

FOLLOWING GOD FULLY

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An Introduction to the Puritans

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and Michael Reeves



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Following God Fully

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The Puritans, as a body, have done more to elevate the national character than any class of Englishmen that ever lived. Ardent lovers of civil liberty, and ready to die in its defense—mighty at the council board, and no less mighty in the battlefield—feared abroad throughout Europe, and invincible at home while united—great with their pens, and no less great with their swords—fearing God very much, and fearing men very little—they were a generation of men who have never received from their country the honor that they deserve.

—J. C. Ryle

(introduction to Thomas Manton's *Works*, 2:xi)

Table of Contents

Preface ix

PART ONE

Who Were the Puritans?

1. The Myth and Foundation of Puritanism 3
2. The Story of Puritanism 7
3. Puritanism Defined 11
4. Why Puritan Teaching Today? 15
5. Why the Puritan Lifestyle Today? 18

PART TWO

Puritan Stalwarts

6. William Perkins (1558–1602) 23
7. Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) 25
8. Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) 27
9. John Eliot (1604–1690) 29
10. John Owen (1616–1683) 31
11. John Bunyan (1628–1688) 33
12. John Flavel (1628–1691) 35
13. Matthew Henry (1662–1714) 37
14. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) 39

PART THREE

The Triune God and His Saving Work

15. Communion with the Triune God 43
16. God the Father: Predestination, Creation, and Providence 46
17. Christ the Mediator 49
18. Christ the Compassionate Intercessor 52

19. The Holy Spirit 55
20. Covenant Theology 58

PART FOUR
A Saved and Holy People

21. Regeneration 63
22. Faith and Repentance 66
23. Union with Christ and Justification 69
24. Adoption 72
25. Sanctification 76
26. Assurance of Salvation 80
27. Perseverance 84
28. Heaven, a World of Love 87

PART FIVE
Christ's Bride

29. Church and Worship 91
30. The Lord's Supper 94
31. Church Offices and Government 98
32. The Lord's Day 101
33. Preaching 104
34. Listening to Sermons 108
35. Pastoral Counseling 112
36. Evangelism 115

PART SIX
Puritans in Daily Life

37. Meditation and Prayer 121
38. Conscience 124
39. Marriage 127
40. Child-Rearing 131
41. Work as a Calling 134

PART SEVEN
The Puritans for Today

42. Learning from Puritan Faults 141
43. Lessons from the Puritans for Today 146
44. How Should We Begin Reading the Puritans? 150

Preface

Twice God said of Caleb that he followed Him fully—once before the forty-year wilderness journey, and once after (Num. 14:24; Josh. 14:14). As a fruit of Christ’s righteousness imputed to him, Caleb was enabled by God’s grace to follow God fully all the days of his life. To follow God fully means to follow Him in these ways:

- *Constantly.* That’s what Caleb did. Caleb didn’t just follow God when it was easy. He refused to yield to murmuring rebels who surrounded him for forty years in the wilderness. He was determined to follow God constantly, perseveringly, patiently, unswervingly, in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2), even if it meant rejection by his peers.
- *Sacrificially.* To follow God sincerely means following Him with all your heart regardless of the cost because He is holy, beautiful, lovable, and worthy to be worshiped. It means being willing to sacrifice all for Him. That’s what Caleb did; he loved not his life unto death. When the Israelites picked up stones to put Caleb to death because he said that Israel should go into the land of Canaan, Caleb didn’t flinch, compromise, or negotiate. He would rather die than disobey God.
- *Consistently.* Caleb didn’t pick and choose which commands of God he felt like obeying, but he did whatever the Lord told him to do. His obedience was not a partial, halting obedience, but a consistent, complete obedience. Every area of his life was fully devoted to God—including all its particulars. Like the Puritans, Caleb believed that God’s law must be reduced to its particulars, since to offend in one point is to offend in all (James 2:10). Caleb did the particular duties he was commanded to do at the time, rather than rest in a general assent to the whole of the law while excusing any momentary lapse or disobedience.
- *Exclusively.* After forty years of wandering in the wilderness and after fierce battles with the Canaanites, Caleb was rewarded in Joshua 14:14 “because...he wholly followed the LORD God of Israel.” After all those

trials, difficulties, and temptations, Caleb is described as one who wholly followed the Lord, who allowed no other gods in his life. He didn't waste his life, but lived exclusively for his God, the only God. By grace, he lived life to the fullest—for his God, by his God, unto his God's glory.

