

Thriving in Grace



Thriving in Grace

Twelve Ways the Puritans
Fuel Spiritual Growth

Joel R. Beeke
and
Brian G. Hedges



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Thriving in Grace

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For

Ian Hamilton

a lover of our rich Puritan experiential heritage,
a treasured brother and warm friend and preacher,
whose every message enlightens my mind and feeds my soul.

“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you” (Philippians 1:3).

—JRB

&

Luke Potter

faithful brother and fellow laborer;
may the old Puritan motto,

Vincit Qui Patitur (“He who suffers conquers”),

always be inscribed on your heart, as you

“endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3).

—BGH

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When I consider the vast mines of rich Puritan literature available to us today, I vacillate between feeling like a kid in a candy store and being overwhelmed with “so many books, so little time!” Though I will never be able to read them all, I am deeply grateful for publishers like Banner of Truth and Reformation Heritage Books that have made so many of these books available and accessible to ordinary pastors like me. I read the Puritans because they feed my soul.

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—Brian G. Hedges

I wish to express my gratitude to Brian Hedges for a great working relationship. When he proposed a manuscript to Reformation Heritage Books of several chapters of this book, the Manuscript

Committee decided that it would be good if I were to join him as co-author in enlarging the book to twelve chapters, providing he was willing. Happily, he was more than willing! After collaborating on twelve subjects out of numerous possibilities, we decided to take responsibility for six chapters each; and Brian wrote the introduction and chapters 2, 4–6, and 9–10, while I wrote chapters 1, 3, 7–8, 11–12, and the conclusion. We then edited each other’s chapters. Since we were responsible for writing different chapters, we chose, for the most part, to use singular pronouns rather than plural, on the infrequent occasions when we referred to our own thoughts and convictions. I found Brian to be a like-minded brother on his view of and love for Puritan authors, as well as a joy to work with and a good writer.

For the last 50+ years I have always tried to be reading at least one Puritan book. Many times I have thanked God for writers like Thomas Watson, John Bunyan, Thomas Brooks, Thomas Goodwin, and Anthony Burgess—each of which have been my favorite Puritan writer at different periods of my life. Over the decades, I have often felt like Luther when he said that most of his best friends were “dead ones”—sitting on his shelves. I cannot thank God’s grace enough in raising up the Puritans to feed my soul like no other group of writers in church history.

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We pray God that this little book will whet your appetite for reading the Puritans. If you want to know God and your own soul better, read the Puritans. You will not be sorry! By the Spirit’s grace, you will “thrive in grace.”

—Joel R. Beeke

Introduction

It is a sad fact that sometimes pediatricians diagnose children with a condition called FTT (“failure to thrive”) syndrome.¹ The causes of FTT are many and varied, including genetics, sickness, and poor nutrition. But the diagnosis itself is given in cases of arrested development—when a child’s growth measurements fall below a certain level or norm.

A similar condition is found in many Christians: spiritual FTT. Rather than abounding in love (1 Thess. 3:12), knowing the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7), and rejoicing with “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8), these believers are marked by inconsistent and unhealthy patterns of growth and regression.

They languish in zeal and falter in hope. Their love for others sputters along, but rarely shifts into the higher gears of sacrificial generosity or service. While they have the capacity to feed on God’s Word, they have to be spoon-fed. Their faith is weak, their hope burns dim, and the winds of adversity easily capsize and sink

1. Parts of this introduction are adapted from Brian G. Hedges, “Eight Roadblocks to Spiritual Health,” first published online by Desiring God. See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/eight-roadblocks-to-spiritual-health>, accessed March 5, 2020.

their joy. These are cases of spiritual arrested development. Maybe this sounds like you.

As believers in Christ, we are commanded to grow in grace (2 Peter 3:18). In those soul-stirring words of Philip Bliss (1838–1876), we do well to cry from our hearts:

More holiness give me,
 More sweetness within,
 More patience in suff'ring,
 More sorrow for sin;
 More faith in my Saviour,
 More sense of His care;
 More joy in His service,
 More purpose in prayer.²

But while we long for these “religious affections,” as Jonathan Edwards called them, we often fail to thrive in them. Our motivational reach exceeds our practical grasp. Rather than grow and flourish, we struggle to keep our heads above water.

