

*"The Chief Design of my Life - Mortification and Universal Holiness"*  
*Reflections on the Life and Thought of John Owen*

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Introduction

For example, his book, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, is probably the most famous and most influential book of John Owen. It was published in 1647 when Owen was 31 years old. It is the fullest and probably the most persuasive book ever written on the "L" in TULIP: limited atonement.

The point of the book is that when Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her," (Eph. 5:25), he means that Christ really did something decisive and unique for the church when he died for her – something that is particular and sovereign, and different from what he does for people who experience his final judgment and wrath. The book argues that the particular love Christ has for his bride is something more wonderful than the general love he has for his enemies. It is a covenant love. It pursues and overtakes and subdues and forgives and transforms and overcomes every

resistance in the beloved. *The Death of Death* is a great and powerful book – it kept me up for many evenings about twelve years ago as I was trying to decide what I really believed about the third point of Calvinism.

### **An Overview of Owen's Life**

Most people – even pastors and theologians – do not know much about John Owen. One of the reasons is that his writings are not popular today. But another reason is that not much is known about him – at least not much about his personal life. Peter Toon, in his 1971 biography says, "Not one of Owen's diaries has been preserved; and ... the extant letters in which he lays bare his soul are very few, and recorded, personal reactions of others to him are brief and scarce. We have to rely on a few letters and a few remarks of others to seek to understand him as a man. And these are insufficient to probe the depths of his character. So Owen must remain hidden as it were behind a veil ... his secret thoughts remain his own".

I think this may be a little misleading because when you read the more practical works of Owen the man shines through in a way that I think reveals the deep places of his heart. But still the details of his personal life are frustratingly few. You will see this – and share my frustration – in what follows.

Owen was born in England in 1616, the same year that William Shakespeare died and four years before the Pilgrims set sail for New England. This is virtually in the middle of the great Puritan century (roughly 1560 to 1660). "Puritanism was at heart a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with God and godliness. It began in England with William Tyndale the Bible translator, Luther's contemporary, a generation before the word "Puritan" was coined, and it continued till the latter years of the seventeenth century, some decades after "Puritan" had fallen out of use ... Puritanism was essentially a movement for church reform, pastoral renewal and evangelism, and spiritual revival ... The Puritan goal was to complete what England's Reformation began: to finish reshaping Anglican worship, to introduce effective church discipline into Anglican parishes, to establish righteousness in the political, domestic, and socioeconomic fields, and to convert all Englishmen to a vigorous evangelical faith".

Owen was born in the middle of this movement and became its greatest pastor-theologian as the movement ended almost simultaneously with his death in 1683 (see note 14). His father was a pastor in Stadham, five miles north of Oxford. He had three brothers and a sister. In all his writings he does not mention his mother or his siblings. There is one brief reference to this father which says, "I was bred

up from my infancy under the care of my father, who was a Nonconformist all his days, and a painful laborer in the vineyard of the Lord" (see note 15).

At the age of 10 he was sent to the grammar school run by Edward Sylvester in Oxford where he prepared for the university. He entered Queens College, Oxford at 12, took his Bachelor of Arts at 16 and his M.A. three years later at 19. We can get a flavor of what the boy was like from the observation by Peter Toon that Owen's zeal for knowledge was so great at this time that "he often allowed himself only four hours of sleep each night. His health was affected, and in later life, when he was often on a sick-bed, he regretted these hours of rest that he had missed as a youth" (see note 16).

Owen began his work for the B.D. but could not stand the high church Arminianism and formalism of Oxford any longer and dropped out to become a personal tutor and chaplain to some wealth families near London.

In 1642 the Civil war began between Parliament and King Charles (between the high-church religion of William Laud and the Puritan

religion of the Presbyterians and Independents in the House of Commons). Owen was sympathetic with Parliament against the king and Laud, and so he was pushed out of his chaplaincy and moved to London where five major events of his life happened in the next four years that stamped the rest of his life.

