

FINDING GRACE IN THE DEPTHS: Gospel Forgiveness as Motivation for Marital Reconciliation *Logan Williams*¹

How can married couples find motivation for forgiveness and reconciliation after relationship-shattering sins? The Scripture provides a powerful answer to these questions by pressing into the abundant forgiveness of the Lord: “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Psalm 130:3–4).² This paper will argue that Psalm 130 is a powerful addition to the marital expository counseling toolkit as it engages both the one sinning and the one sinned against. It sends the offender out of the depths of his sin and into the abundant forgiveness of the Lord, and it sends the offended back to the place of Gospel truth, which is the only true source of forgiveness. The paper will engage with commentators on Psalm 130, most notably the Puritan author John Owen and his substantial work on the passage, and other authors on the topic of forgiveness. It will show that there are robust biblical truths contained in the passage which can address even life-dominating sins and offer hope.

Paul speaks words of challenge and encouragement to the Galatians: “Brothers, if any of you is caught in sin...” (Galatians 6:1). Caught. That is what Stan was. He had been found out. Susan knew something was wrong, but she had no idea it was this. The deeds done in darkness had now come to light, and Stan was now sitting next to his wife, pouring out the details of a year-long drift into digital infidelity. The allure of online anonymity had drawn Stan to devote himself to women who were not Susan. He had given himself over to a digital affair consisting of intimate conversations and inappropriate pictures exchanged with other women online. As

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² All Scripture quoted is quoted in the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

his bride listened, Stan confessed the sin that had ensnared him and brought great pain to their marriage.

Is there hope for a couple like this? Is there sufficient motivation to be found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ for Stan to truly repent of his sin? Can Susan find in the Gospel a wellspring of grace and mercy to forgive him for this grave offense? Where can a faithful biblical counselor direct this couple to find help and hope?

The paper will open Psalm 130 through expository counseling application as it relates to the offender, and, from there, it will trace the path to true repentance. It will then show that the outcome of true gospel forgiveness is gospel proclamation and the offer of forgiveness to others; therefore the offended can only truly forgive when she has seen her own sinfulness and has turned to Christ. In the final section, the paper will address Stan and Susan and the application of Psalm 130, along with other key Scriptures, to the problems they face.

MOTIVATION FOR PERSONAL REPENTANCE

Marriages between believing spouses, though undeniably sweetened by faith in Christ, still battle the ongoing presence of indwelling sin. Born-again spouses still sin against one another. Some of these sins happen and are resolved in a moment, but others cut deeper.³ Stan and Susan found themselves facing a barrage of potentially marriage-shattering sins: ongoing lying, abuse of finances to support the infidelity, unfaithfulness of heart and body, and abdication of marital promises. Their relationship was in deep, troubled waters, but God's Word has answers for even intensely troubled waters.

Psalm 130 lays out the movement of a sinner from the realization of his sorry state, through the acknowledgment of guilt and God's offer of grace, and finally into a new turning toward God and others. This section will begin with the state of the sinner, caught in "the depths" of his sin.

³ See Winston T. Smith, *Marriage Matters: Extraordinary Change Through Ordinary Moments* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010). Smith does an exemplary job of displaying just how important these smaller hurts can be to enhance the Christ-like love shared between a couple: "moments that seem the most ordinary—moments of annoyance, conflict, pain, or cold indifference—can become moments in which you're able to understand God's incredible agenda for love and begin to do something new."

