

The Soul in the Depths of Sin

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John Owen (1616-1683). No outline of Owen's life can give an adequate impression of the stature and importance to which he attained in his own day. He was summoned to preach before Parliament on several occasions, most notably on the day after the execution of Charles I. During the Civil War, Owen's merit was recognized by General Fairfax, then by Cromwell who took him as Chaplain to Ireland and Scotland. He was adviser to Cromwell, especially though not exclusively on ecclesiastical affairs, but fell from the Protector's favour after opposing the move to make him King. In 1658 he was one of the most influential members of the Savoy Conference of ministers of Independent persuasion. After the Ejection he enjoyed some influence with Charles II who occasionally gave him money to distribute to impoverished ejected ministers. All in all, he was, with Richard Baxter, the most eminent Dissenter of his time.

The state of the soul here represented, as the basis on which this psalm is built, and which first claims our consideration, is described in the expression, out of the depths.

Some of the ancients, as Chrysostom, suppose this expression to relate to the depths of the heart of the Psalmist; but 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: "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. And they are of two sorts:

Providential, in respect to outward distresses, calamities, and afflictions, "Save me, O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul." Psalm 69:1. In the Hebrew, "I stick in the mire of the deep, and there is no standing; I am come into the depths of waters, and the flood overflows me." It is trouble, and the extremity of it, that the Psalmist thus expresses. He was brought by it into a condition like a man ready to be drowned: being cast into the bottom of deep and miry waters, where he had no firm foundation to stand upon, nor ability to come out; as he further explains himself, verse 15.

There are also *internal* depths, depths of conscience on account of sin. "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps." Psalm 88:6. What he intends by this expression the Psalmist declares in the next words, ver. 7, "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me." Sense of God's wrath upon his conscience, on account of sin, was the deep he was cast into; so, ver. 15, speaking of the same matter, he saith, "I suffer thy terrors;" and ver. 16, "Thy fierce wrath goeth over me:" which he calls water, waves, and deeps; according to the metaphor already explained.

And these are the deeps that are here principally intended. Augustine says on the place, "He cries out under the weight and waves of his sins." This the ensuing psalm makes evident. 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.

It is true, indeed, that these deeps do often concur as David speaks, "Deep calleth unto deep," Psalm 42:7. The deeps of affliction awaken the conscience to a deep sense of sin. But sin is the disease, affliction only a symptom of it; and in effecting a cure, the disease itself is principally to be heeded, the symptom will follow, or depart of itself.

This, in general, is the state of the soul, as described in this psalm, and is as the key to the ensuing discourse, or the hinge on which it turns. Hence we deduce these two propositions:

Gracious souls, after much communion with God, may be brought into inextricable depths and entanglements on account of sin.

The inward root of distresses is principally to be attended to in all pressing trials: our sin, as the cause of our afflictions.

It is a sad truth that we have proposed for consideration: he that hears it ought to tremble in himself, that he may rest in the day of trouble; it speaks out the apostle's advice, "Be not high-minded, but fear;" Rom. 11:20. And "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." 1 Cor. 10:12. When Peter had learned this truth by woeful experience, after all his boldness and forwardness, he gives this counsel to all saints, "that they would pass the time of their sojourning here in fear," 1 Pet. 1:17; knowing how near, in our greatest peace and serenity, evil and danger may lie, even at the door.

Some few instances of the many that are left on record, wherein this truth is exemplified, may be mentioned. "Noah was a just man, perfect in his generation, and Noah walked with God." Gen. 6:9. He did so a long season, and that in an evil time, amidst all sorts of temptations, "when all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth." This gave an eminency to his obedience, and doubtless rendered 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. He that shall read the story recorded of Noah, (Gen. 9:20,) will easily grant that he was brought into inextricable distress on account of sin. His own drunkenness, ver. 21, with the consequences of it, provoked the unnatural conduct of his son, ver. 22; and this leads him to the devoting of that son and his posterity to destruction, ver. 24, 25; all which, joined with the sense of God's just indignation, from whom he had newly received that tremendously miraculous deliverance, must overwhelm him with sorrow and anxiety of spirit.

