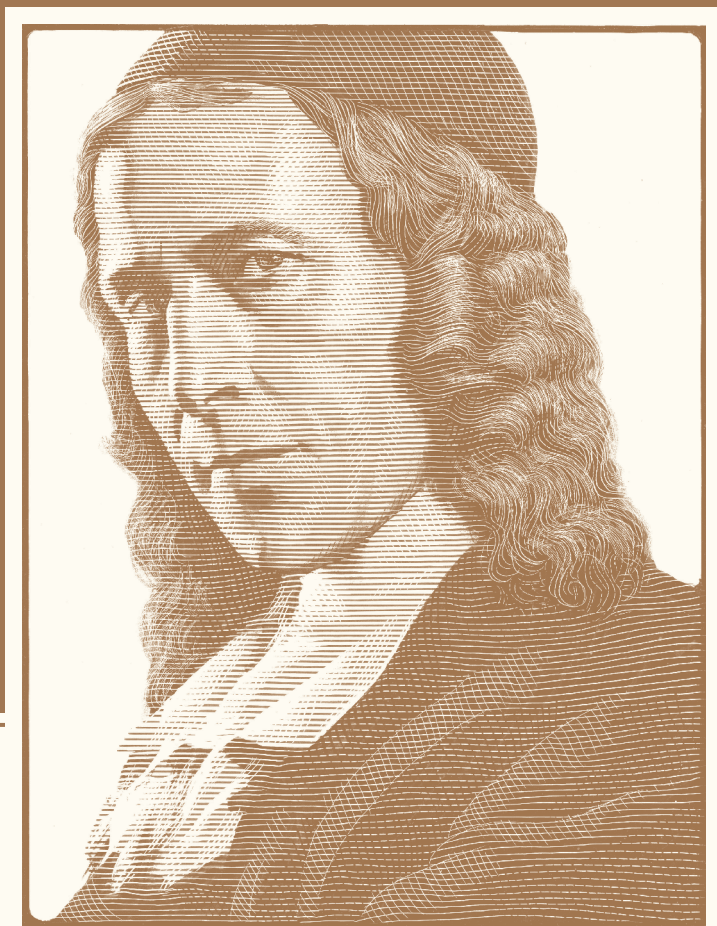


FOREWORD BY CARL R. TRUEMAN

MATTHEW BARRETT & MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN



OWEN

*on the Christian Life*

LIVING FOR THE GLORY OF GOD IN CHRIST

“John Owen is one of the church’s greatest minds. His theology runs deep: it is exegetically robust, expansive in scope, and penetratingly insightful. Barrett and Haykin ably guide readers through Owen’s work and mine many brilliant gems. I highly recommend this book for anyone weary of banal and Christless spirituality.”

**J. V. Fesko**, Academic Dean and Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“The writings of John Owen constitute an entire country of biblical, exegetical, doctrinal, spiritual, casuistical, practical, ecclesiastical, controversial, and political theology. Massive in size, Oweniana cannot be visited on a day trip. Indeed a lifetime hardly suffices for all there is to explore. But hire as your tour guides Matthew Barrett and Michael Haykin, and the daunting journey seems possible after all. With these seasoned scholars and enthusiasts as companions, visiting the varied counties, the significant towns, and the great cities of Oweniana is as enjoyable as it is instructive. *Owen on the Christian Life* simply excels as an outstanding contribution to an already first-class series.”

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas, Texas

“Theologically rich, carefully researched, and historically grounded, this book leads us into the wisdom of one of the greatest theologians of all time. Barrett and Haykin’s study of John Owen expands our view of the Christian life to embrace the knowledge of God’s glory in Jesus Christ. As our Lord reminded us, that is life indeed (John 17:3). Once you finish this book, you will definitely want to read Owen himself!”

**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“John Owen’s work is well worth knowing, especially since he was one of the giants who understood that all good theology is inevitably pastoral. Matthew Barrett and Michael A. G. Haykin strongly believe this as well; therefore, they prove able guides committed to introducing key theological emphases that not only inform Owen’s own conception of the Christian life but should guide ours as well.”

**Kelly M. Kopic**, Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College

“All that Owen wrote sought to promote contemplation of God and pursuit of godliness. This clear and loving account of his theology provides a sure guide to the spiritual riches of a magnificent Christian thinker.”

**John Webster**, Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Aberdeen

"I am delighted to be able to commend this guide to the Christian life drawn so deftly from the writings of John Owen by Drs. Barrett and Haykin. The authors are familiar with the Owen corpus and have drawn widely from the available materials. The result is a delightfully lucid work. When one first comes to Owen's writings, the sheer bulk may be daunting. Owen was a pastor, and this guidebook is a delight to read and study. Anyone who ventures into these pages will find the result richly rewarding and hopefully will turn to the sources. As I read this book, repeatedly I thought of what a blessing this would have been to me in the late 1950s when I acquired unexpectedly an almost complete set of Owen's *Works*."

**Robert W. Oliver**, Retired Pastor and Seminary Lecturer; writer on English Nonconformist and Baptist History

"*Owen on the Christian Life* is one of the most valuable accounts yet published of the practical theology of the most eminent English Puritan. Owen's theology has become known for its difficulty and polemic, and yet, as Barrett and Haykin demonstrate, it was driven by and was intended to develop a life of discipline and devotion. This book will be one of the best studies of Owen's thinking to be published in anticipation of his anniversary year."

**Crawford Gribben**, Professor of Early Modern British History,  
Queen's University

"John Owen was arguably the most important Puritan; his mind, the most penetrating; and his understanding of the Bible and theology, preeminent. As a pastor, he had a deep concern for the spiritual well-being of his hearers and readers. It is gratifying that this excellent discussion of Owen's consideration of the Christian life brings his work to a wider readership."

**Robert Letham**, Director of Research and Senior Lecturer in Systematic and Historical Theology, Wales Evangelical School of Theology

"As Barrett and Haykin make clear, John Owen always wrote for life: truth is not just to be believed but also to be experienced. Their book explores many of the great truths of the Christian faith in the hands of this great thinker. They translate the wisdom of his age for the benefit of ours, all in a way that helps us faithfully to live in the reality of God's holiness, love, and grace."