But this need not be so. It is possible for believers to not only get by but to grow and flourish in spiritual experience. And it is our conviction that few things could better facilitate such growth than a fresh reading of the English Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³

Commenting on Peter’s command to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18),

2. P. P. Bliss, “My Prayer,” No. 594, Stanza 1, *Gospel Hymns Nos. 1 to 6 Complete* (Bryn Mawr, Pa.: John Church Company: 1894).

3. For a helpful historical introduction to the Puritans, see Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). The term “Puritan,” though originally derogatory, in this book is a short-hand reference for that Reformed stream of theologians, pastors, and preachers in England, Scotland, and New England who ministered from the mid-sixteenth century to the late-seventeenth century—or, in the case of Jonathan Edwards in New England, into the eighteenth century. When referring to specific people from church history, our practice is to provide the dates of their lives in parentheses following their first reference in this book.

John Owen (1616–1683) observed that “it is not enough that we decay not in our spiritual condition”—we are also required to “endeavour after an improvement, an increase, a thriving in grace, that is, in holiness.”⁴ “Thriving in grace” is a beautiful description of gospel holiness and spiritual maturity.

The purpose of this book is to help believers thrive in grace through reading the Puritans. In the chapters that follow, we will explore twelve ways the Puritans can fuel our spiritual growth. Our sincere prayer is that reading these reflections will encourage you in your ongoing pursuit of, conformity to, and communion with, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

4. John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1966), 3:387.



THE PURITANS

Shape Our Lives by the Authoritative Scriptures

The reading of the word is an ordinance of God, and mean[s] of salvation, of God's own appointment. The Bible is this word, and God has given it to us, and appointed it to be read.

—THOMAS BOSTON¹

In John Bunyan's (1628–1688) famed *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian is escorted into a private room in the Interpreter's House. The Interpreter shows him a painting of metaphorical meaning: "Christian saw the picture of a very grave person hang up against the wall; and this was the fashion of it. It had eyes lifted up to Heaven, the best of books in his hand, the law of truth was written upon his lips, the world was behind his back. It stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head."²

After explaining the meaning of the portrait, Interpreter said, "I have showed thee this picture first, because the man whose picture this is, is the only man whom the Lord of the place whither thou art going, hath authorized to be thy guide in all difficult

1. Thomas Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston, Part 2*, ed. Samuel M'Millan (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1848), 2:422.

2. John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (1854; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 3:98.

places thou mayest meet with in the way.”³ It was the portrait of a faithful minister of the Word, called by God to be a trusty guide to a pilgrim people. We can discern in this portrait a summary of the idealized values of the Puritan minister.

The Puritan ideal of the faithful minister is of one who spurns the world, looks to heaven only for his reward, and—not least of all—is a man of the Book. “The best of books [is] in his hand,” Bunyan writes. It’s also in his conversation: “The law of truth was written upon his lips.” Firmly grasping the Word of God, speaking forth the wisdom of God, the Puritan sought to bring all of life under the will of God.

Interpreter tells Christian that this man of the Book is the *only* authorized guide appointed by God. This is not so much because of the man as it is because of the Book that is in his hand. Interpreter warns him: “Take good heed to what I have showed thee, and bear well in thy mind what thou hast seen, lest in thy journey thou meet with some that pretend to lead thee right, but their way goes down to death.”⁴ There are many deceivers in the world who do not lead by the Book. What distinguishes the true guide from false guides is, above all, the Book. The distinctive characteristic of the sure and safe guide on the way to the Celestial City is that he is driven by Scripture alone.

All of Scripture for All of Life

Sola Scriptura, one of the five “solas,” or watchwords of the Protestant Reformation, asserts that Scripture alone is the supreme, infallible authority for Christian faith and life. Known as the “formal principle” of the Protestant Reformation, this watchword summarizes the truth that Scripture is the ultimate criterion for all that we believe and practice. The Puritans inherited a well-developed doctrine of *sola Scriptura* from the Reformers. They

3. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in *Works*, 3:98.

4. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in *Works*, 3:98.

championed its cause and brought it into fuller practical development as they sought to develop its implications more thoroughly than the Reformers had done in their generation.

We might say that the greatest contribution the Puritans have made to the church's understanding of the Bible is in their uncommon ability to apply its teachings to everyday life. They took profound theological knowledge and turned it into accessible wisdom for living. Taking solid, Reformed, biblical, experiential, confessional Christianity, they applied it to the lives of people in the pew. They excelled in unleashing the full implications of Scripture's doctrine into the context of the nitty gritty affairs of the everyday man. Sharpening Reformed theology into higher definition, they simultaneously sought to apply Scripture to every facet of our existence in God's world.

The result of all this biblical reflection and application was the formation of a Christian worldview. Though the term "worldview" did not come into use until the eighteenth century in Germany, the Puritans certainly had one. They eyed the world around them and looked at themselves through the lenses or spectacles of Holy Scripture. They didn't simply apply the Bible to life; they applied their lives to the Bible, surrendering themselves to the absolute authority of Scripture. They sought to subject God's entire world to God's entire Word. Always concerned with the "use" or practical application of Scripture, they sought to shape every area of life by the Word. Whether marriage, family, politics, work, recreation, stewardship, hobbies, entertainment, friendship, or whatever topic, it was to be formatively mastered by the Word of the Lord.

Peter Lewis wrote in *The Genius of Puritanism* that "Puritanism was not merely a set of rules or a larger creed, but a life-force: a vision and a compulsion which saw the beauty of a holy life and moved towards it, marveling at the possibilities and thrilling to the satisfaction of a God-centred life."⁵ This "life-force" combined

5. Peter Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism* (Sussex: Carey Publications Limited, 1979), 12.

a theocentric vision of holy infatuation with God’s glory with scrupulous scriptural living. The consequence was that “every area of life came under the influence of God and the guidance of the Word.”⁶

In the remainder of this chapter, we consider how the Puritans can help shape our lives by Scripture through the personal reading of the Word and the public preaching of the Word. Then we’ll attempt to summarize what they understood about how this influx of biblical truth should be assimilated and applied, namely, in how it should result in a life of consecration and God-oriented piety for the glory of God.

The Reading of the Word

The Puritans believed that the Bible should be the Christian’s daily companion. The Scottish, puritan-minded Thomas Boston (1676–1732) said, “The reading of the word is an ordinance of God, and mean[s] of salvation, of God’s own appointment. The Bible is this word, and God has given it to us, and appointed it to be read.”⁷ Boston says that there are three contexts in which God has appointed it to be read.

First, the Bible is to be read in public, in the services of the church (1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13). In addition to the preaching of the Word of God, the Puritans followed the custom of the early church of *lectio continua*: reading through the Bible book by book, chapter by chapter, in sequence.⁸ During these times, there would

6. Lewis, *The Genius of Puritanism*, 12.

7. Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 2:422.

8. Justin Martyr (100–165) describes church worship in the second century: “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray” (*First Apology* 1.67; ANF 1:186).

be no commenting—just reading the text out loud and listening to it corporately, receiving it and submitting to it, as an act of worship.

Second, the Bible is to be read aloud in families. We'll return to that point in a moment. Third, the Bible is to be read in private, the "secret reading of it by one's self." For Boston, to own a Bible and habitually neglect it was a sure sign of a lack of spiritual life. "By this means the soul converses with God in his word. And those who do not make a practice of daily reading the scripture, are none of the Lord's people, whatever otherwise they may profess."⁹ If we have tasted of the transforming power of the new birth, we will continually hunger for the pure milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2). Lack of hunger can only signify sickness, or, tragically, lack of life altogether. "The godly man is a lover of the Word," says Thomas Watson (1620–1686).¹⁰

As noted above, the Bible must also be read in families. Every family was expected to practice daily family worship in which the head of the family would read and comment on the Scriptures to the rest of the household. Boston said, "Every family ought to be a church; and as they are to speak to God by prayer, so they are to hear God speak to them, by reading his word. And this they ought to do every morning and evening, as well as command their children and servants to read it by themselves."¹¹ Whether you practice family worship twice daily, as Boston recommends, or once, be sure to read the Word aloud together in the home. "For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children" (Ps. 78:5).

