

# Thomas Goodwin and the Puritans

## Introduction

- “Puritanism is ‘the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy’” -H. L. Mencken.<sup>1</sup>
- Defining Puritanism is very difficult since it has so many different offshoots and manifestations.
  - “The word itself ‘Puritan’ was originally a term of abuse devised in the 1560s by antagonists and had the connotation of ‘peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy.’”<sup>2</sup>
- But what were they really like? According to J.I. Packer, the Puritans were “folk who lived slowly enough to be able to think deeply about God.”<sup>3</sup>
  - “Puritans could differ in church polity, in worship style, even in their expressions of piety, but all wanted the English Church to resemble more closely the Reformed churches on the Continent.”<sup>4</sup>
- This morning, I’ll argue that the Puritans are worthy of our consideration because they

*Today, in the first part of our teaching, we’ll see that what began as a movement to reform the Church of England transformed into a political movement that toppled the king.*

*In the second part, we’ll get a glimpse of puritan piety—or devotion—that beautifully captures the holiness, grace, and compassion of God.*

## I. Moody Monarchs, Part Two

- Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

This was generally a good time to be a protestant in England. Elizabeth feigned interest in both Protestant and Roman Catholic princes so that she could avoid persecution and difficulties from enemies allied to the Holy Roman Emperor and the Roman Catholic Church—as well as avoid an unwanted marriage.

She reigned for a long time, 45 years, and never married nor bore children. As such, her first cousin twice removed—the son of Mary, Queen of Scots—James I became king after her death in 1603. Both were descended from King Henry VII.
- James I (1603-1625)

James had first ruled in Scotland from 1567 onward and had been an effective king there. He upheld the protestant Presbyterian church and was widely enjoyed by the people. His reign in both Scotland, England, and Ireland was marked by peace.

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 264.

<sup>2</sup>Woodbridge and James, 264.

<sup>3</sup>“John Piper Interviews J.I. Packer”, accessed from <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/john-piper-interviews-j-i-packer>

<sup>4</sup>Woodbridge and James, 264.

- Charles I (1625-1649)

After James died in 1625, his son began to reign in his place. Charles did not hold the tranquil reign that his father had. Instead, his time in the throne was marked by tribulation, penned in blood, and punctuated with executions. *William Laud, S.L. and S.S.*<sup>5</sup>

Charles believed that kings are “little gods on Earth” and was not agreeable to the Parliament in the least. The result was increasing infringement on royal decorum and established political procedure which tumbled into the English Civil War (1642-1651). The final result was that the king, Charles I, was convicted of treason and beheaded in public on January 30, 1649.

- Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell (1653-1660)

In his place an act of Parliament made military general and Puritan member of parliament Oliver Cromwell the Lord Protector. Cromwell was not a king, rather, he was acting as the supreme governor of the realm. In essence, he was king in all but the title. Since Britain no longer had a king it was officially dubbed a commonwealth or republic.

While this was a huge departure from the norm, it did come with some benefits. Particularly for the religious liberty of groups that had previously been persecuted. Cromwell was an ardent believer with true faith. His politics may be sharply criticized from numerous angles but what cannot be questioned is the genuineness of his faith.

- Haykin:

- A firm belief in divine providence was the bread and butter of the Puritanism of Cromwell’s day. To give but one instance, the early Stuart Puritan Richard Sibbes (1577-1635) could state on the basis of Matthew 10:29-30 that God’s ‘providence extends to the smallest things, to the sparrows and to the hair of our heads; he governs every particular passage of our lives.’<sup>6</sup>

- It will be salutary, Cromwell writes, for them [his key naval commanders] to submit all of their

affairs to the disposition of our All-wise Father; who, not only out of prerogative, but because of his wisdom, goodness and truth, ought to be resigned unto by his creatures, and most especially by those who are children of his begetting through the Spirit. ...Indeed all the dispensations of God, whether adverse or prosperous, do fully read that lesson. We can no more turn away the Evil, as we call it, than attain the Good.<sup>7</sup>

- “Who can love to walk in the dark? But Providence doth often so dispose.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>S.M. Houghton, *Sketches from Church History: An Illustrated Account of 20 Centuries of Christ’s Power* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 154-155..

