

“The greatest Christian writers are those who most powerfully project to spiritual readers the knowledge of God, of ourselves, and of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Among these are Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, and the Puritan John Owen, who ought to be better known than he is. The editors of this volume have worked hard to make Owen’s unrivalled insight into the Christian’s inner war with sin accessible to all, and the result is truly a godsend. Filled with classic devotional theology which, like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, needs to be read again and again to be properly grasped, we have in the three treatises presented here a companion for life.”

—J. I. PACKER, Professor of Theology, Regent College

“John Owen’s three treatises on sin, mortification, and temptation are a priceless treasure. To read them is to mine pure spiritual gold. Unfortunately, as in mining, reading Owen is hard work. Now, through skillful editing, Kelly Kopic and Justin Taylor have made Owen’s work accessible to modern readers while still retaining his unique writing style. Anyone concerned about personal holiness will profit from reading this new edition of a classic work.”

—JERRY BRIDGES, Navigators Community Ministries Group

“Sin is tenacious, but by God’s grace we can hate it and hunt it. John Owen provides the master guide for the sin-hunter. Kopic and Taylor bring together three of Owen’s classics, clarifying them in simple ways—but all the substance, the careful, hounding arguments are still there to train our spiritual sight and love our souls.”

—MARK DEVER, Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church,
Washington, D.C.

“With a volume of Owen in your hands you may wonder why you have wasted so much time reading lesser things. True, as Dr. John (“Rabbi”) Duncan once said, if you are going to read this you will need to ‘prepare yourself for the knife.’ But that knife is the scalpel of one of the finest spiritual surgeons in the history of the church. Owen understood as few have how the gospel makes us well. Three cheers for everything Kopic and Taylor are doing to introduce a new generation of Christians to Owen’s peerless works.”

—SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON, Senior Minister,
First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C.

“For over three hundred years the doctrinal and devotional works of John Owen have been a classic resource for the church. Though unusually insightful, Owen may be too challenging for many to read with benefit. Now, with brilliant editorial efforts and insightful introductions by Kelly Kopic and Justin Taylor, Owen’s magnificent treatises on sin and sanctification have been made available for a new generation. I am confident that this welcomed volume will provide guidance and enablement for believers in need of God’s grace and blessing. The editors are to be congratulated for their fine work!”

—DAVID S. DOCKERY, President, Union University,
Jackson, Tenn.

“John Owen is a spiritual surgeon with the rare skill to cut away the cancer of sin and bring gospel healing to the sinner’s soul. Apart from the Bible, I have found his writings on sin and temptation to be the best books ever written for helping me to stop sinning the same old sins. Now Owen’s profound thinking on spiritual change in the Christian life is available in a user-friendly format that will help a new generation gain gospel victory over the power of remaining sin.”

—PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN, Senior Minister,
Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

“No writer has taught me more about the dynamics of the heart and the deceitfulness of sin than John Owen. Reading his writing has been life-changing, although at times his seventeenth-century style can be a challenge to modern ears. How grateful I am that Kopic and Taylor have invested their time and considerable skills to bring Owen’s profound and practical teaching to a modern audience. Read this book carefully; it will help you understand your heart and experience God’s grace.”

—C. J. MAHANEY, Sovereign Grace Ministries,
Gaithersburg, Md.



Overcoming SIN &
TEMPTATION

JOHN OWEN

EDITED BY
KELLY M. KAPIC AND JUSTIN TAYLOR

FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER

CROSSWAY BOOKS

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FOREWORD

I REJOICE AT THIS publication of John Owen's works on the nature of our battle with sin. It is the kind of thinking we need. Therefore, I thank God for Kelly Kapic and Justin Taylor. They have done a good service for the church. I hope teachers and pastors will help their people benefit from this book.

As I look across the Christian landscape, I think it is fair to say concerning sin, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly" (Jer. 6:14; 8:11, ESV). I take this to refer to leaders who should be helping the church know and feel the seriousness of indwelling sin (Rom. 7:20), and how to fight it and kill it (Rom. 8:13). Instead the depth and complexity and ugliness and danger of sin in professing Christians is either minimized—since we are already justified—or psychologized as a symptom of woundedness rather than corruption.

This is a tragically light healing. I call it a tragedy because by making life easier for ourselves in minimizing the nature and seriousness of our sin, we become greater victims of it. We are in fact not healing ourselves. Those who say that they already feel bad enough without being told about the corruptions of indwelling sin misread the path to peace. When our people have not been taught well about the real nature of sin and how it works and how to put it to death, most of the miseries people report are not owing to the disease but its symptoms. They feel a general malaise and don't know why, their marriages are at the breaking point, they feel weak in their spiritual witness and devotion, their workplace is embattled, their church is tense with unrest, their fuse is short with the children, etc. They report these miseries as if they were the disease. And they want the symptoms removed.

We proceed to heal the wound of the people lightly. We look first and mainly for circumstantial causes for the misery—present or past. If we're good at it, we can find partial causes and give some relief. But the healing is light. We have not done the kind of soul surgery that is possible only when the soul doctor knows the kind of things Owen talks about in these books, and when the patient is willing to let the doctor's scalpel go deep.

What Owen offers is not quick relief, but long-term, deep growth in grace that can make strong, healthy trees where there was once a fragile sapling. I

pray that thousands—especially teachers and pastors and other leaders—will choose the harder, long-term path of growth, not the easier, short-term path of circumstantial relief.

