

THE TEMPLE

The Christian Heritage Series
Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, Idaho 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

George Herbert, *The Temple*
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First published in 1633.

Cover design by James Engerbretson
Cover illustration by Forrest Dickison
Interior design by Valerie Anne Bost and James Engerbretson

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THE
TEMPLE

SACRED POEMS AND PRIVATE
EJACULATIONS
BY GEORGE HERBERT

With an Introduction by John Piper

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“WHILE I USE I AM WITH THEE”: THE LIFE AND POETRY OF GEORGE HERBERT

If you go to the mainstream poetry website *Poetry Foundation* and click on George Herbert’s name, what you read is this: “He is . . . enormously popular, deeply and broadly influential, and arguably the most skillful and important British devotional lyricist of this or any other time.”¹ This is an extraordinary tribute to a man who never published a single poem in English during his lifetime and died as an obscure country pastor when he was 39. But there are reasons for his enduring influence.

His Short Life

George Herbert was born April 3, 1593, in Montgomeryshire, Wales. He was the seventh of ten children born to Richard and Magdalene Herbert, but his father died when he was three, leaving ten children, the oldest of which was 13. This didn’t put them in financial hardship, however, because Richard’s estate, which he left to Magdalene, was sizeable.

1. “George Herbert,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed January 9, 2020, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/george-herbert>.

Herbert was an outstanding student at a Westminster preparatory school, writing Latin essays when he was eleven years old, which would later be published. At Cambridge, he distinguished himself in the study of classics. He graduated second in a class of 193 in 1612 with a bachelor of arts, and then in 1616, he took his master of arts and became a major fellow of the university.

In 1619, he was elected public orator of Cambridge University. This was a prestigious post with huge public responsibility. A few years later, however, the conflict of his soul over a call to the pastoral ministry intensified. And a vow he had made to his mother during his first year at Cambridge took hold in his heart. He submitted himself totally to God and to the ministry of a parish priest. He was ordained as a deacon in the Church of England in 1626 and then became the ordained priest of the little country church at Bemerton in 1630. There were never more than a hundred people in his church.

At the age of 36 and in failing health, Herbert married Jane Danvers the year before coming to Bemerton, March 5, 1629. He and Jane never had children, though they adopted three nieces who had lost their parents. Then, on March 1, 1633, after fewer than three years in the ministry, and just a month before his fortieth birthday, Herbert died of tuberculosis, which he had suffered from most of his adult life. His body lies under the chancel of the church, and there is only a simple plaque on the wall with the initials GH.

His Dying Gift

That's the bare outline of Herbert's life. And if that were all there was, nobody today would have ever heard of George Herbert. The reason anyone knows of him today is because of something climactic that happened a few weeks before he died.

His close friend Nicholas Ferrar sent a fellow pastor, Edmund Duncon, to see how Herbert was doing. On Duncon's second visit,

Herbert knew that the end was near. So he reached for his most cherished earthly possession and said to Duncon,

Sir, I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it: and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies.²

That little book was a collection of 167 poems. Herbert's friend Nicholas Ferrar published it later that year, 1633, under the title *The Temple*. It went through four editions in three years, was steadily reprinted for a hundred years, and is what you hold in your hands today. It established Herbert as one of the greatest religious poets of all time, though not one of these poems was published during his lifetime.

Centuries of Accolades

For nearly four centuries now, Herbert has been recognized one of the most gifted craftsmen the world of poetry has ever known. Not only is he regarded by many as "the greatest devotional poet in English," but his skill in the use of language has earned him the high praises in the twentieth century from T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Elizabeth Bishop, and Seamus Heaney.

2. Quotation from Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr. George Herbert* (1670), quoted in John Tobin, ed., *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 310–11.

Herbert loved crafting language in new and powerful ways. It was for him a way of seeing and savoring and showing the wonders of Christ. The central theme of his poetry was the redeeming love of Christ, and he labored with all his literary might to see it clearly, feel it deeply, and show it strikingly. We don't have a single sermon that he ever preached. None has survived the vagaries of history. One can only imagine that they would have been rich with the beauties of Christ. What we have is his poetry. And here the beauty of the subject is wedded to the beauty of his craft.

What we are going to see is not only that the beauty of the subject inspired the beauty of the poetry, but more surprisingly, the effort to find beautiful poetic form helped Herbert see more of the beauty of his subject. The craft of poetry opened more of Christ for Herbert—and for us.

