

PIERCING  
HEAVEN

|

PRAYERS  
*of the*  
PURITANS



A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, featuring large acanthus leaves at the top and bottom, and smaller floral motifs on the sides.

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PURITANS

|  
COMPILED AND EDITED  
BY ROBERT ELMER

ADDITIONAL EDITING  
BY MARK WARD AND TOM PARR

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## INTRODUCTION

*That prayer is most likely to pierce heaven which first pierces one's own heart.*

—Thomas Watson (1620–1686)<sup>1</sup>

What does it take to pray like a Puritan? And why would we want to?

For more than two centuries, a bright, passionate faith spread throughout England and across the Atlantic to its colonies—a passion that spurred service and holy living for the day along with a clear view of eternity.

The Puritan movement sought to carry the Reformation forward and “purify” the Church of England throughout the 1600s and into the 1700s on both sides of the Atlantic. Its followers sought purity of Scripture-based worship, purity of doctrine, and purity of prayer

Their aim was neither casual nor perfunctory prayer. The prayers of the Puritans shook lives to the core, pled with a sovereign God for mercy, and praised him in the brightest sunshine of grace.

“In Puritan thinking, the Christian life was a heroic venture, requiring a full quota of energy,” says Wheaton College professor Leland Ryken. “For the Puritans, the God-centered life meant making the quest for spiritual and moral holiness the great business of life.”<sup>2</sup>

But much has changed over the past several hundred years, and we speak a very different language from these saints. That in

itself is enough of a barrier between their understanding of God, and ours. As written, their words and thoughts are often difficult to decipher.

So the intent of this book is to bring back some of the most passionate examples of Puritan prayer, from earnest repentance to joyful praise.

With updated language that is edited and compiled from sermons and original writings, each prayer transports us to a time when worship was central to the health of the community, and certainly not just for an hour on the weekend.

There is serious faith entwined in these prayers—faith that can still illuminate the darkness of our world, and of our times. Just as then, the life of faith stands in stark contrast to that which surrounds us.

With that in mind, we may have much more in common with our Puritan ancestors in the faith than we could have imagined. Just read what they prayed, and pray along. In so doing, we become a living answer to the prayer of one Puritan pastor, Philip Doddridge, who asked that his writings “may reach to those who are yet unborn, and teach them your name and your praise, when this author has long dwelled in the dust.”<sup>3</sup>

And the Rev. Doddridge wasn't the only one with a long-range perspective. Another Puritan pastor, Joseph Alleine, wrote in 1671:

*And though I might never know it while I live, yet I beg you, Lord God, let it be found at the last day, that some souls are converted by these labors. And let some be able to stand forth and say that by these they were won to you. Amen, amen. Let the one who reads this say amen.*<sup>4</sup>

## PURITANICAL PURITANS

The Puritans have an undeserved reputation for severity. (The very name “Puritan” was originally a slur.) And indeed, they lifted God very high, so that man might appear as nothing before him.

Matthew Henry wrote,

*You are the blessed and only ruler, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords, who only has immortality, dwelling in the light which no one can approach, whom no one has seen or can see.*

But the Puritans believed in a biblical God, one who is not just “transcendent” but “immanent”—one who is both impossibly far and incredibly near.

Robert Hawker wrote,

*Oh Lord, send forth today abundant streams to cleanse, revive, comfort, satisfy, and strengthen all your churches. Lord, cause me to drink of the rivers of your pleasure, for you are the fountain of life.*

This combination of awe before God’s holy presence and deep, passionate love for the Christ who said, “I am with you always,” marks the Puritans. Far from being haunted by the fear that someone, somewhere might be happy (H.L. Mencken’s taunt about them), the Puritans knew where true and lasting pleasure was to be found.

They also discovered the great open secret of prayer: the value of praying God’s words back to him. Over and over throughout their prayers, the Puritans make allusion to the Bible. It suffuses their devotion, keeping it from morphing into mysticism. It also makes them accessible to today’s Christians—

because the Bible is something we surely share. We can learn to pray like the Puritans.

The only way the Puritans' killjoy reputation can be maintained is through ignorance of what they actually wrote. It was not just warm-hearted but ardent, not just careful but truly biblical. The prayers of the Puritans are a treasure for today.

## A FEW NOTES ABOUT THE TEXT

Quotations throughout have been slightly modernized, both for spelling and for vocabulary. They have also, a few times, been turned from third-person to second-person so as to form prayers of direct address. It is testimony to the Puritan's devotional depth that this was such an easy task. They wrote before God to men.

The Puritans also wrote with a notable attention to beautiful word pictures, and any modernizing is provided with the intent to reveal rather than obscure their warm-hearted eloquence. "Thee" and "ye"—which in this book have been translated into contemporary English—are valuable for distinguishing singular and plural second-person pronouns in Elizabethan English, but they tend to make modern readers sense a level of formality that the Puritan writers did not intend. Puritan writing did not sound archaic or grandiloquent to its original readers.