The two dead pastor-theologians of the English-speaking world who have nourished and taught me most are Jonathan Edwards and John Owen. Some will say Edwards is unsurpassed. Some say Owen was the greater. We don't need to decide. We have the privilege of knowing them both as our friends and teachers. What an amazing gift of God's providence that these brothers were raised up and that hundreds of years after they have died we may sit at their feet. We cannot properly estimate the blessing of soaking our minds in the Bible-saturated thinking of the likes of John Owen. What he was able to see in the Bible and preserve for us in writing is simply magnificent. It is so sad—a travesty, I want to say—how many Christian leaders of our day do not strive to penetrate the wisdom of John Owen, but instead read books and magazines that are superficial in their grasp of the Bible.

We act as though there was nothing extraordinary about John Owen's vision of biblical truth—that he was not a rare gift to the church. But he was rare. There are very few people like this whom God raises up in the history of the church. Why does God do this? Why does he give an Owen or an Edwards to the church and then ordain that what they saw of God should be preserved in books? Is it not because he loves us? Is it not because he would share Owen's vision with his church? Great trees that are covered with the richest life-giving fruit are not for museums. God preserves them and their fruit for the health of his church.

I know that all Christians cannot read all such giants. Even one mountain is too high to climb for most of us. But we can pick one or two, and then ask God to teach us what he taught them. The really great writers are not valuable for their cleverness but for their straightforward and astonishing insight into what the Bible really says about great realities. This is what we need.

The Bible is God's word. Therefore, it is profound. How could it not be? God inspired it. He understands himself and the human heart infinitely. He is not playing games with us. He really means to communicate the profoundest things about sin and hell and heaven and Christ and faith and salvation and holiness and death. Paul does not sing out in vain, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33, ESV). No. He summons us to stop settling for pop culture and to learn what the Bible really has to say about the imponderable depths of sin and grace.

Owen is especially worthy of our attention because he is shocking in his insights. That is my impression again and again. He shocks me out of my platitudinous ways of thinking about God and man. Here are a few random recollections from what you are (I hope) about to read. You will find others on your own.

“There is no death of sin without the death of Christ” (*Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, chapter 7). Owen loves the cross and knows what happened there better than anyone I have read. The battle with sin that you are about to read about is no superficial technique of behavior modification. It is a profound dealing with what was accomplished on the cross in relation to the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit through the deep and wonderful mysteries of faith.

“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” (chapter 7). Oh, the pastoral insights that emerge from Owen! As here: If you are fighting sin, you are alive. Take heart. But if sin holds sway unopposed, you are dead no matter how lively this sin makes you feel. Take heart, embattled saint!

“God says, ‘Here is one, if he could be rid of this lust I should never hear of him more; let him wrestle with this, or he is lost’” (chapter 8). Astonishing! God ordains to leave a lust with me till I become the sort of warrior who will still seek his aid when this victory is won. God knows when we can bear the triumphs of his grace.

“Is there the guilt of any great sin lying upon you unrepented of? A new sin may be permitted, as well as a new affliction sent, to bring an old sin to remembrance” (chapter 9). What? God ordains that we be tested by another sin so that an old one might be better known and fought? Sin is one of God’s weapons against sin?

“The difference between believers and unbelievers as to knowledge is not so much in the *matter* of their knowledge as in the *manner* of knowing. Unbelievers, some of them, may know more and be able to say more of God, his perfections, and his will, than many believers; but they know nothing as they ought, nothing in a right manner, nothing spiritually and savingly, nothing with a holy, heavenly light. The excellency of a believer is, not that he has a large apprehension of things, but that what he does apprehend, which perhaps may be very little, he sees it in the light of the Spirit of God, in a saving, soul-transforming light; and this is that which gives us communion with God, and not prying thoughts or curious-raised notions” (chapter 12). How then will we labor to help people know much and know it “in a right manner”? What is that?

“[Christ] is the head from whence the new man must have influences of life and strength, or it will decay every day” (chapter 14). Oh, that our people would feel the urgency of daily supplies of grace because “grace decays.” Do they know this? Is it a category in their mind—that grace decays? How many try to live their lives on automatic pilot with no sense of urgency that means of grace are given so that the riches of Christ may daily be obtained with fresh supplies of grace.

The list could go on and on. For me, to read Owen is to wake up to ways of seeing that are so clearly biblical that I wonder how I could have been so blind. May that be your joyful experience as well.

—John Piper, Pastor for Preaching and Vision
Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

PREFACE

READING JOHN OWEN: WHY A NEW EDITION?

JUSTIN TAYLOR

READING OWEN IS WORTH THE EFFORT

One of our goals in publishing this volume is to reintroduce John Owen to the church today. And one of the hindrances in the way of his reception is his reputation for being hard to read. There is no glossing over the fact that studying Owen's writings requires hard work. But we would also insist—alongside many of the great saints in the history of the church—that the effort required to read Owen is richly repaid. We agree with the judgment of J. I. Packer regarding Owen's works: "I did not say that it was easy to read them!—that would not be true; yet I do venture to say that the labour involved in plodding through these ill-arranged and tediously-written treatises will find them abundantly worthwhile."¹ Our goal has been to produce a faithful and accurate edition of Owen's writings on sin and temptation that begins to overcome some of these barriers to understanding his profound and practical insights and instruction.