## 1. Five Events that Stamped the Rest of his Life

### A. Conversion

The first is his conversion -- or his assurance of salvation and deepening of his personal communion with God. It is remarkable that it happened in a way almost identical to Charles Spurgeon's conversion two centuries later. On January 6, 1850 Spurgeon was driven by a snow storm into a Primitive Methodist Chapel where a layman stood in for the pastor and took the text from Isaiah 45:22, "Look to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth." Spurgeon looked and was saved (see note 17).

Owen was a convinced Calvinist with large doctrinal knowledge, but he

lacked the sense of the reality of his own salvation. That sense of personal reality in all that he wrote was going to make all the difference in the world for Owen in the years to come. So what happened one Sunday in 1642 is very important.

When Owen was 26 years old he went with his cousin to hear the famous Presbyterian, Edmund Calamy at St. Mary's Church Aldermanbury. But it turned out Calamy could not preach and a country preacher took his place. Owen's cousin wanted to leave. But something held Owen to his seat. The simple preacher took as his text Matthew 8:26, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" It was God's appointed word and appointed time for Owen's awakening. His doubts and fears and worries as to whether he was truly born anew by the Holy Spirit were gone. He felt himself liberated and adopted as a Son of God. When you read the penetrating practical works of Owen on the work of the Spirit and the nature of true communion with God it is hard to doubt the reality of what God did on this Sunday in 1642 (see note 18).

## B. Marriage

The second crucial event in those early years in London was Owen's marriage to a young woman named Mary Rooke. He was married to her for 31 years, from 1644 to 1675. We know virtually nothing about her. But we do know one absolutely stunning fact that must have colored all of Owen's ministry for the rest of his life (He died eight years after she did.). We know that she bore him 11 children, and all but one died as a child, and that one daughter died as a young adult. In other words Owen experienced the death of eleven children and his wife! That's one child born and lost on the average every three years of Owen's adult life (see note 19).

We don't have one reference to Mary or to the children or to his pain in all his books. But just knowing that the man walked in the valley of the shadow of death most of his life gives me a clue to the depth of dealing with God that we find in his works. God has his strange and painful ways of making us the kind of pastors and theologians he wants us to be.

C. First book

The third event in these early London years is the publishing of his first book. He had read thoroughly about the recent controversy in Holland between the Remonstrants (whom he called Arminians) and the Calvinists. The Remonstrance was written in 1610 and the Calvinistic response was the Synod of Dordt in 1618. In spite of all its differences Owen saw the English High Church of William Laud and the Dutch Remonstrants as essentially one in their rejection of predestination which for Owen had become utterly crucial, especially since in conversion which he so thoroughly attributed to God.

So he published his first book in April 1643 with the polemical, preface-like title, *A Display of Arminianism: being a discovery of the old Pelagian idol, free-will, with the new goddess, contingency, advancing themselves into the throne of God in heaven to the prejudice of His grace, providence and supreme dominion over the children of men.*

This is important not only because it set his direction as a Calvinist, but as a public, controversial writer whose whole life would be swallowed up by writing in the final month of his life in

1683.

#### D. Becoming a pastor

The fourth crucial event in these years was Owen's becoming a pastor of a small parish in Fordham, Essex, on July 16, 1643. He didn't stay long in this church. But I mention it because it set the course of his life as a pastor. He was always essentially a pastor, even when involved with administration at the University of Oxford and even when involved with the political events of his day. He was anything but a cloistered academic. All of his writing was done in the press of pastoral duties. There are points in his life where this seems utterly amazing—that he could keep on studying and writing with the kind of involvements that he had.

#### E. Addressing Parliament

The fifth event of these early years in London was the invitation in 1646 to speak to the Parliament. In those days there were fast days during the year when the government asked certain pastors to preach

to the House of Commons. It was a great honor. This message catapulted Owen into political affairs for the next 14 years.

