SHORT BIOGRAPHIES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

Lives that SHAPED THE CHURCH



AUGUSTINE
354–430



MARTIN LUTHER
1483–1546



WILLIAM TYNDALE
c. 1494–1536



JOHN CALVIN
1509–1564



JOHN OWEN
1616–1683



JOHN BUNYAN
1628–1688



JONATHAN EDWARDS
1703–1758



CHARLES SPURGEON
1834–1892

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PAUL LINTOTT

Lives That Shaped the Church
Short biographies from church history
by Paul Lintott

First edition, 2026. This book is distributed free of charge.

Quotations from older writers are taken from public-domain translations where possible, including E. B. Pusey's translation of Augustine's *Confessions* (1838) and Henry Beveridge's translation of Calvin's *Institutes* (1845). Translations of Luther are fresh renderings of his public-domain originals.

Portraits. All are public domain:

- Philippe de Champaigne, *Saint Augustine*, c. 1645–50. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Martin Luther*, 1528. Veste Coburg.
- Engraved portrait of William Tyndale, unknown artist, c. 1820. National Library of Wales. No portrait from his lifetime survives.
- Anonymous French school, *Portrait of John Calvin*, c. 1550. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.
- Portrait of John Owen, c. 1668, attributed to John Greenhill. National Portrait Gallery, London.
- Thomas Sadler, *John Bunyan*, 1684. National Portrait Gallery, London.
- Henry Augustus Loop after Joseph Badger, *Jonathan Edwards*, 1860. Princeton University Art Museum.
- Alexander Melville, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 1885. National Portrait Gallery, London.

The cover uses all eight portraits listed above. Cover design original to this book.

Introduction

Every Christian stands on someone's shoulders. The Bible we read, the hymns we sing, the way we talk about grace and faith and the church: all of it has come down to us through people. Some of them were brilliant. Some were barely educated. All of them were flawed. And God used each of them to shape the church we know today.

This book tells the stories of eight of them. They span fifteen centuries, from a professor weeping in a garden in Milan in 386 to a London preacher dying on the French Riviera in 1892. Augustine gave the Western church its language for grace. Luther and Tyndale put the gospel, and the Bible itself, back into ordinary hands. Calvin gave the Reformation its clearest teacher. Owen and Bunyan, a scholar and a tinker, kept the faith alive through persecution. Edwards saw revival sweep the American colonies and explained what true religion is. Spurgeon preached Christ to millions.

The chapters are short and can be read in any order, though they are arranged by date so that each story leads into the next. Each one opens with a single scene, then tells the life from beginning to end. At the close you will find a few of the person's best-known sayings in their own words, a note on famous quotes that are often wrongly attributed to them, a table of key dates, and suggestions for further reading.

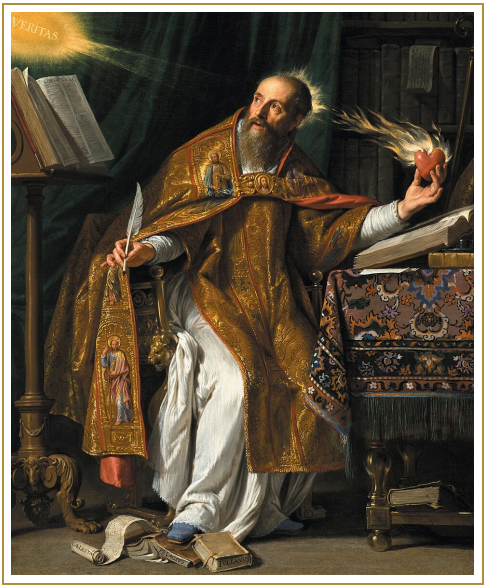
These are not stories of plaster saints. Luther wrote terrible things about the Jews. Calvin helped send a man to his death for heresy. Edwards owned slaves. Those failures are told plainly here, because hiding them would be dishonest, and because the heroes of the faith were sinners saved by grace, like the rest of us. That is the point.

Quotations from older writers are taken from public-domain translations wherever possible, and the sources are given. If these lives send you to the writers' own books, the book will have done its work.