Why? Because the Bible is a priceless possession! Through the efforts of Christ's servants—men such as William Tyndale (1494–1536) and the Reformers—the Bible became a commonplace

9. Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 2:423.

10. Thomas Watson, *A Godly Man's Picture* (1666; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 60.

11. Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 2:423.

possession, available to every home. Did Tyndale shed his bold blood to put families in possession of this once forbidden Book only to have it collect dust on the shelf? The Puritans believed that it was to be treasured in the home above any other possession that could possibly adorn the living situation, because it is a Book worth dying for. Plus, there is much profit in making it central to the family's quality time together. The reading of the Bible in families unites family members around the throne of God and joins them together in worship and love, binding their hearts to God and one another.

In Puritan parishes, other literary auxiliaries served to simplify and amplify the teachings of the Bible. When the typical Puritan pastor would assume the call to pastor a congregation, he would normally put in place a system of systematic Christian education. The tool of choice for this task was the trusted catechism, a guide to theology in the form of questions and answers. By using catechisms already in existence or writing their own, Puritan pastors would instruct their congregations on how to make use of them.

The catechism was a doctrinal map that charted out the theological terrain of Scripture. It provided a concise and systematic summary of the major doctrines of the Bible, enabling laypeople to discern these themes in their own reading of Scripture. That way, the Bible could be understood as a unified, coherent whole, the product of God's singular wisdom. John Cotton (1585–1652) titled his catechism *Milk for Babes, Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments*. Other Puritans included in the titles of their catechisms such expressions as “the main and fundamental points,” “the sum of the Christian religion,” the “several heads” or “first principles” of religion, and “the ABC of Christianity.”¹² By careful pastoral oversight, the Puritans would hold their people accountable for teaching the catechism in their households and for practicing daily family worship.

12. Adapted from Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 963–64.

How many Christians today treasure the public reading of Scripture in church? The Puritans taught their people to cherish it. How many Christians today neglect the daily, private reading of the Scriptures? The Puritans emphasized that we must read our Bibles daily, deliberately, slowly, meditatively, prayerfully, and with experiential application. What about family worship? Does your family gather together around the Bible, or is your family time structured around the television, the computer, and the smartphone, which splinter our gathered families into isolated segments, each in their own little world? Who is discipling our children? Is it Peter and Paul and the pious Reformed giants of the past, or is it Caesar, Hollywood, and the media? The Puritans urge us to have our minds fashioned and renewed by the regular reading of God's Word.

Reading the Scriptures privately and in families is no substitute for corporate worship, however. The church provides the context in which the Spirit ordinarily—and most powerfully—works in conjunction with the Word. Today many Christians think they can be well fed and nourished by private Bible study and sermons on the internet, while they neglect any meaningful participation in the church. That was not the Puritan view. They had a high esteem for the Word in the church.

The Preaching of the Word

“Preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2), Paul charged Timothy. The Puritans took this charge seriously. The insistence of the Puritans on the primacy of preaching in the church was rooted in their conviction of the divine inspiration, authority, power, and purity of the Word. Being deeply convinced that God builds His church primarily by the instrument of preaching, the Puritans made preaching central to the worship of the church. In this they followed the Reformation as they put the pulpit, rather than the altar, at the center of their churches, and put preaching, rather than the sacraments, at the center of their worship. Richard Sibbes (1577–1635) wrote,

“Preaching is the ordinance of God, sanctified for the begetting of faith, for the opening of the understanding, for the drawing of the will and affections to Christ.”¹³

Over five decades ago, Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981), the gifted expositor known for setting logic on fire in his preaching, and an avid student of the Puritans, lamented:

We are living in an age which is querying everything, and among these things it is querying the place and the value and the purpose of preaching. In increasing numbers people seem to be depreciating the value of preaching, and they are turning more and more to singing of various types and kinds, accompanied with various kinds of instruments. They are going back also to dramatic representations or recitals of the Scripture, and some are going back even to dancing and various other forms of external manifestations of the act of worship. All this is having the effect of depreciating the place and value of preaching.¹⁴

The primacy of the Word is being displaced while unauthorized imposters, such as entertainment, usurp Christ’s rightful place in the church. This downgrade that is causing the modern church to stray from the Reformation’s attention to biblical exposition would have been detested by the Puritans.

