

CHAPTER 8

A summary of the book...

“SOUL-DEPTHS and SOUL-HEIGHTS”

by Octavius Winslow

(1808–1878)

Octavius Winslow spoke at the opening of Spurgeon’s Tabernacle in 1861 – This study of his on PSALM 130 opens with the “*depths*,” and closes with the “*heights*” – it reflects the depths and heights of every believer’s history. Psalm 130 is perhaps the best known of all the Penitential Psalms. It contains the ardent prayer of a man who is distressed by a sense of God’s anger against sin – by an earnest, penitent turning to God, he longs for the forgiveness of his iniquities. The Christian life is tortuous and chequered in its course – today it is a depth; tomorrow a height. This experience is common to all saints. Sink as the gracious soul may, it ever finds the Rock of Ages beneath, upon which faith firmly and securely stands. Whatever be the depressions of the believer, it is important to keep in mind his real standing before God – there is not an angel in heaven so dear to God as the accepted believer in Christ (remember, He “died” for the believer!), though earth is still his abode, and a body of sin his dwelling.

A practical lesson grows out of this truth – know “your standing” in the sight of God. The measure of our assured interest in Christ, will be the measure of our faith in Christ – this is the true definition of “assurance” (Heb 11:1). Assurance comes from *truly believing* that Christ is your Savior; conversely, the *object* of our salvation is not our faith, but CHRIST. Faith is but the instrument by which we receive Christ as a sinner. The eye of faith, looking unto Jesus, gradually becomes stronger. All the sinner’s merit and worthiness, is centered in Christ – God’s “unspeakable gift” of grace will awaken in the soul the assured and grateful acknowledgment, “He loved ME and gave Himself for ME!” How can it be!? Octavius Winslow enumerates some of the “*soul-depths*” into which many of God’s people are frequently plunged, in which grace sustains, and out of which love delivers them —

1. Existence and power of “indwelling sin” – While the Holy Spirit renews the soul, He never entirely uproots and slays the principle and root of sin in the regenerate; the root, or principle of original sin remains deeply and firmly embedded in the soil of the soul, springing up and yielding its baneful fruit, demanding incessant mortification, and will remain so until death sets the spirit free. The old inhabitant still resides in the new creature, inflicting upon the soul many a deep and grievous wounds. It is the existence of this fact that constitutes a source of so much soul-distress to the regenerate. When the Holy Spirit inserts the plough more deeply into the corrupt soil of the heart, revealing the hidden, deep-seated evil, the believer cries from out of the depths of his corruption, “*O wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*” (Rom 7:24). “O Lord, out of the depths of my deep corruption I cry unto You!” (Ps 130:1). “My soul is plunged into great and sore troubles by reason of indwelling sin – pride, self-righteousness, carnality, covetousness, worldliness – working powerfully and deceitfully in my heart, and bringing my soul into great depths of sorrow.” *When we first found the Savior, we imagined that the warfare had at last ceased*, that the victory was won, and that, henceforth, our Christian course would be a continuous triumph over every foe, our path to heaven smooth and cloudless. Our real growth in grace is the measure of our growing acquaintance with ourselves. A deeper knowledge of our sinfulness, and a more intimate acquaintance with the subterfuges of our own heart, has changed our song of triumph into a wail of despair... and our cry of agony ascends to God. Don’t be surprised at this “*strange thing*” that has happened to you – such “*depths*” have all saints; all are brought into the region of their own heart, where their holiest lessons are learned. Therefore, let not

the conflict of indwelling sin plunge you into despair; rather accept it as an unmistakable evidence of your possession of the divine nature, who's existence has revealed the antagonism of the latent evil of your heart.