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Chapter One



Augustine

354–430

The Restless Heart

Philippe de Champaigne, *Saint Augustine*, c. 1645–50. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

A VOICE IN THE GARDEN

In the late summer of 386, a thirty-one-year-old professor threw himself down under a fig tree in a garden in Milan and wept.

By any outward measure, Aurelius Augustinus had made it. He was the official professor of rhetoric in the city where the Western emperor held court. He wrote speeches in praise of the emperor and taught the sons of the powerful how to win an argument. A good marriage had been arranged for him. A governorship was not out of the question.

Inside, he was coming apart. For more than a decade he had been searching for the truth, and he now believed he had found it in the Christian faith his mother had prayed over him since birth. He just could not bring himself to give up the life he had. "Give me chastity and continency," he had once prayed, "only not yet."

Minutes earlier, a visitor named Ponticianus had told him and his friend Alypius about Antony, an Egyptian who had given away everything to follow Christ, and about two court officials who had read Antony's story and walked away from their careers on the spot. Augustine felt exposed. Uneducated people were storming heaven, he cried to Alypius, while men like them wallowed in flesh and blood with all their learning.

He fled to the far end of the garden. "How long? how long?" he asked God. "To-morrow, and to-morrow? Why not now?"

Then, from a house nearby, he heard a child's voice chanting a sing-song phrase he had never heard in any game: *Take up and read; take up and read.*

Augustine stopped crying. He went back to where Alypius sat, picked up the book of Paul's letters he had left there, and opened it at random. His eyes fell on Romans 13:13–14: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof."

"No further would I read," he wrote years later, "nor needed I." A light of peace flooded his heart, and the darkness of doubt vanished. He marked the page with his finger and walked inside to tell his mother.

That moment in a Milan garden would become one of the most famous conversions in history. To see why it mattered so much, we have to go back to a small town in North Africa.

A boy from Thagaste

Augustine was born on 13 November 354 in Thagaste, a market town in the Roman province of Numidia, in what is now Algeria. Rome had ruled North Africa for centuries. Its wheat fed the empire, and its cities had baths, theatres and schools.

His family was respectable but stretched. His father, Patricius, was a minor landowner and town councillor with a quick temper, a pagan who would only be baptised near the end of his life. His mother, Monica, was a devout Christian whose patience and prayers would shape her son's whole story.

The boy was clever, and his parents knew it. They scraped together money to send him to school in nearby Madauros, and later to the great city of Carthage. Augustine admits he hated Greek, loved Latin poetry, and wept over the death of Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* while feeling nothing about the state of his own soul.

At sixteen, waiting at home while the family saved for his studies, he and some friends crept into a neighbour's orchard one night and stole a load of pears. They were not hungry. The pears were not even good. They took a few bites and threw the rest to the pigs.

Decades later, Augustine spent most of a chapter of his *Confessions* on that small theft. What disturbed him was the motive. He had not stolen for food or profit, but for the thrill of doing what was forbidden, and for the company of friends who egged each other on. In that orchard he saw the human heart in miniature: drawn to wrong simply because it is wrong.

The long road to Milan

"To Carthage I came," Augustine wrote, "where there sang all around me in my ears a cauldron of unholy loves." He arrived around 370, aged about seventeen. He threw himself into student life, the theatre and romance. Soon he took a partner, a woman whose name he never tells us, and lived faithfully with her for some fifteen years. Around 372 she bore him a son. They called him Adeodatus, "given by God."

At nineteen, Augustine read a now-lost book by the Roman orator Cicero called *Hortensius*, which urged its readers to love wisdom above everything. It set him on fire. He went looking for wisdom in the Bible, but found its plain style unimpressive next to Cicero's polish.

Instead he joined the Manichees, a fashionable sect that claimed to offer a rational religion for clever people. They taught that the universe was a battle between two equal powers, Light and Darkness, and that evil was a kind of substance mixed into us. That suited Augustine well. If evil was a foreign force inside him, his sins were not really his fault. He stayed a follower for about nine years.

Monica was heartbroken. She wept and prayed so constantly that a bishop she pleaded with finally sent her away with a line Augustine never forgot: "It is not possible that the son of these tears should perish."

Meanwhile his career rose. He taught rhetoric in Thagaste and then Carthage. Slowly he grew disillusioned with the Manichees. When their most celebrated teacher, Faustus, finally came to town, Augustine found him charming but unable to answer his questions.