Lloyd-Jones says of the Puritans that “to them, preaching was central, and the most important thing of all.”¹⁵ Unleashing the written Word through the preached Word served to amplify the meaning of the text, making it come alive and work efficaciously by the Spirit’s grace in ways that ordinarily go beyond our private Bible reading. Lloyd-Jones quotes the Puritan Thomas Cartwright

13. Richard Sibbes, *The Fountain Opened*, in *The Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 5:514.

14. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors, Addresses Delivered at the Puritan and Westminster Conferences, 1959–1978* (1987; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014), 373.

15. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, 375.

(1535–1603), who said, “As the fire stirred giveth more heat, so the Word, as it were, blown by preaching, flameth more in the hearers than when it is read.” Commenting on that, Lloyd-Jones said, “The real function of preaching is not to give information, it is to do what Cartwright says; it is to give more heat, to give life to it, to give power to it, to bring it home to the hearers.”¹⁶

Thomas Boston would have agreed: “It is the mercy of the church of God, that they have the word of God as a lamp always burning; but the preaching of it is the snuffing¹⁷ of the lamp, by which it gives the greater light.”¹⁸ In another place, Boston wrote,

The word of God is the sword of the Spirit. We cannot want [lack] it in an evil hour, if we mind to strive against the stream. It is true, the word read is the sword of the Spirit as well as preached. But the preaching of it is the special mean[s] to draw it out of the scabbard, and put it into the hand of poor sinners against their enemies. Thus the Eunuch, after reading the word, replied to Philip’s question, “How can I understand it, except some man should guide me?” And he desired that Philip do come up and sit with him for that purpose. The well is deep, and there is need of some to draw for the people, that they may drink.¹⁹

We too live in an evil hour. The church in our day needs reformation and revival. Biblical illiteracy is becoming the plague of a “post-Christian” culture. We must not sheathe our sword! A high esteem for Scripture will lead to giving a high priority to the public proclamation of it. Those who love God’s Word long to broadcast it abroad. We must remember that, as the Reformers taught, “through the words of the preacher, the living voice of the

16. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, 376.

17. That is, the trimming of the lampwick.

18. Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 2:423.

19. Boston, “Thanksgiving For My Continuance in Etrick” (Sermon XXVII), in *Works*, 3:373–74.

gospel (*viva vox evangelii*) is heard.”²⁰ Every genuine reformation and revival in history was driven by the anointed unleashing of the Word of God. Where faithful, biblical, Spirit-empowered preaching prospers and is esteemed among the people, spiritual vitality flourishes. God’s Word isn’t sent forth in vain (Isa. 55:11).

The Word preached, says Thomas Watson, is “a commentary upon the Word written. The Scriptures are the sovereign oils and balsams; the preaching of the Word is the pouring of them out. The Scriptures are the precious spices; the preaching of the Word is the beating of these spices, which causes a wonderful fragrance and delight.”²¹ He says that the godly person loves the Word when it is preached because by it Christ speaks to us from heaven (Heb. 12:25) and extends His power to save us (1 Cor. 1:24). “The stamp of divine authority on the Word preached makes it an instrument conducive to man’s salvation.”²² Sound preaching is like sublime music to the ears of the people of God. “What was once said of the city of Thebes, that it was built by the sound of Amphius’ harp, is much more true of soul conversion. It is built by the sound of the gospel harp.... This ministry of the Word is to be preferred before the ministry of angels.”²³

Out of esteem for God, we should treasure the Word in all the forms it comes to us, especially when it is preached. The good we receive from the preached Word refreshes our souls like the dew that fell with the manna. The church needs, in this desperate hour, not just faithful preachers but faithful hearers and receivers of the Word (James 1:21).