Not every writer in the ensuing pages is, technically, a "Puritan." But the Puritan spirit was fruitful and multiplied, spreading beyond the time and place of its birth. The non-Puritan writers included here would surely be honored to share pages with bona fide Puritan luminaries.





*If any surviving friends should, when I am in the dust, come across this  
memorial of my transaction with you, may they make it their own.*

*—Philip Doddridge*





## LIST OF AUTHORS

*Joseph Alleine (1634–1668)*

*Richard Alleine (1610/11–1681)*

*Isaac Ambrose (1604–1664)*

*William Ames (1576–1633)*

*Richard Baxter (1615–1691)*

*Lewis Bayly (1575–1631)*

*Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672)*

*William Bridge (1600–1670)*

*Thomas Brooks (1608–1680)*

*John Bunyan (1628–1688)*

*Anthony Burgess (1600–1663)*

*Jeremiah Burroughs (1599–1646)*

*Stephen Charnock (1628–1680)*

*David Clarkson (1622–1686)*

*Arthur Dent (died 1607)*

*Philip Doddridge (1709–1751)*

*William Gurnall (1616–1679)*

*William Guthrie (1620–1665)*

*Robert Hawker (1753–1827)*

*Matthew Henry (1662–1714)*

*George Herbert (1593–1633)*

*Ezekiel Hopkins (1633–1689)*

*John Howe (1630–1705)*

*John Owen (1616–1683)*

*Robert Parker (1564–1614)*

*Edward Reynolds (1599–1676)*

*John Robinson (1575–1625)*

*Richard Sibbes (1577–1635)*

*Nathanael Vincent (1639–1697)*

*George Whitefield (1714–1770)*

*Octavius Winslow (1808–1878)*

*Herman Witsius (1636–1708)*



THE PRAYERS





HELP ME ASK FOR HELP!



## A CRY FOR RENEWING GRACE

We cry to you, God, for renewing grace. We lie at your footstool and cry, “Help, Lord, or else I perish!”

Create in me a new heart, and renew a right spirit within me.

Renew me in the spirit of my mind, and renew me in my inner soul.

Take away this old mind that is so blind, so vain, so carnal.

Take away this old will that is so obstinate, so perverse, so rebellious.

Take away this old conscience that is so partial, so seared, so senseless.

Take away this old heart that will never delight in, comply with, or submit to you.

Let old things pass away, let all things become new. You who brought this world out of nothing with a word, can with a word work in me this new creation.

Do not let me perish. Say the word, and it will be done. Just say the word, and this soul—now a dark, woeful chaos and a lump of corruption and confusion—will become a new creature.

Lord, give me this new heart, put this new spirit into me. You have the key of David. You close, and no one opens. You open, and no one can shut. Lord, open this heart that has been too long closed against you. Break down these strongholds that keep you from me.

Cast out sin and cast out the world that kept you out of possession for so long. Bind the strong man and cast him out.

Other lords have had dominion over me, they have made me miserable by keeping my Lord, my happiness, from me. Cast out these intruders, take possession of me, and be mine forever.

You call for my heart, Lord; it is yours. Though I have dealt treacherously with you, and given my heart to other things, it is yours. It cost you dearly. So enter, take possession of it.

You knock at the door to this wretched heart. Why stay so long outside? Come in and bless me with your presence. Break it open with almighty power, and let it no longer shut you out. Amen.

— *David Clarkson*

## I THIRST FOR GRACE IN CHRIST

Merciful Lord God, you are Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. You say “It is done” of things that are yet to come, so faithful and true are your promises.

You have promised by your own word, out of your own mouth, that to anyone who is thirsty you will give the fountain of the water of life freely.

O Lord, I thirst. I long for one drop of mercy. As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you, O God, and for your compassion.

If I had the glory, the wealth, and the pleasure of the whole world—if I had ten thousand lives, joyfully I would lay them



down, just to have this poor trembling soul received into the bleeding arms of my blessed Redeemer.

O Lord, my spirit within me is melted into tears of blood. My heart is splintered in pieces. Out of the place of dragons and of the shadow of death, I lift up my thoughts, heavy and sad, before you.

The memory of my former vanities and sins is poison to my soul. The very flames of Hell, Lord, the fury of your just wrath, the scorplings of my own conscience, have so wasted and parched my heart that my thirst cannot be quenched.

My desire is for the pardon and grace of Jesus Christ. And Lord, in your blessed book you cry, “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” In that great day of the feast, you stood and cried, “If anyone thirst, come to me and drink.”

And these are your own words: “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.”

I challenge you, Lord, in my extreme thirst for you, and for spiritual life in you, by that word, and by that promise which you made—make it good to me. I grovel in the dust and tremble at your feet.

Open now that promised well of life. For I must drink or else I die. Amen.

—*Isaac Ambrose*