The matter is more clear in David. Under the Old Testament, none loved God more than he, and none was loved of God more than he. The paths of faith and love wherein he walked are, to the most of us, like the way of an eagle in the air, too high and hard for us; yet to this very day do the cries of this man after God's own heart sound in our ears. Sometimes he complains of broken bones, sometimes of drowning deeps, sometimes of waves and water-spouts, sometimes of wounds and diseases, sometimes of wrath and the sorrows of hell—every where of his sins, the burden and trouble of them. Some of the occasions of his depths, darkness, entanglements and distresses we all know. As no man had more grace than he, so none is a greater instance of the power of sin, and the effects of its guilt upon the conscience. But instances of this kind are obvious, and occur to the thoughts of all, so that they need not be repeated. I shall show, then

What is intended by the depths into which gracious souls, after much communion with God, may fall.

Whence it comes to pass that they may so fall; and

What sins usually bring them into great spiritual distresses, with some aggravations of those sins.

I. WHAT ARE *some of the depths into which believers may fall.*

1. *Loss of the sense of the love of God*, which the soul formerly enjoyed. There is a twofold sense of the love of God, of which believers in this world may be made partakers. There is the transient acting of the heart by the Holy Ghost, with ravishing joys, in apprehension of God's love, and our relation to him in Christ. This, or the immediate effect of it, is called "joy unspeakable, and full of glory." 1 Pet. 1:8. The Holy Ghost shining into the heart, with a clear evidence of the soul's interest in all Gospel mercies, causes it to leap for joy, to exult and triumph in the Lord; as being for a season carried above all sense and thought of sin, self, temptation, or trouble. But as God gives the bread of his house unto all his children, so these dainties and high cordials he reserves only for the seasons and persons, wherein, and to whom, he knows them to be needful and useful. Believers may be without this sense of love, and yet be in no depths.

Again, there is an abiding sense of God's love upon the hearts of those of whom we speak, who have long had communion with God, consisting 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 the root from whence spring all that peace and ordinary consolation of which believers in this world are made partakers. This is that which quickens and enlivens them to duty, Psalm 116:12, 13, and is the salt that renders their sacrifices and performances savory to God and refreshing to themselves. This 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." Psalm 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. So the prophet expresses it, "Although the figtree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vine, the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat, the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." Habak. 3:17, 18. And this is that sense of love which the choicest believers may lose on account of sin. This is one step into their depths. They do not retain such gospelapprehension of it, as to give them rest, peace, or consolation; to influence their souls with delight in duty, or to support in trials.

2. Perplexed thoughtfulness about their great *unkindness towards God*, is another part of the depths of sin-entangled souls. So David complains, "I remembered God, and was troubled." Psalm 77:3. How came the remembrance of God to be a matter of trouble to him? In other places he professes that it was all his relief and support: how comes it to be an occasion of his trouble? All had not been well between God and him; and whereas formerly, in his remembrance of God, his thoughts were chiefly exercised about his love and kindness, now they were wholly engrossed with his own sin and unkindness: this causes his trouble. Herein lies a share of the entanglements occasioned by sin. Saith such a soul in itself: "Foolish creature! hast thou thus requited the Lord? Is this the return that thou hast made to him for all his love, his kindness, his consolations and mercies? Is this thy love to him? Is this thy kindness to thy friend? Is this thy boasting of him, that thou hadst found so much goodness and excellency in him and his love, that though all men should forsake him, thou never wouldst do so? Are all thy promises, all thy engagements, which thou madest unto God in times of distress, upon prevailing obligations, and mighty impressions of his good Spirit upon thy soul, now come to this, that thou shouldst so foolishly forget, neglect, despise, cast him off? Well! now he is gone, he has withdrawn from thee, and what wilt thou do! Art thou not even ashamed to desire him to return?" Thoughts of this nature cut Peter to the heart, upon his fall. The soul finds them cruel as death, and strong as the grave. It is bound in their chains, and cannot be comforted. Psalm 38:3, 4, 5, 6. And herein consists a great part of the depths inquired after. For this consideration excites and puts an edge upon all grieving, straitening, perplexing affections, which are the only means whereby the soul of a man may be inwardly troubled, or trouble itself: such are sorrow and shame, with that self-displeasure and self-revenge wherewith they are attended. And as their reason and object in this case transcend all other occasions of them, so on no other account do they cause such severe and perplexing reflections in the soul as on this.