<sup>6</sup>Oliver Cromwell, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin, *“To Honour God”: The Spirituality of Oliver Cromwell* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua Press, Inc., 1999), 21.

<sup>7</sup>Cromwell, ed. Haykin, 22.

<sup>8</sup>Cromwell, ed. Haykin, 23.

*Did Cromwell have more than a belief in God's sovereignty? What did he believe about himself? See highlighted section on page 26.*

- "The best of us are poor weak saints."<sup>9</sup>
- *See his letter to his cousin, Elizabeth St. John, in 1638. Note especially his earnest desire to honor God by his life (25-26).*
- From these excerpts we learn that Oliver Cromwell was a man who believed in more than just the sovereignty of God. He was an earnest man who was grieved by his sin, who praised God for his mercy and grace which abounded to him the chief of sinners, who desired to honor God with his whole life, *and, significantly, who never got over the fact that God loved him and forgave him.*
- *See his letter to his son-in-law, Charles Fleetwood, in 1652 (27-28). Cromwell's confidence was in Christ, not himself. He rested his assurance on the faithfulness of God the Father to God the Son, not on his subjective feelings or the perceived strength of his own faith.*

*What is your confidence founded upon? What gives you confidence that you're good with God? Or, in other words, what makes you sure that you have peace with him?*

- Do you have confidence before God because of your discipline?
- Is it because you're on a streak of not sinning?
- Is it because of the "correctness" of your theology or politics?
- Is it your lack of visible sin?
- Is it because of the success of your parenting, business decisions, or relationships?
- Is it because of your wealth or the degree to which you have been given earthly blessings?
- Is it because of your health, physically or emotionally?

*All of these are blessings but they cannot be what gives us confidence before the throne of God. Why? Because one day we may receive a trial from the gracious hand of our Loving God that strips these all away. On that day, what will our confidence be? It must be only in Christ. We are weak, all else will fail or fall apart but Christ remains ever-true.*

*One person who can help us grasp the confidence we have in Christ in the Puritan Thomas Goodwin.*

## **II. The Spirituality of the Puritans**

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<sup>9</sup>Cromwell, ed. Haykin, 14.

- **Early Life—The Mind<sup>10</sup>**

- Thomas Goodwin was born on October 5, 1600 in Rollesby, Norfolk, England.
- Goodwin’s parents were nonconformists—those who resisted uniformity with the established Church of England and wanted the freedom for each local church to govern its own affairs. From an early age, Thomas was brought up with theological convictions and with intentional discipleship. From the cradle, he was a student of the Scripture.
- Goodwin went to Cambridge to study at the age of 13. That school was then called a “nest of puritans”.<sup>11</sup> At school he was trained in humanism and scholasticism. On his menu were “logic, rhetoric, metaphysics, physics, and linguistics”.<sup>12</sup>
- While he was at school, Goodwin also was shaped by the classics of Reformed theology: the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. These documents along with the “plain and wholesome” preaching of Richard Sibbes were “decisive in both the spiritual and theological formation of Goodwin.”<sup>13</sup>
- Richard Sibbes and John Preston were two preachers to whom Thomas listened regularly. They urged their hearers to “live according to the Reformation principles which they had already achieved legally.”<sup>14</sup> That is, Goodwin imbibed the teaching of those who had imbibed the true biblical doctrine and recovered the truths of the early church. They represented the true catholic, universal church and were rightly considered to be evangelical. These men and the creeds and confession which he read formed the backbone of Goodwin’s education.
- Goodwin graduated with a BA in 1617 and an MA in 1620.

- **Conversion—Conviction of sin**

- On October 2, 1620—just a few days before his 20th birthday—Goodwin was persuaded by a friend to attend a funeral. The man preaching at the service brought about such conviction over sin in Goodwin that he realized he had never been saved. His biographers write that “God used the message to show Goodwin his dreadful sins, the essential depravity of his heart, his averseness to all spiritual good, and his desperate condition, which left him exposed to the wrath of God.”<sup>15</sup>
- Preaching on sin, Goodwin had this to say:

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<sup>10</sup>Goodwin, Thomas, “A Habitual Sight of Him”: *The Christ-Centered Piety of Thomas Goodwin*, Ed. by Joel R. Beeke, Mark Jones, and Michael A. G. Haykin (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 4. Biographical information drawn from this source.