Owen came to the attention of Oliver Cromwell, the governmental leader ("Protector") in the absence of a king, and Cromwell is reputed to have said to Owen, "Sir, you are a person I must be acquainted with;" to which Owen replied, "that will be much more to my advantage than yours" (see note 20).

Well, maybe and maybe not. With that acquaintance Owen was thrown into the turmoil of civil war. Cromwell made him his chaplain and carried him off to Ireland and Scotland to preach to his troops and to assess the religious situation in these countries and to give the theological justification for Cromwell's politics.

Not only that Cromwell in 1651 appointed Owen to the Deanship at Christ Church College in Oxford and then the next year made him also the Vice-Chancellor. He is involved with Oxford for nine years until 1660 when Charles II returns and things begin to go very bad for the Puritans.

## 2. Fruitfulness Amid Pressure

What began to amaze me as I learned how public and how administratively laden Owen's life was, was how he was able to keep on studying and writing in spite of it all, and in part because of it all.

At Oxford Owen was responsible for the services of worship because Christ Church was a cathedral as well as a college and he was the preacher. He was responsible for the choice of students, the appointment of chaplains, the provision of tutorial facilities, the administration of discipline, the oversight of property, the collection of rents and tithes, the gift of livings and the care of almsmen the church hospital. but his whole aim in all his duties Peter Toon says was "to establish the whole life of the College on the Word of God (see note 21).

His life was simply overwhelmed with pressure. I can't imagine what kind of family life he had, and during his time his children were

dying (We know that at least two sons died in the plague of 1655.).

When he finished his duties as Vice chancellor he said in his closing address,

"Labours have been numberless; besides submitting to enormous expense, often when brought to the brink of death on your account, I have hated these limbs and this feeble body which was ready to desert my mind; the reproaches of the vulgar have been disregarded; the envy of others has been overcome: in these circumstances I wish you all prosperity and bid you farewell" (see note 22).

In spite of all that administrative pressure and even hostility because of his commitment to godliness and to the Puritan cause, he was constantly studying and writing, probably late at night instead of sleeping. That's how concerned he was with doctrinal faithfulness to Scripture. Peter Toon lists 22 published works during those years. For example, he published his defense of the Saints' Perseverance in 1654. He saw a man named John Goodwin spreading error on this doctrine and he felt constrained, in all his other duties, to answer him -- with 666 pages! It fills all of volume 11 in his Works. And he wasn't writing fluff that would vanish

overnight. One biographer said that this book is "the most masterly vindication of the perseverance of the saints in the English tongue" (see note 23).

During these administrative years he also wrote *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), *Of Communion with God* (1657), *Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It* (1658). What is so remarkable about these books is that they are what I would call intensely personal and in many places very sweet. So he wasn't just fighting doctrinal battles he was fighting sin and temptation. And he wasn't just fighting, he was trying to foster heartfelt communion with God in the students.

He was relieved of his duties of the Deanship in 1660 (having laid down the Vice-Chancellorship in 1657). Cromwell had died in 1658. The monarchy with Charles II was back. The Act of Uniformity that put 2000 Puritans out of their pulpits was just around the corner (1662). The days ahead for Owen now were not the great political, academic days of the last 14 years. He was now from 1660 until his death in 1693 a kind of fugitive pastor in London.

During these years he became what some have called the "Atlas and Patriarch of Independency." He had begun his ministry as a Puritan of Presbyterian persuasion. But he became persuaded that the Congregational form of government is more Biblical. He was the main spokesman for this wing of Non-conformity, and wrote extensively to defend the view (see note 24).

But even more significant he was the main spokesman for tolerance of both Presbyterian and Episcopal forms. Even while at Oxford he had the authority to squash Anglican worship, but he allowed a group of Episcopalians to worship in rooms across from his own quarters (see note 25). He wrote numerous tracts and books to call for tolerance within Orthodoxy. For example in 1667 he wrote (in *Indulgence and Toleration Considered*):

"It seems that we are some of the first who ever anywhere in the world, from the foundation of it, thought of ruining and destroying persons of the same religion with ourselves, merely upon the choice of some peculiar ways of worship in that religion" (see note 26).