THE OFFENDER EXPERIENCES SPIRITUAL TURMOIL, (PSALM 130:1-2)

The Miserable State of a Sinner in “the Depths”

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!” (Psalm 130:1). Stan’s troubles had not started the day Susan found the string of messages which tipped her off to his infidelity. Stan’s inner turmoil had built over a series of months as he began to experience the difficulties associated with harboring sin. John Owen describes the believer who persists in sin as being in a state of “inextricable depths and entanglements” which can affect both the believer’s internal and external well-being.⁴ These may manifest as outward affliction and even calamity, but they also exist as internal experiences of God’s workings on a wayward soul. Stan had experienced much of the latter—the turmoil of soul. The wise counselor, encountering a situation like Stan’s, will be sensitive to this turmoil of soul: to harbor sin in one’s heart is a miserable condition. David described the physical agony as bones wasting away (Psalm 32:3). The believer whose heart is fixed upon sin misses out on the experience of the love of God.⁵ John Owen helpfully notes: “A sense of God’s presence in love is sufficient to rebuke all anxiety and fears in the worst and most dreadful condition; and not only so, but to give in the midst of them solid consolation and joy...And this is that sense of love which the choicest believers may lose on the account of sin. This is one step into their depths.”⁶ Stan began to lose his experiential apprehension of God’s love for him.⁷

⁴John Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” vol. 6, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1966), 332. Owen (1616–1683) amassed a substantial body of work on the topics of sin and its overthrow. Along with his exposition of Psalm 130 (which itself spans 400+ pages in modern volumes), Owen also penned *The Mortification of Sin*, *Indwelling Sin*, and *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*. All of these can be found in Goold’s collected works of Owen. The latter three titles were helpfully collected together in Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, redesign edition, (Crossway, 2015).

⁵Commentator Daniel Estes helpfully clarifies: “In this context in Psalm 130, the depths represent the great distance between the psalmist and the Lord due to the incompatibility of human sin with God’s holiness (cf. v. 3).” Daniel J. Estes, *Psalms 73–150* (Holman Bible Publishers, 2019), 513.

⁶Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 334.

⁷Emotions hold a legitimate place in the Christian experience. God calls Christians to delight themselves in Him through obedience to Him and His Word (Psalm 1:2, 35:27, 37:4). Owen and other Puritan authors spoke of the experiential piety of following the Lord. This theme is most clearly traced in Owen’s work in *Of Communion with God* which can be found in vol. 2 of Goold’s collection.

Owen's work on the depths continues. Believers in the depths begin to lose sight of who God truly is, contorting their memories of Him. The internal depths continue as the Law is sharpened in the heart and memories of God's promises of chastisement loom large.⁸ The believer in the depths begins to fear total separation unto damnation by God, and is even pierced by the very arrows of God.⁹ While such an experience lasts for a season, God's grace intervenes and preserves the believer from a total and final sense of God's abandonment. Finally, spiritual duties fall by the wayside. The believer no longer has the strength to engage in prayer, joyfully hear the Word, or speak and act in heavenly ways. Knowing the profound implications of a trip into the depths prompts the next course of inquiry: what kinds of sin can lead to the depths?

Identifying Sins Which Lead to “the depths”

The Scripture's presentation of sin and the believer's interaction with it is multifaceted. One telling example is the first chapter of John's first letter which explains how the believer must continually confess sin (v. 9), is cleansed from sin (v. 7), cannot deny the presence of sin (vv. 8, 10), and yet must not accept an ongoing walk in the darkness of sin (v. 6).

Owen's presentation concerning the depths of Psalm 130 included three facets of sin: damning sins, daily sins, and “depths” sins. Owen's apprehension of Calvinist theology ensured that for a true born-again, elect believer, there was no sin which would lead to full and final separation between God and the believer.¹⁰ Moreover, the application of the covenant of grace provides consolation against the guilt of what Owen describes as daily sins: “Though [believers] fall into sins every day, yet they do not fall into depths every day.”¹¹ As a counselor, this is knowable from experience. Some sins are no less offensive to God and yet fail to smite the

⁸ “When any affliction or public judgment of God is fastened 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.” Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 336.

⁹ Psalm 38:2–3, 39:11, Job 6:4.

¹⁰ “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.” Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 338.

