Saints	187
	The Saints Above Were All Sinners	189
	Some Were Great Sinners	190
	God’s Patience Towards the World	193
	After Adam’s Fall	193
	Throughout History	194
	Constantly Abused	194
	More than Sufferance	194
	Reaches All for the Sake of Some	195
	Points to God’s Willingness to Forgive	196



## CONTENTS

Saints' Faith and Experience in this World	199
Profession without Power	201
Profession with Power	204
The Institution of Religious Worship	211
To Glorify God	211
God Chooses What He Will Receive as Worship	212
Fallen Angels Are not Called to Worship	213
God's Call to Worship Declares Forgiveness	214
Ordinances That Specifically Confirm Forgiveness	216
Commands to Pray for Pardon	220
The New Covenant	223
Any Covenant Between God and Man Is a Marvel	224
Covenant Abrogation Requires Momentous Cause	225
Why 'a New Covenant'?	228
The Oath of God	230
The Nature of the Oath	231
The End of His Oath	231
Unspeakable Condescension	232
'As I Live'	233
The Name of God	234
God Reveals Himself by His Name	234
God Reveals Himself by an Appropriate Name	235
Every Name Confirmed in Jesus Christ	237
'The God of Forgiveness'	238
The Nature of God	239
Eternally Glorious	239
He Made All Things for Himself	240
He Can Add Nothing to Himself	240
We Know Only What He Is Pleased to Reveal	243
He Reveals His Properties in Fitting Acts	243
Properties Revealed in Their Effects After Creation	244
Mercy, Grace, and Patience	245
God's Sending of His Son	246
The Source of the Sending—the Counsel of Peace	246
The Only Begotten of the Father	248
In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh	250



## CONTENTS

	The Purpose	251
	He Lives Again	253
	God's Greatest Work	253
	God Requires Us to Forgive One Another	257
	Many Testimonies	257
	The Characteristic of a Good Man	260
	The Mark of a True Christian	261
5	<b>FORGIVENESS AND UNBELIEVERS</b>	263
	Forgiveness Becomes God	263
	His Thoughts Are not Our Thoughts	264
	Have You not Known?	266
	Forgiveness Glorifies God	269
	Most Men Do not Believe Forgiveness	271
	Gospel Truth	273
	Believe Forgiveness in God—Obtain Forgiveness	274
	Easy Believers	275
	How Did You Come to Believe?	276
	Have You More than a General Belief?	277
	Have You Been Convicted of Your Sin?	279
	Do You Live in Sin?	281
	All of Grace?	283
	An Exhortation to Unbelievers	284
	There Are Terms of Peace	286
	No Room for Delay or Excuses	290
	Pleasing Terms	294
	Where Does Your Hope Rest?	312
6	<b>RULES FOR FINDING GOSPEL PEACE</b>	321
	I Let Christ Be Your Judge	322
	His Judgments often Contradict Men's Judgments	323
	How Christ Pronounces His Sentence	326
	II Expect to Carry Hell in One Hand and Heaven in the Other	328
	Attendants to Assurance	330
	The Effects of Evangelical Assurance	334