His ideas of tolerance were so significant that they had a large

influence on William Penn, the Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania, who was a student of Owen. And it is significant to me as a Baptist that in 1669 he wrote, with several other pastors, a letter of concern to the governor and congregationalists of Massachusetts pleading with them not to persecute the Baptists (see note 27).

### 3. Pastoral Ministry

During these 23 years after 1660 Owen was a pastor. Because of the political situation he was not always able to stay in one place and be with his people but he seemed to carry them on his heart even when he was moving around. Near the end of his life he wrote to his flock, "Although I am absent from you in body, I am in mind and affection and spirit present with you, and in your assemblies; for I hope you will be found my crown and rejoicing in the day of the Lord" (see note 28).

Not only that, he actively counseled and made plans for their care in his absence. He counseled them in one letter with words that are amazingly relevant to pastoral care struggles in our churches today:

"I beseech you to hear a word of advice in case the persecution increases, which it is like to do for a season. I could wish that because you have no ruling elders, and your teachers cannot walk about publicly with safety, that you would appoint some among yourselves, who may continually as their occasions will admit, go up and down from house to house and apply themselves peculiarly to the weak, the tempted, the fearful, those who are ready to despond, or to halt, and to encourage them in the Lord. Choose out those unto this end who are endued with a spirit of courage and fortitude; and let them know that they are happy whom Christ will honor with His blessed work. And I desire the persons may be of this number who are faithful men, and know the state of the church; by this means you will know what is the frame of the members of the church, which will be a great direction to you, even in your prayers" (see note 29).

Under normal circumstances Owen believed and taught that, "The first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word" (see note 30). He pointed to Jeremiah 3:15 and the purpose of God to "give to his church pastors according to his own heart, who should feed them with knowledge and understanding." He showed that the care of preaching the gospel was

committed to Peter, and through him to all true pastors of the church under the name of "feeding" (John 21:15, 16). He cited Acts 6 and the apostles decision to free themselves from all encumbrances that they may give themselves wholly to the word and prayer. He referred to 1 Timothy 5:17 that it is the pastor's duty to "labor in the word and doctrine," and to Acts 20:28 where the overseers of the flock are to feed them with the word.

Then he says, "Nor is it required only that he preach now and then at his leisure; but that he lay aside all other employments, though lawful, all other duties in the church, as unto such a constant attendance on them as would divert him from this work, that he give himself unto it ... Without this, no man will be able to give a comfortable account of his pastoral office at the last day" (see note 31). I think it would be fair to say that this is the way Owen fulfilled his charge during these years whenever the political situation allowed him.

#### 4. Owen and Bunyan

It's not clear to me why some Puritans at this time were in prison

and others, like Owen were not. Part of the explanation was how openly they preached. Part of it was that Owen was a national figure with connections in high places. Part of it was that the persecution was not nationally uniform, but some local officials were more rigorous than others.

But whatever the explanation it is remarkable the relationship that John Owen had in these years with John Bunyan who spent too many of them in prison. One story says that King Charles II asked Owen one time why he bothered going to hear an uneducated Tinker like Bunyan preach. Owen replied, "Could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning" (see note 32).

One of the best illustrations of God's hiding a smiling face behind a frowning providence is the story of how Owen failed to help Bunyan get out of prison. Repeatedly when Bunyan was in prison Owen worked for his release with all the strings he could pull. But to no avail. But when John Bunyan came out in 1676 he brought with him a manuscript "the worth and importance of which can scarcely be

comprehended" (see note 33). In fact Owen met with Bunyan and recommended his own publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. The partnership succeeded, and the book that has probably done more good, after the Bible, was released to the world -- all because Owen failed in his good attempts to get Bunyan released, and because he succeeded in finding him a publisher. The lesson: "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,/but trust him for his grace;/behind a frowning providence/he hides a smiling face."