OWEN'S WRITING STYLE

In order to understand Owen's literary style, it is worth quoting Packer at length:

There is no denying that Owen is heavy and hard to read. This is not so much due to obscure arrangement as to two other factors. The first is his lumbering literary gait. 'Owen travels through it [his subject] with the elephant's grace and solid step, if sometimes also with his ungainly motion,'

¹J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1990), 84.

says [Andrew] Thomson. That puts it kindly. Much of Owen's prose reads like a roughly-dashed-off translation of a piece of thinking done in Ciceronian Latin. It has, no doubt, a certain clumsy dignity; so has Stonehenge; but it is trying to the reader to have to go over sentences two or three times to see their meaning, and this necessity makes it much harder to follow an argument. The present writer, however, has found that the hard places in Owen usually come out as soon as one reads them aloud. The second obscuring factor is Owen's austerity as an expositor. He has a lordly disdain for broad introductions which ease the mind gently into a subject, and for comprehensive summaries which gather up scattered points into a small space. He obviously carries the whole of his design in his head, and expects his readers to do the same. Nor are his chapter divisions reliable pointers to the discourse, for though a change of subject is usually marked by a chapter division, Owen often starts a new chapter where there is no break in the thought at all. Nor is he concerned about literary proportions; the space given to a topic is determined by its intrinsic complexity rather than its relative importance, and the reader is left to work out what is basic and what is secondary by noting how things link together.²

At the same time, we shouldn't exaggerate the difficulties of Owen's prose when set before a certain sort of reader:

His studied unconcern about style in presenting his views, a conscientious protest against the self-conscious literary posturing of the age, conceals their uncommon clarity and straightforwardness from superficial readers; but then, Owen did not write for superficial readers. He wrote, rather, for those who, once they take up a subject, cannot rest till they see to the bottom of it, and who find exhaustiveness not exhausting, but satisfying and refreshing. . . .

Owen's style is often stigmatized as cumbersome and tortuous. Actually it is Latinised spoken style, fluent but stately and expansive, in the elaborate Ciceronian style. When Owen's prose is read aloud, as didactic rhetoric (which is, after all, what it is), the verbal inversions, displacements, archaisms and new coinages that bother modern readers cease to obscure and offend. Those who think as they read find Owen's expansiveness suggestive and his fulsomeness fertilising.³

²Ibid., 147.

³Ibid., 193, 194.

READING OWEN: A NEW OPTION

Up until now, there have been two main options for those who want to read Owen's writings on sin and temptation. One could work through volume 6 of *The Works of John Owen* as edited by William Goold in the 1850s,⁴ or one could use a contemporary abridgement or paraphrase.⁵ In this volume we are seeking to present something new: an unabridged but updated edition of Owen's three classic works that preserves all of Owen's original content but seeks to make it a bit more accessible. In so doing, we hope to play a small part in reintroducing Owen to both the church and the academy.⁶

FEATURES OF THIS NEW EDITION

What changes have we made to the original edition of Owen's works? We have:

- provided overviews of the thesis and arguments for all three books
- footnoted difficult vocabulary words or phrases (at their first occurrence in each book) and collected them into a glossary
- Americanized the British spelling (e.g., behaviour to behavior)
- updated archaic pronouns (e.g., thou to you)
- updated other archaic spellings (e.g., hath to have; requireth to requires)
- updated some archaic word forms (e.g., concernments to concerns, surprisals to surprises)
- corrected the text in places where the nineteenth-century edition incorrectly deviated from the original
- modernized some of the punctuation

⁴ There are two main collections of Owen's works: a 21-volume set edited by Thomas Russell (1826), and a 24-volume set edited by William Goold (1850–1853). The former is long out of print; the latter, save for one volume, has been reprinted in facsimile by the Banner of Truth Trust in Edinburgh (1965–1968) and has remained in print for the last 40 years. *The Works of John Owen*, with some slight updates, have also been included on a CD-Rom published by Ages Software of Rio, Wisconsin.

⁵ For an edited abridgement, see John Owen, *Triumph Over Temptation: Pursuing a Life of Purity*, Victor Classics, ed. James M. Houston (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2004). (This volume was formerly titled *Sin and Temptation: The Challenge of Personal Godliness*, originally published by Multnomah in 1983, followed by Bethany in 1996.) The principle was "to seek the kernel and remove the husk," which involved cutting about half of the original work and extensive rewriting. See also Kris Lundgaard's popular work, *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk About the Power and Defeat of Sin* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), which is not an edition of Owen's writings per se, but rather an effort by Lundgaard to restate and recast Owen's arguments for today. In addition, the Banner of Truth Trust and Christian Focus Publications in the UK have each produced small paperback editions of *The Mortification of Sin*, with only slight modifications contained therein.

⁶ We are also editing a new edition of Owen's *Communion with God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, forthcoming).

- placed Owen’s Scripture references in parentheses⁷
- added our own Scripture references in brackets when Owen quotes or alludes to a passage but does not provide a reference
- transliterated all Hebrew and Greek words, and provided a translation if Owen didn’t provide one
- translated all Latin phrases that Owen leaves untranslated
- provided sources for quotations and allusions where possible
- removed Owen’s intricate numbering system, which functioned as an extensive outline
- added headings and italics throughout this volume, and extensive outlines of our own at the end, to aid the reader in following the flow of Owen’s thought

As an example of the sort of limited modernizing that we have done to the text, the following is a reproduction of an original paragraph from Owen’s *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin* (from his exposition of Revelation 2) . . .

The fame might also be showed concerning the rest of those *Churches*, only one or two of them excepted. *Five* of them are charged with decays and declensions. Hence there is mention in the Scripture of the *Kindness of Youth*, of the *Love of Espousals*, with great commendation, *Jer. 2. 2, 3.* of our *first Faith*, *1 Tim. 5. 12.* of the *beginning of our confidence*, *Heb. 3.14.*

. . . and this is our edited version as it appears in this volume:

The same also might be showed concerning the rest of those churches, only one or two of them excepted. Five of them are charged with decays and declensions. Hence there is mention in the Scripture of the “kindness of youth,” of the “love of espousals,” with great commendation (*Jer. 2:2-3*); of our “first faith” (*1 Tim. 5:12*); of “the beginning of our confidence” (*Heb. 3:14*).