¹¹ Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 338.

conscience in such a way to cause a counselee to experience the level of turmoil described by “the depths.”¹² And yet for Owen, there is still a third category—one for which grace is provided, though restraint is not provided absolutely: sins which lead to the depths.¹³ Owen offers a tremendous list of sins which can lead to the depths, summarized here as sins after the “spiritual highs” encountered in life and ministry, sins during or after deliverance from great affliction, the memory of sins clung to before conversion, sin after ignoring a special visitation by the grace of God, sin in neglect of great opportunities for service, sin after special warning, and sin after special warnings have been issued.¹⁴ The wise counselor can utilize these categories as diagnostic questions to better understand the depths-entering situation the counselee is in. All of these can lead to the depths, and the believer caught in the depths finds himself with only one true remedy: crying out to the Lord.

Crying Out From “the Depths”

The natural response of a soul in the depths is to cry out for rescue. Owen writes: “A drowning man needs no exhortation to endeavour his own deliverance and safety; and spiritual troubles will, in like manner, put men on attempts for relief.”¹⁵ As the Psalm progresses to verse 2, Owen notes that the first real action on the part of a believer caught in the depths is petitioning the Lord. A believer seeking true rescue from his sin will eschew self-righteousness and instead call out to the Lord. Owen cites men’s lack of tenacity in this pursuit as evidenced by the worldliness of professing believers. We would no sooner sit by and watch our home burn down without cries for help and earnest work, and yet we will watch our relationship with the Lord languish without so much as a whimper. And this, too, so many counselees have done.

Unfortunately, the situations which have led the counselee to visit with the counselor are typically the final stages of a months or years-long process that could have been averted much earlier. When true change of heart is on the horizon, it

¹²However, even such “daily sins” can quickly become “depths sins” if not addressed and repented of.

¹³Owen writes, “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 unto the means of receiving them appointed for us to walk in.” Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 341.

¹⁴Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 344–348.

¹⁵Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 350.

begins with an earnest pursuit of the Lord. This is said to come as the result of the Spirit's special work in the believer to remind him of God's goodness and graciousness in saving him in the first. In this way, "a recovery from depths is as a new conversion gone over afresh."¹⁶

Stan needed this kind of reminder. He needed to know who he was in Christ and how far he had fallen from his calling to holiness and faithfulness. As he experienced the depths of his sin, he needed a fresh reminder of God's love for him in Christ and the new life he had been called to. And yet, as Owen continues to describe, such a reminder would only come through an acknowledgment of Stan's sin and a new appraisal of God's abundant grace for him.

THE OFFENDER GAINS A SINCERE SENSE OF SIN (PSALM 130:3)

The counselor seeking to help someone escape the depths of his sin will ensure that he has indeed experienced what John Owen calls "*a sincere sense of sin*."¹⁷ Stan is well-aware of the idea of sin. He has substantial experience in the church and is certainly aware of the notion that we are all sinners and that we do various kinds of sins. In that way, he has *a* sense of sin. But the sense which Owen and the wise counselor is looking for is much deeper than that; it is a sense that proportionately affects the heart of the believer.¹⁸ This deep and abiding sense of sin must precede real turning from sin. It flows from the application of the Law: "As ever you would have your souls *justified* by grace, take care to have your sins *judged* by the law."¹⁹ This sense of sin and its legal burden produces a confession of sin that is free and full. Susan's confrontation had not yet produced a free confession; Stan needed time to acknowledge his sin to the Lord and then to his bride. Moreover, Stan's confession would never be full while he hid the details or the nature of the various online affairs: "Reserves ruin confession."²⁰ Grasping this sense of sin should lead

¹⁶ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 356.

¹⁷ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 368. Emphasis original.

¹⁸ The counselor here is looking for intellectual and affective coherence in the counselee's confession. Puritan author Thomas Watson captured this: "Moist tears dry up sin and quench the wrath of God." Thomas Watson, *Doctrine of Repentance* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1988), second introduction.

¹⁹ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 370. Emphasis original.

²⁰ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 374.