God's Secretary

On the one hand, Herbert was moved to write with consummate skill because his only subject was consummately glorious. "The subject of every single poem in *The Temple*," Helen Wilcox says, "is, in one way or another, God."³

How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
My soul might ever feel!⁴

3. Helen Wilcox, ed., *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xxi.

4. "The Temper (I)" in Wilcox, *English Poems of George Herbert*, 193.

His aim was to feel the love of God and to engrave it in the steel of human language for others to see and feel. Poetry was entirely for God, because everything is entirely for God.

Herbert believed that since God ruled all things by His sacred providence, everything revealed God. Everything spoke of God. The role of the poet is to be God's echo. Or God's secretary. To me, Herbert's is one of the best descriptions of the Christian poet: "Secretarie of thy praise."

O Sacred Providence, who from end to end
Strongly and sweetly movest! shall I write,
And not of thee, through whom my fingers bend
To hold my quill? shall they not do thee right?

Of all the creatures both in sea and land
Only to Man thou hast made known thy wayes,
And put the penne alone into his hand,
And made him Secretarie of thy praise.⁵

God bends Herbert's fingers around his quill. "Shall they not do thee right?" Shall I not be a faithful secretary of thy praise—faithfully rendering—beautifully rendering—the riches of your truth and beauty?

Saying Leads to Seeing

But Herbert discovered, in his role as the secretary of God's praise, that the poetic effort to speak the riches of God's greatness also gave him deeper sight into that greatness. Writing poetry was not merely the expression of his experience with God that he had *before* the writing. The writing was part of the experience of God. It was, in

5. "Providence," in Wilcox, *English Poems of George Herbert*, 416.

THE DEDICATION

*Lord! My first fruits present themselves to thee!
Yet not mine neither; for from thee they came,
And must return. Accept of them and me,
And make us strive who shall sing best thy name.
Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain:
Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain.*

THE CHURCH-PORCH

PERIRRHANTERIUM

1

Thou, whose sweet youth and early hopes enhance
Thy rate and price, and mark thee for a treasure;
Harken unto a verser, who may chance
Rhyme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.
A verse may find him who a sermon flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice.

2

Beware of lust; it doth pollute and foul
Whom God in baptism washed with his own blood;
It blots the lesson written in thy soul;
The holy lines cannot be understood.
How dare those eyes upon a Bible look,
Much less towards God, whose lust is all their book?

3

Wholly abstain, or wed. Thy bounteous Lord
Allows thee choice of paths: take no by-ways;

But gladly welcome what he doth afford,
 Not grudging that thy lust hath bounds and stays.
 Continence hath his joy: weigh both, and so
 If rottenness have more, let heaven go.

4

If God had laid all common, certainly
 Man would have been th' encloser: but since now
 God hath impaled us, on the contrary
 Man breaks the fence, and every ground will plough.
 O, what were man, might he himself misplace!
 Sure to be cross, he would shift feet and face.

5

Drink not the third glass, which thou canst not tame
 When once it is within thee; but before
 Mayest rule it as thou list, and pour the shame,
 Which it would pour on thee, upon the floor.
 It is most just to throw that on the ground,
 Which would throw me there if I keep the round.

6

He that is drunken, may his mother kill
 Big with his sister: he hath lost the reins,
 Is outlawed by himself: all kind of ill
 Did with his liquor slide into his veins.
 The drunkard forfeits man, and doth divest
 All worldly right, save what he hath by beast.

7

Shall I, to please another's wine-sprung mind,
 Lose all mine own? God hath giv'n me a measure

Short of his can and body. Must I find
A pain in that wherein he finds a pleasure?
 Stay at the third glass: if thou lose thy hold,
 Then thou art modest, and the wine grows bold.

8

If reason move not gallants, quit the room.
(All in a shipwreck shift their several way.)
Let not a common ruin thee entomb;
Be not a beast in courtesy; but stay,
 Stay at the third cup, or forego the place.
 Wine above all things doth God's stamp deface.

9

Yet, if thou sin in wine or wantonness,
Boast not thereof, nor make thy shame thy glory.
Frailty gets pardon by submissiveness;
But he that boasts, shuts that out of his story;
 He makes flat war with God, and doth defy,
 With his poor clod of earth, the spacious sky.

10

Take not his name, who made thy mouth, in vain:
It gets thee nothing, and hath no excuse.
Lust and wine plead a pleasure; avarice, gain;
But the cheap swearer through his open sluice
 Lets his soul run for naught, as little fearing.
 Were I an epicure, I could bate swearing.