CONTENTS

III Wait 337

IV Search Out Sin 339

    Consider What Areas of Sin Disturb Your Peace 341

    Consider Sin at Various Stages of Life 341

V Distinguish Between Unbelief and Jealousy 343

    Unbelief Weakens 345

    Unbelief Is Selfish 346

VI Distinguish Between Faith and Feeling 347

    Peace and Joy Are not Essential to Faith 348

    Grace May Work Unrecognised 350

VII Do Not Mix Foundation and Building Work 351

VIII 'Get Up!' 353

    Spiritual Wisdom Is Essential 356

    Beware Unbalanced Spiritual Counsel 356

IX Guard Your Thoughts of God 358

X Lay Hold of Every Appearance of Grace 361

XI Pinpoint the Cause of Your Restlessness 363

7 CAUSES OF SPIRITUAL DISQUIET 365

    Afflictions 365

        What Aggravates Afflictions 366

        How to Avoid Spiritual Trouble Under Affliction 371

    Inner Turmoil About the State of the Soul 377

        Uncertainty About Regeneration 377

    A Digression on Judging Others 384

        Many Christian Duties Require us to Judge Others 384

        One Spirit—One Body 385

        Some Duties Require Certainty of Regeneration 388

        Rules for Dealing with Doubts of Regeneration 389

    Inner Turmoil over a Sense of Spiritual Poverty 398

        Add One Grace to Another 399

        More Spiritual Men See Their Unspiritualness More 401

        Hypocrisy 401

        God Does not Despise Small Things 402

        Christ Makes Our Little a Great Deal 403

        Believe Now to Obey Now 403



## CONTENTS

- The Power of Indwelling Sin 404
- Unexpected 404
  - Universal 405
  - Endless 405
  - Not Inconsistent with Grace 406
  - Your Opposition to Sin Is the Measure 406
- 8 MY SOUL WAITS 409
- ‘I Wait...’ 415
    - How We Wait 416
    - Why We Wait 421
  - ‘...for the Lord’ 426
    - Himself 426
    - A Great and Sovereign Ruler 428
  - ‘In His Word I Hope’ 450
    - God’s Promises Reveal Him to Believers 450
- 9 HE SHALL REDEEM ISRAEL 455
- Israel, ‘Hope in the Lord’ 458
  - ‘With Him Is Plenteous Redemption’ 459
  - ‘...from All His Iniquities’ 460
  - ‘Consider How it Was with Me’ 462
  - Final Words 463





## THIS EDITION

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The contents of this book were first published as an exposition of Psalm 130. The text here is unchanged apart from the following features, designed to make the book more user-friendly:

1. The text has been divided into nine chapters.
2. Subheadings, sometimes extending to four levels and mainly based on the original numeric structure, have been inserted. The contents pages include primary and secondary subheadings to aid navigation.
3. Sentences enumerating more than five or six items, lists of more than one sentence, selected notes, and some ‘digressions’ are broken off from the main text and displayed.
4. The style and placement of biblical references has been made consistent with modern practice and Roman numerals have been changed to Arabic.
5. Words such as ‘unto’ become ‘to’ or ‘doth consist’ becomes ‘consists’.





## INTRODUCTION

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‘I have been accustomed,’ wrote John Calvin on the Psalms, ‘to call this book, I think not inappropriately, “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul.”’<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even more appropriately, as a former colleague once commented to me, ‘An Anatomy and Physiology’ of the soul. It is for this reason that the people of God in every age have found them a treasure trove buried deep in the heart of sacred Scripture. They speak *to us*, as all God’s Word does; but they also speak *for us*. Here are words for the voiceless. It has always been the experience of afflicted saints that they discover that even although they knew the words of the Psalms, now they understand what the psalmist meant when he penned them.

All this is wonderfully evident in John Owen’s exposition of Psalm 130. Remarkable in the length to which it extends (it is somewhere north of four hundred pages long in this edition), it is even more remarkable in the breadth of his discussions of Christian experience, in the depth to which it penetrates, and in the heights which it ultimately reaches in leading the reader into the high privilege of the assurance of forgiveness.

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trs., James Anderson (Calvin’s Commentaries, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, 1843-1855), xxxvi-xxxvii.



## ASSURANCE

In addition, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX* is obviously in large measure an anatomy of the author's soul and in places a transcript of the spiritual experience which contributed in a major way to John Owen becoming perhaps the greatest English theologian of all time, and certainly her greatest exponent of spiritual theology. His colleague David Clarkson perhaps best expressed this in his funeral sermon:

I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his great design to promote Holiness in the life and Exercise of it among you...He was a burning and a shining light, and you for a while rejoiced in his light. Alas! It was but for a while

And then, almost as an afterthought, Clarkson added, 'and we may Rejoyce in it still.'<sup>2</sup> And one obvious way in which that is true—probably far beyond Clarkson's expectation—is to be found in the pages of this volume which Dr Philip Ross has, with his usual expertise, edited for the modern reader.