In 383, tired of rowdy Carthaginian students, he sailed for Rome. He slipped away at night, telling Monica he was seeing off a friend and leaving her praying at a chapel on the shore. Rome's students turned out to be worse: they behaved well in class, then switched teachers as a group to dodge paying their fees.

In 384 a lucky break came. The prefect of Rome, Symmachus, recommended him for the post of public professor of rhetoric in Milan, then the imperial capital of the West. Augustine moved north. Monica, undeterred, followed him.

In Milan he went to hear the city's bishop, Ambrose, at first only to study his technique as a speaker. Ambrose was a former governor and a superb preacher. He showed Augustine that the Old Testament passages that had embarrassed him could be read with depth and intelligence. Augustine came for the style and found himself listening to the substance.

Around the same time he read some books of the Platonist philosophers. They taught him to think of God as spiritual and unchanging, and of evil not as a thing in itself but as a lack of good, the way darkness is the absence of light. The Manichee answer fell apart. Augustine now believed Christianity was true, but belief was not the same as surrender.

There was a painful cost along the way. Monica helped arrange a marriage to a young heiress, and Augustine's partner of fifteen years was sent back to Africa. She vowed never to be with another man. "My heart which clave unto her was torn and wounded and bleeding," he wrote. Rather than wait two years for his fiancée to come of age, he took another mistress. He was, by his own account, a slave to habit.

Washed, and a farewell at Ostia

After the garden, everything changed quickly. Augustine resigned his professorship, using a chest complaint as a convenient excuse. He broke off the engagement. That autumn he withdrew with Monica, Adeodatus, Alypius and a few friends to a borrowed country house at Cassiciacum, in the hills north of Milan, to read, pray and talk philosophy.

At the Easter Vigil of 387, on the night of 24 to 25 April, Ambrose baptised Augustine in Milan. Alypius and fifteen-year-old Adeodatus were baptised with him. "We were baptised," Augustine wrote, "and anxiety for our past life vanished from us."

The little group set out for home. At the port of Ostia, near Rome, they waited for a ship to Africa. One evening Augustine and Monica stood at a window overlooking a garden and talked together about what heaven would be like. As they spoke, he says, they seemed for a moment to reach beyond everything earthly and touch eternal Wisdom itself.

Monica told him she had nothing left to live for. Her one wish had been to see him a Christian before she died, and God had given her more than that. Within days she fell ill with a fever. She asked to be buried wherever she died: "Nothing is far to God." She died at fifty-six, and Augustine, who had held back his tears at the funeral, finally wept alone for the mother who had wept so long for him.

The reluctant bishop

Back in Thagaste in 388, Augustine sold his inheritance and set up a small community where he and his friends lived simply, studied and prayed. It was the quiet life he wanted. Then, around 389, Adeodatus died, still in his teens. Augustine would later describe him as a boy whose intelligence left him in awe.

Augustine had learned to avoid towns that needed a priest, because talented laymen were sometimes drafted by force. In 391 he visited the port city of Hippo Regius to talk a friend into joining his community, and went to church. The elderly bishop, Valerius, mentioned that the city needed a priest. The congregation turned, seized Augustine and pushed him forward. He was ordained in tears.

Within about five years he was bishop of Hippo, and he stayed there for the rest of his life, some thirty-five years. He preached several times a week, heard disputes, cared for the poor, freed slaves when he could, and lived in community with his clergy. He hated gossip so much that he reportedly had a verse carved on his dining table warning guests that anyone who spoke ill of the absent was not welcome there.

Around 397 he began the *Confessions*. Nothing quite like it had been written before. It is a long prayer addressed to God, telling the story of his life, from the pear tree to the garden, with brutal honesty. Its most famous line comes in the first paragraph: "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee." Later comes another: "Too late loved I Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new!"

As a bishop he was pulled into one controversy after another. Against the Donatists, a rival African church that insisted only a pure clergy could give

valid sacraments, he argued that the church is a mixed field of wheat and weeds until the harvest, and that the sacraments belong to Christ, not to the minister.

Against the British monk Pelagius and his followers, who taught that people could choose to live without sin by their own effort, Augustine insisted that everything good in us is a gift of God's grace. He had learned it the hard way, in a garden in Milan, by finding he could not free himself. His prayer, "Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt," had scandalised Pelagius.