**Tim Cooper**, Associate Professor of Church History, University of Otago,  
New Zealand

OWEN

*on the Christian Life*

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# OWEN

*on the Christian Life*

LIVING FOR THE GLORY  
OF GOD IN CHRIST

MATTHEW BARRETT AND  
MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN

FOREWORD BY CARL R. TRUEMAN

 **CROSSWAY**  
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*To my son, Charles—  
may you find a friend in John Owen  
and together meditate on the glory of God in Christ.  
—Matthew Barrett*

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*To Trinity Baptist Church,  
Burlington, Ontario—  
where I learned much about John Owen  
and his vision of the Christian life.  
—Michael A. G. Haykin*



*All solid, learned, sober endeavours for the vindication of the absolute-ness, freedom, independency, and pre-eminence of that grace in Jesus Christ, whereby we are saved, will doubtless find acceptance with the children of Gospel-wisdom and all that love the glory of him that bought us.*

**JOHN OWEN, LETTER TO READER, NOVEMBER 7, 1653,  
IN W. EYRE, *VINDICIAE JUSTIFICATIONIS  
GRATUITAE* (1654)**

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## SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor



# FOREWORD

We live in an age when the challenges to Christianity, theological and practical (if one can separate such), are pressing in from all sides. Perhaps the most obvious challenge is the issue of homosexuality. Given the high pastoral stakes in this matter, it is important that we make the right decisions.

What has this to do with the thought of a man who died nearly 350 years ago? Simply this: in our era much practical thinking is driven by emotions. Emotions are enemies of fine distinctions. And yet the ethical and practical issues facing the church today demand precisely such fine distinctions if we are to do our task as pastors and church members: comfort the brokenhearted and rebuke those at ease in their sin. And John Owen was of an era when fine distinctions were part of the very fabric of practical theology.

Like one of his great theological heroes, Augustine, Owen was an acute psychologist of the Christian life. Further, as part of the great post-Reformation elaboration and codification of Reformed orthodoxy, he was adept at careful distinctions and precise argument. Finally, as a pastor and preacher, he constantly brought these two things together in practical ways in his congregation. We might add that the pastoral problems in the seventeenth century—greed, sex, anxiety, marital strife, petty personal vendettas—have a remarkably familiar and contemporary feel.

Owen thus wrestled with what he as pastor and his congregants could expect from the Christian life. Is such a life to be marked merely by an increasing appreciation for justification in Christ? Or is it also to involve the steady slaying of sin within our bodily members? Certainly it is hard to read the New Testament and see Paul's imperatives as simply pointing to legal impossibilities in order to drive us to despair. If they were simply that, why

does he typically place them at the end of his letters, after talking about the work that is done in Christ?

Further, Owen wrestled with the nature of sin and temptation. Is it sinful to be tempted? Well, that cannot be true in the simplest and most straightforward way because the New Testament teaches that Christ was sinless while tempted in every way as we are. This is where fine distinctions become helpful. Owen distinguishes between external temptations and internal. Thus one might pass a suggestive poster outside a shop that tempts one to have a lustful thought and yet resist that temptation and not sin. Or one may be sitting at home daydreaming and start to have inappropriate thoughts about a neighbor's wife. The one represents an external temptation; the other, internal.

That difference is crucial and surely plays into current discussions of same-sex attraction. Some say that the tendency itself is not wrong because temptation itself is not wrong. Owen would reply that it depends on how one is using the term *temptation*. Thus, Owen has much to say to perhaps the most pressing pastoral issue of our day.

Yet our culture is against Owen. That is not so much a theological statement as a comment on our intellectual life. Owen is hard to read. He wrote in long sentences and sometimes arcane and technical vocabulary. I suspect his theology is not so much rejected by the church today as simply not read. The effort is too great, whatever the actual reward might be.

For this reason, it is a pleasure to write the foreword to this book. Here the neophyte will find Owen's understanding of the Christian life explained in concise and clear prose. And for committed Owen aficionados, the authors provide a helpful overview. Hopefully, it will be the gateway for many who have never read Owen themselves to now be encouraged to do so. Given the times in which we live, when the most important questions both without and within the church relate to practical, pastoral ministry, a sound understanding of the Christian life is of paramount importance. There is no better place to start than Owen, and this is a fine introduction to the great man on precisely that topic.

Carl R. Trueman  
Paul Woolley Professor of Church History  
Westminster Theological Seminary

# PREFACE

A book on John Owen on the Christian life is especially difficult to write for the simple reason that no one book can do justice to the rich depth of Owen's writings and theology. To begin with, the sheer *volume* of works Owen wrote in his lifetime is truly remarkable. He stands alongside Augustine, Luther, and Calvin when one considers the large corpus of his writings, including not only theological treatises but also his commentary on Hebrews, as well as his sermons before Parliament and the local church. But even more impressive is the *quality* of those works. In other words, Owen's greatness owes not merely to his having written so many large theological tomes—many theologians have done that—but rather the rich content contained in those doctrinal works. Each of his works is like a deep well. One lets down his bucket to draw up water, and it returns full every time.

Therefore, this book is an exercise in the impossible. To write on such a herculean theologian like John Owen is a daunting task to say the least. How can we do justice to a man who wrote so many books on almost every theological topic, preached a multitude of sermons on a cornucopia of biblical texts, and contributed in significant ways to the development of seventeenth-century Puritanism in an evolving European context? Therefore, a few words are in order about how we wrote this book and how you might approach reading it.

## **The Task at Hand**

*Owen on the Christian Life* is not meant to be exhaustive. It would be a tremendous and enormous project for an author (or, more likely, a group of authors) to tackle a comprehensive study of Owen's theology. But that was



not our assignment in this book. Instead, we have chosen a select number of doctrines and topics that we believe were central to Owen's thought. In doing so, this book aims to introduce the reader to the fundamentals of Owen's theology with special attention to its application to the Christian life.