<sup>11</sup>Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans: Containing a Biographical Account of Those Divines Who Distinguished Themselves in the Cause of Religious Liberty, from the Reformation Under Queen Elizabeth, to the Act of Uniformity in 1662* (London: for J. Black, 1813), 113.

<sup>12</sup>Goodwin, Ed. Beeke, Jones, and Haykin, 6.

<sup>13</sup>Goodwin, Ed. Beeke, Jones, and Haykin, 6.

<sup>14</sup>Schaeffer, “The Spiritual Brotherhood,” 34.

<sup>15</sup>Goodwin, Ed. Beeke, Jones, and Haykin, 9.

- “The subject then to be insisted on is the sinfulness of sin, a subject therefore as necessary as any other, because if ever we be saved, sin must first appear to us all, as it did here to him, ‘above measure sinful.’”<sup>16</sup>
- He says that sin makes us slaves of what we were meant to rule:
  - ...yet sin hat made it a drudge and slave to every creature it was made to rule; therefore the prodigal as a type is to serve swine, and feed on husks, so as every vanity masters it. Therefore we find in Scripture, that men are said to be ‘servants to wine,’ Titus 2:3. Servants to riches, and divers lusts, &c.<sup>17</sup>
- As a result, we feel shame because we are slaves to sin. The excellency of God’s creation—we are made in his image after all—is debased by our slavery to sin. Therefore, we feel shame for our sin.<sup>18</sup> This slavery is of a peculiar sort, however, because it is completely voluntary. We choose to sin and become its slave. Every day our actions confirm it.
- Further, we have reason to fear sin because sin is the enemy of God (Rom 8:7-8). God will destroy all that is arrayed against him, including us if we are found to be rebels living in shame and slavery to sin.<sup>19</sup>
- Sin is like a poison that inflicts the body with every disease:
  - As you would count that a strange poison the least drop of which contains the force of all poison in it; that a strange disease, the least infection whereof brought the body subject to all diseases: yet such an one is sin, the least making the soul more prone and subject to all.<sup>20</sup>
- Sin is its own worst punishment. This Goodwin draws from Romans 1:24-25:
  - *Secondly*, As God is the chiefest good, because he is the greatest happiness to himself, so sin, the greatest evil to itself, for there can be no worse punishment of it than itself; therefore when God would give a man over as an enemy he means never to deal withal more, he gives him up to sin.<sup>21</sup>
- So, from Goodwin we learn about the sinfulness of sin; it’s just the worst. Sin separates us from God, poisons us, makes us slaves, is its own worst punishment, and makes us enemies of God that must be punished. All this came crashing down on Goodwin as he sat listening to that funeral sermon.

*The point in my sharing this with you is this: sin condemns us all; it corrupts us all; it enslaves us all; it makes us all enemies of God. The only exemption to this tyranny of sin is the Lord Jesus Christ, all others are subject to its corrupting effects. The truth is that we’re not good; the Law of God rightly condemns us as sinners. This conviction of the sinfulness of sin was shared by both Cromwell and Goodwin.*

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<sup>16</sup>Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 153. Only volume four of his works is cited in these notes.

<sup>17</sup>Goodwin, 153.

<sup>18</sup>Goodwin, 153-154.

<sup>19</sup>Goodwin, 156.

<sup>20</sup>Goodwin, 158.

<sup>21</sup>Goodwin, 158.