Stan to pronounce sentence upon himself according to the Law. The sense of lowness and guilt must then precede the application of Christ's grace, or else grace becomes "cheap."²¹ "Grace will not seem high until the soul be laid very low."²²

The Psalmist presses forward into verse 3 with his own apprehension of guilt. He turns first to God's undeniable knowledge of all man's dealings. God alone can mark all of men's iniquities; he both knows them all and, according to the Law, stands ready to judge them.²³ God's omniscience brings Him into every room occupied by men and provides Him with infinite access to the thoughts that swirl around in their hearts. Not only was God aware of Stan's secret adulterous pursuits, but His moral displeasure accompanied His awareness. God's holiness would have none of Stan's sin, so Stan must begin to rightly assess "the deep insinuation of a dreadful ruin" which comes to those whose sin is counted against them.²⁴

Deceptions abound here. The believer in the depths can be tempted to believe that the guilt of sin can be escaped due to God's inability to know his secret deeds, or that God would even ignore his sin. Just the same, the believer might hope that God would consider his sin more lightly than it deserves, or he may hope that God would be placated by his own offerings of good works. Finally, he may embrace the lie that God's wrath is less than he has expected.²⁵ However, all of these must be cleared away and the believer must rightly acknowledge the just wrath of God against sin as well as the infinite ability of God to mark and punish iniquity.

THE OFFENDER BEHOLDS GOD'S FORGIVENESS (PSALM 130:4)

Having reached the bottom of "the depths," it is now time for Stan to turn from sin to Christ. Harboring sin leads the believer into a period of deep darkness

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eric Metaxas, *The Cost of Discipleship*, first edition. (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

²² Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 375.

²³ "If Yahweh kept strict tally of human sin and acted on it in speedy punishment, none would survive." Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, vol. 21, revised edition (Zondervan Academic, 2018), 256. Helpfully quoted in Estes, *Psalms 73-150*, 514.

²⁴ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 359-360.

²⁵ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 366-367.

which includes internal turmoil over the loss of a sense of God's ever-present love. These depths should point the believer to rightly assess himself and his sin in light of the omniscient justice of God. All of this is experienced as a sense of the weight and inescapability of sin. And yet, the believer is not to remain there, nor should the counselor leave him there. The bottom of the ocean is not a resting place, but a boundary of redirection for the believer who must now seek true grace from God Himself, who alone can rescue the believer from the depths. The believer's union with Christ will draw him, not only to conviction and confession of sin but to full discovery and embrace of God's forgiveness. The wise counselor who has helped the counselee press the Law of God deeply into the wound of his sin will apply the balm of Gospel grace to the wounded soul.

DISCOVERING TRUE FORGIVENESS IS A DIFFICULT PROCESS

James Montgomery Boice charts the way forward: "Sin is the problem, then, and what the psalmist seeks is forgiveness, which God gives freely."²⁶ Stan's path to reconciliation began with a real acknowledgment of his sin and continues by truly discovering the truth at the core of Psalm 130:4—with God there is forgiveness. This is the future promise and present reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "Our God is a forgiving God."²⁷ Because of Christ's Cross-work and resurrection, believers can know that they have forgiveness of sins.²⁸ Stan needs to experience this forgiveness afresh.

Discovering forgiveness is a delicate process. God's offer of forgiveness in Christ is easily confused and abused. It would be easy enough for Stan to adopt the position Paul argues against in Romans 6:1: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" This certainly must not be the case. What about Stan's conscience

²⁶James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms: Psalms 107-150* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1140. Estes furthers the thought: "Attempts to relieve guilt by activity, possessions, achievements, positive thoughts, and denial are as ineffective as taking aspirin to heal a tumor because while they may address the symptoms, they cannot cure the disease. The good news of Psalm 130 is that when sinners cry out to God in the night of their guilt, he is gracious in forgiving them. Their hope is not in their merit before the Lord but in the Lord's unmerited mercy to them." Estes, *Psalms 73-150*, 517.

²⁷Boice, *Psalms*, 1140.