Moreover, *Owen on the Christian Life* is not a typical historical-theological study. It is a part of Crossway's Theologians on the Christian Life series. So while we focus on Owen's theology, we do so with the intention all along of applying his thought to the Christian life. As authors, we need not stretch Owen's theological works to somehow apply them to the Christian life. Owen was a theologian who always had this purpose in mind when he sat down to write. Whether it was the Trinity, the person of Christ, or the doctrines of predestination, regeneration, or justification, Owen continually sought to show how these glorious truths shape how we live for the glory of God in the face of Christ. For Owen, theology and doxology go hand and hand, like a married couple, impossible to divorce from one another.

### **How Is This Book Different?**

Additionally, we are not the first, nor will we be the last, to write on John Owen. Nor do we wish to be so. It must be acknowledged that a number of outstanding scholars have written books on Owen before us. Perhaps the book closest to our own is that of Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*. Ferguson's book is excellent in many ways, and we would encourage every reader to sink his or her teeth deep into it. Our book is not meant to replace Ferguson's outstanding volume, nor is it designed to improve upon it. Rather, ours is meant to complement the work of Ferguson (and many other worthy scholars). Likewise, our hope is that our book will add to the ongoing study of Owen, encouraging others to probe areas where we do not tread.

However, our book does differ from Ferguson's in notable ways. For example, Ferguson's volume does not devote significant attention to divine providence, predestination, justification, the person of Christ, or the nature of the atonement. Therefore, among many other topics, we have also spent considerable space treating these doctrines not only because they were of great importance to Owen, but also to avoid overlapping territory with Ferguson too much. On the other hand, while Ferguson gives lengthy attention to topics like covenant theology, law and gospel, assurance, apos-

tasy, the sacraments, and prayer, our utilization of these themes in Owen is intentionally minimal. Nonetheless, the keen eye will notice many of these themes sprinkled throughout the book and even assumed in various ways. So while we do attend to many of those areas Ferguson has touched on, our book seeks to look at Owen from another angle, addressing several doctrines that Owen wrote on extensively and that need to be unearthed. Our hope is that this book will add to the ongoing study of Owen, encouraging others to probe areas where we do not tread.

### **Who Should Read *Owen on the Christian Life*?**

For whom did we write this book? There are several excellent books on Owen that are meant for an academic audience, and we have provided a Select Bibliography at the end of this volume for that purpose. However, this book, and the entire series, is not written for the academic elite. It is written for any and every Christian interested in what this Puritan giant had to say about the Christian life. Therefore, while we do not pass over or ignore the weightiness of Owen's theology, nevertheless, the book is written with a very practical and pastoral focus in mind. So if you want to be introduced to Owen, his theology, and how he applied that theology to Christian living, then you have picked up the right book. Our hope is that, with Owen's help, you will walk away with a deep sense of some of the most important truths of the Christian faith, and that you will see just how important theology is for living the Christian life. If you do, then not only have we succeeded, but we have also represented Owen well, since his aim, as both a theologian and a pastor, was to demonstrate that what we think about God should transform everything about us. Again, theology and doxology go together, and the latter flows naturally from the former.

One other word is in order. For the average layperson, the Puritans are not easy to read, especially John Owen. Puritan thought is embedded in what to many is increasingly archaic English. Sadly, many have picked up a book by Owen and minutes later set it down indefinitely because of the difficulty of comprehending him. We are not ignorant of the fact that for many, reading Owen is a fearful task. What we have tried to do in this book, therefore, is translate Owen for those who are not familiar with the Puritans and their style of writing. Where Owen is famously (or for others, infamously) long-winded, exploring one digression after another, we have

done our best to summarize his main points, and to footnote those places we did not cover but welcome every reader to explore.

At the same time, we have also tried to avoid “dumbing-down” Owen. One of Owen’s strengths is his ability to leave no stone unturned. Owen has the extraordinary skill of describing a theological truth in such depth that he brings to the surface aspects of that truth you had never thought of or imagined could exist. Therefore, though we have tried to make Owen digestible for the novice, nevertheless, there are many times when you just need to hear Owen for yourself, unchecked, unbridled, unabridged, and unedited. In that light, we have, as much as possible, quoted him so that you can hear this great Puritan thinker unfiltered.

### **Why We Need to Read and Learn from John Owen**

Why should we read, get to know, and learn from a Puritan like John Owen? As J. I. Packer has argued, we need to read the Puritans, and John Owen especially, because we are spiritual dwarfs by comparison.<sup>1</sup> Far too often in the recent past the focus of Christians has shifted away from the glory of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ and has instead made Christianity man-centered and success-oriented. Consequently, Christian spirituality has become sentimental and self-indulgent. In short, we lack spiritual maturity.

In contrast, John Owen was a spiritual giant. Many reasons could be listed as to why, but we will focus on just three. First and foremost, Owen had a big view of God and a passion to see this great God lifted up in worship. The glory of God in Christ was at the very core of Owen’s thought, suffusing his writing and preaching at every turn. Owen was radically God-centered. But for Owen, and for the Puritans altogether, intellectual knowledge was not enough. Rather, one must *know* God experientially, or, as Owen would put it, experimentally. In other words, it was not enough for God to be studied; God had to be served, adored, and worshiped. Truly understanding who God is and what he has done in redemptive history is meant to arouse our affections for God. Head knowledge always has to be accompanied by heartfelt experience, which leads us to our next point.

Second, we can learn much from the quality of Owen’s spirituality. In knowing God, Owen knew humanity.<sup>2</sup> While human beings have been

<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Owen sounds much like Calvin before him. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.1.1.

made in God's image, sin has radically distorted them in every way. Every person stands guilty before a holy God and every person is corrupt, unwilling and unable to turn to Christ. For Owen, it is only through the effectual and gracious work of the Spirit that sinners are converted to Christ and thereafter grow in holiness and likeness to Christ. It is no wonder that Owen's assistant, David Clarkson, wrote of him, "It was his great Design to promote Holiness in the Life and Exercise of it among you."<sup>3</sup> And for Owen, this communion with the triune God was at the very center of the Christian's sanctification and growth in holiness.