2. The outbreaks of "indwelling sin" – Were there no indwelling *root* of sin, there would be no outgrowing *fruit* of sin. But where is the true believer who has fully uprooted the indwelling principle of evil? He does not exist. Listen to the language of David: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions and my sin is ever before me" (Ps 51:2-3). Listen to Job: "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6). Listen to Peter: "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Listen to Paul: "Sinners, of whom I am chief." Peter went out and wept bitterly – his penitence is a type of all true penitents. Sooner or later God's Spirit calls the wanderer to his feet with the confession and prayer: "O Lord, pardon my iniquity; for it is great. Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed." Every heart that knows its own plague will cry just such a confession.
3. Mental darkness and despondency – There are also "depths" of mental darkness and despondency into which gracious souls fall. While the reality of their conversion is undoubted by all but themselves, they seem to have settled down into a spiritual state of despondency and despair in which all evidence is ignored, all comfort refused, and all hope extinguished. Religious delusion is the great characteristic of souls in a melancholy state of "*morbid religiousness*" – in a number of cases the cause is purely physical; an unhealthy condition of any one vital organ may so powerfully act upon the mind and the soul, that it shades the brightest hopes and prospects. Depressed child of God, be of good cheer – the Lord loves you even in the darkest seasons of life... He "died" for you when you were at enmity with Him (Rom 5:8)... He knows your frame, and remembers that you are but dust. Your present mental cloud-veil cannot extinguish the heavenly light within you, touch your spiritual life, or separate you from His love. With tenderness and gentleness Jesus deals with the "*sick one whom He loves*" – though you be on the very verge of despair and self-destruction, Jesus is there patiently forbearing and abounding in sympathy and lovingkindness. (vii-11)

The Holy Spirit works "in the soul" the work that Christ did "for the soul" – It was always God's purpose, by the exercise of His grace, to accomplish our entire salvation in Christ; while giving us the responsibility to "*diligently make our calling and election sure*;" thus we are to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12), encouraged by the assurance that "God is also at work in us, to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). Therefore, to look "*within ourselves*" for spiritual light, joy and hope, is ludicrous – it is to "*Christ*" we are to look; the Author and Perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). He is our Redeemer. So we are to turn away from ourselves to Jesus. Jesus said, "Look unto Me, all the earth, and be saved; for I am God, and there is none else... I am the door... I am the bread of life." Behold the Lamb... contemplate His Person... study His work... feast upon His Word... let Him be all in all to your soul.

In many cases "spiritual despondency" may be traced to the idea, incessantly haunting the mind, of having committed the "unpardonable sin." This fear is completely groundless. Holy fear and trembling which the apprehension creates, is of itself a sufficient contradiction of such a thing. Besides, the "unpardonable sin" was that of ascribing to the agency of Satan the divine power by which He wrought His wonderful miracles – note the context. *There are "depths" in Satan's temptations of various degrees; some deeper and darker than others.* Some of the Lord's people are tempted to doubt, and almost deny the work of grace in their soul. Some are tempted to limit the power and willingness of Christ to save them; others are tempted to deny the truth of God's Word, the veracity of His character, and a future life beyond the grave.

These temptations are “common to man” (1 Cor 10:13). The Lord will not leave you to perish in these wiles, but will raise you above the depths.

Deep and billowy and dark are often the waters through which the saints waded to glory. The Lord “tries the righteous,” and He tries them to make them yet more righteous. For **David** it was in the cave of Adullam... for **Daniel** it was in the lion’s den... for **Joseph** it was in a pit... for **Paul** it was in the jail at Philippi... for **John** it was in exile on the island of Patmos – it was in these difficult settings where these men were brought into the richest teaching, and the most blessed experiences of their lives. Shall we plead exemption from these depths of trial and sorrow? Remember the words of our Lord, “Those whom I love I rebuke and chasten” (Heb 12:6). The loss that threatens your resources... the bereavement that breaks your heart. . . the trial that saddens your spirit... the temptation that assails your faith is the “*furnace of affliction*” to prove you. The Lord said, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with thee.” Welcome the sanctified discipline of trial and sorrow that *proves* your conversion real. Lord, if your furnace thus refines, and your knife thus prunes – render your gold more pure, and your branch more fruitful.

Remember, just as there are “depths,” so there are “deliverances;” and in God’s own time those deliverances will come. “Cast now away therefore your confidence, which has great recompense of reward.” Did the Lord ever leave His Son to flounder and sink and perish in His depths? Never! *He invariably sends help from above*, takes them in His arms, and gently draws them out of their “many waters,” just as He lifted up **Joseph** from the pit, and **Daniel** from the lion’s den, and **Jeremiah** from the dungeon. Cheer up then, you sinking, desponding one! Behold the “rainbow” in the clouds – the symbol and pledge of God’s covenant faithfulness to make good on His promises, and deliver you out of all your trouble. Let me add a comment regarding Winslow at this point – admittedly his work can be a difficult read at times, so carefully and prayerfully work your way through his material, re-reading it if necessary.