²⁸Romans 5:8, Ephesians 2:8-9, Colossians 3, 1 John 1:9, 1 John 4:10.

and the just requirement of the Law concerning his sin? John Owen helpfully notes that both the conscience and the Law make no provision for forgiveness. The Law speaks death to lawbreakers, and Stan is certainly a lawbreaker. Thus, God's message of Gospel forgiveness must override Stan's conscience and his understanding of the Law.²⁹

Moreover, Stan must avoid false presumptions of forgiveness which can come to him by believing falsehoods about God, or by believing some vague, general notion of forgiveness available to all. Owen writes, "The reason why most of men are not troubled about their sins to any purpose, is from a persuasion that God is merciful and will pardon; when indeed none can really, on a gospel account, ordinarily, have that persuasion, but those who have been troubled for sin, and that to the purpose."³⁰ Put another way, apart from the troubling sense of sin, which Owen laid out above, a general sense of God's mercy is mere fantasy. Stan will not find true repentance here, but rather will only "choke [conviction] and heal [his] conscience with this notion of pardon."³¹ The kind of discovery Stan needs will point him away from bland notions of forgiveness and toward forgiveness rooted in the true character and nature of God as well as the work of Jesus Christ.

TRUE FORGIVENESS UNDERSTOOD AND RECEIVED

Stan, just as the psalmist, needed a full apprehension of what forgiveness in Jesus Christ could mean again for him. Estes writes, "The good news that will come in v. 4 is that the Lord is indeed perfectly just, but at the same time he is gracious beyond measure."³² Owen offers several particulars regarding the foci for Gospel forgiveness. These could serve as helpful tools in the counseling room to point a counselee such as Stan towards God's forgiveness in Christ.³³

1) "*The name and infinite goodness of the nature of God.*" Here the believer is set upon the character of God and able to see "peculiar sweetness and encouragement"

²⁹ This is not to nullify the Law; rather, it is to force the conscience to see that our sin demands a substitute and our wickedness must be accounted for.

³⁰ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 396.

³¹ Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 396.

³² Estes, Psalms 73-150, 514.

³³ Below cited from Owen, "A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX," 408-410. (Emphasis original.)

from pondering God's abounding goodness. 2) "*The sovereignty of God's will.*" Pursuing forgiveness requires acknowledgment of God's unsearchable will. The believer can rest in his complete inability to create his own rescue and cast himself upon God's will. 3) "*The mediation and blood of Christ.*" Owen notes that this particular pursuit should be most familiar to believers. We ought to go first, by faith, to our Mediator when seeking forgiveness. 4) "*Actual pardon.*" God has promised pardon for those who are in Christ; this promise is fuel for further trusting in and experientially receiving the forgiveness offered to believers. Whichever of these may have, in any given case, the greatest effect, the believer must seek real remedy for their depths-inducing guilt in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

HOW AN ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S FORGIVENESS LEADS TO FUTURE OBEDIENCE

The latter portion of v. 4 speaks to the result of the forgiveness God offers in Christ: "...that you may be feared." The commentaries expand the word "feared" to "revered," as evidenced in several of the translations as well as other uses of this verb in the Old Testament. Allen adds "Forgiveness increases the sinner's reverent awe of and trust in Yahweh."³⁴ In this believer. Estes writes, "By his forgiveness, the Lord proves himself more powerful than sin. His grace, however, should not cause us to think less of him, but it is intended to cause us to respect him."³⁵ Stan's recognition of Christ's offer of forgiveness points him to a new desire for obedience to Christ. "The sinning believer's obligation is thereby increased, and greater obedience and trust are the result. Such is God's better way."³⁶ Stan is now fitted to pursue holy living and a full change of heart and mind from his former ways. He has readily accepted God's legal declarations against his sins of eyes and heart and hands. He has found in Christ a full means of reconciliation to almighty God and a new way to live and follow heartily after the God who offers such great forgiveness. He has additionally found the motivation not only to repent for his sin but to seek forgiveness from his wife he so clearly wronged.

³⁴ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, vol. 21, 256.

³⁵ Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, 514.

³⁶ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Volume 21, 256.