3. A revived sense of *justly-deserved wrath* belongs also to these depths. 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! And this often befalls gracious souls on account of sin. Psal. 88:7. "Thy wrath lieth hard upon me," says the Psalmist; it pressed and crushed him sorely. There is a self-judging as to the desert of wrath which is consistent with a comforting persuasion of an interest in Christ. In that the soul finds sweetness, as it lies in a subserviency 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." The soul converses with death, and what seems to lie in a tendency thereunto. The Lord also, to increase his perplexities, puts new life and spirit into the law; gives it a fresh commission, as it were, to take such a one into its custody; and the law will never, in this world, be wanting to its duty.

4. There are also oppressing *apprehensions of temporal judgments*; for God will judge his people; and judgment often begins at the house of God. Though God, saith such a one, should not cast me off for ever, though he should pardon my iniquities, yet he may so take vengeance of my inventions as to make me feed on gall and wormwood all my days. "My flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and I am afraid of thy judgments." Psalm 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!" saith he, "make me not the reproach of the foolish." Psalm 39:8. Sometimes he trembles, lest God should strike him suddenly with some signal judgment, and take him out of the world in darkness and sorrow; so saith David, "Take me not away in thy wrath." Sometimes he fears lest he should be like Jonah, and raise a storm in his family, in the church whereof he is a member, or in the whole nation: "let them not be ashamed for my sake." These things make his heart soft, as Job speaks, and to melt within him. When any affliction or public judgment of God is joined to a quick living sense of sin in the conscience, it overwhelms the soul, whether it be only justly feared, or be actually inflicted, as was the case of Joseph's brethren in Egypt. The soul is then rolled from one deep to another. Sense of sin casts it on the consideration of its affliction; and affliction turns it back on a sense of sin. So deep calleth unto deep, and all God's billows go over the soul; and they do each of them make the soul tender, and sharpen its sense unto the other. Affliction softens the soul, so that the sense of sin cuts the deeper, and makes the larger wounds; and the sense of sin weakens the soul, and makes affliction the heavier, and so increases its burden. In this case, that affliction which a man in his usual state of spiritual peace could have embraced as a sweet pledge of love, is as goads and thorns in his side, depriving him of all rest and quietness. God makes it as thorns and briers, wherewith he will teach stubborn souls their duty, as Gideon did the men of Succoth.

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*. Jonah seems to conclude so, chap. 2:4.

“Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight:” I am lost for ever, God will own me no more. And Psalm 88:4, 5, “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.” This may reach the soul, until the sorrows of hell compass it, and lay hold upon it; until it be deprived of comfort, peace, and rest; until it be a terror to itself, and be ready to choose strangling rather than life. This may befall a gracious soul on account of sin. But yet, because this wars directly against the life of faith, God doth 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.” Psalm 38:2. Ever and anon, in his walking, God shot a sharp piercing arrow, fixing it on his soul, that wounded and perplexed him, filling him with pain and grievous vexation. These arrows are God’s rebukes. “When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity.” Psalm 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, chap. 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,” saith he, “in my flesh, because of thine anger; nor is there any rest in my bones, because of my sin.” Psalm 38:8. The whole person is brought under the power of them,, and all health and rest is taken away. And,

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.” Psalm 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 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.

Now, I say, a gracious soul, after much communion with God, may, on account of sin, by a sense of the guilt of it, be brought into a state wherein some or all of these, with other like perplexities, may be its portion. And these make up the depths whereof the Psalmist here complains. I shall now show,

II. WHENCE IS IT *that believers may be brought into depths on account of sin.*

The nature of the covenant of grace, wherein all believers now walk with God, and wherein lies their whole provision for obedience, leaves it possible for them to fall into these depths that have been mentioned. 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 an, 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. It is not, therefore, of indispensable necessity that there should be administered grace in it, effectually preserving from every sin: yet it is on all accounts to be preferred before the other; for besides the relief by pardon, which the other knew nothing of, there is in it also much provision against sin, which was not in the other.