## 5. Death

Owen died August 24, 1683. He was buried on September 4, in Bunhill Fields, London, where five years later the Tinker and "Immortal Dreamer of Bedford Jail" would be buried with him. It was fitting for the two to lie down together, after the Congregational Giant had labored so long in the cause of toleration for lowly Baptists in England and New England.

His All-encompassing Aim in Life—Holiness

What I would like to try to do now is get close to the heart of what made this man tick and what made him great. I think the Lord wants us to be inspired by this man in some deep personal and spiritual ways. That seems to be the way he has touched people most -- like J. I. Packer and Sinclair Ferguson.

I think the words of his which come closest to giving us the heart and aim of his life are found in the preface to the little book: *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* which was based on sermons that he preached to the students and academic community at Oxford:

"I hope I may own in sincerity that my heart's desire unto God, and the chief design of my life ... are, that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others, to the glory of God, that so the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things" (see note 34).

That was 1656. Owen was 40 years old. Twenty-five years later he was still sounding the same note in his preaching and writing. In 1681 he published *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*. Sinclair Ferguson is probably right when he says, "Everything he

wrote for his contemporaries had a practical and pastoral aim in view -- the promotion of true Christian living" (see note 35) -- in other words the mortification of sin and the advancement of holiness. This was his burden not only for the churches but also for the University when he was there. Peter Toon says, "Owen's special emphasis was to insist that the whole academic curriculum be submerged in preaching and catechizing and prayer. He wanted the graduates of Oxford not only to be proficient in the Arts and Sciences but also to aspire after godliness" (see note 36).

Even in his political messages -- the sermons to Parliament -- the theme was repeatedly holiness. He based this on the Old Testament pater -- that "the people of Israel were at the height of their fortunes when their leaders were godly" (see note 37). So the key issue for him was that the legislature be made up of holy people.

His concern that the gospel spread and be adorned with holiness was not just a burden for his English homeland. When he came back from Ireland in 1650 where he had seen the English forces, under Cromwell, decimate the Irish, he preached to Parliament and pleaded for another

kind of warfare:

"How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold him out as a Lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends? ... Is this to deal fairly with the Lord Jesus? -- call him out to do battle and then keep away his crown? God hath been faithful in doing great things for you; be faithful in this one -- do your utmost for the preaching of the Gospel in Ireland" (see note 38).

From his writings and from the testimony of others it seems fair to say that the aim of personal holiness in all of life, and the mortifying of all known sin really was the labor not only of his teaching but of his own personal life.

David Clarkson, his pastoral associate in the later years of Owen's ministry, gave his funeral address. In it he said,

"A great light is fallen; one of eminency for holiness, learning, parts and abilities; a pastor, a scholar, a divine of the first magnitude; holiness gave a divine lustre to his other accomplishments, it shined in his whole course, and was diffused

through his whole conversation" (see note 39).

John Stoughton said, "His piety equaled his erudition" (see note 40). Thomas Chalmers of Scotland commented on *On the Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalence of Indwelling Sin in Believers*, "It is most important to be instructed on this subject by one who had reached such lofty attainments in holiness, and whose profound and experimental acquaintance with the spiritual life so well fitted him for expounding its nature and operations" (see note 41).

### Why We Should Listen to John Owen

The reason this question is so urgent for us today is not only that there is a holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14), but that there seems to be a shortage of political and ecclesiastical leaders today who make the quest for holiness as central as the quest for church growth or political success. The President of the United States communicated very clearly that he did not think his personal holiness was a significant factor in his leadership of this nation. The cavalier way many church leaders treat sexual propriety is an echo of the same disease. John Owen would have been appalled at both the national and the ecclesiastical

scene.