11

When thou dost tell another's jest, therein
Omit the oaths, which true wit cannot need

Pick out of tales the mirth, but not the sin;
 He pares his apple, that will cleanly feed.
 Play not away the virtue of that name,
 Which is thy best stake when griefs make thee tame.

12

The cheapest sins most dearly punished are;
 Because to shun them also is so cheap:
 For we have wit to mark them, and to spare.
 O crumble not away thy soul's fair heap!
 If thou wilt die, the gates of hell are broad;
 Pride and full sins have made the way a road.

13

Lie not; but let thy heart be true to God,
 Thy mouth to it, thy actions to them both.
 Cowards tell lies, and those that fear the rod;
 The stormy working soul spits lies and froth.
 Dare to be true. Nothing can need a lie.
 A fault, which needs it most, grows two thereby.

14

Fly idleness; which yet thou canst not fly
 By dressing, mistressing, and compliment.
 If those take up thy day, the sun will cry
 Against thee; for his light was only lent.
 God gave thy soul brave wings; put not those feathers
 Into a bed, to sleep out all ill weathers.

15

Art thou a magistrate? Then be severe.
 If studious, copy fair what time hath blurred;

Redeem truth from his jaws. If soldier,
Chase brave employments with a naked sword
Throughout the world. Fool not; for all may have,
If they dare try, a glorious life or grave.

16

O England, full of sin, but most of sloth!
Spit out thy phlegm, and fill thy breast with glory.
Thy gentry bleats, as if thy native cloth
Transfused a sheepishness into thy story.
Not that they all are so; but that the most
Are gone to grass, and in the pasture lost.

17

This loss springs chiefly from our education.
Some till their ground, but let weeds choke their son;
Some mark a partridge, never their child's fashion;
Some ship them over, and the thing is done.
Study this art; make it thy great design:
And if God's image move thee not, let thine.

18

Some great estates provide, but do not breed
A mastering mind; so both are lost thereby.
Or else they breed them tender; make them need
All that they leave: this is flat poverty.
For he that needs five thousand pounds to live,
Is full as poor as he that needs but five.

19

The way to make thy son rich is, to fill
His mind with rest, before his trunk with riches:

THE CHURCH

THE ALTAR

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears,
Made of a heart, and cemented with tears,
Whose parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workman's tool hath touch'd the same.

A HEART alone
Is such a stone,
As nothing but
Thy power doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy name:

That, if I chance to hold my peace,
These stones to praise thee may not cease.
O, Let thy blessed SACRIFICE be mine,
And sanctify this ALTAR to be thine!

THE SACRIFICE

O all ye who pass by, whose eyes and mind
To worldly things are sharp, but to me blind;
To me, who took eyes that I might you find:

Was ever grief like mine?

The princes of my people make a head
Against their Maker; they do wish me dead,
Who cannot wish, except I give them bread.

Was ever grief like mine?

Without me, each one who doth now me brave,
Had to this day been an Egyptian slave.
They use that power against me, which I gave.

Was ever grief like mine?

Mine own apostle, who the bag did bear,
Though he had all I had, did not forbear
To sell me also, and to put me there.

Was ever grief like mine?

For thirty pence he did my death devise,
Who at three hundred did the ointment prize,
Not half so sweet as my sweet sacrifice.

Was ever grief like mine?

Therefore my soul melts; and my heart's dear treasure
Drops blood, the only beads my words to measure.
"Oh, let this cup pass, if it be thy pleasure!"

Was ever grief like mine?

These drops, being tempered with a sinner's tears,
 A balsam are for both the hemispheres,
 Curing all wounds but mine; all but my fears.

Was ever grief like mine?

Yet my disciples sleep. I cannot gain
 One hour of watching: but their drowsy brain
 Comforts not me, and doth my doctrine stain.

Was ever grief like mine?

Arise, arise! they come. Look, how they run!
 Alas! what haste they make to be undone!
 How with their lanterns do they seek the Sun!

Was ever grief like mine?

With clubs and staves they seek me, as a thief,
 Who am the way of Truth, the true Relief;
 Most true to those who are my greatest grief.

Was ever grief like mine?

Judas, dost thou betray me with a kiss?
 Canst thou find hell about my lips, and miss
 Of life, just at the gates of life and bliss?

Was ever grief like mine?

See, they lay hold on me; not with the hands
 Of faith, but fury. Yet, at their commands,
 I suffer binding, who have loosed their bands.

Was ever grief like mine?