Third, Owen sought reformation, not only in the individual believer but also in the corporate church. Owen was serious about both the Christian life and the church's godliness, which in his mind was to occur through the preaching and teaching of God's Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the practice of church discipline. In this sense Owen was in line with the best of the sixteenth-century Reformers. If there was any man who sought to initiate and cultivate genuine reformation in England, it was John Owen. If we desire to see spiritual renewal in our own day, we will do well to pay heed to the lessons we can glean from the life and writings of Owen.

It is sad that many Christians today have never heard of John Owen, let alone read this colossal Puritan. Owen simply is not read and celebrated to the extent of others such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. Nevertheless, he should be. Owen's writings are a gold mine just waiting to be dug up and discovered anew. Therefore, it is our aim both to introduce you to Owen's understanding of the Christian life, and to instill within each reader a thirst to imbibe Owen, drinking deeply from this Puritan well. In so doing, our ultimate goal is not to create merely a renewed interest in Owen, as important as that is. Rather, our aspiration is to allow Owen to speak for himself, giving us a glimpse into the majesty, glory, and supremacy of our great God, as well as a renewed passion to see the gospel of Jesus Christ take root both in the church and in the life of the believer.

### **Living for the Glory of God in Christ**

Last, a word is needed about the subtitle of this book, *Living for the Glory of God in Christ*. Clarkson said in his sermon at the funeral of John Owen:

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), xiii.

I need not tell you of this who knew him, that it was his great Design to promote Holiness in the Life and Exercise of it among you: But it was his great Complaint, that its Power declined among Professors. It was his Care and Endeavor to prevent or cure spiritual Decays in his own Flock: He was a burning and a shining Light, and you for a while rejoiced in his Light. Alas! It was but for a while; and we may Rejoyce in it still.<sup>4</sup>

Clarkson has well captured the *raison d'être* of the life of Owen. Owen's books and sermons drip with this ever-flowing, ever-radiant emphasis on Christian holiness. At the core of this emphasis was his desire to live a life of purity and godliness, one that magnified, glorified, and pleased God and his Savior Christ Jesus. Like Owen, we also lament that few today understand and experience what it is like to live in this way. But also like Owen, we aim in this book to help prevent and cure spiritual decay in the church. So if you are lacking in your zeal for Christ and are weary in your struggle against sin and your pursuit of godliness, then you have come to the right place. Drink deeply.

*Soli Deo gloria*

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, xiii.

# CHRONOLOGY

- 1616 John Owen is born to Rev. Henry Owen and his wife, Hester.
- 1625 James I is succeeded by Charles I.
- 1626 Owen begins grammar school.
- 1628 Owen enters Oxford University.
- 1629 Charles I dissolves Parliament.
- 1630 William Laud becomes chancellor of Oxford.  
Puritans leave for New England and are led by John Winthrop.
- 1632 Owen graduates with a BA.
- 1633 Laud is appointed archbishop of Canterbury.
- 1635 Owen is awarded an MA; begins a seven-year BD program.
- 1637 Owen leaves Oxford University.
- 1640 The Long Parliament (1640–1653) convenes.
- 1642 The English Civil War begins; Owen moves to London and gains assurance of salvation.
- 1643 Owen takes up a pastorate in Fordham, Essex; Owen marries Mary Rooke (c. 1618–1676).  
The Westminster Assembly convenes.  
The Solemn League and Covenant is signed.
- 1644 Parliamentarians gain an important victory at the Battle of Marston Moor.
- 1645 Laud is executed; the decisive Battle of Naseby is fought.
- 1646 Owen preaches before Parliament (April 29).  
He is inducted as vicar of Coggeshall, Essex.  
Owen becomes a Congregationalist.

- 1647 The Westminster Confession of Faith is completed.
- 1648 The First Civil War comes to an end.
- 1649 Charles I is executed; England is declared a commonwealth. As Oliver Cromwell's chaplain, Owen travels to Ireland.
- 1650 Owen is appointed preacher to the Council of State and a chaplain to Cromwell with the expedition to Scotland.
- 1651 Owen is appointed dean of Christ Church, Oxford University.
- 1652 Owen is appointed vice-chancellor of Oxford.
- 1653 Cromwell dissolves Parliament and is appointed Lord Protector. Owen is awarded an honorary DD from Oxford.
- 1657 Owen opposes the offer of the crown to Cromwell. Owen is no longer vice-chancellor.
- 1658 Owen takes a leading role at the Savoy Assembly. Cromwell dies (September 3).
- 1660 The monarchy is restored under Charles II. Owen leaves Christ Church and Oxford (March); he lives at Stadhampton.
- 1662 The Act of Uniformity seeks to impose Anglican uniformity; two thousand Puritan ministers are ejected on St. Bartholomew's Day (August 24); Owen moves to Stoke Newington.
- 1664 The Conventicle Act prohibits Nonconformist pastors from preaching.
- 1665 The Great Plague kills many in London; the Five Mile Act prohibits Nonconformist ministers from returning to parishes.
- 1666 The Great Fire in London destroys much of the city.
- 1669–1670 Owen discusses Nonconformist unity with Richard Baxter.
- 1672 Limited religious freedom is granted by the Declaration of Indulgence.
- 1673 Owen's church unites with that of Joseph Caryl; the congregation now meets in Leadenhall Street, London.
- 1675 Owen's first wife, Mary, dies.
- 1676 Owen marries Dorothy D'Oyley.
- 1683 Owen dies (August 24); he is buried in Bunhill Fields (September 4).
- 1689 The Toleration Act receives royal assent.