John Owen is a good counselor and model for us on this matter of holiness because he was not a hermit. We often think some people have the monkish luxury of just staying out of the mess of public life and becoming holy people. Not so the Puritans of Owen's day.

J. I. Packer said that Puritanism was "a reformed monasticism outside the cloister and away from monkish vows" (see note 42). This is especially true of Owen.

His contemporary, Richard Baxter, called Owen "the great doer" (see note 43). He lived in the public eye. He was involved in academic administration; he was in politics up to his ears; he was entangled with the leading military officers of the country; he was embroiled in controversies over all kinds of matters from the authenticity of the Hebrew vowel points and the Epistle of Ignatius to the national laws of toleration and the nature of justification; he was looked to by thousands of congregational independent ministers as their spokesman at the national level; he was all the while pastoring people -- and don't forget, losing a child in death every three

years.

And we all know that a life like that is shot through with criticism that can break the spirit and make the quest for personal holiness doubly difficult. When his adversaries could not better him in argument they resorted to character assassination. He was called, "the great bell-weather of disturbance and sedition ... a person who would have vied with Mahomet himself both for boldness and imposture ... a viper, so swollen with venom that it must either burst or spit its poison" (see note 44).

And even more painful and disheartening is the criticism of friends. He once got a letter from John Eliot, the missionary to the Indians in America, that wounded him more deeply, he said, than any of his adversaries.

"What I have received from you ... hath printed deeper, and left a greater impression upon my mind, than all the virulent revilings and false accusations I have met withal from my professed adversaries ... That I should now be apprehended to have given a wound unto holiness

in the churches, it is one of the saddest frowns in the cloudy brows of Divine Providence" (see note 45).

Add to this the daily burdens of living in a pre-technological world with no modern conveniences, and passing through two major plagues one of which in 1665 killed 70,000 of the half-million people in London (see note 46), plus the 20 years of living outside the protection of the law -- then we know that John Owen's holiness was not worked out in the comforts of peace and leisure and safety. When a man like this, under these circumstances, is remembered and extolled for centuries for his personal holiness we should listen.

How Did He Pursue Holiness?

1. Owen humbled himself under the mighty hand of God.

Though he was one of the most influential and well-known men of his day his view of his own place in God's economy was sober and humble. Two days before he died he wrote in a letter to Charles Fleetwood, "I am leaving the ship of the Church in a storm, but while the great Pilot is in it the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable" (see note 47).

Packer says that "Owen, [though] a proud man by nature, had been brought low in and by his conversion, and thereafter he kept himself low by recurring contemplation of his inbred sinfulness" (see note 48). What Owen wrote illustrates this:

"To keep our souls in a constant state of mourning and self-abasement is the most necessary part of our wisdom ... and it is so far from having any inconsistency with those consolations and joys, which the gospel tenders unto us in believer, as that it is the only way to let them into the soul in a due manner" (see note 49).

With regard to his immense learning and the tremendous insight he had into the things of God he seems to have a humbler attitude toward his achievements because he had climbed high enough to see over the first ridge of revelation into the endless mysteries of God.

"I make no pretence of searching into the bottom or depths of any part of this "great mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh." They are altogether unsearchable, unto the [limit] of the most enlightened minds, in this life. What we shall farther comprehend of them in the other world, God only knows" (see note 50).

This humility opened Owen's soul to the greatest visions of Christ in the Scriptures. And he believed with all his heart the truth of 2 Corinthians 3:18 that by contemplating the glory of Christ "we may be gradually transformed into the same glory" (see note 51). And that is nothing other than holiness.

2. Owen grew in knowledge of God by obeying what he knew already.

In other words Owen recognized that holiness was not merely the goal of all true learning; it is also the means of more true learning.

This elevated holiness even higher in his life: it was the aim of his life and, in large measure, the means of getting there.