Despite their shortcomings, the Puritans strove to be Calebs (and Joshuas) before God, to follow Him fully in every area of their lives. Like Caleb, they were but men, beset with the common infirmities of our race; but they were men of faith, and that set them apart from many others. It was saving, justifying faith that set Caleb, Joshua, and the Puritans apart from their contemporaries—that is, faith lived out, salvation worked out with fear and trembling. By grace, they followed the Lord constantly, sacrificially, consistently, and exclusively. Hence the title of this book.

What follows is an introduction to the Puritan story—to their lives, their faith in God the Father, their focus on Jesus Christ, and their sanctification by the Spirit. It unveils them as the bride of Christ and shows how they lived their daily lives. It teaches us what we can learn from them—both from their Caleb-like convictions and from their weaknesses.

Welcome to our introduction to the Puritans in forty-four short chapters. May God use this book in some small way to make us a bit more like Caleb and the Puritans so that we would follow them insofar as they followed Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

PART ONE

Who Were the Puritans

The Myth and Foundation of Puritanism

“The frozen chosen.” “Haunted by the fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” “Baptized in vinegar and weaned on a pickle.” That’s the latter-day view of the Puritans. The very words Puritan and puritanical are slung about as bits of verbal mud.

In fact, the word was coined in the sixteenth century as a term of abuse. For the average Englishman, there was the Roman Catholic “Papist” on one side, and the “Precisionist” or “Puritan,” on the other side. The term suggested a nit-picking, holier-than-thou party of men who considered themselves purer than the rest. It was certainly not a fair description: those it was applied to clearly never thought of themselves as pure, but far from it, as their constant testimony to their own sinfulness and imperfection demonstrates.

Who, then, were the Puritans? Perhaps John Milton put it best, when he spoke of “the reforming of the Reformation,” for that was the united goal of all Puritans: a continuation of the work of reforming the visible church, the lives of church members, and the society in which they lived. It was not that they thought of themselves as pure or fully Reformed; it was that they wanted to reform in an ongoing manner what in the church and in themselves remained to be purified. They wanted reformation, while they frankly disavowed the idea that the Reformation could ever be thought to be finished and complete.

Right but Repulsive?

Before we tell their story, some of the mud that has been thrown at them needs to be wiped off if we are ever to understand them.

For one thing, they did not even look like what we think of today as the stereotypical Puritan. We might imagine the Puritans always wore black—and scowled. That is how their portraits show them, for that was their Sunday best—and sitting for portraits was a formal thing, often far from pleasant. But on other days they might wear any one or more of the colors of the rainbow. In the fashion of the times, John Owen, perhaps the greatest Puritan theologian, would walk

through Oxford with his hair powdered, wearing a velvet jacket, with Spanish leather boots.

Nor were they a crowd of inveterate sourpusses. Edmund Morgan writes: “Contrary to popular impression, the Puritan was no ascetic. If he continually warned against the vanity of the creatures as misused by fallen man, he never praised hair shirts or dry crusts. He liked good food, good drink and homely comforts.”¹ As the description of Owen shows, they also liked to dress well according to their means and station in life.

A Scriptural People

The most important trait of the Puritans that contributes to their being misunderstood today is the one that really did unite them all: their passionate love for the Bible as the written Word of God, for Bible study, and for listening to sermons that faithfully and fully expounded the Bible. This was the foundation of their faith, their thought, their teaching, their worship, and their daily lives.

Again and again we hear of Puritans happily traveling hours to hear a good, substantial sermon, and of how they thought a good Bible study better than an evening’s reveling. Sermons were usually an hour or longer, but even two-hour sermons were not unheard of. Laurence Chaderton (1536–1640), the extraordinarily long-lived Master of that nursery of Puritanism, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, once apologized to his congregation for preaching to them for two hours straight. Their response was to cry, “For God’s sake, sir, go on, go on!” To people who have never experienced the reading and hearing of the Word as something thrilling, such behavior sounds at best boring, and at worst deranged. But the people of Europe had been without a Bible that they could read in their native tongue for approximately a thousand years. To be able to read God’s own words, and to see in them such good news that God saves sinners, not on the basis of their holy intentions or good works, but entirely by His own grace, was like glorious sunshine bursting into the dark, gray world of religious guilt and human misery.