1. There is provision made in it *against all and every tin that would disannul the covenant*, and make a final separation between God and a soul that hath been once taken into it. This provision is absolute; God hath taken upon himself to make it good, to establish this law of the covenant, that it shall not by any sin be disannulled. "I will," saith God, "make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them to do them good, but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." Jer. 32:40. This security depends not on any thing in ourselves. All that is in us is to be used as a means for the accomplishment of this promise; but the event or issue depends absolutely on the faithfulness of God. And the whole certainty and stability of the covenant depends on the efficacy of the grace administered in it to preserve men from all such sins as would disannul it.

2. There is in this covenant of grace provision made for *constant peace and consolation*, notwithstanding the guilt of such sins as, through their infirmities and temptations, believers are daily exposed to. Though they fall into sins every day, yet they do not fall into depths every day. In the tenor of this covenant there is a consistency between a sense of sin unto humiliation, and peace with strong consolation. After the apostle had described the whole conflict that believers have with sin, and the frequent wounds which they receive thereby, which makes them cry out for deliverance, Rom. 7:24, he yet concludes, chap. 8 1, that there is no condemnation to them: which is a sufficient and stable foundation of peace. So, 1 John 2:1, "These things write I unto you, that ye sin not; and if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Our great business and care ought to be, that we sin not; but yet, when we have done our utmost, "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves." What then shall poor, sinful, guilty creatures do? Why, let them go to the Father, by their Advocate, and they shall not fail of pardon and peace. And, saith Paul, "God is abundantly willing, that we might have strong consolation, who fly for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us." Heb. 6:17, 18. What was his condition who fled of old to the city of refuge for safety, from whence this expression is taken? He was guilty of blood, though shed unawares; and so that he was to die for it, if he escaped not to the city of refuge. Though we may have the guilt of sins on which the law pronounces death, yet flying to Christ for refuge, God has provided not only safety, but strong consolation. Forgiveness in the blood of Christ not only takes guilt from the soul, but trouble also from the conscience; and in this respect the apostle at large sets forth the excellency of his sacrifice. Heb. 10. The sacrifices of the law, he tells us, could not make perfect the worshippers; which he proves, because they did never take away, thoroughly and really, conscience of sin, that is, depths or distresses of conscience about sin. But now, saith he, Jesus Christ, in the covenant of grace, hath "for ever perfected them that were sanctified;" providing for them such stable peace and consolation, that they should not

need the renewing of sacrifices every day. This is the great mystery of the Gospel, in the blood of Christ, that those who sin every day should have peace with God all their days, if their sins fall within the compass of those infirmities against which this consolation is provided.

3. There is provision made of grace to *preserve the tout from great and enormous sins*, such as in their own nature are apt to wound conscience, and cast the person into depths in which he shall have neither rest nor peace. There is in this covenant, grace for grace, John, 1:16; and abundance of grace, administered from the fulness of Christ: grace reigneth in it, Rom. 6:6, destroying and crucifying the body of sin.

But this provision in the covenant of grace against peace-ruining, soul-perplexing sins, is not, as to the administration of it, absolute. There are covenant commands and exhortations, on the attendance upon which the administration of much covenant grace depends. To watch, pray, improve faith, to stand on our guard continually, to mortify sin, to fight against temptations with steadfastness, diligence, constancy, are every where prescribed; and that in order to the insurance of the grace mentioned. So Peter informs us, the divine power of God "hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness." 2d Epistle 1:3. We have from it an habitual supply and provision for obedience at all times: also, saith he, verse 4, "He hath given unto us great and precious promises, that by them we might be partakers of the divine nature."