"The true notion of holy evangelical truths will not live, at least not flourish, where they are divided from a holy conversation (=life). As we learn all to practice [!!!], so we learn much by practice ... and herein alone can we come unto the assurance, that what we know and learn is indeed the truth [cf. John 7:17] ... And hereby will they be led continually into farther degrees of knowledge. For the mind of man is capable of receiving continual supplies in the increase of light and knowledge ... if ... they are

improved unto their proper end in obedience unto God. but without this the mind will be quickly stuffed with notions so that no streams can descend into it from the fountain of truth" (see note 52).

Thus Owen kept the streams of the fountain of truth open by making personal obedience the effect of all that he learned, and the means of more.

3. Owen passionately pursued a personal communion with God.

It is incredible that Owen was able to keep writing edifying and weighty books and pamphlets under the pressures of his life. The key was his personal communion with God. Andrew Thomson, one of his biographers wrote,

"It is interesting to find the ample evidence which [his work on Mortification] affords, that amid the din of theological controversy, the engrossing and perplexing activities of a high public station, and the chilling damps of a university, he was yet living near God, and like Jacob amid the stones of the wilderness, maintaining secret intercourse with the eternal and invisible" (see note 53).

Packer says that the Puritans differ from evangelicals today because

with them

" ... communion with God was a great thing, to evangelicals today it is a comparatively small thing. The Puritans were concerned about communion with God in a way that we are not. The measure of our unconcern is the little that we say about it. When Christians meet, they talk to each other about their Christian work and Christian interests, their Christian acquaintances, the state of the churches, and the problems of theology -- but rarely of their daily experience of God" (see note 54).

But God was seeing to it that Owen and the suffering Puritans of his day lived closer to God and sought after communion with God more earnestly than we. Writing a letter during an illness in 1674 he said to a friend, "Christ is our best friend, and ere long will be our only friend. I pray God will all my heart that I may be weary of everything else but converse and communion with Him" (see note 55).

God was using illness and all the other pressures of Owen's life to drive him into communion with God and not away from it.

But Owen was also very intentional about his communion with God. He said, "Friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits; and these, the more free and less occasioned by urgent business (see note

56) ..." In other words, in the midst of all his academic and political and ecclesiastical labors he made many visits to his Friend, Jesus Christ.

And when he went he did not just go with petitions for things or even for deliverance in his many hardships. He went to see his glorious friend and to contemplate his greatness. The last book he wrote -- he was finishing it as he died -- is called *Meditations on the Glory of Christ*. That says a great deal about the focus and outcome of Owen's life. In it he said,

"The revelation ... of Christ ... deserves the severest of our thoughts, the best of our meditations and our utmost diligence in them ... What better preparation can there be for [our future enjoyment of the glory of Christ] than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel" (see note 57).

The contemplation Owen has in mind is made up of at least two things: on the one hand there is what he called his "severest thoughts" and "best meditations" or in another place "assiduous meditations,"

and on the other had relentless prayer. The two are illustrated in his work on Hebrews.

One of his greatest achievements was his seven volume commentary on Hebrews. When he finished it near the end of his life he said, "Now my work is done: it is time for me to die" (see note 58). How did he do it? We get a glimpse from the preface:

"I must now say, that, after all my searching and reading, prayer and assiduous meditation have been my only resort, and by far the most useful means of light and assistance. By these have my thoughts been freed from many an entanglement" (see note 59).

His aim in all he did was to grasp the mind of Christ and reflect it in his behavior. This means that the quest for holiness was always bound up with a quest for true knowledge of God. That's why prayer and study and meditation always went together.

"I suppose ... this may be fixed on as a common principle of Christianity; namely, that constant and fervent prayer for the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit, is such an indispensable means for ... attaining the knowledge of the mind of God in the Scripture, as that without it all others will not [avail]" (see note 60).

Owen gives us a glimpse into the struggle that we all have in this regard lest anyone think he was above the battle. He wrote to John Eliot in New England,

"I do acknowledge unto you that I have a dry and barren spirit, and I do heartily beg your prayers that the Holy One would, notwithstanding all my sinful provocations, water me from above; C 154"

In other words the prayers of others were essential not just his own.