To fail to understand the Puritans’ love for the Bible—that they loved to read, hear, study, memorize, sing, discuss, live by it, and to relish the Spirit’s power that accompanied it—makes it impossible to understand the Puritans themselves. Puritan Richard Greenham suggested eight ways to read Scripture: with diligence, wisdom, preparation, meditation, conference, faith, practice,

1. Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 16.

and prayer.² The Puritans gathered up what they found in the Book of God and applied it to all areas of life. They viewed this sacred Book of all books as the God of the universe speaking to them personally as their Father, comforting them as their Savior, and directing them as their Sanctifier, giving them the truth they could trust for all eternity. They regarded its sixty-six books as the library of the Holy Spirit bequeathed to them and empowered by Him to renew their minds and transform their lives in and through Jesus Christ, to the glory of God.

The Puritans called believers to be Word-centered in faith and practice. Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* shows how the Puritans regarded the Bible as a trustworthy guide for all of life. Every case of conscience was subjected to Scripture's directives. Henry Smith said, "We should set the Word of God always before us like a rule, and believe nothing but that which it teacheth, love nothing but that which it prescribeth, hate nothing but that which it forbiddeth, do nothing but that which it commandeth."³

If you read the Puritans regularly, their Bible-centeredness becomes contagious. Though their commentaries on Scripture are not the last word in scholarly exegesis, the Puritans show us, better than many later works, how to vow whole-hearted allegiance to the truth of Holy Scripture. Like them, you will become a believer in the living Book, concurring with John Flavel, who said, "The Scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying."⁴

To them, the Bible was more precious than life itself. Take, for example, an account of a well-known Puritan event: "Roaring" John Rogers preaching a sermon in the pretty little village of Dedham in the east of England. Here John Howe records Thomas Goodwin's memory:

In that sermon he [Rogers] falls into an expostulation with the people about their neglect of the Bible: (I am afraid it is more neglected in our days); he personates God to the people, telling them, "Well, I have trusted you so long with my Bible; you have slighted it, it lies in such and such houses all covered with dust and cobwebs; you care not to look into it. Do you use my Bible so? Well, you shall have my Bible no longer."

2. Richard Greenham, "A Profitable Treatise, Containing a Discourse for the Reading and Understanding of the Holy Scriptures," in *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ*, M. Richard Greenham, ed. H.[enry] H.[olland] (1599; repr., New York: Da Capo, 1973), 389–97.

3. Henry Smith, "The True Trial of the Spirits," in *The Works of Henry Smith* (Stoke-on-Trent, U.K.: Tentmaker Publications, 2002), 1:141. Cf. Westminster Confession (14.2).

4. Quoted in Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1983), 6:41.

And he takes up the Bible from his cushion, and seemed as if he were going away with it, and carrying it from them; but immediately turns again and personates the people to God, falls down on his knees, cries and pleads most earnestly, “Lord, whatsoever thou dost to us, take not thy Bible from us; kill our children, burn our houses, destroy our goods; only spare us thy Bible, only take not away thy Bible.” And then he personates God again to the people: “Say you so? Well, I will try you a little longer; and here is my Bible for you, I will see how you will use it, whether you will love it more, whether you will value it more, whether you will observe it more, whether you will practice it more, and live more according to it.” But by these actions...he put all the congregation into so strange a posture that he never saw any congregation in his life. The place was a mere Bochim, the people generally (as it were) deluged with their own tears; and he told me that he himself, when he got out, and was to take horse again to be gone, he was fain to hang a quarter of an hour upon the neck of his horse weeping, before he had power to mount; so strange an impression was there upon him, and generally upon the people, upon having been thus expostulated with for the neglect of the Bible.⁵

The whole story is quite incomprehensible without appreciating that, for the Puritan, the Bible was the most valuable treasure and surest foundation for faith and life that this world affords. In the written Word of God they found the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, revealed as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Puritanism was all about reforming all of life according to the supremely authoritative standard of the Bible in and through Jesus Christ.

5. John Howe, “The Principles of the Oracles of God. In Two Parts,” in *The Works of the Rev. John Howe, M.A., Complete in One Volume* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846), 1085.