What then, in this blessed estate and condition, is required of us, but that we may make a due improvement of the provision made for us, and enjoy the comforting influence of those promises that he holds out to us; ver. 5, 6, 7. "Giving all diligence, add to your faith, virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, temperance; and to temperance, patience; and to patience, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly-kindness and to brotherly-kindness, charity:" that is, carefully and diligently attend to the exercise of all the graces of the Spirit, and to a conversation in all things becoming the Gospel. What then shall be the issue, if these things are attended to? ver. 8. "If these things be in you and abound, ye shall be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." It is not enough that these things be in you, that you have the root of them from the Holy Ghost, but you are to take care that they flourish and abound; without which, though the root of the matter may be in you, and so you be not wholly devoid of spiritual life, yet you will be poor, barren, sapless, withering creatures, all your days. But now, suppose that these things do abound, and we be made fruitful thereby, why then, saith he, ver. 10, "If you do these things ye shall never fall." What, never fall into sin? nay, that is not the promise; and he that says, when he hath done all, "that he hath no sin," he is a liar. Or is it, never fall totally from God? no, the preservation of the elect, of whom he speaks, from total apostacy, is not suspended on such conditions, especially not on any degree of them, such as their abounding imports. But it is, that they shall not fall into their old sins, from which they were purged, ver. 9, such conscience-wasting and defiling sins as they lived in, in the time and state of their unregeneracy. Thus, though there be in the covenant of grace, through Jesus Christ, provision made of abundant supplies for the soul's preservation from entangling sins;

yet their administration hath respect unto our diligent attendance on the appointed means of receiving them.

And here lies the latitude of the new covenant; here lies the exercise of renewed free-will. This is the field of free, voluntary obedience, under the administration of gospel grace. There are extremes which, in respect to the event, it is not concerned in. To be wholly perfect, to be free from every sin, all failings, all infirmities, is not provided for, nor promised in this covenant. It is a covenant of mercy and pardon, which supposes a continuance of sin. To fall utterly and finally from God is provided against. Between these two extremes of absolute perfection and total apostacy lies the large field of believers' obedience and walking with God. Many a sweet heavenly passage there is, and many a dangerous depth, in this field. Some walk near to the one side, some to the other; yea, the same person may sometimes press hard after perfection, sometimes wander to the very border of destruction. Now, between these two lie many a soul-plunging sin, against which no absolute provision is made, and into which, for want of giving all diligence, believers often fall.

4. There is *not, in the covenant of grace, provision made of ordinary and abiding consolation, for any under the guilt of sins greatly aggravated, which they fall into by neglecting the condition of abounding grace just named.* Sins there are, which, either because in their own nature they wound and waste conscience, or in their effects break forth into scandal, causing the name of God and the Gospel to be evil spoken of, or in some of their circumstances are full of unkindness against God, do deprive the soul of its wonted consolation. How, by what means, on what account such sins came to terrify conscience, to break the bones, to darken the soul, and to cast it into inextricable depths, notwithstanding the relief that is provided of pardon in the blood of Christ, I shall not now declare. That they will do so, and that consolation is not of equal extent with safety, we know. Hence God assumes it to himself, as an act of mere sovereign grace, to speak peace and refreshment to the souls of his saints, in their depths of sin-entanglements. Isa. 57:18, 19. And indeed, if the Lord had not thus provided that great provocation should stand in need of special reliefs, it might justly be feared, that the negligence of believers might possibly produce much bitter fruit.

Only this must be observed by the way, that what is spoken relates to the sense of sinners in their own souls, and not to the nature of the thing itself. There is in the Gospel, consolation provided against the greatest as well as the least sins. The difference arises from God's sovereign communication of it, according to the tenor of the covenant's administration, which we have laid down. Hence, because under Moses' law there was an exception of some sins, for which there was no sacrifice appointed, so that those who were guilty of them could no way be justified from them; that is, carnally, as to their interest in the judaical church and polity; Paul tells the Jews, "That through Jesus Christ was preached unto them the forgiveness of sins, and that by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which they could not be justified by the law of Moses." Acts 13:38, 39. There is now no exception of any particular sins, as to pardon and peace; but what we have spoken relates to the manner wherein God is pleased to administer consolation to the souls of sinning believers.