MOTIVATION FOR EXTENDING FORGIVENESS

The Offended is Fitted to Declare Grace to Others, (Psalm 130:5–8)

Having considered Psalm 130's application to the offending party, this essay now turns to show how the pattern of grace laid out in verses 1–4 is completed and extended to others in verses 5–8. Psalm 130 closes in two movements. First, the psalmist declares his waiting for the Lord in verses 5 and 6, and then, in 7 and 8, he calls out to his countrymen: "Hope in the Lord!"³⁷

"I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His Word I hope" (Psalm 130:5). Verses 5 and 6 see the psalmist waiting. He is waiting with hopeful expectation, hope which can only be rooted in the Word of God.³⁸ And yet, as James Boice helpfully notes, he is not waiting for the arrival of God's forgiveness.³⁹ The forgiveness apprised in verse 4 has already come. He has experienced this forgiveness. This confidence can be seen in 1 John 1:9 and John's confidence that those who confess their sins will find in Christ a faithful forgiver.⁴⁰ The one redeemed from his sin waits for the Lord. This is a word for counselors walking alongside both sinner and sinned against. Experiential forgiveness can take time. Restored presence and fullness of relationship may require waiting. Just as in "the depths" the believer caught in sin experiences a lack of the experiential presence of God, so too, after reconciliation with the Lord, he waits for the return of that presence. On the completion of his waiting, he can see not only the full folly of his sin, but also the desperate need that those around have of the experience of the same gospel forgiveness.

The final movement of Psalm 130 turns the psalmist outward. This is a beautiful response to the experience of forgiveness. It also sets Psalm 130 apart from the traditional "penitential psalms" as commentator Daniel Estes notes: "In place of the customary final praise in a lament psalm, Psalm 130 concludes with an

³⁷ "This is not a tepid, half-hearted trust, but the psalmist is all in for the Lord as he completely places himself and his need into the Lord's hands." Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, 515.

³⁸ Allen writes helpfully: "Around him lurks a dark night of trouble, sinister with threat and fearfulness. He longs for relief, as ardently as the city sentinels peering into the darkness from the watchtower long for daylight and for danger's end." Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Volume 21, 256.

³⁹ Boice, *Psalms*, 1142.

⁴⁰ Allen marks out 1 John 1:8–10 as the New Testament fulfillment of Psalm 130.

exhortation to Israel in vv. 7–8.”⁴¹ The psalmist turns his eyes to his countrymen and calls them to find all the fullness of communion with God through His “steadfast love” (this is the *hesed* love of God) and “plentiful redemption” (Psalm 130:7).⁴² This aspect of Psalm 130 provides a wholistic paradigm for sin restoration. Not only is it a call to a sinning spouse like Stan to repent, but it is also a call to an offended spouse like Susan to offer forgiveness.

For the counselor, the task then is guiding Susan through the truth of her salvation in Christ and its natural outpouring in the forgiveness of others. Susan has seen the forgiveness of the Lord in her past. Her sins have brought her low in the past. She has seen the depths of her own heart and experienced God’s chastening hand. Knowing her own sinfulness, she can rise up like the psalmist and declare grace over sin. As John Owen summarizes: “They who out of depths have, by faith and waiting, obtained mercy, or are supported in waiting from a sense of believed mercy and forgiveness, are fitted, and only they are fitted, to preach and declare grace and mercy unto others.”⁴³ Apart from the fullness of already-received forgiveness, Susan can find no particular motivation for forgiving Stan. He has taken advantage of her trust. He has failed to keep his marital covenantal promises. He has exposed her and the family to shame in the community if word of his behavior gets out. And yet, the soul redeemed from the depths can call out to another, “Hope in the Lord.”

APPLICATION TO MARITAL COUNSELING

The final section of this paper will seek to apply the understandings of Psalm 130 above to counseling Stan and Susan in their distress. It will include interaction with additional passages of Scripture that echo and enhance the message of Psalm 130 as well as trusted voices in the biblical counseling movement who have spoken helpfully to ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation in marriage. A counselor encountering Stan and Susan would quickly find himself experiencing the effects

⁴¹ Estes, *Psalms 73–150*, 512. The traditional penitential psalms are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, and 130; each of which can also bring light to the process of repentance.