## CHAPTER I

# BEING JOHN OWEN

*The Puritan John Owen . . . was one of the greatest of English theologians. In an age of giants, he overtopped them all. C. H. Spurgeon called him the prince of divines. He is hardly known today, and we are the poorer for our ignorance.*<sup>1</sup>

### **“I Would Gladly Relinquish All My Learning”**

Charles II (r. 1660–1685) once asked one of the most learned scholars that he knew why any intelligent person should waste time listening to the sermons of an uneducated tinker and Baptist preacher by the name of John Bunyan (1628–1688).<sup>2</sup> “Could I possess the tinker’s abilities for preaching, please your majesty,” replied the scholar, “I would gladly relinquish all my learning.” The name of the scholar was John Owen (1616–1683), and this small story—apparently true and not apocryphal—says a good deal about the man and his Christian character. His love of and concern for the preaching of the Word reveals a man who was Puritan to the core. And the fragrant humility of his reply to the king was a virtue that permeated all of his writings, in which he sought to glorify the triune God and help God’s people find the maturity that was theirs in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 191.

<sup>2</sup> Parts of this chapter are taken from Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Reformers and Puritans as Spiritual Mentors* (Ontario: Joshua, 2012), chap. 9. For permission to use this material here, the authors are indebted to Joshua Press.

<sup>3</sup> For the story, see Andrew Thomson, *Life of Dr Owen*, in *The Works of John Owen* (1850; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 1:xcii; Allen C. Guelzo, “John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter,” *Christianity Today* 20 (May 21, 1976): 14; Peter Toon, *God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen: Pastor, Educator, Theologian*



In his own day some of Owen's fellow Puritans called him the "Calvin of England."<sup>4</sup> More recently, Roger Nicole has described Owen as "the greatest divine who ever wrote in English," and J. I. Packer says of him that during his career as a Christian theologian, he was "England's foremost bastion and champion of Reformed evangelical orthodoxy."<sup>5</sup> Despite his theological brilliance, it needs noting that Owen's chief interest was not in producing theological treatises for their own sake, but in advancing the personal holiness of God's people.<sup>6</sup>

### "Bred Up from My Infancy": Owen's Early Years

John Owen was born in 1616, the same year that William Shakespeare died. Owen grew up in a Christian home in a small village now known as Stadhampton, then called Stadham, about five miles southeast of Oxford.<sup>7</sup> His father, Henry Owen, was a Puritan and the minister of the parish church there. The names of three of his brothers have also come down to us: his older brother, William, who became the Puritan minister at Remenham, just north of Henley-on-Thames; and his two younger brothers: Henry, who fought as a major in the New Model Army of Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), and Philemon, who was killed fighting under Cromwell in Ireland in 1649.<sup>8</sup>

Of Owen's childhood years only one reference has been recorded. "I was bred up from my infancy," he remarked in 1657, "under the care of my father, who was a nonconformist all his days, and a painful labourer [that is, diligent worker] in the vineyard of the Lord."<sup>9</sup> If we take as our cue the way that other Puritans raised their children, we can presume that as a small boy Owen, along with his siblings, would have been taught to pray, to read the Bible, and to obey its commandments. At least once a day there

(Exeter: Paternoster, 1971), 162. Subsequent references to the works of Owen throughout this book are cited according to the title of the work, as well as the volume and page numbers in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 23 vols. (1850–1855; repr., London: Banner of Truth, 1965–1968). References to Owen's commentary on Hebrews are cited in the same fashion, the Hebrews volumes being vols. 17–23 of the *Works*. Where pertinent, the biblical text being commented upon will also be referenced.

<sup>4</sup>Guelzo, "John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter," 14; Richard L. Greaves, "Owen, John (1616–1683)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., May 2009, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/view/article/21016>, accessed June 16, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>Guelzo, "John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter," 14; Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 81.

<sup>6</sup>Guelzo, "John Owen, Puritan Pacesetter," 15–16.

<sup>7</sup>For a good account of Owen's life, see Toon, *God's Statesman*. For Owen's theology, the best studies are undoubtedly Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), and now Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012). See also Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987); and Robert W. Oliver, ed., *John Owen: The Man and His Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

<sup>8</sup>Toon, *God's Statesman*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>Owen, *A Review of the True Nature of Schism*, in *Works*, 13:224.

would have been time set aside for family worship when he would have listened to his father explain a portion of God's Word and pray for their nation, his parishioners, and each of his children.<sup>10</sup> It needs noting that this is the only personal remark about his family that Owen makes in any of his published works. There was clearly a reticence on his part to open up his life to his readers. As James Moffatt remarked at the turn of the twentieth century: "Owen never trusts himself to his readers. . . . Hence his private life and feelings remain for the most part a mystery."<sup>11</sup>

At twelve years of age, Owen was sent by his father to Queen's College, the University of Oxford. Here he obtained his BA on June 11, 1632, when he was sixteen. He went on to study for the MA, which he was awarded on April 27, 1635. Everything seemed to be set for Owen to pursue an academic career. It was not, however, a good time to launch out into world of academe. The archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud (1573–1645), had set out to suppress the Puritan movement, which was seen as radical, even revolutionary, by the leadership of the state church. Laud thus began a purge of the churches and universities. By 1637 Owen had no alternative but to leave Oxford and to become, along with many other Puritans who refused to conform to the established church, a private chaplain. He eventually found employment in the house of Lord Lovelace, a nobleman sympathetic to the Puritan cause. Laud's policies, supported by the monarch Charles I (r. 1625–1649), alienated the Puritan cause and pushed the Puritans to the point where many of them believed they had no choice but to engage in a civil war against their sovereign. In the early stages of the English Civil War, which broke out in 1642, Lord Lovelace decided to support the king, and Owen, whose sympathies were with Parliament, left his chaplaincy and moved to London.

### **A "Clear Shining from God"**

The move to London was providential in a couple of ways. First of all, it brought him into contact with the some of the leading defenders of the parliamentary cause, Puritan preachers who viewed the struggle between the king and Parliament in terms of the struggle between Christ and anti-Christian forces. Moreover, it was during these initial days in London that he had an experience he would never forget. By 1642 Owen was convinced

<sup>10</sup>Toon, *God's Statesman*, 2.