Having shown that the covenant of grace leaves it possible that the souls of believers should fall into inextricable depths, I proceed more directly to show *whence it is that they often do actually thus fall.*

1. From *indwelling sin*, as it remains in the best of saints in this life. For,

Though the strength of every sin be weakened by grace, yet *the root of no sin is in this life wholly taken away.* Lust is like the stubborn-Canaanites, who, after the general conquest of the land, would dwell in it still. Judg. 1:27 Indeed, when Israel grew strong, they brought them under tribute, but they could not utterly expel them. 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. The body of death is not to be utterly done away, but in the death of the body. In the flesh of the best saints there dwelleth “no good thing,” Rom. 7:18; but the contrary is there, that is the root of all evil. The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, as the Spirit lusteth against the flesh. Gal. 5:17. As, then, there is a universality in the actings of the Spirit in its opposing all evil, so there is a universality in the actings of the flesh for the furtherance of it.

Some lusts or branches of original corruption obtain in some persons such advantages, 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.

Indwelling sin, though weakened, retains all its properties: the properties of a thing follow its nature. Where the nature of any thing is, there are all its natural properties. What are these properties of indwelling sin I should here declare, but that I have handled the whole power and efficacy, the nature and properties of it, in another treatise. In brief, they are such that it is no wonder that some believers are by them cast into depths; but it is indeed wonderful that any escape them.

2. The power and prevalence of *temptation*; which because I have also already shown in another discourse, I shall not here farther insist upon.

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. But yet I may say generally, signal provocations meet with one of these two events from God. 1. Those in whom they are, are left to some signal barrenness and fruitlessness in their generation; they wither, grow barren, worldly, and sapless, and are much cast out of the hearts of the people of God. Or, 2. They are exercised in these depths, from whence their way of deliverance is laid down in this psalm. Thus, I say, 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.

III. WHAT SINS *usually bring believers into great spiritual distresses.*

Sins in their own nature *wasting conscience*, are of this sort. Sins that rise 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. Such are the sins enumerated, 1 Cor. 6:9, 10. "Be not deceived," said the apostle, "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." Certain it is, that 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, or any like them. 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 is 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 I need not insist on these. Some say that they deprive even true believers of all their interest in the love of God—but unduly; all grant that they bereave them of all comforting evidence and well-grounded assurance of it. So they did David and Peter, and herein lies no small part of the depths we are searching into. But,

There are sins, which, though they do not rise up in the conscience with such a bloody guilt as those mentioned, yet, by reason of their aggravations, God makes them a root of disquietness and trouble to the soul all its days. He says of some sins of ungodly men, "As I live, this iniquity shall not be purged from you until ye die." If you are come to this height, you shall not escape, I will not spare you. 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. Sins under *signal enjoyments of love and kindness* from God are of this sort. When God hath given unto any one 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, 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 especial mercies, will meet, at one time or other, with especial rebukes. Nothing more distresses the conscience of a sinner than the remembrance, in darkness, of abused light—in desertions, of neglected love. This, God will make him sensible of. "Though I have redeemed them," saith God, "yet they have spoken lies against me." When God has, in his providence, dealt graciously with a person—it may be, delivered him from straits and troubles, set him in a large place, blessed him in his person, relations, and employments, dealt well with his soul, in giving him a gracious sense of his love in Christ; for such a one to fall into sin goes to

the heart of God, and shall not be passed over. Under-valuations 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* are also of this character. God doth not afflict willingly, or chasten us merely for his pleasure; he does it to make us partakers of his holiness. To take so little notice of his hand, as under it, or after it, not to watch against the workings and surprisals of sin, has unkindness in it: "I smote him," saith God, "and he went on frowardly in the ways of his own heart." These provocations of his sons and daughters he cannot bear with. Has God brought thee into the furnace, so that thou hast melted under his hand, and in pity and compassion given thee enlargement, if thou hast soon forgotten his dealings with thee, is it any wonder if he remind thee by troubles in thy soul?