*Out of the depths I cry,
Oppressed with grief and sin;
O gracious Lord, draw nigh,
Complete Thy work within.
O listen to Thy suppliant’s voice,
And let my broken bones rejoice. (11-20)*

Seasons of soul-depths are ever seasons of “heart-prayer” in the Christian’s experience. At no point does the “*divine life*” of the believer so strongly vindicate its nature as then. This was the case here in Psalm 130 – “*Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord.*” Communion with God is the outbreathing of the quickened soul, and no condition can stifle it. Its potency is learned to a great extent when faith is tried, the heart is overwhelmed, and the soul is plunged into the depths. The arrow of prayer springs from the bow of faith, and winged by the power of the Spirit – as such, it overcomes every obstacle. The intensity of prayer raises with the agony of one’s spirit; it gathers strength with the anguish of the soul – read Jonah. There is no “*depth*” so profound, no darkness so dense, no need so pressing, no perplexity so great, but from it you may cry unto the Lord, and He will incline His ear. Cries out of depths of soul-distress have a peculiar eloquence and an irresistible success with God. “*My soul hangeth upon God*” (Ps 63:9).

“My soul hangeth upon God” (Ps 63:9) – Let’s look for a moment at the “*object*” upon which the believing, sinking soul hangs – it is upon “*deity*.” Some are hanging upon self... some upon wealth... some upon intellectual powers... some upon bodily strength... some upon their own self-righteousness.

But the believing soul, though a desponding and sinking soul, hangs upon God. “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? There is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee.” This is the “*support*” of every gracious soul. Sin-burdened soul, sinking into depths of guilt and despair, come, hang in faith upon this divine, this most sure nail. “When I cannot think of Jesus,” said a sick one, “Jesus is thinking of me.” The tried and desponding soul can never sink below the everlasting arms of God. God is frequently inclined to permit His children to descend into great “depths” of spiritual and mental conflict, and even temporal need, that He might display His love and power in stooping to their necessity. “I was brought low, and He helped me.” No difficulty is too great or too severe to take to Jesus – our strong refuge is “*prayer*,” remember, God’s mercy in Christ Jesus is infinite. Sunk though you are in sin and guilt, you have not sunk below the depths of God’s love and grace. The prodigal had wandered far from his father, yet, when he came to himself he exclaimed, “I will arise and go to my father” – your heavenly Father waits to enfold you to His loving and forgiving heart! (21-27)

*Depth of mercy! can there be
Mercy still reserved for me?
Can my God His wrath forbear
Me, the chief of sinners, spare?
I have long withstood His grace,
Long provoked Him to His face;
Would not hearken to His calls,
Grieved Him by a thousand falls.
If I rightly read Thy heart,
If Thou all compassion art,
Now Thine ear in mercy bow,
Pardon and accept me now.*

Prayer is not only necessary when in the “depths,” but also to be preserved from them. “Watch and pray” is our Lord’s twofold injunction, given amid the most difficult circumstance of His life. We are to pray lest our feet slide and we lose our steadfastness in the faith... or else we fall into the depths of Satan, the seductions of the flesh, and the allurements of the world; and plunge into depths of doubt, darkness, and despondency. A true child of God, though he may sadly backslide, and be sorely chastened, cannot finally perish. “I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined His ear to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And He has put a new song in mouth.” (27-31)

“If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who can stand?” (Ps 130:2) – Some of the most glorious unfoldings of God’s character and of Christ’s beauty, of divine truth and lessons of the Christian life, are found in those “*soul-depths*.” Right and deep views of sin lie at the root of correct and high views of God; and low thoughts of God inevitably engender low perceptions of sin. The Puritan **John Owen** forcibly puts the matter thus: “*The generality of men make light work of sin; and in nothing does it more appear what thoughts they have of God. He that has light thoughts of sin had never great thoughts of God. As men’s conceptions are of God, so will they be of sin, which is an opposition to Him. This is the frame of most men; they know little of God; God is not revered; sin is but a trifle... he who knows not sin’s deceit and sinfulness, knows nothing of forgiveness.*” It was God’s wrath against “sin” that moved Him to crucify His Son! So, in the cross of Christ we see the enormity of man’s sin and the greatness of God’s love. Hence, you now have nothing to do with your sins – past, present and future – but to “mortify the root and combat vigorously their ascendancy.” (31-37)

