

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

THOMAS WATSON

(1620–1686)

PIERCING  
HEAVEN

PRAYERS  
*of the*  
PURITANS

*Piercing Heaven: Prayers of the Puritans*

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Introduction	1
List of Authors	9

## THE PRAYERS

### TEACH ME TO PRAY. 13

*Our Lord's prayer · Prepare me to seek you*

### HELP ME ASK FOR HELP! 17

*No hope without Christ's righteousness · The commander and hearer of prayer · A cry for renewing grace · I thirst for grace in Christ · Give me Jesus · Renew me in grace · Is my name written on God's heart? · Create in me a new heart · Coming to the high priest · Grace for the weary · I will wait for you to lead me · Awake my sleeping heart · Prayer for a new heart · Show me the way from your word, 1 · Show me the way from your word, 2 · A prayer for our children · Show me the way from your word, 3 · To the gardener of my soul · Breathing in grace · Grace to light our lives · Melt our hearts · Give us a nobler mind · How they love each other · Fighting the good fight · Seeking Jesus for yet more grace · Preparing for battle · Come, Holy Spirit · No one speaks like Jesus · Help us to pray · I need the Comforter · Teach me grace · Be pleased with us, in him · My reason employed for your truth · Prayers from George Whitefield's journal · Asking, receiving*

### HELP ME THROUGH MY DOUBTS. 57

*A prayer from one still on the fence · Increase my faith · Venture all for Christ · Give me a heart to believe · Give me faith! · From one degree of faith to the next*

**HELP ME THROUGH MY TIME OF  
SADNESS AND SUFFERING.**

67

*When I am sick · Prayer for a dying father · In time of  
suffering · Is mercy gone? · No sorrow like yours*

**HELP ME ENDURE TEMPTATION.**

73

*A prayer for deliverance from the world · A prayer for  
revival · Search me, Lord · Call my wandering heart  
home · I am hunted with temptation · Let me not sin  
against you · I need your protection · I wrestle with sin ·  
Strength to stand under temptation*

**HELP ME REST IN GOD'S LOVE.**

89

*God stoops to the weak and unworthy · God has married  
his people · In the beauty of Jesus · The Shepherd of new  
believers · To the God who bends down to reach us · Sing  
the song of glory · Enjoying the favor of God · The Father  
planned it all · Jesus only · The blessed work of the Spirit*

**I BELIEVE—HELP MY UNBELIEF!**

101

*Taking hold of God's promises · Casting my burdens on  
Jesus · I am comforted with him · Give me a new heart ·  
You have promised goodness · Run to Jesus · Waiting for  
glory · Come in your all-sufficiency · Looking for the new  
heavens · Open our eyes, Lord · Dwell in me, Spirit ·  
A prayer for dependence on the Spirit · Help is in God  
alone · Let me hope · When your promises keep me ·  
Waiting for the King of Glory · Looking for the Daystar ·  
Trusting God in difficult times · Jesus supplies · Let the*

*King of Glory come in · The Almighty Breaker · Because you are Jesus · Jesus my hiding place · Jesus my friend · The heavenly show · Enlarge my heart so you may dwell there · God can, God will · Mountains are level in God's strength · Jesus the all in all · For when we doubt · You have the words of eternal life · Mercy upon mercy · Our souls pant for you*

**PREPARE MY HEART FOR THE  
LORD'S DAY AND THE LORD'S TABLE.**

135

*A Sabbath prayer · Praying to eternity · Before a sermon · After the sermon · A prayer for preparing a sermon · A prayer to prepare for Communion · A Communion prayer · Come to the table · A prayer before Communion*

**TAKE MY LIFE AND LET IT BE  
CONSECRATED.**

149

*A prayer of surrender · Your will be done · I give you myself · A prayer of self-dedication · Draw me closer, in your time · We have obtained grace to give ourselves to you · Make me useful again · A new passion to follow God · Am I being changed into Christ's image? · A prayer of surrender · I lay myself at your feet · My amen to your amen · Make my heart the good ground · Following Jesus, all day long · Erring on the side of love · Be the Lord of my heart · We will walk in your ways · No will but yours · Crowning the King · I am his · I will cling to you · Your name on my heart and home · I want to be yours · A prayer of dedication*

**HELP ME GIVE THE GOSPEL  
TO OTHERS.**

181

*God alone can save · O Lord, draw people to Christ! ·  
Now is the day of salvation · A salvation prayer · A prayer  
for my neighborhood · Father, cure the world's disease ·  
Invite the stranger in · Help our witness · For the spread  
of the word · Show yourself to the nations*

**FORGIVE MY SINS.**

195

*Cleanse me, Emmanuel · My sins! My sins! · In humility ·  
Help me cry, Lord · I am the one to blame · Light up my  
conscience · Prayer of a convicted sinner · Marvelous  
grace on corrupt sinners · Discipline me · It all belongs  
to Jesus · The prayer of a condemned criminal · We are  
ashamed*

**HELP ME PRAISE AND  
THANK THE LORD.**

213

*A wonderful, lopsided trade · Jesus the buyer and the seller ·  
My thankful heart with glorying tongue · Overwhelmed  
by your grace · I am forever secure · Longing for his glory ·  
Such a great ransom · You are God alone · Where praise  
grows to prayer · You out-do your grace · Blessed are the  
poor · The everlasting song · Glory to the Ascended One ·  
My praise flows to your ocean · Risen Lord, eternal priest ·  
Welcome to the wedding feast · Counting God's glory ·  
Who is our praise but Jesus? · The glorious branch · You  
are the light! · The Lord will come into his garden · The  
heavens declare your glory · All is in your hand · Jesus  
the doorkeeper · You are holy · You have made me, Lord ·  
You are on your throne · You are the potter · You knit us  
together · We worship Jesus, God and man · To approach  
an infinite God*