Owen rarely spoke of himself. The general outline of his life is well known. Born 1616; son of a minister; educated at Oxford; parish minister in Fordham and later in Coggeshall; chaplain to Oliver Cromwell; Vice Chancellor (read 'President') of the University of Oxford; scholar and prodigious author (his collected writings amount to 24 volumes each of around 600 pages in length); and, towards the end of his life, pastor of an independent congregation in London. He died in 1683.<sup>3</sup>

Somewhere in his twenties, Owen appears to have gone through a prolonged period of deep personal struggle. He never fully removed the veil that hung over those years, nor does he provide us with any self analysis that would explain the period of spiritual melancholy through which he passed. What we do know is that he

- 2 David Clarkson, *A Funeral Sermon on the Most Lamented Death of the late reverend and learned divine John Owen, D.D.*, preached on 9<sup>th</sup> September 1683. Clarkson (1622–86) was appointed pastoral colleague to Owen in 1682 and succeeded him.
- 3 See A. Thomson, *The Life of John Owen*, in Owen's *Works*, ed. W.H. Goold, Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850–53, volume 1 pp. XIX–CXII. Separately published as *John Owen, Prince of Puritans*, Tain: Christian Focus, 1996.

was already a preacher of Christ's gospel who through dark hours came to a fresh sense of light and joy in Christ.

The depth of Owen's experience may well explain why he would become weary of all superficial religion. It certainly helps to explain why he devotes around seventy-five percent of his work on Psalm 130 to the fourth verse: 'There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.' Once fully recovered and strengthened, Owen determined to preach on the truth that had set him free and raised him up, and, as with a number of his works, the public exposition of the text became the impetus for and foundation of the subsequent book, first published in 1668.<sup>4</sup>

In the standard edition of Owen's *Works*, edited by William Goold, the exposition of Psalm 130 was bound together with three other massively penetrating works, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, his work *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*, and its twin volume *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*. Taken together they represent a massive theological, spiritual, and psychological analysis of the power of sin. If you would read Owen, noted Professor John ('Rabbi') Duncan, 'prepare yourself for the knife.' But Owen's deep penetrating unmasking of the human heart is matched by his exposition of the sheer wonder of the grace of God in the gospel. For Owen these were ever the twin *sine qua non* for any authentic exposition of the Christian gospel.

There is much here that is striking. One is Owen's emphasis on the fact that real believers may find themselves in considerable soul distress because of their sin. They need to learn from the psalmist how to respond to this reality, and then how to recover from it. The great key is the discovery of forgiveness.

Owen takes us patiently by the hand and leads us on in our understanding and grasp of grace. All this is predicated on his

4 The subject of the assurance of grace and salvation was a major theme in the writings of the seventeenth century Puritans following in the tradition of the Reformation. For an extended discussion see Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999. Dr Beeke's work contains an extended treatment of Owen's view, pp. 165-213.



## ASSURANCE

conviction that a deep sense of forgiveness is not as common a reality among believers as we might like to think. He himself had once lacked it. In another context he shrewdly observed that in fact many Christians view the Father ‘with anxious, doubtful thoughts.’ Sadly, he noted, ‘What fears, what questionings are there, of his good-will and kindness.’<sup>5</sup> All of this, of course, was in keeping with the statements of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (in which Owen had no hand) and its daughter confession *The Savoy Declaration* (in which he played a major role) that genuine Christians might have to pass through long struggles and deep waters before they experienced the full assurance of their salvation. Owen had done so himself. The key for the Westminster and Savoy Divines, however, as for Owen, was that such assurance could be experienced through the right use of the ordinary ‘means of grace’, that is the instruments God uses to help us experience the fulfillment of his promises.

Within this context, Owen both challenges our generation of surface thinking and models for us what a ministry of these ‘means’ might be. This is what we discover in his detailed exposition of Psalm 130 verse 4 (‘There is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared’). While our inclination may be to point the soul struggling for assurance to read a few texts that describe assurance, Owen does more. He does not merely cite biblical texts; he uses his detailed knowledge of the whole of Scripture as an instrument by which he actually transitions us from doubts and fears to a settled assurance of grace and salvation. In this sense he preaches us out of lack of assurance into the joy of assurance.