The chief source of all that Owen preached and wrote was this "assiduous meditation" on Scripture and prayer. Which leads us to the fourth way that Owen achieved such holiness in his immensely busy and productive life. Which leads us to the fourth way that Owen achieved such holiness in his immensely busy and productive life.

4. Owen was authentic in commending in public only what he had experienced in private.

One great hindrance to holiness in the ministry of the word is that we are prone to preach and write without pressing into the things we say and making them real to our own souls. Over the years words begin to come easy, and we find we can speak of mysteries without

standing in awe; we can speak of purity without feeling pure; we can speak of zeal without spiritual passion; we can speak of God's holiness without trembling; we can speak of sin without sorrow; we can speak of heaven without eagerness. And the result is a terrible hardening of the spiritual life.

Words came easy for Owen, but he set himself against this terrible disease of unauthenticity and secured his growth in holiness. He began with the premise: "Our happiness consisteth not in the knowing the things of the gospel, but in the doing of them" (see note 61). Doing, not just knowing, was the goal of all his studies.

As a means to this authentic doing he labored to experience every truth he preached. He said,

"I hold myself bound in conscience and in honor, not even to imagine that I have attained a proper knowledge of any one article of truth, much less to publish it, unless through the Holy Spirit I have had such a taste of it, in its spiritual sense, that I may be able, from the heart, to say with the psalmist, 'I have believed, and therefore

I have spoken" (see note 62).

So for example his Exposition of Psalm 130 (320 pages on eight verses) is the laying open not only of the Psalm but of his own heart. Andrew Thomson says,

"When Owen ... laid open the book of God, he laid open at the same time the book of his own heart and of his own history, and produced a book which ... is rich in golden thoughts, and instinct with the living experience of 'one who spake what he knew, and testified what he had seen'" (see note 63).

The same biographer said of Owen's *On The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (1681) that he "first preached [it] to his own heart, and then to a private congregation; and which reveals to us the almost untouched and untrodden eminences on which Owen walked in the last years of his pilgrimage" (see note 64).

This was the conviction that controlled Owen:

"A man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul. And he that doth not feed on and thrive in the digestion of the food which he provides for others will scarce make it savoury unto them; yea, he knows not but the food he hath

provided may be poison, unless he have really tasted of it himself.

If the word do not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us" (see note 65).

It was this conviction that sustained Owen in his immensely busy public life of controversy and conflict. Whenever he undertook to defend a truth, he sought first of all to take that truth deeply into his heart and gain a real spiritual experience of it so that there would be no artificiality in the debate and no mere posturing or gamesmanship. He was made steady in the battle because he had come to experience the truth at the personal level of the fruits of holiness and knew that God was in it. Here is the way he put it in the Preface to *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated* (1655):

"When the heart is cast indeed into the mould of the doctrine that the mind embraceth, -- when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us, -- when not the sense of the words only is in our heads, but the sense of the thing abides in our hearts -- when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for -- then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men" (see note 66).

That, I think, was the key to Owen's life and ministry, so renown for

holiness -- "when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for -- then shall we be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men."

The last thing Owen was doing at the end of his life came was communing with Christ in a work that was later published as *Meditations on the Glory of Christ*. His friend William Payne was helping him edit the work. Near the end Owen said, "O, brother Payne, the long-wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see the glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world" (see note 67).

But Owen saw more glory than most of us see, and that is why he was known for his holiness, because Paul taught us plainly and Owen believed, "We all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being changed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next."

### **Lesson from Owen's life**

The primary lesson I take away from this study of Owen's life and thought is that in all our enterprises and projects the primary goal for his glory should be

holiness to the Lord. The indispensable means of that holiness is the cultivation of personal, deep, authentic communion with God – the full meaning of which I leave for him to teach you as you read his works.