In August 410 the unthinkable happened. Alaric and his Goths sacked the city of Rome. Pagans blamed the disaster on the empire abandoning the old gods. Augustine answered with *The City of God*, a massive work written between 413 and 426. He argued that there are two cities, built by two loves: the earthly city, built on love of self, and the city of God, built on love of God. Empires rise and fall. The city of God endures.

The end came as the Roman world in Africa was collapsing. In 429 the Vandals crossed from Spain and swept across the province. By the summer of 430 they were besieging Hippo itself, and the city was crowded with refugees. Augustine, now seventy-five, fell ill with a fever.

His friend and first biographer, Possidius, tells us that Augustine had the penitential psalms copied out and fixed to the wall beside his bed, and read them through his tears. He asked to be left alone for his last days, except when the doctors came or meals were brought. He died on 28 August 430. He left no will, Possidius notes, because as one of God's poor he had nothing to leave, except his library, which he wanted carefully preserved for the church.

Why Augustine matters

Few people outside the Bible have shaped Western Christianity as much as Augustine. Medieval theologians quoted him constantly. A thousand years after his death, an Augustinian friar named Martin Luther and a French lawyer named John Calvin both found in his writings on grace the key to reading Paul. Catholics and Protestants still argue over which of them is his true heir.

But his deepest legacy may be the *Confessions* itself. In it, a brilliant, proud, divided man tells the truth about himself before God. Sixteen centuries later, readers still recognise their own restless hearts in his, and still find his answer: rest is found in God alone.

In his own words

> *"Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."*
>
> Confessions, Book 1

> *"Too late loved I Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new! too late I loved Thee!"*
>
> Confessions, Book 10

> *"Give me chastity and continency, only not yet."*
>
> Confessions, Book 8, recalling his prayer as a young man

> *"Give what Thou commandest, and command what Thou wilt."*
>
> Confessions, Book 10

> *"Love, and do what thou wilt."*
>
> Homilies on the First Epistle of John, 7. He meant that true love for God and neighbour will shape everything we do, not that anything goes.

Often attributed to Augustine, but not his: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity" comes from a German Lutheran writer, Rupertus Meldenius, around 1627. "Love the sinner, hate the sin" echoes a line in one of his letters, "with love for mankind and hatred of sins," but the familiar wording is modern.

Key dates

Year	Event
354	Born 13 November in Thagaste, North Africa
c. 370	Goes to study in Carthage
c. 372	Son Adeodatus born
373	Reads Cicero's *Hortensius*; joins the Manichees
383	Sails to Rome
384	Becomes professor of rhetoric in Milan; hears Ambrose
386	Conversion in the garden in Milan
387	Baptised by Ambrose at Easter; Monica dies at Ostia
391	Forcibly ordained priest at Hippo
c. 395–396	Becomes bishop of Hippo
c. 397–400	Writes the *Confessions*
410	Goths sack Rome
413–426	Writes *The City of God*
430	Dies 28 August during the Vandal siege of Hippo

Further reading

- Augustine, *Confessions*. Quotations in this chapter are from E. B. Pusey's 1838 translation, which is in the public domain and free online.
- Possidius, *The Life of St Augustine*. A short memoir by Augustine's friend, written soon after his death.
- Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. The classic modern life, readable and authoritative.

Chapter Two



Martin Luther

1483–1546

Here I Stand

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Martin Luther*, 1528. Veste Coburg.

A monk before the emperor

On the evening of 18 April 1521, in a hot, crowded hall in the German city of Worms, a thirty-seven-year-old monk stood before the most powerful man in Europe.

Charles V was only twenty-one, but he ruled Spain, the Netherlands, much of Italy, Austria and the lands of the Holy Roman Empire. Around him sat princes, bishops and ambassadors. On a table lay a pile of books. The monk, Martin Luther, had written all of them.

The day before, an official had asked him two questions. Were these his books? And would he take back what was in them? Luther had answered the first question yes. On the second, to everyone's surprise, he asked for time to think. He was given one night.