*What's more, we cannot save ourselves. To answer our question we asked earlier, we cannot base our confidence before God on anything in us. Sin has made us enemies of God. Therefore, nothing within us can be our foundation of confidence that we have peace with God. Righteousness and peace must come from outside of us.*

- **Assurance—Freedom in Christ**

- The trouble was that even after Goodwin had faith in Christ alone to save him, he continued to look, for the next seven years, to something *within* himself for his sense of assurance that he had peace with God.
  - His biographers write:
    - From 1620 to 1627, Goodwin sought personal assurance of faith. Through letters and conversations with a godly minister, Rev. Nicholas Price of King's Lynn (who Goodwin said was "the greatest man for experimental acquaintance with Christ that ever he met"), he was led to see his need to "live by faith in Christ, and to derive from him life and strength for sanctification, and all comfort and joy through believing." Later, he said about this time of spiritual struggle: "I was diverted from Christ for several years, to search only into the signs of grace in me. It was almost seven years ere I was taken off to live by faith on Christ, and God's free love, which are alike the object of faith." Goodwin's soul finally found rest in Christ alone.<sup>22</sup>
- In the years of ministry that followed, Goodwin's convictions grew and so did his conviction that the Church of England needed a second Reformation. In England he was being forced to comply with church practices that he thought smelt of popery, which grieved his conscience. As such, in 1638, he fled the country to Arnhem, Netherlands where he could practice and preach with no restrictions.<sup>23</sup>
  - "At this time, debate over the practices in worship in the Church of England intensified, leading ultimately to the Civil War in 1642."<sup>24</sup>
  - After three years, Goodwin returned to pastor a church in London in 1641.
  - In 1643 he was asked to participate in the Westminster assembly, where he advocated for church reform and spoke before the group a total of 357 times.
  - In 1650, Goodwin was appointed the Deputy Director of Magdalen College, Oxford and exercised a great deal of influence on the university as a whole.
- In the mid-1650s, Goodwin even became a chaplain to the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. It was Goodwin who conversed with him upon his deathbed. In some of his last moments Cromwell was in distress about the measure of confidence he had in his faith. Goodwin reminded Cromwell of the perseverance of the saints; in essence, he pointed Cromwell away from himself and back to the faithfulness of Christ.

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<sup>22</sup>Goodwin, Ed. Beeke, Jones, and Haykin, 11.

<sup>23</sup>Goodwin, Ed. Beeke, Jones, and Haykin, 15.

<sup>24</sup>Goodwin, Ed. Beeke, Jones, and Haykin, 15.

*For us too, we must remember that it is not faith in our faith that saves us. It is not our good works that saves us. It is not keeping the law that saves us. It is not our discipline that saves us. It is not our perceived blessing that gives us confidence on the day of judgment. No, it's Christ alone.*

*Similarly, your worst sins—the vilest, grossest, most perverted deeds you have committed—the evil that you have done and the good that you have left undone, all that Satan could condemn you with cannot keep you out of heaven. Why? Because Christ says we can come. By faith in him alone we receive forgiveness and every blessing in heaven. We come with our sin and empty hands and he fills us with every good thing.*

- **Preacher of the heart of Christ**

- Thomas Goodwin was a profound interpreter of the Bible. He could bring clarity to the most difficult to understand doctrines and make them practical and nourishing to the simplest saint.
- Specifically, Goodwin spent a significant amount of time reflecting on [Matthew 11:28-30](#) and [Hebrews 4:14-16](#). The contemplation of these passages led to his writing the work *The Heart of Christ in Heaven Towards Sinners on Earth*.
- Goodwin reminds us that the misery we cause ourselves by sin and the suffering we endure can never exceed his mercy.<sup>25</sup>
- *See the uses of this doctrine in the Heart of Christ in Heaven Toward Sinners on Earth.*

- **Restoration of the Monarchy**

- In 1660 after the death of Oliver Cromwell and the failure of his son to rule effectively, a coalition was formed to make Charles II, the Son of Charles I, king.
- This restoration brought an end to the days of Goodwin preaching and teaching at Oxford. Instead, he quietly pastored a church in London until his death in 1680.

## Conclusion

- In contrast to the journalist we quoted at the beginning of this lesson, we can be assured that the Puritans were very joyful people. They were and they are happy because they have Christ.
- We too may be full of joy because we have the gospel of peace. Christ promises to give us rest in Christ. Will we give up our efforts of earning our salvation and the favor of God? Will we admit that we have an insurmountable sin problem that only our faithful Savior Jesus Christ can rescue us from? Will we come to the Lord Jesus with empty hands, fall before him, confess our sin, and receive forgiveness, joy, and everlasting life in him?

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<sup>25</sup>Goodwin, 129.