This explains the detailed character of Owen’s work. While we moderns do not find detail unusual in an academic text book in our own discipline, or on the financial or sporting statistics of the newspaper, when it comes to spiritual experience we tend to prefer ‘instant’ to ‘freshly ground, slowly percolated.’ We are impatient with the laws or principles that govern the spiritual life. It is here that Owen teaches us to slow down, think, understand, and apply.

5 *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold (1850-53), reprinted Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, II.32.

Owen thus provides us with an extended exposition of the wonder of forgiveness, where and how we can discover it, and how it is revealed to us in Christ. He then takes us through a series of eleven ‘rules’ which serve to guide us safely in this area of experience.

We live in an antinomian age which honours the rules of the sports more than the rules of God’s word. Perhaps it is as well, therefore, to point out that these are not an expression of a legalism that will lead us into bondage, but an exposition of the basic principles of God’s word and gospel grace which will deliver us from bondage into spiritual liberty.

Here, then, we have spiritual anatomy and physiology at its best. Owen excels in diagnosis—no stone is left unturned in his examination of the soul. By comparison, few books today will give us the principles by which we may ‘search out sin’ in our hearts; and equally few will clarify the importance of distinguishing between faith and spiritual sense (rule vi), and avoiding the error of mixing the foundation and the ‘building’ work (rule vii). But these, along with their companions, are vital to our spiritual health and stability.

In this vein Owen continues his exposition until he quietly reflects in the closing sentences that he has probably written enough, and draws his work to a close.

Like many of Owen’s other works, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX* was written to be read as a single book. But it would be unwise to read it in isolation from Owen’s other works, or at least without knowing that all of Owen’s emphasis on experimental Christianity and subjective experience is securely rooted in his understanding and exposition of the glory of Christ’s Person and Work, the character of God as Trinity and our fellowship with him, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Anyone for whom this volume constitutes a first encounter with Owen would certainly be both wise and well-served by turning to one or other of these works next. It will then become clear that the enjoyment of assurance takes place within the context of fellowship of the Spirit, centered

6 Owen treats these subjects in *Works* vols 1–3 respectively. See also the companion volumes in this series edited by Philip Ross.

## ASSURANCE

on Jesus Christ, and bringing us to the knowledge of God as our Heavenly Father.

Perhaps the most fitting way to bring these words of introduction to a close is by adding two personal testimonies.

The first is now three hundred and forty years old, and comes from the sermon preached at Owen's funeral by his colleague and successor David Clarkson:

A great light is fallen; one of eminency for holiness, learning, parts, and abilities; a pastor, a scholar, a divine of the first magnitude; holiness gave a Divine lustre to his other accomplishments, it shined in his whole course, and was diffused through his whole conversation.

I need not tell you of this that knew him, and observed that it was his great design to promote holiness in the power, life, and exercise of it among you. It was his great complaint that the power of it declined among professors. It was his care and endeavour to prevent or cure spiritual decays in his own flock. He was a burning and a shining light, and you for a while rejoiced in his light: alas! that it was but for a while, and that we cannot rejoice in it still!

He had extraordinary intellectuals [i.e. intellectual gifts] a vast memory, a quick apprehension, a clear and piercing judgment; he was a passionate lover of light and truth, of Divine truth especially; he pursued it unweariedly, through painful and wasting studies, such as impaired his health and strength, such as exposed him to those distempers with which he conflicted many years: and some may blame him for this as a sort of intemperance, but it is the most excusable of any, and looks like a voluntary martyrdom. However it showed he was ready to spend, and be spent, for Christ: he did not bury his talent, with which he was richly furnished, but still laid it out for the Lord who had intrusted him. He preached while his strength and liberty would serve, then by discourse and writing.

That he was an excellent preacher none will deny who knew him, and knew what preaching was, and think it not the worse because it is spiritual and evangelical. He had an admirable facility in discoursing on any subject, pertinently and decently,



## INTRODUCTION

and could better express himself extempore, than others with premeditation. He was never at a loss for want of expression; a happiness few can pretend to; and this he could show upon all occasions, in the presence of the highest persons in the nation, and from the greatest to the meanest. He hereby showed he had the command of his learning. His vast reading and experience was hereby made useful, in resolving doubts, clearing what was obscure, advising in perplexed and intricate cases and breaches, or healing them which sometimes seemed incurable. Not only we, but all his brethren will have reason to bewail the loss of him. His conversation was not only advantageous in respect to his pleasantness and obligingness; but there was that in it which made it desirable to great persons, natives and foreigners, and that by so many, that few could have what they desired.