A WORD ABOUT THE STRUCTURE

Readers will note that, unlike in modern books, there are no chapter titles—Owen didn’t assign any. Furthermore, the location of the chapter breaks can

⁷ Readers will note that the Scripture references in this volume do not correspond precisely to any particular translation. The reason for this is twofold: (1) Owen did not rely upon one translation. His use of Scripture often involves his own combination of translation and paraphrase. (2) While some of the Scripture passages are similar to the Geneva Bible or to the King James Bible (published just five years before Owen’s birth), they do not match precisely due to our updating of archaic components in those translations.

come across as arbitrary. As Packer said, Owen “obviously carries the whole of his design in his head, and expects his readers to do the same. Nor are his chapter divisions reliable pointers to the discourse, for though a change of subject is usually marked by a chapter division, Owen often starts a new chapter where there is no break in the thought at all.” In fact, we believe that making the chapter breaks prominent can actually add to the confusion in reading Owen’s work. (For example, in the outline for *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, you’ll note that chapter 3 begins with Roman numeral II.) One option would have been to dispense with the chapter numbers altogether. We decided to retain the chapter numbers, but to make them less prominent by placing them in brackets and not always at the beginning of a new page. This allows Owen’s own outline to receive greater emphasis, and we believe it will aid the reader in following Owen’s thought.

As noted above, we have also taken Owen’s original intricate numbering system and used it to create our own outlines in the back of the book. We encourage readers to use these outlines, paginated for easy reference, where one can see his main points and the flow of his argument.

OUR PRAYER

Although we desire to see an increased understanding of and appreciation for Owen’s works in our day, our greater desire is to see fellow believers return to the biblical means of sanctification in their battle to overcome sin and temptation. All of us find within ourselves a law to the effect that, when we want to do right, we discover evil within ourselves (Rom. 7:21). Our prayer is that this book will be used of God to help us watch and pray against temptation (Matt. 26:41) so that by the Spirit we would mortify the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13).⁸

Soli Deo gloria.

⁸Romans 7:21 is the foundational text for Owen’s *Indwelling Sin*. Matthew 26:41 is the key text for *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*. And Romans 8:13 stands at the front of *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*.

INTRODUCTION

LIFE IN THE MIDST OF BATTLE: JOHN OWEN'S APPROACH TO SIN, TEMPTATION, AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

KELLY M. KAPIC

*"Be killing sin or it will be killing you."*¹

WHY READ JOHN OWEN?

Sitting across from me in our London flat with warm tea in her hand and short-bread on the table, my wife had a revelation. During recent conversations we had been praying that God would provide a mentor for me while I was working on my Ph.D.—someone who would ask the hard questions, challenge my thinking and living, and consistently point me to the love of the Father. As we sat talking that morning, in what had become normal language around our home, I began another sentence with, "Do you know what Owen said yesterday . . . ?" Stopping me, Tabitha interjected, "You *are* being mentored. Listen to how you refer to John Owen, as if he were still alive. He is your mentor."

She was right. Although Owen had been dead for centuries, I found myself in almost daily dialogue with this prominent Puritan whose thought was serving as the object of my doctoral studies. While recognizing the cultural and historical differences between Owen's time and my own was of vital importance for my academic research, still I was often drawn into a living dialogue with this intriguing man. Sometimes I found myself frustrated with his methods or conclusions, but very often his insights simply captured me. His words would stir me to the point of honest self-examination and an ever-

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 24 vols. (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-1855; reprint by Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, 1991) (hereafter cited as *Works*), 6:9.

growing appreciation for the glory and love of God. I can recall many a time when I would have to stop reading, stand up, and just walk around for awhile, trying to digest a profound sentence. While a person from another century cannot serve as a replacement for living and breathing fellowship, I have learned the value of listening to the saints of old, and this Puritan theologian is certainly a voice worth hearing. I sometimes think of Dr. John Owen as a perceptive physician who delivers both a terrifying diagnosis and the means of a miraculous cure.



John Owen was born in the year of William Shakespeare's death, 1616, and his life paralleled an exciting and tumultuous century in Britain.² Before he died in 1683, Owen had experienced life as an army chaplain, a political insider, Vice Chancellor of Oxford, a leading Puritan theologian, faithful pastor, father, and husband. He had also known great personal loss. Though he had eleven children with his first wife, only one of them survived beyond adolescence; the one girl who did survive ended up returning to live with her father after her marriage collapsed, and while in his home she died of consumption.³ Such painful experience cannot help but leave a deep imprint on a person. On the professional level Owen's career had reached great heights, such as preaching before Parliament, leading Oxford University, and having friendships with those in the highest positions of authority, including Oliver Cromwell. Yet he also lived through the loss of power and position, as his country moved away from a Puritan-influenced government back to a country led by a King who was less than excited about the Puritan ideals.⁴

²The best published biography on Owen remains Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen: Pastor, Educator, Theologian* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1971). See also Peter Toon, ed., *The Correspondence of John Owen* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1970); idem, ed., *The Oxford Orations of Dr. John Owen* (Cornwall: Gospel Communications, 1971). Some recent book-length studies on Owen's thought deserve mention: Richard W. Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage, 2004); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); Robert W. Oliver, ed., *John Owen: The Man and His Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002); Steve Griffiths, *Redeem the Time: The Problem of Sin in the Writings of John Owen* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2001); Jon D. Payne, ed., *John Owen on the Lord's Supper* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004); Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002); Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998). Kelly M. Kapic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, forthcoming, 2007).

³Dewey D. Wallace, "The Life and Thought of John Owen to 1660: A Study of the Significance of Calvinist Theology in English Puritanism" (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1965), 124. Sarah Gibbord Cook also writes of the difficult time after the Restoration, when Dr. and Mrs. Owen were separated from their children for long periods of time because of various circumstances ("A Political Biography of a Religious Independent: John Owen, 1616–83" [Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1972], 290).

⁴Cf. Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 170–178.