The believer has need to learn what true and deep “contrition for sin” is – that learning will bring him into a very close knowledge of himself. By the way, the deepest humiliation, the most broken and contrite spirit is not often found in the “high places” where the soul is privileged to walk. “If Thou, Lord, should mark iniquities – the depravity of my nature, the sinfulness of my heart, my thoughts and imaginations, my words and actions, my covetousness, worldliness, and carnality – O Lord, how could I stand?” (Ps 130). We must “cultivate” a holy contrition for sin – godly sorrow and holy contrition will preserve your heart pure and tender. Let not one evening pass over your head without examining how your spiritual account stands. “How have I offended Thee, O God? How have I neglected to perform my duties? How have I injured someone with my words? How have I reflected upon that which is most evil?” Let us lament over our transgressions from our inmost souls, and labor to make up tomorrow what we may have lost today. The effect of this holy scrutiny will be humble contrition; though it be a bitter experience, it will yield a sweet fruit. *“Blessed are those who weep and mourn their willful wanderings and spiritual lapses.”*

A humble acknowledgment of sin is a consequence of contrition for sin – “I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord” (Ps 32:5). Why is it that so many of God’s saints travel all their days with their heads bowed low? Why do so few attain to the high standard of an “assured interest” in Christ? Why do so many walk in the spirit of legal bondage, know little of their pardon and acceptance? May it not, to a great degree, be traced to their lax habit of “confession of sin to God”? It is because they go day by day, and week by week, bearing the burden of conscious sin and uncleansed guilt. Oh, the great secret of a pure, holy, and happy walk is in living close by God’s confessional. This was David’s testimony: “When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groanings all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever-heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and my iniquity I did not hide. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord; and Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin” (Ps 32: 3-5). The gospel reveals Christ as the *“Great Sin-Bearer”* of the sinner – we must see Him “wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities,” and made a “sin-offering for us” – “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). Let faith rest upon divine word – “Jesus is my Substitute... Jesus stood in my place... Jesus bore my sins... Jesus suffered all and paid my entire debt... *herein I rest.*” “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). (38-46)

“What God is like Thee, that pardons iniquity? There is forgiveness with Thee” – the divine pardon of sin is God’s most gracious act. God satisfies the matter of justice Himself, and bears the entire cost of the plan – a cost which the infinite resources of Deity alone could meet. “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” And now the chief of sinners may approach boldly the throne of grace and obtain mercy, because of the merits of Christ. “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” – how vast the cost! How immeasurable the sacrifice! It cost God the surrender of His own dear Son, sent into the world poor, despised, insulted, and subjected to indescribable tortures of the cross – *“Who is a God like Thee?”* It cost Him the sacrifice of Himself – His last drop of blood; His last breath of life – to purchase for us divine forgiveness. Oh, the redeeming, dying love of Christ, which passes knowledge! *“How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?”* (47-51)

The “moral reformation of our criminals” has long been a perplexing problem baffling the most astute philosopher and the most benevolent philanthropist – the plan is still an experiment, and in the vast majority of cases when the hardened criminal is pardoned, he relapses more deeply into crime. So pardon has, in the vast majority of cases, not only failed to weaken the force of his depravity, but has proved a stimulus to a bolder conception and a more awful commission of crime. Let us turn to the “divine forgiveness of the

sinner” – never has God regretted the extension of His forgiveness to the vilest sinner, because *the grace of pardon conquers him!* The softening, melting, sanctifying influence of the cross has dissolved the congestive power of sin (so to speak) in the heart, which now beats more freely and throbs more intensely with life and love to God, to Christ and holiness. The grace of pardon not only has cancelled the guilt, but it has conquered the power of sin; it has slain the tyrant. “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Is 1:18). “Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardons iniquity, transgression, and sin?” God’s forgiveness of sin furnishes the believer with the most persuasive motive to live a pure, a holy, and a godly life.

