Assurance
Assurance

Overcoming the difficulty of knowing forgiveness

John Owen
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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

‘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.”’ 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.

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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.’ 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.

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

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2 David Clarkson, *A Funeral Sermon on the Most Lamented Death of the late reverend and learned divine John Owen, D.D.*, preached on 9th September 1683. Clarkson (1622–86) was appointed pastoral colleague to Owen in 1682 and succeeded him.

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 1668.4

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

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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.
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.’ 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.

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. 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

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

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

7 Clarkson, loc. cit.
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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.⁸

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

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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
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
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.