I need speak nothing of his writings, though that is another head that I intimated; they commend themselves to the world. If holiness, learning, and a masculine unaffected style can commend anything, his practical discourses cannot but find much acceptation [acceptance] with those who are sensible of their soul concerns, and can relish that which is Divine, and value that which is not common or trivial. His excellent Comment [commentary] upon the Hebrews gained him a name and esteem, not only at home, but in foreign countries. When he had finished it (and it was a merciful providence that he lived to finish it) he said, Now his work was done, it was time for him to die.<sup>7</sup>

The second testimony is more recent and indeed more personal.

Mountain climbers are reputed to respond to the question ‘Why climb mountains?’ by saying ‘Because they’re there.’ If asked why I began to read Owen, the answer would probably be the same. I was seventeen or eighteen, and Owen was ‘there’ (his *Works* were in the process of their first major reprinting in over one hundred years). Clearly he was a theological and pastoral mountain worth climbing. As I began to read him I felt as if someone had come into a wood paneled room, and led me by the hand to the wall to show me that one panel had a handle and was in fact a door into a larger

<sup>7</sup> Clarkson, *loc. cit.*



ASSURANCE

room. Therein treasures in abundance awaited my exploration. Owen seemed to go down deeper, stay up longer, come up with more treasure, lead to greater heights of understanding grace than anything I had read before.

Now, decades later, I still find myself turning to the old master and thinking, ‘Why do I spend time reading other books when such riches are available to me here?’ Of course, the world is full of valuable Christian books and we should read as many as we can. But Owen belongs to a special category of well-tried and fully proved authors whom to read is to invest for a lifetime.

As a schoolboy, still a few years short of encountering Owen I was required to read a number of the *Essays* of Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Although lacking the experience fully to appreciate that knight’s wisdom, one of his comments has lingered in my memory over the years:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested: that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly and with diligence and attention.<sup>8</sup>

*A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX* undoubtedly fits into this last category—‘to be read wholly and with diligence and attention.’ Dr Ross has again placed us in his debt by preparing this attractive edition to enable us to do just that. All that remains therefore is that I encourage you to set aside the time, slow down part of your life, and begin to chew on Owen. For this book may be one of the most nutritious meals you ever digest!

*Sinclair B Ferguson*  
*First Presbyterian Church*  
*Columbia, South Carolina*

8 Francis Bacon, ‘Of Studies’ in *Essays*, ed. with intro and notes, F.G. Selby, London: MacMillan & Co., 1889, p.129.



## TO THE READER

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Christian Reader, The ensuing exposition and discourses are intended for the benefit of those whose spiritual state and condition is represented in the psalm here explained. That these are not a few, that they are many, yea, that to some part or parts of it they are all who believe, both the Scriptures and their own experience will bear testimony. Some of them, it may be, will inquire into and after their own concerns, as they are here declared. To be serviceable to their faith, peace, and spiritual consolation has been the whole of my design. If they meet with any discovery of truth, any due application of it to their consciences, any declaration of the sense and mind of the Holy Ghost in the Scriptures, suitable to their condition and useful to their edification, much of my end and purpose is obtained.

I know some there are that dislike all discourses of this nature, and look upon them with contempt and scorn; but why they should so do I know not, unless the gospel itself, and all the mysteries of it, be folly to them. Sin and grace in their original causes, various respects, consequents, and ends, are the principal subjects of the whole Scripture, of the whole revelation of the will of God to mankind. In these do our present and eternal concerns lie, and