20. Carl L. Beckwith, Timothy George, and Scott M. Manetsch, eds., *Ezekiel, Daniel: Old Testament*, vol. 12, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012), xiv.

21. Watson, *A Godly Man’s Picture*, 64.

22. Watson, *A Godly Man’s Picture*, 65.

23. Watson, *A Godly Man’s Picture*, 64.

Extremism or Reasonable Service?

The Puritans were zealous not only to learn the Bible but to live the Bible. Some people think that such zealous attention to the Bible is a bit extreme. A common criticism that has been hurled at the Puritans is the charge of legalism. But their desire to honor the Scriptures in all of life was not driven by any attempt to earn the favor of God or to merit righteousness. They abhorred such a thought and denounced it powerfully in their polemics against all strands of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Their motivation was not fear of condemnation but gratitude for salvation. They based their experiential application of the imperatives of Scripture on the indicatives of gospel grace.

A good example of this is Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) exemplifies the Puritan understanding of this text when he says that the exhortation is addressed to those who are “the subjects of God’s redeeming mercies.”²⁴ As Edwards points out, the indicative was a reality in them by grace; grounding his exhortation on that, the inspired apostle implores believers to a sanctified life. This is not legalism; it is biblical, gospel-grounded piety. Scripture calls for total consecration as it shapes the whole of life (see 1 Thess. 5:23). In an experiential sermon on Romans 12:1, Edwards asks, “What is offering or giving ourselves up to God?” Listen to what he says (my amplifying comments are interspersed in brackets to show the relevance to the subject before us):

A willing embracing [of] all God’s commands [every precept of His Word], and a devoting ourselves up to God as servants, and receiving him as sovereign, God and King over our souls and bodies, over all our powers and all our actions. ’Tis a

24. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith and Harry S. Stout, revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2:343.

giving our understandings to him to be enlightened [by His Word and Spirit], and to be exercised in thinking upon him [especially in meditating on the Word]. 'Tis a giving our wills to him, to be guided and exercised in choosing of him above all things [as our wills are informed by His Word]. 'Tis a giving our affections to him to be governed and exercised in loving him, and what he loves, and hating what he hates [as specified in His Word]. 'Tis a giving all our executive powers to him to be employed wholly in his service [as His will is revealed in His Word].²⁵

Though my bracketed comments are not in the original, Edwards would have agreed that they are implied. In his Reformed understanding of the Christian life, such a Word-driven consecration was a given.

God reigns in grace, and He extends that reign to us through Scripture as the Scripture authoritatively shapes every aspect of our lives. Edwards teaches that it should shape our souls and bodies, our powers and actions, our understandings and wills, our affections and all that we are as God's image-bearers. The Word of God must be brought to bear on how we think, how we feel, how we act, how we plan, how we live, and how we love.

This is not extremism; it is our "reasonable service" to our matchless Savior and King! In the words of John Flavel (1628–1691), "If Jesus Christ did wholly set himself apart for believers, *how reasonable is it that believers should consecrate and set themselves apart wholly for Christ?*"²⁶ Such consecration is driven by the Word. After all, the Lord did pray, "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

25. Jonathan Edwards, "Dedication to God," in *Jonathan Edwards Sermons*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (New Haven: Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University, 1722–1723), Romans 12:1.

26. John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life: A Display of Christ in His Essential and Mediatorial Glory*, in *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel* (London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 1:101.

Theocentric, Scripture-Shaped Piety

Because the Puritans had a high view of the Bible, they had a high view of God. Actually, it was their high view of God that led them to have such a high esteem for the Bible, because it is His self-attested, self-authenticating, inspired and precious Word. They “received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also [in them] that believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

John Flavel comments on the divine authority, commanding power, and transforming efficacy of the Scriptures:

Can the power of any creature, the word of a mere man, so convince the conscience, so terrify the heart, so discover the very secret thoughts of the soul, as to put a man into such tremblings? No, a greater than man must needs be here; none but a God can so open the eyes of the blind, so open the graves of the dead, so quicken and enliven the conscience that was seared, so bind over the soul of a sinner to the judgment to come, so change and alter the frame and temper of a man’s spirit, or so powerfully raise, refresh and comfort a drooping dying soul; certainly the power of God is in all this; and, if there were no more, yet this alone were sufficient to make full proof of the divine authority of the scriptures.²⁷

Flavel draws attention to a common theme in Puritan writings. In their respect for the Bible, the Puritans made much of Isaiah 66:2: “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.” They understood this trembling to be that of a filial fear toward God as Holy Father, a sincere reverence that led them to hang upon every detail of the Word with a humble heart and attentive conscience. The Puritan conscience was captive to God by the Word.