3. Breaking off from under *strong convictions* and drawings of love, before conversion, is often remembered upon the conscience afterwards. When the Lord, by his Spirit, shall mightily convince the heart of sin, and make to it withal some discoveries of his love and the excellencies of Christ, so that it begins to yield and be overpowered, being almost persuaded to be a christian; if then, through the strength of lust or unbelief, it goes back to the world or self-righteousness, its folly has unkindness with it, which sometimes shall not be passed by. 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. Sudden *forgetfulness* of endearing manifestations of special love. This, God cautions his people against, as knowing their proneness to it. "God the Lord will speak peace to his people and his saints; but let them not turn again to folly." Ps. 85:8. Let them take heed of their aptness to forget endearing manifestations of special love. 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 also is 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. Disquietments and perplexities of heart are worms that will certainly breed in the rust of unexercised gifts. God loseth a revenue of glory and honor by such slothful souls; and he will make them sensible of it. I know some at this day whom omissions of opportunities for service are ready to sink into the grave.

6. Sins after especial *warning* in all that variety of special warnings which God is pleased to use towards sinning saints, I shall single out one only. When a soul is

wrestling with some lust or temptation, God, by his providence, causeth some special word, in the preaching of the Gospel or the administration of some ordinance peculiarly suited to the state of the soul, in the way of rebuke or persuasion, to come nigh and enter the inmost heart. The soul cannot but take notice that God is nigh to him, that he is dealing with him, and calling on him to look to him for assistance. And he seldom gives such warnings to his saints, but that he is nigh them in an eminent manner to give them relief and help, if, in answer to his call, they apply themselves to him; but if his care and kindness be neglected, his reproofs are usually more severe.

7. Sins that bring *scandal* seldom suffer the soul to escape depths. Even in great sins, God, in chastening, takes more notice often of the scandal than the sin; as 2 Sam. 12:14. Many professors take little notice of their worldliness, their pride, their passion, their lavish tongues; but the world do, and the Gospel is dishonored by it; and no wonder if they find, from the hand of the Lord, the bitter fruits.

Many other aggravations of sins there are, not perhaps in their own nature so appalling as some others, but which plunge the soul into depths. Those which have been named may suffice as illustrations; which is all we have aimed at.

The consideration of some *aggravations of the guilt* of these sins, which usually bring the soul into the condition described, shall close these remarks.

1. The soul is furnished with a *principle of grace*, which is continually operative, and working for its preservation from such sins. The new creature is living and active, from its own growth, increase, and security, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace, "It lusteth against the flesh." It is naturally active for its own preservation and increase; as new-born children have a natural inclination to the food that will keep them alive, and cause them to grow. The soul then cannot fall into these entangling sins, but it must be with a high neglect of that very principle which is bestowed upon it for quite contrary ends and purposes. The laborings, lustings, desires, crying of it, are neglected. It is from God, and of God, and is the renovation of his image in us; that which God owneth and careth for; and the wounding of its vitals, the stifling of its operations, the neglect of its endeavors for the soul's preservation, *always* attend sins of such magnitude.

2. As this principle of life and obedience is not able of itself to preserve the soul from such sins as will bring it into depths, there is full *provision for continual supplies of it* in Jesus Christ. There are treasures of relief in Christ, to which the soul may at any time repair, and find succor against the incursions of sin. He says to the soul, as David to Abiathar, when he fled from Doeg, "Abide with me, fear not: he that seeketh my life, seeketh thy life; but with me thou shalt be in safety." Sin is my enemy no less than thine; it seeks the life of thy soul, and it seeks my life; abide with me, for with me thou shalt be in safety. To this the apostle exhorts us, "Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Heb. 4:16. If ever it be a time of need with a soul, it is when under the assaults of provoking sins; at such a time there is suitable and seasonable help in Christ for succor and relief. The new creature begs, with sighs and groans, that the soul would apply itself unto him. To neglect him,

with all his provision of grace, whilst he stands calling to us, “Open unto me, for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night”—cannot but be a high provocation. And what think we is the heart of Christ, when he sees his children giving way to conscience-wasting sins, without that application to him which the life and peace of their own souls call upon them for. These are not sins of daily infirmity, which cannot be escaped; but their guilt is always attended with a neglect, more or less, of the relief provided in Christ against them. The means of preservation from them, is blessed, ready, nigh at hand; the interest of Christ in our preservation, great—of our souls, unspeakable; to neglect and despise means, Christ, our own soul’s peace and life, must render guilt very guilty.

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