PREFACE

from and by them has God designed the great and everlasting exaltation of his own glory. Upon these do turn all the transactions that are between God and the souls of men. That it should be an endeavour needless or superfluous, to inquire into the will of God about, and our own interest in, these things, who can imagine? Two ways there are whereby this may be done. First, speculatively, by a due investigation of the nature of these things, according as their doctrine is declared in the Scripture. An endeavour according to the mind of God herein is just and commendable, and comprehensive of most of the chief heads of divinity. But this is not to be engaged in for its own sake. The knowledge of God and spiritual things has this proportion to practical sciences, that the end of all its notions and doctrines consists in practice. Wherefore, secondly, these things are to be considered practically; that is, as the souls and consciences of men are actually concerned in them and conversant about them. How men contract the guilt of sin, what sense they have and ought to have thereof, what danger they are liable to thereon, what perplexities and distresses their souls and consciences are reduced to thereby, what courses they fix upon for their relief; as also, what is that grace of God whereby alone they may be delivered, wherein it consists, how it was prepared, how purchased, how it is proposed, and how it may be attained; what effects and consequents a participation of it produces; how in these things faith and obedience to God, dependence on him, submission to him, waiting for him, are to be exercised, is the principal work that those who are called to the dispensation of the gospel ought to inquire into themselves, and to acquaint others withal. In the right and due management of these things, whether by writing or oral instruction, with prudence, diligence, and zeal, consists their principal usefulness in reference to the glory of God and the everlasting welfare of the souls of men. And they are under a great mistake who suppose it an easy and a common matter to treat of these practical things usefully, to the edification of them that do believe; because both the nature of the things themselves, with the concerns of the souls and consciences of all sorts of persons in them, require that they be handled plainly, and without those

intermixtures of secular learning and additions of ornaments of speech which discourses of other natures may or ought to be composed and set off withal. Some, judging by mere outward appearances—especially if they be of them from whom the true nature of the things themselves treated of are hid—are ready to despise and scorn the plain management of them, as that which has nothing of wisdom or learning accompanying of it, no effects of any commendable ability of mind for which it should be esteemed. But it is not expressible how great a mistake such persons, through their own darkness and ignorance, do labour under. In a right spiritual understanding, in a due perception and comprehension of these things—the things of the sins of men and grace of God—consists the greatest part of that wisdom, of that soundness of mind, of that knowledge rightly so called, which the gospel commands, exhibits, and puts a valuation upon. To reveal and declare them to others in words of truth and soberness fit and meet; to express them to the understandings of men opened and enlightened by the same Spirit by whom the things themselves are originally revealed; to derive such sacred spiritual truths from the word, and by a due preparation to communicate and apply them to the souls and consciences of men—contains a principal part of that ministerial skill and ability which are required in the dispensers of the gospel, and wherein a severe exercise of sound learning, judgment, and care, is necessary to be found, and may be fully expressed.

Into this treasury, towards the service of the house of God, it is that I have cast my mite in the ensuing exposition and discourses on Psalm 130. The design of the Holy Ghost was therein to express and represent, in the person and condition of the psalmist, the case of a soul entangled and ready to be overwhelmed with the guilt of sin, relieved by a discovery of grace and forgiveness in God, with its deportment upon a participation of that relief. After the exposition of the words of the text, my design and endeavour has been only to enlarge the portraiture here given us in the psalm of a believing soul in and under the condition mentioned; to render the lines of it more visible, and to make the character given in its description more legible; and withal, to give to others in the like condition



PREFACE

with the psalmist a light to understand and discern themselves in that image and representation which is here made of them in the person of another. To this end have I been forced to enlarge on the two great heads of sin and grace—especially on the latter, here called the ‘forgiveness that is with God.’ An interest herein, a participation hereof, being our principal concern in this world, and the sole foundation of all our expectations of a blessed portion in that which is to come, it certainly requires the best and utmost of our endeavours, as to look into the nature, causes, and effects of it, so especially into the ways and means whereby we may be made partakers of it, and how that participation may be secured to us to our peace and consolation; as also into that love, that holiness, that obedience, that fruitfulness in good works, which, on the account of this grace, God expects from us and requires at our hands. An explication of these things is that which I have designed to ensue and follow after in these discourses, and that with a constant eye, as on the one hand to the sole rule and standard of truth, the sacred Scriptures, especially that part of it which is under peculiar consideration; so, on the other, to the experience and service to the edification of them that do believe, whose spiritual benefit and advantage, without any other consideration in the world, is aimed at in the publishing of them.