Throughout the various seasons of his life Owen proved himself a most able author: the authoritative nineteenth-century edition of his works fill twenty-four tightly printed volumes.⁵ Amid his extensive writings, which include biblical commentaries and exhaustive (and exhausting!) treatments of doctrines like justification and the atonement, Owen also produced devotional literature that quickly became beloved. In the volume you are reading we have selected three of his classics on spirituality—although it needs to be said that he viewed all of his discourses as spiritual exercises and not as something void of practical import. In these three particular works we find Owen’s detailed reflections on sin, temptation, and the believer’s call to holiness.

In 1656 Owen first published *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. In 1658 that volume was slightly revised and another short treatise, *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It*, was also printed. During the time that these two books were published, Owen was still serving as Dean of Christ Church, Oxford University, and the substance of both discourses grew out of brief sermons that Owen delivered during his tenure there. Young students were most likely the bulk of his original audience—Owen had entered Queen’s College Oxford as a student at the age of twelve, which was not uncommon for the time.⁶ One consequence of addressing this youthful audience seems to be that his reflections tend toward the concrete and practical, emphasizing the particular rather than lingering too long on the abstract. Here were young people who were beginning to experience the complexity of sin and self, and Owen was compelled to help.

Crucial to resisting sin and temptation, according to Owen, was an understanding of what you were fighting. Although written a decade later, Owen’s explorations on these practical subjects are further unpacked in his book, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of Indwelling Sin* (1667). Here Owen focuses on the power of sin not as it exists “out there,” but as it exists “within” a person. By the time this volume was published, Owen’s context had significantly changed: he had been removed from the academic setting, had watched the return of Charles II, and had personally witnessed the governmental crackdown on nonconformist Puritan preachers. But for Owen, circumstances—whether amiable or painful—were not an excuse to

⁵ Besides the standard printed 24-volume set noted above, an electronic version has recently been produced: “The Works of John Owen” (Rio, Wis.: Ages Software, 2000). Owen’s Latin writings have also recently been translated and made available in English: John Owen, *Biblical Theology, or, the Nature, Origin, Development, and Study of Theological Truth, in Six Books*, trans. Stephen Westcott (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994).

⁶ Toon, *God’s Statesman*, 5.

stop resisting sin. The call of holiness was a call from God himself, and thus not contingent upon the state of affairs in which one finds oneself.

Christians are called to war against sin. According to Owen, this means they are called to learn the art of battle, which includes understanding the nature of sin, the complexity of the human heart, and the goodness and provision of God. Following a classic stream of orthodox theology, Owen argues that humility is crucial to growth in the Christian life, and proper humility comes from “a due consideration” both of God and of oneself.⁷ Only from this perspective can one be in a right position to approach the call to holiness.

KNOWING YOURSELF

Owen’s varied experiences, such as working with students (not to mention faculty) and providing pastoral care, gave him ample opportunity for reflection on the way that sin weaves its way into every aspect of people’s lives. Two particular challenges about human nature that appear in these volumes deserve brief comment: his attempt to present a holistic view of the human person, and his belief that personality differences must be considered when dealing with sin.

Engaging the Whole Person

Contemporary readers may at first glance struggle with Owen’s detailed parsing of human nature and sin, believing that his reflections are dated and irrelevant. However, upon closer examination the reader may begin to recognize that although Owen does not use current labels, he is dealing with very contemporary issues, such as depression, addiction, apathy, and lust.

One of Owen’s concerns was that some people reduced the struggle with sin to a problem centered on the physical body. They had taken the biblical language of the “body of sin” (Rom 6:6, ESV) and inappropriately treated it as a literal reference to physicality. This misunderstanding leads to what Owen considers the monastic “mistake”: believing that rigid regiments that yield greater physiological control will eventually diminish the sin that lies in a person.⁸ For Owen, while the body is important, it is but the instrument for the real problem.

Using classic faculty-psychology categories of the mind, the will, and the affections, Owen consistently attempts to present a holistic perspective of the

⁷ *Works*, 6:200.

⁸ *Works*, 6:7, 18.

human person, and this informs his view of sin and sanctification.⁹ Originally humanity was created without sin, and thus their mind rightly reflected on the Creator and his creation, their affections properly loved God, and their will followed after the good. However, with the fall these faculties became disordered. Even after believers are redeemed by God they will continue to struggle with the abiding vestiges of sin that disorient the faculties, a condition that remains throughout their earthly life.¹⁰

Sin moves by drawing the mind away from God, enticing the affections and twisting desires and paralyzing the will, thus stunting any real Christian growth.¹¹ One of the most frightening truths that Owen wants the believer to recognize is that “Your enemy is not only *upon* you . . . but is *in* you also.”¹² Part of understanding the battle against sin is seeing that the enemy, so to speak, is not only external, but internal, which is why Christians often have conflicting desires within them.¹³ Most Christians seem unaware of or apathetic about the sin that remains in them, but whether they recognize it or not there is a “living coal continually in their houses,” which, if not properly attended to, will catch their home on fire.¹⁴

As the Scriptures often call attention to the “heart” or “soul” of a person, Owen argues that such references tend to be shorthand for the various faculties, and thus to deal with sin the whole person must be engaged.¹⁵ Although Owen gives ample attention to each of the faculties, let us focus on the affections as a test case to show the nature of sin and temptation. Far too often Christians working within the Reformed tradition have been guilty of confusing stoic ideals of emotional detachment with maturity in the Christian life. But this Reformed tradition, which Owen self-consciously grows out of, has at its best made significant space for the importance of the affections. As early as the sixteenth century John Calvin, one of the great fathers of the Reformed tradition, saw this confusion and warned against it. Calvin chided those Christians who acted like “new stoics,” because they believed that groaning, weeping, sadness, and having deep concerns were signs of sinfulness. According to Calvin such comments tend to grow from “idle men who, exercising themselves more in speculation than in action,” do not understand

⁹ For a discussion of Owen’s anthropology and his use of faculty psychology, see Kacic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen*, especially chapter 2.