**HELP ME BEGIN THE DAY.** 249

*A prayer for the morning · Morning prayer and thanksgiving · Morning pleading for blessings · Another morning prayer · A prayer as we awake · Prayers throughout the day · Preserve me through this day · Morning prayer*

**HELP ME LIVE THE DAY.** 263

*Fighting the daily fight · Preserve us, God · Where could we ever hide from you? · A prayer of everyday gratitude · When God visits my table · To the Holy Spirit · What kind of Christians are we? · A midday prayer for perspective · Thanks before a meal*

**HELP ME CLOSE THE DAY.** 273

*A prayer before I die · Prayer of repentance for the evening · Refresh me tonight, Lord · An evening prayer · Prayer of thanks for the evening · An evening prayer of confession · Another evening prayer · An evening prayer for a clean heart*

**YOUR KINGDOM COME.** 287

*The kingdom is yours · A prayer for the end times · The battle belongs to Jesus · Even so come, Lord Jesus! · Your kingdom come, here and in heaven · Looking to rest in heaven · What a morning that will be · A prayer for the church*

Notes 299

Biographies 301

Index of Authors 311

Sources Quoted 315

## INTRODUCTION

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>1</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>2</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>3</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



TEACH ME TO PRAY.



## OUR LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, you are seated on a throne of glory in the highest heaven, and we bow before your awful presence with humble reverence. Even so we approach you with the confidence that we are your children, and you are our bountiful and compassionate parent.

We join our prayers to you with hearts full of brotherly love, and ask for each other the blessings we seek for ourselves.

Above all, we desire your glory. May your name be set apart and holy. May the whole world of living creatures join us to give you the honor you so deserve and require. May your kingdom come and your will be done among us. Help us to know, understand, and pursue your kingdom.

And may your will, always wise and gracious, be done on earth just as it is in heaven. Teach us mortals to resign ourselves to you in obedience, the same way your angels in heaven obey you.

As for ourselves, Lord, help us not to seek the grand things of life. Help us not to worry about the future, but we humbly ask that you would open your bountiful hand—the one on which we always depend. Give us our daily supply for what we need today, and teach us to let you take care of the rest.

Though in many respects we have been disobedient and ungrateful children, yet we beg you, compassionate Father, to forgive us our offenses. We know we are guilty in your

book, with debts we can never repay. But please forgive those debts, even as we forgive others—even those who have offended and injured us. We ask for the same kind of pardon we are willing to extend to others.

And do not bring us into places of pressing temptation, where we would lose our integrity and our soul would be endangered. But if we must be tried, graciously rescue us from the power of the evil one, that he would not triumph.

We know you can do these things for your children, and we humbly trust you will, because yours is the universal kingdom, the fullness of almighty power, and the glory of infinite perfection. To you be the praise of all, forever.

Amen. So may it be. We sincerely and earnestly desire that you may be glorified and our prayers heard and accepted.  
Amen.

— Philip Doddridge

## PREPARE ME TO SEEK YOU

O Lord, teach me to pray, that I may call upon your name. Prepare my heart to seek, and open your ears mercifully to hear me.

Almighty and eternal Lord God, you are the Creator and Continual Preserver of all things, both in heaven and earth. By your gracious providence I was at first fearfully and wonderfully made, and even now you keep me and preserve me.

I am the workmanship of your hands, and I desire to humble both soul and body before your heavenly majesty.

So here in your presence, Lord, I confess my own unworthiness to come before you, to call upon you, or to perform the least duty that will concern your worship and glory.

Because my heart is polluted and unclean, I beg you to be gracious to me for Jesus Christ your Son's sake. For the sake of his promise, truth, and mercy, have mercy upon me.

Pardon and forgive all the sins, iniquities, and trespasses I have ever committed against you, in what I have said or what I have done. Amen.

— *Robert Parker*



HELP ME ASK FOR HELP!



## NO HOPE WITHOUT CHRIST'S RIGHTEOUSNESS

Lord, I would be the most miserable person in the world if my hopes were only in this life. Why? Because I am hopeless without Christ's righteousness. My life could never be comfortable, and there would be no hope at all of eternal life.

If you denied me that hope, I would be the most miserable one of all. I may be happy without worldly enjoyments, but all things in the world cannot make me happy without this.

So however you treat me in this world, whatever you deny me, Lord, deny me not this. I can be happy without riches and abundance, like Job and Lazarus were. I can be happy even if I am reviled and reproached, as was Christ and his disciples. I can be happy and comfortable in prison, as were Paul and Silas.

But I cannot be happy without the righteousness of Christ.

All the riches, places, or honors on earth will leave me miserable if I am without this. Even if I were rich and needed nothing, without this I would still be wretched and miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

If I had all things that that a person could desire on earth, what good would it do me without Christ's righteousness?

What would riches do for me, if they came with the wrath of God? What comfort would honor bring me, if I remained a son of perdition or a child of wrath?

What sweetness would there be in pleasure, if I were on the path to everlasting torments?

What miserable comforts and enjoyments are these, without Christ's righteousness!

Lord, however you deal with me in outward things, whatever you take from me, whatever you deny me—do not deny me Christ! Do not deny me a share in his righteousness! Amen.

—*David Clarkson*

## THE COMMANDER AND HEARER OF PRAYER

You who commands and hears prayer! You who helps your people to pray!

Pour out the spirit of grace and supplication, that your throne of grace may be surrounded by supplicants, that there may be a great flocking to the mercy seat, and grace may be imparted abundantly to your own glory, through Jesus Christ the high priest, who is passed into the heavens, and is at your right hand forever. Amen.

—*Nathanael Vincent*

## 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,