⁴² “The psalmist’s renewed hope spills over to affect others, as in v. 7 he calls on others in Israel to join him in hoping in the Lord as he seeks to set into motion concentric circles of confidence in the Lord.” Estes, *Psalms*, 515.

⁴³ Owen, “A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX,” 648.

of sin in the world. The hurt which Stan caused has clearly soured the relationship between him and Susan, and yet, in the paradigm of forgiveness offered in Psalm 130, there is real hope for reconciliation.

Beginning with Conversion

The wise counselor would begin by assessing the faith of both Stan and Susan. Biblical counselors since Jay Adams have recognized the necessity of salvation for God-honoring change. Owen puts a fine point on this thought: “To kill sin is the work of living men; where men are dead (as all unbelievers, the best of them, are dead), sin is alive, and will live.”⁴⁴ The unconverted soul remains in Psalm 130 verse 3—standing against the weight of sin and the wrath of God. Stan and Susan need to recount a true experience of repentance and faith in Christ. They need to know that God is active in their life in and through Christ. Though Stan’s sin is at the forefront, they need to both see that they are sinful people and have dishonored God in many ways. They also will need to see a Godward vision for all of their lives. The counselor could help both Stan and Susan see their lives *Coram Deo* and come to a further realization that their choices, both in how Stan has sinned and how Susan responds to his sin, are before the face of God.⁴⁵

Called to Repentance

This groundwork of faith prepares the counselor to guide Stan through a season of true turning from his sin against God and his bride.⁴⁶ The counselor could help Stan to understand if he has really experienced the depths of his sin or if he has lulled himself into apathy with one of the lies discussed above. Scripture admonishes the counselee in Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.” As Stan sees his sin and repents, first to the Lord, he can begin to make full and free confession to Susan.

⁴⁴ Kopic and Taylor, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, 83.

⁴⁵ I am thankful specifically to the ministry of the late R.C. Sproul (1939–2017) for introducing me to this brief phrase and its tremendous importance in the Christian life.

⁴⁶ My doctoral program research focus has centered around this aspect of Owen’s theology. Specific areas of concern include the biblical process of mortification of sin (sin-killing) and how a biblical counselor can engage in a helpful way in this process. Key components I have observed in my study so far include: mortification is an ongoing, rather than a one-time, process in the life of a believer; the means and methods of mortification significantly matter—we cannot accept means from any and every quarter but must rather proceed as God has prescribed in His Word; every hope for mortification is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Called to Offer Forgiveness

Beginning with a real acknowledgment of conversion is also necessary for Susan. The logic of Psalm 130 is that experiencing God's forgiveness leads to offering man's forgiveness and calling others to experience God's forgiveness. Susan needs a heart full of gospel mercy. This will not come from her flesh or worldly understandings of forgiveness. The flesh would happily see justice meted out to the offender. Yet, as Susan sees her own place inside Psalm 130 and the gospel narrative it produces, she can lift her eyes to her countrymen, specifically the one she is wed to. In Christ's economy, forgiveness offered by those who have been forgiven is necessary.

The counselor could helpfully walk her through the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23–35. This parable clearly demonstrates the antithesis of the principle of forgiven/offering forgiveness at play in Psalm 130. In it, the parabolic king sends for his servant to settle debts. The “weasel” first servant, as Chris Brauns humorously names him, owes something like several hundred thousand years worth of labor debt.⁴⁷ And yet, after the weasel's pleading, the king offers grace. Rather than calling out to his countrymen that forgiveness was available (viz. Psalm 130:7–8), the servant descends upon another servant to demand repayment for a, while still substantial, much more reasonable sum. The wickedness of the weasel does not go unpunished. This parable is frequently referenced in biblical counseling materials on forgiveness and that for good reason.⁴⁸ If counselors are to lead Christian counselees to offer biblical forgiveness, they must first lead them to see the vast debt owed to God's justice which was repaid in Christ. Only then can Susan rightly offer forgiveness to Stan.