The hardest work of man is to “forgive and forget” a wrong done to him – Jesus said, “Who can have tasted the sweetness of God’s forgiving love, the “ten thousand talents” all forgiven, and then go his way and refuse to forgive the “one hundred pence” owed to him? Jesus also said, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him... if he is thirsty, give him drink.” If one claims to be a disciple of the loving, forgiving Savior, we have a right to enquire, “*Where is your badge?*” – if the response be, “What badge?” we simply reply in the words of the Lord Himself: “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another” (Jn 13:34). Let us cease to cherish in our hearts an unforgiving, uncharitable, unforgetful spirit. “Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us” (Mt 6:12). (52-63)

*Forgive and forget – it is better
To fling every feeling aside,
Than to allow the deep cankering fetter
Of revenge in thy breast to abide.
For the step through life’s path shall be lighter,
When the load from the bosom is cast;
And the sky that’s above thee be brighter,
When the cloud of displeasure is past.
Though thy spirit swell high with emotion
To give back an injustice again,
Let it sink in oblivion’s ocean;
For remembrance increases the pain.
And why should we linger in sorrow,
When its shadow is passing away,
Or seek to encounter tomorrow
the blast that o’erswept us today?*

Sin is a powerful tyrant – Long after its overthrow it still exists in the regenerate a dethroned despot; its sting extracted and its venom destroyed, but still retaining sufficient power to wound and distress the soul. Despoiled of its empire, like the Canaanites of old, it is yet domiciled in the land, making perpetual invasions and assaults on the camp of Israel; demanding on their part sleepless vigilance and perpetual conflict. Thus, the work of sin-mortification and world-crucifixion must go on, that, by a gradual process of defeat, the Canaanites, like the ones of old, are driven out “*little by little,*” until the last enemy is destroyed. It is a blessed height of the soul when the believer can look down upon his old sins and habits, lying mortally wounded at his feet, dying daily to their power and reign. There is no real happiness this side of heaven apart from “*personal holiness.*” My soul! let your one and supreme aim be, a loftier standard of personal holiness and unreserved consecration to God. Lord, what is lacking in my grace supply... what is weak in my faith, strengthen... what is low in my Christian life, raise... what is languid and ready to die, quicken and revive, that I may stand complete in all the will of God.

Sin will remain in the regenerate to the last of life, but a “full redemption” awaits him – The moment the Christian is released from the body, he is in a state of perfect holiness as it regards the *soul*; but the full redemption of the *body* is yet to come. “We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the redemption of our body” (Rom 8:23). The time is coming when we shall no longer be chained to a corrupt body, a living corpse, tainted with sin, assailed by disease, suffering, and death. A glorious resurrection awaits us. It will be a “spiritual body” (yet material), a body free from the infirmities of the flesh, and the indwelling presence of sin. (116-121)

The true element of the gospel is “holy joy” – “Behold, I bring you good tidings of *great joy*... a Savior has been born!” Think of it – we are SAVED!!! When the soul is “born again,” it emerges from its lower life, and ascends into a new divine heavenly life – a life from God and for God; a life in Christ, by Christ, and with Christ. Therefore writes Paul, “For me to live is Christ!” (Phil 1:21). “Old things have passed away; all things become new” (2 Cor 5:17). Who can describe the sacredness and preciousness of this walk? God is love, and to enjoy and dwell in God’s love, is to walk upon the highest place on earth, and in closest proximity to heaven. How elevating is this walk! It lifts us above the dark clouds of trial and sorrow that floats beneath, into a high and luminous atmosphere of God’s love. Be not satisfied with walking in low shaded places, but climb in faith these high places. *Prayer raises the believer into the highest and holiest atmosphere.* Well rewarded is he for his holy toil, who has climbed these sacred stairs, laden with sin, weary with care, pressed with neediness, crushed with sorrow. Ascend, then, this sacred mount... walk with God upon these high places... cheered and strengthened by Jesus’ words: “Whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give it to you... *and your joy will be made full!*”

Remember, whom the Lord loves “He chastens” (Heb 12:6) – It is impossible to interpret the dark and mysterious dispensations of God’s providence accurately except in the light of His love. The believer has never known how deeply God loves him until God has afflicted him. It is thus that sanctified sorrows yield to the believer the richest fruit. Wounded in heart, weary in spirit, and weakened in trial, he walks upon his high places of difficulty and danger warily, humbly, and prayerfully. As an old divine remarks: “*The physician attacks the disease, not the patient; his object is to cure the one he causes to suffer.*” It is thus that God, whose mercy is infinite, chastises us only to bring us into the way of salvation or to confirm our course in it. Therefore, since you do not become angry with your physician when he sets your broken bones, don’t murmur against the Lord, who wounds only for your good. Thus, ascend from the depths of darkness and doubt, of coldness and unbelief, and walk in the “*high places*” of filial fellowship with God. (122-134)