All my disciples flee; fear put a bar
 Betwixt my friends and me. They leave the Star

Yet, by confession, will I come
 Into the conquest. Though I can do naught
 Against thee, in thee I will overcome
 The man who once against thee fought.

THE AGONY

Philosophers have measured mountains,
 Fathomed the depths of seas, of states and kings,
 Walked with a staff to heaven, and traced fountains;
 But there are two vast, spacious things,
 The which to measure it doth more behove,
 Yet few there are that sound them: Sin and Love.

Who would know Sin, let him repair
 Unto mount Olivet; there shall he see
 A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
 His skin, his garments, bloody be.
 Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain
 To hunt his cruel food through every vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
 And taste that juice which on the cross a pike
 Did set again abroad; then let him say,
 If ever he did taste the like.
 Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
 Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine.

THE SINNER

Lord! how am I all ague, when I seek
 What I have treasured in my memory!
 Since, if my soul make even with the week,
Each seventh note by right is due to thee.

I find there quarries of piled vanities;
 But shreds of holiness, that dare not venture
 To show their face; since, cross to thy decrees,
There the circumference earth is, heaven the centre.

In so much dregs the quintessence is small:
 The spirit and good extract of my heart
 Comes to about the many hundredth part.
Yet, Lord, restore thine image; hear my call:
 And, though my hard heart scarce to thee can groan,
 Remember that thou once didst write in stone.

GOOD FRIDAY

O, My Chief Good!
How shall I measure out thy blood?
How shall I count what thee befell,
 And each grief tell?

Shall I thy woes
Number, according to thy foes?
Or, since one star showed thy first breath,
 Shall all thy death?

Or shall each leaf
Which falls in autumn, score a grief?
Or cannot leaves, but fruit, be sign
Of the true vine?

Then let each hour
Of my whole life one grief devour;
That thy distress through all may run,
And be my sun.

Or rather let
My several sins their sorrows get,
That, as each beast his cure doth know,
Each sin may so.

Since blood is fittest, Lord, to write
Thy sorrows in, and bloody fight;
My heart hath store, write there; where, in
One box, doth lie both ink and sin.

That, when Sin spies so many foes,
Thy whips, thy nails, thy wounds, thy woes,
All come to lodge there, Sin may say
“No room for me,” and fly away.

Sin being gone, O fill the place,
And keep possession with thy grace;
Lest Sin take courage, and return,
And all the writings blot or burn.

REDEMPTION

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
 Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
 And make a suit unto him, to afford
 A new small rented lease, and cancel th' old.

In heaven, at his manor, I him sought.
 They told me there, that he was lately gone
 About some land, which he had dearly bought
 Long since on earth, to take possession.

I straight returned; and, knowing his great birth,
 Sought him accordingly in great resorts,
 In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts.
 At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
 Of thieves and murderers; there I him espied,
 Who straight, "Your suit is granted," said, and died.

SEPULCHER

O Blessed body! whither art thou thrown?
 No lodging for thee, but a cold, hard stone?
 So many hearts on earth, and yet not one
 Receive thee?

Sure there is room within our hearts, good store,
 For they can lodge transgressions by the score;
 Thousands of toys dwell there; yet out of door
 They leave thee.

But that which shows them large, shows them unfit.
Whatever sin did this pure rock commit,
Which holds thee now? Who hath indicted it
Of murder?

Where our hard hearts have took up stones to brain thee,
And, missing this, most falsely did arraign thee;
Only these stones in quiet entertain thee,
And order.

And as of old the law by heavenly art
Was writ in stone, so thou, which also art
The letter of the word, find'st no fit heart
To hold thee.

Yet do we still persist as we began;
And so should perish, but that nothing can,
Though it be cold, hard, foul, from loving man
Withhold thee.

EASTER-WINGS

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,

Though foolishly he lost the same;

Decaying more and more,

Till he became

Most poor;

With thee

O let me rise,

As larks, harmoniously,

And sing this day thy victories.

Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin:

And still with sicknesses and shame,

Thou didst so punish sin,

That I became

Most thin.

With thee

Let me combine,

And feel this day with victory:

For, if I imp my wing on thine,

Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

EASTER

Rise, heart! thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise

Without delays,

Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise

With him mayst rise;

That, as his death calcined thee to dust,

His life may make thee gold; and, much more, just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part

With all thy art.

The cross taught all wood to resound his name,

Who bore the same.

His stretched sinews taught all strings what key

Is best to celebrate this most high day.