¹⁰ *Works*, 6:165.

¹¹ *Works*, 6:97, 167, 245, 252.

¹² *Works*, 6:162.

¹³ Cf. Romans 7:7-25. Owen’s whole treatise *Indwelling Sin* builds off of this chapter, especially Romans 7:21.

¹⁴ *Works*, 6:166.

¹⁵ *Works*, 6:170.

the pain of this world and the ravages of sin, which the Savior who wept and mourned knew so well.¹⁶ The goal of Calvin and of others after him, like Owen, was not the absence of affections, but rightly informed and directed affections.

Affections are a gift from God to all humanity. Far too often the faculties have been “gendered” in the church, for example, when people lump “rationality” with men and “emotions” with women. In addition to empirical evidence that easily contradicts such hastily drawn stereotypes, one should reject such schemas because *all* Christians are called to love God with their mind, will, and affections. Healthy affections are crucial to the life of faith, and numbing them cannot be the answer. In Owen’s estimation, because the affections are so important to faithful obedience, Scripture often interchanges the language of heart and affections, for here is “the principal thing which God requires in our walking before him. . . . Save all other things and lose the heart, and all is lost—lost unto all eternity.”¹⁷

The goal of the Christian life is not external conformity or mindless action, but a passionate love for God informed by the mind and embraced by the will. So the path forward is not to decrease one’s affections but rather to enlarge them and fill them with “heavenly things.” Here one is not trying to escape the painful realities of this life but rather endeavoring to reframe one’s perspective of life around a much larger canvas that encompasses *all* of reality. To respond to the distorting nature of sin you must set your affections on the beauty and glory of God, the loveliness of Christ, and the wonder of the gospel: “Were our affections filled, taken up, and possessed with these things . . . what access could sin, with its painted pleasures, with its sugared poisons, with its envenomed baits, have unto our souls?”¹⁸ Resisting sin, according to this Puritan divine, comes not by deadening your affections but by awakening them to God himself. Do not seek to empty your cup as a way to avoid sin, but rather seek to fill it up with the Spirit of life, so there is no longer room for sin.

Considering Personalities

Part of treating persons as holistic beings is recognizing the similarities and differences among them. With this in mind, it seems strange that “psychology” is so often a negative term among Christians. Certainly people have used

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:709 (III.viii.9).

¹⁷ *Works*, 6:249.

¹⁸ *Works*, 6:250; cf. 6:188.

this science in a problematic manner at times, reducing human persons to mechanistic behavioral responses without any reference to God. However, many Christians have created problems on the other end by their overly simplistic view of human persons, failing to account for such important factors as physiological distinctions, diverse backgrounds, and deep-seated socio-economic impulses. While it is true that all humans are made in God's image, and that everyone is called to resist sin and seek righteousness, these commonalities do not cancel out undeniable particularities. In other words, what does righteousness look like in the lives of concrete individuals? How does sin tempt people in different ways? In many respects Owen's three treatises can be read as early modern attempts to explore human psychology as affected by sin and renewed by the Spirit.¹⁹

Faithful living does not always look the same. Sensitive pastors have long recognized this, learning the art of taking the wisdom of Scripture and applying it with care to the lives of those they counsel. Cookie-cutter molds simply will not work. In this vein, one reason that Owen consistently calls his readers to understand their own temperaments is because this will help them better appreciate how sin and temptation arise in their own lives. He recognizes that some people are by birth and experience "earthy," while others are "naturally gentle," and still others tend to have "passionate" dispositions. The challenge for all is to learn about their own constitution: "He who watches not this thoroughly, who is not exactly skilled in the knowledge of himself, will never be disentangled from one temptation or another all his days."²⁰

According to this Puritan pastor, there is no temperament that is free from temptation, and the trick is to be aware of the threats that are easily overlooked. For example, those who are naturally gentle and pleasant may be surprised to find themselves far down a path that they should have courageously departed from long ago. Such a person may, for instance, turn a deaf ear to slander or a blind eye to injustice because acknowledging these wrongs might require the person to act courageously. Although it would be easier to mind his own business, he may need to risk discomfort by standing up for those mocked or being willing to express righteous anger in the face of discrimination. Others who tend toward the "earthy" may rightly uphold what is now commonly called authenticity, but in the process they foster "selfishness" and "harsh thoughts of others." We all have "peculiar lusts" due to our particular constitution, education, or prejudice, and such things have "deep rooting and strength in

¹⁹ Cf. Timothy J. Keller, "Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 9/3 (1988): 11-43.

²⁰ *Works*, 6:132.

them.”²¹ Satan tends to attack us according to our particular personalities, moving against a confident person much differently than an anxious one, but tempting both nonetheless. Thus, we must learn our dispositions, for in so doing we are more prepared to avoid the stealthy arrows directed at us.

A persistent danger among Christians is that we confuse certain personalities with sanctification, creating an inaccurate hierarchy within the kingdom of God. In fact, Owen believes that because of our various backgrounds and temperaments, it is very hard to discern the most faithful Christians, since looks can be deceiving:

Remember that of many of *the best Christians, the worst* is known and seen. Many who keep up precious communion with God do yet oftentimes, by their *natural tempers* of freedom or passion, not carry so glorious appearances as others who perhaps come short of them in grace and the power of godliness.²²

Not only can appearances be misleading, but people in positions of leadership in the church often suffer greater falls than the average congregation member. When considering countless examples of the saints in Scripture (e.g., Noah, David, Hezekiah), Owen concludes that great “eruptions of actual sin” often occur not in “the lowest form or ordinary sort of believers,” but in people who have in the past “had a peculiar eminency in them on the account of their walking with God in their generation.”²³ Past faithfulness is not a protection against present dangers.