<sup>11</sup>James Moffatt, *The Golden Book of John Owen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904), 19–20.

that the final source of authority in religion was the Holy Scriptures and, moreover, that the doctrines of orthodox Calvinism were biblical Christianity. But he had yet to experience personally the Holy Spirit bearing witness to his spirit and giving him the assurance that he was a child of God.<sup>12</sup>

Owen found this assurance one Sunday when he decided to go with a cousin to hear Edmund Calamy the Elder (1600–1666), a famous Presbyterian preacher, at St. Mary's Church, Aldermanbury. On arriving at this church, they were informed that Calamy was not going to preach that morning. Instead a country preacher (whose name Owen never did discover) was going to fill in for the Presbyterian divine. Owen's cousin urged him to go with him to hear Arthur Jackson (c. 1593–1666), another notable Puritan preacher, at nearby St. Michael's. But Owen decided to remain at St. Mary's. The preacher took as his text Matthew 8:26: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" It proved to be a message that Owen needed to hear and embrace. Through the words of a preacher whose identity is unknown, God spoke to Owen and removed once and for all his doubts and fears as to whether he was truly regenerate. He now knew himself to be born of the Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of this spiritual experience cannot be overestimated. It gave Owen the deep, inner conviction that he was indeed a child of God and chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that God loved him and had a loving purpose for his life, and that this God was the true and living God. In practical terms, it meant a lifelong interest in the work of God the Holy Spirit that would issue thirty years later in his monumental study of the Holy Spirit, *Pneumatologia; or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*.<sup>14</sup> As he later wrote, "Clear shining from God must be at the bottom of deep labouring with God."<sup>15</sup>

### **Pastoral Ministry and Preaching before Parliament**

In 1643 Owen was offered the pastorate in the village of Fordham, six miles or so northwest of Colchester in Essex. Owen was here till 1646, when he became the minister of the church at the market town of Coggeshall, some five miles to the south. Here, as many as two thousand people would fill

<sup>12</sup>Toon, *God's Statesman*, 12.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 12–13.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 13. It also meant Owen would write on the doctrine of assurance. See Owen, *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm 130*, in *Works*, 6:324–648.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Peter Barraclough, *John Owen (1616–1683)* (London: Independent Press, 1961), 6.

the church each Lord's Day to hear Owen preach.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although Owen would later speak slightly of his preaching to King Charles II—as seen in the anecdote with which this chapter began—it is evident that he was no mean preacher.

It is also noteworthy that this change in pastorates began an ecclesiological shift to Congregationalism. Up until this point Owen had been decidedly Presbyterian in his understanding of church government. However, Owen began to change his mind after reading *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven* by John Cotton (1584–1652), which had been published in 1644, and by 1648 he was a confirmed Congregationalist. It was also at Coggeshall that he wrote the classic work on particular redemption *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647).<sup>17</sup> The backdrop for these early years of Owen's pastoral ministry was the English Civil War, when England knew the horrors of bloody fields of battle, and father was ranged against son and neighbor against neighbor on the battlefield. Well has this period been described as “the world turned upside down.” It needs to be noted, though, that little of the early fighting actually took place in Essex or remotely near Coggeshall; hence at this time, Owen saw little of the bloody horrors of civil war.<sup>18</sup>

During these tumultuous days Owen clearly identified himself with the parliamentary cause. Like others who ardently supported Parliament in their struggle against the king, Owen would look back on some of the decisive parliamentary victories in the 1640s as a clear vindication of their cause by God.<sup>19</sup> He also developed a friendship with the rising military figure Oliver Cromwell and was frequently invited to preach before Parliament. By late 1648 some of the parliamentary army officers had begun to urge that Charles I be brought to trial on charges of treason since he had fought against his own people and Parliament. Charles was accordingly put on trial in January 1649, and by the end of that month a small group of powerful Puritan leaders had found him guilty and sentenced their king to death. On January 31, the day following the public execution of the king, Owen was asked to preach before Parliament.

Owen used the occasion to urge upon the members of Parliament that

<sup>16</sup> Robert W. Oliver, “John Owen (1616–1683)—His Life and Times,” in Oliver, *John Owen*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> For a study of this work, see Jack N. Macleod, “John Owen and the Death of Death,” in *Out of Bondage* (London: The Westminster Conference, 1983), 70–87.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Cooper, “Why Did Richard Baxter and John Owen Diverge? The Impact of the First Civil War,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 507–11.

<sup>19</sup> As he once stated, “Where is the God of Marston Moor, and the God of Naseby? is an acceptable expostulation in a gloomy day.” Quoted in Moffatt, *Golden Book of John Owen*, 112.

for them, now the rulers of England, in order to obtain God's favor in the future they must remove from the nation all traces of false worship and superstition and wholeheartedly establish a religion based on Scripture alone. Owen based his sermon on Jeremiah 15. He made no direct reference to the events of the previous day, nor did he mention, at least in the version of his sermon that has come down to us, the name of the king. Nevertheless, his hearers and later readers would easily have been able to deduce from his use of the Old Testament how he viewed the religious policy and end of Charles. From the story of the wicked king Manasseh that is recorded in 2 Kings 21 and with cross-references to Jeremiah 15, he argued that the leading cause for God's judgments upon the Jewish people had been such abominations as idolatry and superstition, tyranny and cruelty. He then pointed to various similarities between the conditions of ancient Judah and the England of his day. At the heart of the sermon was a call to Parliament to establish a Reformed style of worship, to disseminate biblical Christianity, to uphold national righteousness, and to avoid oppression. He assured the Puritan leaders who heard him that day that God's promise of protection to Jeremiah was also applicable to all who in every age stood firmly for justice and mercy.<sup>20</sup>

### **Ireland and Oxford**

Later that same year, Owen accompanied Cromwell on his campaign in Ireland, where he stayed from August 1649 to February 1650. Though ill much of this time, he preached frequently to "a numerous multitude of as thirsting a people after the gospel as ever yet I conversed withal."<sup>21</sup> When he returned to England the following year, he confessed, "The tears and cries of the inhabitants of Dublin after the manifestations of Christ are ever in my view." Accordingly, he sought to convince Parliament of the spiritual need of this land and asked:

How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold him out as a lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends? Is it the sovereignty and interest of England that is alone to be there transacted? For my part, I see no farther into the mystery of these things but that I could heartily rejoice,

<sup>20</sup> Owen, "Righteous Zeal Encouraged by Divine Protection," in *Works*, 8:133–62; Toon, *God's Statesman*, 33–34.