⁴⁷ Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Crossway, 2008), 121.

⁴⁸ The context of this parable in Matthew 18 only further clarifies Jesus' intended effect. It follows shortly after the parable of the lost sheep in verses 12–14 and the directions for what is typically known as “church discipline” in verses 15–18. Church discipline is a progressive process of confrontation and correction intended to turn a wayward brother from his sin. The process begins long before the traditional use of the nomenclature which only includes the exclusion from the fellowship of church. Rather, believers are to regularly confront sin as it is encountered (Galatians 6:1–2, Hebrews 3:13) and if a sinning believer refuses to repent, they are to be confronted with an increasing host of witnesses, culminating in the full body of the church. The forgiveness modeled in Psalm 130 should prompt believers who have been rightly corrected from their sin to call others further on to holiness.

Called to Patience

The complexity with which Owen describes the process of receiving true forgiveness should give the biblical counselor pause when seeking to mediate forgiveness between a couple as strained as Stan and Susan. Chris Brauns in his tremendous book *Unpacking Forgiveness* gives a needed call to the one sinned against to seek forgiveness with great urgency, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. As above, the one sinned against needs only the reminder of God's goodness shown to him in the past to be well-fueled for offering forgiveness to another. Yet, as a mediator in the situation, it is important not to send the offended spouse out to offer forgiveness to an as-yet unrepentant sinner.⁴⁹ The condemnation of Jeremiah 6:11 and 8:14 is that the prophets and priests cried "peace, peace when there is no peace." So too, the counselor need not demand that full forgiveness be issued at the first blush of remorse.

Stan's sin was rife with deception and secrecy. Following the model of the Apostle Paul, the wise counselor will look for bona fide evidence of heartfelt repentance such as those found in 2 Corinthians 7:11, "For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter." This means a practical course of homework to demonstrate Stan's willingness to pursue "radical amputation" may necessarily come before a formal request for and offer of forgiveness. This is not to say that Susan should exhibit any bitterness or reservations against Stan. Rather, as one forgiven herself, she extends the offer of forgiveness while holding also to Stan's best interest in the situation which is his growth in holiness.

⁴⁹ One of the critical features of Brauns's book is his well-reasoned and thorough discussion of the various modes of forgiveness commonly taught in secular and even Christian literature. A common feature of many of these presentations on forgiveness is that they call on the offended person to fully forgive the offender whether or not any repentance or request for forgiveness has taken place. This view is most specifically linked to the "therapeutic" view of forgiveness which roots forgiveness not in the restoration of relational wholeness but personal peace and satisfaction. The understanding, as presented by the therapeutic view, is that those who withhold forgiveness will experience personal bitterness leading to more and more intrapersonal issues. Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness*, specifically chapters 3 and 5.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Psalm 130 is a powerful addition to the marital expository counseling toolkit as it engages both the one sinning and the one sinned against. It showed the depths of unrepentant sin, which is a likely context for the counselee pursuing counseling in the first place. It showed the importance of the counselee rightly pursuing forgiveness from the Lord after attaining a sincere sense of sin. And it showed how, as clearly laid out in Psalm 130:4, truly understanding and receiving such forgiveness from the Lord could lead a believer to future obedience. These aspects were directed to the sinning spouse, particularly the one caught in a deep season of sin. But they also served as the background for the passage's usefulness for the spouse who had been sinned against. Having seen and known the forgiveness of the Lord in her past, the sinned against spouse can offer forgiveness as she has been forgiven.

Psalm 130 carries much usefulness for the biblical counselor because it so holistically and effectively engages both parties in the conflict. The wise counselor will make use of this passage both in his time teaching the couple as well as in their homework assignments and ongoing growth. It is an effective reed to lay beside the counseling process and to gauge the progress made by the couple in and through the process.