In this life there is no escaping the challenges of temptation, and thus all—young and old, pastor and parishioner, poor and rich, wise and simple—must commit themselves to battle against sin. “Be acquainted, then, with thine own heart: though it be deep, search it; though it be dark, inquire into it; though it give all its distempers other names than what are their due, believe it not.”²⁴ Do not justify your own particular sin, but seek to recognize it so that you might fight against it with all your strength. Although sin and temptation affect everyone differently, none can escape the constant onslaught. Christians are called to wage war against this enemy, knowing that there are only two options: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”²⁵ While

²¹ *Works*, 6:132.

²² *Works*, 6:298, emphasis original.

²³ *Works*, 6:279.

²⁴ *Works*, 6:132.

²⁵ *Works*, 6:9.

battlefield language may sound extreme to our ears, that is how Owen—following the Bible—conceives of this struggle. With this in mind, the only hope Owen can promise comes not through further self-examination but by embracing the love and provision of God.

KNOWING YOUR GOD

Affirming the importance of honest introspection does not blind Owen to the fact that this exercise will lead a person to despair if it is not also paralleled with a study of the grace of God. Since sin entered the world, it has become challenging for people to rightly view themselves, God, and his work. We are prone to have “hard thoughts” of God that tend to keep us from turning to him.²⁶ Owen’s goal is not to have people remain focused on their sin but rather to embrace the redemption accomplished in Christ. The aim is not despair but freedom for what Owen often calls “gospel obedience.”²⁷ Obedience rightly understood is always a response to God’s love.

A crucial work of the mind in the process of sanctification is the consistent consideration of God and his amazing grace.²⁸ This does not mean considering God as an abstract metaphysical principle. Rather, the Christian meditates *upon* him and *with* him. This distinction makes all the difference, placing the discussion within the framework of *relationality*, rather than mere rationality. Owen’s challenge is most instructive: “when we would undertake thoughts and meditations of God, his excellencies, his properties, his glory, his majesty, his love, his goodness, let it be done in a way of speaking unto God, in a deep humiliation . . . in a way of prayer and praise—speaking unto God.”²⁹ The invitation here is not to impersonal theological studies but rather to life-changing encounters with Yahweh.

One of the great promises of God is that he will preserve his people. In fact, the idea of the “perseverance of the saints” is frequently misunderstood, according to Owen, for so often discussion about remaining in the faith focuses on human efforts, as if it is up to us to avoid losing our salvation. In truth, the Christian hope rests not ultimately upon our own diligence, but on God’s faithfulness.³⁰ It is *God*, not us, who will ultimately persevere, and that is why he is able to promise us eternal life: “where the promise is, there is all

²⁶ E.g., *Works*, 2:34-35; 6:377, 570-72; 7:521; 9:37-39; 11:389-390, 581, etc.

²⁷ E.g., *Works*, 1:441; 2:180-181; 3:323, 634; 8:536; 11:379-424, etc.

²⁸ *Works*, 6:222.

²⁹ *Works*, 6:225.

³⁰ This is the argument made at great length in Owen’s massive book, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* (1654), *Works*, 11:1-666.

this assistance. The faithfulness of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Spirit, all are engaged in our preservation.”³¹ Christians can be confident about their growth in sanctification and eternal security because they are confident in the God who promises it.

Ever deepening communion with God occurs as the Spirit draws us to the Father through the Son.³² The Father will allow none to be snatched from his hand, the Son incarnate is a truly sympathetic high priest who is the lover of our souls, and the Spirit applies the atoning work of Christ to us. Thus, Owen reminds believers to keep these truths in mind as they face temptation, bringing their “lust to the gospel,” lest they lose sight of the sufficient sacrifice and restorative grace found in God’s work. “What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace?”³³ Notice that the love is preexistent, the blood shed, and the grace extended. The believer is *not* working to secure these realities, but seeking to live in light of them. Christians stand in the shadow of the cross, having experienced the tender mercy of God. They aim not to convince God that they are worthy of his love, but to grow in their knowledge and fellowship with him. It is through this ever-growing communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit that the believer is most able to resist sin and temptation. “Let a soul exercise itself to a communion with Christ in the good things of the gospel—pardon of sin, fruits of holiness, hope of glory, peace with God, joy in the Holy Ghost, dominion over sin—and he shall have a mighty preservative against all temptations.”³⁴

THE WORK OF SANCTIFICATION

How should the Christian understand the work of sanctification? Is the call of believers to holiness God’s work or their own? There are two extremes often found in the church when dealing with these questions. On the one hand, there are those who seem to believe that we are saved by grace and sanctified by works: here grace is problematically reduced to the initial work of salvation. On the other hand, in an effort to avoid “works righteousness,” others tend to collapse justification and sanctification; the danger here is that

³¹ *Works*, 6:142.

³² Owen unpacks the idea of fellowship with God within a Trinitarian framework in his *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* (1657; *Works*, 2:1-274). To place Owen’s approach within the larger context of his thought, see Kacic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen*, especially chapter 5.

³³ *Works*, 6:58.