<sup>21</sup> Owen, *Of the Death of Christ*, in *Works*, 10:479.

that, innocent blood being expiated, the Irish might enjoy Ireland so long as the moon endureth, so that Jesus Christ might possess the Irish. I would there were for the present one gospel preacher for every walled town in the English possession in Ireland. . . . If they were in the dark, and loved to have it so, it might something [to some extent] close a door upon the bowels of our compassion; but they cry out of their darkness, and are ready to follow every one whosoever, to have a candle. If their being gospelless move not our hearts, it is hoped their importunate cries will disquiet our rest, and wrest help as a beggar doth an alms.<sup>22</sup>

Although Owen's pleas were heeded and this period saw the establishment of a number of Puritan congregations—both Congregationalist and Baptist—in Ireland, Crawford Gribben has shown that the inability of the Puritans in Ireland to work together with like-minded brethren for the larger cause of the kingdom of Christ hindered their witness.<sup>23</sup>

By the early 1650s, Owen had become one of Cromwell's leading advisors, especially in national affairs having to do with the church. There is little doubt that Owen was a firm supporter of Cromwell in this period. As Owen told him on one occasion in 1654, for example, "The series and chain of eminent providences whereby you have been carried on and protected in all the hazardous work of your generation, which your God hath called you unto, is evident to all."<sup>24</sup> Two years later, though, when Cromwell was urged to become the monarch of England, Owen was among those who opposed this move. As it turned out, Cromwell did not accept the crown. But Owen's friendship with Cromwell had been damaged, and the two men were nowhere near as close as they had been.<sup>25</sup> This would have distressed Owen since he had viewed Cromwell with enormous admiration. This rupture in his friendship with Cromwell may well have reinforced a tendency in Owen's character to be self-reliant.<sup>26</sup>

Cromwell had appointed Owen to the oversight of Oxford University in 1652 as its vice-chancellor. From this position Owen helped to reassemble the faculty, who had been dispersed by the war, and to put the university back on its feet. He also had numerous opportunities to preach

<sup>22</sup> Owen, "The Steadfastness of the Promises, and the Sinfulness of Staggering," in *Works*, 8:235–36.

<sup>23</sup> Crawford Gribben, *The Irish Puritans: James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003), 91–115.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, in *Works*, 11:5.

<sup>25</sup> Oliver, "John Owen (1616–1683)," 26; Toon, *God's Statesman*, 97–101.

<sup>26</sup> See the remarks on Owen's friendships by Moffatt, *Golden Book of John Owen*, 19–20, and Tim Cooper, "Owen's Personality: The Man behind the Theology," in Kacic and Jones, *Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, 215–26.

to the students at Oxford. Two important works on holiness came out of his preaching during this period. *Of Temptation*, first published in 1658, is essentially an exposition of Matthew 26:4. It analyzes the way in which believers fall into sin. A second work, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), is in some ways the richest of all of Owen's treatises on this subject. It is based on Romans 8:13 and lays out a strategy for fighting indwelling sin and warding off temptation. Owen emphasizes that in the fight against sin the Holy Spirit employs all our human powers. In sanctifying us, Owen insists, the 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; so that his assistance is an encouragement as to the facilitating of the work, and no occasion of neglect as to the work itself.<sup>27</sup>

Not without reason does Owen lovingly describe the Spirit in another place as "the great beautifier of souls."<sup>28</sup>

Oliver Cromwell died in September 1658, and the "rule of the saints," as some called it, began to fall apart. In the autumn of that year, Owen, now a key leader among the Congregationalists, played a vital role in drawing up what is known as the Savoy Declaration, which would give the Congregationalist churches fortitude for the difficult days ahead. Only a few days after Cromwell's death, Owen met with around two hundred other Congregationalist leaders, including men like Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), Philip Nye (c. 1596–1672), and William Bridge (c. 1600–1671),<sup>29</sup> in the chapel of the old Savoy Palace in London. One of the outcomes of this synod was a recommendation to revise the Westminster Confession of Faith for the Congregationalist churches. Traditionally Owen has been credited with writing the lengthy preface that came before the Savoy Declaration. In it he rightly argued, anticipating a key issue over the rest of his life:

<sup>27</sup> In *Works*, 6:20. See also the comments of J. I. Packer, "'Keswick' and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 (1955): 156.

<sup>28</sup> Owen, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*, in *Works*, 6:188. For further discussion of this area of Owen's teaching, see Michael A. G. Haykin, "The Great Beautifier of Souls," *Banner of Truth* 242 (1983): 18–22, and below in chap. 8.

<sup>29</sup> For biographical sketches of these three men, see William S. Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Influential Puritans at the Time When the Westminster Confession of Faith Was Written* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1996), 69–94 passim.

The Spirit of Christ is in himself too *free*, great and generous a Spirit, to suffer himself to be used by any human arm, to whip men into belief; he drives not, but *gently leads into all truth*, and *persuades men to dwell in the tents of like precious faith*; which would lose of its preciousness and value, if that sparkle of freeness shone not in it.<sup>30</sup>

The following year Owen preached again before Parliament. But the times were changing, and this proved to be the last of such occasions.

### **“The Church in a Storm”: Owen, a Leader in a Time of Persecution, 1660–1683**

In 1660 a number of Cromwell’s fellow Puritan leaders, fearful that Britain was slipping into full-fledged anarchy, asked Charles II, then living in exile on the Continent, to return to England as her monarch. Those who came to power with Charles were determined that the Puritans would never again hold the reins of political authority. During Charles’s reign and that of his brother James II (r. 1685–1688), the Puritan cause was thus savagely persecuted. After the Act of Uniformity in 1662, which required all religious worship to be according to the letter of the Book of Common Prayer, and other legislation enacted during the 1660s, all other forms of worship were illegal.