J. I. Packer said, “The concern which was really supreme in the minds and hearts of the people called Puritans was a concern

27. Flavel, *The Method of Grace in the Gospel Redemption*, in *Works*, 2:300.

about God—a concern to know him truly, and serve him rightly, and so to glorify him and to enjoy him.”²⁸ In serving God, Packer tells us, the Puritans placed great emphasis on the necessity of securing and maintaining a clean conscience—one that, having been cleansed by Christ’s blood, is informed by the Bible. Packer explains how the soul of Puritan spirituality pertained to the inner life of the conscience, which “signified a man’s knowledge of himself as standing in God’s presence (*coram Deo*, in Luther’s phrase), subject to God’s word and exposed to the judgement of God’s law, and yet—if a believer—justified and accepted nonetheless through divine grace.”²⁹ Living for God’s glory meant serving Him out of a justified and purified conscience, and serving Him with a clean conscience meant bringing the enlightened conscience into full and integral subjection to the Book by the grace of the gospel.

The Christian life must be Bible-driven because the Christian heart is to be Bible-governed. Packer writes, “To them, there could be no real spiritual understanding, nor any genuine godliness, except as men exposed and enslaved their consciences to God’s word.”³⁰ True piety, according to the Puritans, is the living Word of God exercising its efficacious influence on the totality of our human existence, from the inner life of the heart to the outward life of practical living. Puritan devotion sought to engage the whole person with the whole Scripture, bringing every faculty of the human constitution into conformity to the whole counsel of God. That is what it means to bring *sola Scriptura* into holistic application—to be zealously consumed with a theocentric worldview that seeks to bring all of creation under the authoritative Scriptures to the praise of God.

28. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 107.

29. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 108.

30. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 107.

Contagious Love for the Scriptures

The Puritans shape our minds according to the Bible. They loved the Bible, lived the Bible, sang the Bible, preached the Bible, read the Bible, memorized the Bible. They were thinking about the Bible every day. They were Bible-shaped theologians and Bible-shaped preachers. They just thought that way—that’s who they were. We need more of that focus on the Word of God today.

If you read the Puritans regularly, their focus on the Scriptures becomes contagious. Though their commentaries on Scripture are not the last word in exegesis, they show how to yield wholehearted allegiance to the Bible’s message. The Puritans themselves would not have us to hold them in high esteem but would point us to Christ, who comes to us through the means of grace, the chief of which is Scripture. By their faithful teaching, they bring the Bible to us more practically; their sincere goal was that they could bring us to the Bible more devotedly, more fully, more holistically.

What better way to pore over the Scriptures than to have these seasoned pastor-theologians standing over our shoulders as we read, and by their writings suggesting to us the best of their insights as we meditate on the meaning of the matchless words of God! If we invite them to be our companions as we study God’s Book, we may veritably come to experience in greater measure the truth of the Scripture that says, “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise” (Prov. 13:20). That is our prayer as you read these pages—not that you would be driven merely to the Puritans but that through the testimony of the Puritans you may be driven further into the Scriptures, and further into communion with the triune God of grace and glory.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why is devotion to Scripture and a concern with obedience to its commands not legalism? Meditate on Romans 12:1 and the relationship between the mercies of God and our grateful response of consecration, obedience, and worship.
2. What do your personal and family practices of Bible reading and meditation reflect about the importance and centrality of Scripture to your Christian life? Has something else displaced Scripture in your life?
3. Do you view regularly hearing the preached Word in corporate worship as a means of grace? If God truly speaks to us through the preached Word, how ought this to shape our thoughts and change our practices?