³⁴ *Works*, 6:144.

the biblical call to active, faithful obedience by the believer can be nullified, and inappropriate passivity can set in. Rather than these two extremes, Owen follows the more traditional Reformed perspective that upholds another model of sanctification.³⁵

True and lasting resistance to sin comes not through willpower and self-improvement but through the Spirit who empowers believers with a knowledge and love of God. Throughout his writings Owen is always quick to highlight the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.³⁶ Not only does the Spirit of God bring life to those who are dead in sin, thus causing a new birth, but he also continues the work of God in the renewing of that person in the image of Christ. The fundamental difference between Owen's proposal and self-help programs is that he believes that only as the Spirit communicates the grace and love of the Father to us can we experience genuine relief.³⁷ Mortification of sin is "the gift of Christ" to believers, and this is given by the Spirit of the Son.³⁸ Efforts apart from the Spirit do not bring sanctification, even if they do produce changed behavior. Although the Spirit often uses beneficial activities such as "fasting and watching," rituals and human effort without the Spirit cannot ultimately bring liberation from sin and temptation.³⁹

So is the work of sanctification God's work or our work? Or is it some combination of the two? Maybe such questions are themselves problematic. John Murray, writing several centuries after Owen, fairly communicates the kind of approach Owen employs, although Murray here states it more concisely:

God's working in us [in sanctification] is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works in us and we also work. But the relation is that *because* God works we work.⁴⁰

³⁵ Owen warns, for example, against the extremes of rigid legalism on the one hand and false liberty on the other (*Works*, 6:14).

³⁶ Owen's fullest exploration of the person and work of the Spirit is found in volumes 3 and 4 of his works. Volume 3 contains a massive treatise on the Holy Spirit, and volume 4 contains four shorter explorations of aspects of the work of the Spirit (e.g., the Spirit and prayer, or spiritual gifts).

³⁷ *Works*, 6:7, 10, 16.

³⁸ *Works*, 6:19.

³⁹ *Works*, 6:61, 224-232.

⁴⁰ John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955; reprint, 1992), 148-149, emphasis original.

Owen's own view is similar, seeing sanctification as the work of God in and through the life of the believer. This is not passivity, but active living empowered by the Spirit of life.⁴¹

Two concepts commonly appear in early Reformed approaches to sanctification: mortification and vivification. Building on the language and imagery of Colossians 3:9-10, the idea of *mortification* was understood as a putting off of the "old man," and *vivification* was conceived as the reality of being made alive by the Spirit.⁴² Although the actual language of "vivification" is found less often in Owen than in earlier theologians like John Calvin or the renowned Puritan Thomas Goodwin, the idea is clearly present.⁴³ These twin ideas of sanctification require not only the shedding of sin but also renewal in grace. A practical example of how this works out may prove helpful.

Consider a man who is struggling with inappropriate sexual thoughts about one of his female coworkers. What does holiness look like in this case? Very often Christians have a truncated view of sanctification, which stops far too short of true righteousness. Although it would be a good thing for this man to get to the point that he no longer looks at this woman as an object of lust, that is not all that is hoped for in sanctification. Rather, in the power of the Spirit the goal is to move to a life-affirming position. Thus, the objective is not the absence of thoughts about this woman but the presence of a godly appreciation for her. Under normal circumstances this man should not simply try to deny her existence by avoiding her, but rather begin treating her with dignity, offering words that build her up instead of dehumanizing her with his thoughts. Ultimately lust will be replaced by genuine and appropriate respect and love. Similarly, the goal of dealing with gossip is not merely the absence of slander (which is the good work of mortification), but eventually the creating of an environment of encouragement, peace, and trust (further fruits of the Spirit's enlivening presence and work). Following the

⁴¹ Owen puts it thus: "The Holy Spirit works in us and upon us, as we are fit to be wrought in and upon; that is, so as to preserve our own liberty and free obedience. He works upon our understandings, wills, consciences, and affections, agreeably to their own natures; he works in us and with us, not against us or without us" (*Works*, 6:20).

⁴² See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 196, 328-329.

⁴³ For a helpful comparison between Calvin and Owen on these topics, see Randall C. Gleason, *John Calvin and John Owen on Mortification: A Comparative Study in Reformed Spirituality*, Studies in Church History (New York: Peter Lang, 1995). Calvin employs this language more often than Owen, but Owen does use it for bringing and sustaining life to people who are spiritually dead (e.g., *Works*, 3:209, 282, 329, 334; 15:585). Thomas Goodwin, a friend of Owen, would be an example of a Puritan who employs the language much more frequently, in his slightly older treatise, *The Trial of a Christian's Growth in Mortification, or Purging Out Corruption; and Vivification, or Bringing Forth More Fruit . . .* (1643), *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 12 vols. (James Nichol: 1861-1866; reprint, Eureka, Calif.: Tanski, 1996), 3:432-506.

trajectory of thought of theologians like Calvin and Owen, sanctification involves both putting sin to death and becoming free to love and obey.

CONCLUSION

We have briefly explored a few themes from Owen's thought that might help prepare readers for what they are about to encounter in his writings on sin, mortification, and temptation. Several things will quickly become apparent, such as recognizing that the language, sentence structure, and sometimes his sensitivities are not modern. As you read, do not be surprised to feel a certain amount of historical distance between yourself and Owen—to deny such differences would be naïve and problematic. The goal is not to create romantic views of the past, hoping to usher Christians back to some sort of “pure” seventeenth-century setting. Owen makes it perfectly clear that the power of sin and Satan were just as real then as now. Believers should read Owen not to return to the past but to gain insight into how they might more faithfully live in the present and prepare for the future.

“Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Culture has changed, but sinful human nature has not. For centuries Owen's works have challenged Christians to think afresh about how they face the reality of sin and temptation. Now Owen serves yet another generation of believers, calling us to wake from sleepy and apathetic attitudes toward holiness, demanding that we engage in honest self-reflection. But he doesn't stop there, for he intends to excite in us a renewed sense of the tender mercy of God who delights to commune with his people. Owen's thoughts are before you. You stand at the threshold of Dr. John Owen's office. Will you enter and receive the diagnosis, and stay to hear your cure?