A number of Owen’s close friends, including John Bunyan, suffered fines and imprisonment for not heeding these laws. Although Owen was shielded from actual imprisonment by some powerful friends, such as Lord Philip Wharton (1613–1696), he led at best a precarious existence till his death. He was once nearly attacked by a mob, which surrounded his carriage.<sup>31</sup> Between 1663 and 1666 he was tempted to accept the offer of a safe haven in America when the Puritan leaders in Massachusetts offered him the presidency of Harvard.<sup>32</sup> Owen, though, recognized where he was needed most, and he wrote prodigiously in defense of Nonconformity. This polemical defense, though, took its toll. In 1672, he told the New England Puritan John Eliot (1604–1690), “There is scarce any one alive in the world that hath more reproaches cast upon him than I have,” and as he was experiencing “a dry and barren spirit,” he begged Eliot to pray for him that God

<sup>30</sup> Preface to the Savoy Declaration in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff and rev. David S. Schaff, vol. 3 (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 709; emphasis original. For a recent edition of this confession, see *The Savoy Declaration of Faith* (Millers Falls, MA: First Congregational Church, 1998).

<sup>31</sup> Barraclough, *John Owen*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Greaves, “Owen, John.”



would “water me from above.”<sup>33</sup> Two years later, in a letter to Charles Fleetwood (c. 1618–1692), one of Cromwell’s sons-in-law, he described himself as a “poor withering soul” and he expressed his fear that

we shall die in the wilderness; yet ought we to labour and pray continually that the heavens would drop down from above, and the skies pour down righteousness—that the earth may open and bring forth salvation, and that righteousness may spring up together [see Ps. 85:10–11]. . . . I beseech you to contend yet more earnestly than ever I have done, with God, with my own heart, with the church, to labour after spiritual revivals.<sup>34</sup>

Owen’s fears were not unfounded: he would die without seeing any turning of the tide for the Nonconformists, and the spiritual state of England would continue to decline until the revivals of the mid-1730s.

Owen’s first wife, Mary, died in 1676. When he remarried the following year, his second wife, Dorothy D’Oyley, was the widow of a wealthy Oxfordshire landowner whom Owen would have known from his connections to his home village of Stadhampton.<sup>35</sup> Added to the toil and anxieties of these years were physical challenges, especially asthma and kidney stones. But these years were also ones of prodigious literary fruitfulness. His exhaustive commentary on Hebrews appeared between 1668 and 1684, which he regarded in many ways as his magnum opus.<sup>36</sup> *A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit* came out in 1674, and an influential work on justification, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith*, in 1677. Owen’s *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, which Robert Oliver has rightly termed

<sup>33</sup> Letter to John Eliot (1672), in *The Correspondence of John Owen*, ed. Peter Toon (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1970), 154.

<sup>34</sup> Letter to Charles Fleetwood, July 8 (1674), in Toon, *Correspondence of John Owen*, 159. Owen was not the only Puritan leader urging prayer for revival in the 1670s. Four years after Owen wrote this letter, John Howe (1630–1705) preached a series of sermons based on Ezekiel 39:29 in which he dealt with the subject of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In one of these sermons he told his audience: “When the Spirit shall be poured forth plentifully I believe you will hear much other kind of sermons, or they will, who shall live to such a time, than you are wont to do now-a-days. . . . It is plain, too sadly plain, there is a great retraction of the Spirit of God even from us; we know not how to speak living sense [i.e., felt reality] unto souls, how to get within you; our words die in our mouths, or drop and die between you and us. We even faint, when we speak; long experienced unsuccessfulness makes us despond; we speak not as persons that hope to prevail. . . . When such an effusion of the Spirit shall be as is here signified . . . [ministers] shall know how to speak to better purpose, with more compassion and sense, with more seriousness, with more authority and allurements, than we now find we can.” *The Prosperous State of the Christian Interest before the End of Time, by a Plentiful Effusion of the Holy Spirit: Sermon IV*, in *The Works of the Rev. John Howe*, M. A. (New York: John P. Haven, 1838), 1:575. For the explanation of “living sense” as “felt reality,” see J. I. Packer, *God In Our Midst: Seeking and Receiving Ongoing Revival* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1987), 33.

<sup>35</sup> Oliver, “John Owen (1616–1683),” 35.

<sup>36</sup> See John W. Tweeddale, “John Owen’s Commentary on Hebrews in Context,” in Kopic and Jones, *Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, 52, 54–55.

“incomparable,”<sup>37</sup> was written under the shadow of death in 1683 and represents Owen’s dying testimony to the unsurpassable value and joy of living a life for the glory of Christ.

He fell asleep in Christ on August 24, 1683. His final literary work is a letter to his friend Charles Fleetwood, written but two days before his death. “Dear Sir,” he wrote:

I am going to him whom my soul hath loved, or rather who hath loved me with an everlasting love; which is the whole ground of all my consolation. The passage is very irksome and wearysome through strong pains of various sorts which are all issued in an intermitting fever. All things were provided to carry me to London today attending to the advice of my physician, but we were all disappointed by my utter disability to undertake the journey. I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm, but whilst the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poore under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live and pray and hope and waite patiently and doe not despair; the promise stands invincible that he will never leave thee nor forsake thee.<sup>38</sup>

Owen was buried on September 4 in Bunhill Fields, where the bodies of so many of his fellow Puritans were laid to rest until that tremendous day when they—and all the faithful in Christ—shall be raised to glory.

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<sup>37</sup> Oliver, “John Owen (1616–1683),” 35.

<sup>38</sup> Toon, *Correspondence of John Owen*, 174.



*John Owen* is widely regarded as one of the most influential English Puritans. As a pastor, he longed to see the glory of Christ take root in people's lives. As a writer, he continues to encourage us toward discipline and communion with God. His high view of God and deep theological convictions flowed naturally into practical application and a zeal for personal holiness.

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