Now he was back. He spoke first in German, then repeated it all in Latin, sweating in the torchlight. Some of his books, he said, were simple teaching that even his enemies agreed with. Others attacked abuses in the church that everyone could see. Others answered particular opponents, and there he might have been too harsh. But he could not take any of it back simply because he was told to.

The official pressed him for a plain answer, without horns. Luther gave him one.

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason," he said, "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. God help me. Amen."

The earliest printed versions add four more words, which may or may not have been spoken but have echoed ever since: *Here I stand. I can do no other.*

The hall erupted. Spanish soldiers jeered as he left. Luther raised his arms like a knight who had won a joust. He had just defied the pope and the emperor at once, and every person in that room knew he might soon be dead.

Struck by lightning

Martin Luther was born on 10 November 1483 in Eisleben, in Saxony, and baptised the next day, the feast of St Martin, which is how he got his name. The family soon moved to the mining town of Mansfeld. His father, Hans, had worked his way up from miner to part-owner of copper mines and smelters. His mother, Margarethe, was from a respected town family.

They were strict parents, as most were. Luther later remembered being beaten at school for small mistakes in Latin. But Hans was ambitious for his clever son and paid for him to go to good schools in Magdeburg and Eisenach, and then to the University of Erfurt. Martin earned his master's degree in 1505 and began studying law. His father bought him an expensive copy of the standard law textbook and started looking for a good marriage.

Then, on 2 July 1505, walking back to Erfurt after a visit home, Luther was caught in a violent thunderstorm near the village of Stotternheim. A lightning bolt struck close enough to throw him to the ground. Terrified, he cried out to the patron saint of miners: "Help, St Anne! I will become a monk!"

He kept his word. Two weeks later, against his father's furious objections, he knocked on the door of the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, one of the strictest in town. He sold his law books and gave a farewell party for his friends.

Luther was a very good monk. He fasted, prayed through the night and confessed his sins for hours at a time. "If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, it was I," he said later. But it did not bring him peace. The more he tried, the more he felt the distance between himself and a holy God. He was ordained a priest in 1507, and at his first Mass he was so overwhelmed by the thought of standing before God that he nearly ran from the altar.

In 1510 he walked to Rome on business for his order. He climbed the Holy Stairs on his knees, saying a prayer on every step to release his grandfather's soul from purgatory. At the top, he later said, a question formed in his mind: *Who knows whether it is true?*

The gates of paradise

Luther's superior, Johann von Staupitz, was a wise and kindly man who could see his young friar was tormented. His remedy was to keep him busy. He sent Luther to the small new university at Wittenberg, had him earn a doctorate in theology in 1512, and made him professor of the Bible. Luther would hold that post for the rest of his life.

So he lectured: on the Psalms, then Romans, then Galatians and Hebrews. And as he worked through Paul's letters, one phrase troubled him more than any other. In Romans 1:17, Paul says that in the gospel "the righteousness of God" is revealed. Luther had been taught that God's righteousness meant the justice by which God punishes sinners. "I did not love," he admitted, "indeed I hated, the righteous God who punishes sinners."

He kept beating on the text, day and night. Then he noticed what the rest of the verse said: "The just shall live by faith." Suddenly he saw it. The righteousness of God in the gospel is not what God demands from us, but what God gives us. It is a gift, received by faith, through which the merciful God declares sinners right with himself.

"Here I felt that I was altogether born again," he wrote, "and had entered paradise itself through open gates." Historians still argue about exactly when this breakthrough happened, somewhere between 1514 and 1519. What is certain is that it changed everything.

It soon collided with something very practical. In 1517, a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel was selling indulgences near Wittenberg. These were certificates from the church that promised to reduce the punishment for sins in purgatory, for yourself or for a dead relative. The money was helping to rebuild St Peter's Basilica in Rome, and to pay off a local archbishop's debts. A rhyme attributed to Tetzel's preaching summed up the sales pitch: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

Luther was appalled. His own parishioners were coming back with indulgences, convinced they no longer needed to repent. On 31 October 1517 he sent a letter to the archbishop, enclosing ninety-five theses for debate on the power of indulgences. Tradition says he also nailed them to the door of the Castle Church, which served as the university noticeboard.

The first thesis set the tone: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Luther meant to start an academic argument. Instead, thanks to the printing press, copies spread across Germany within weeks. A monk in a small town had lit a fire he could not put out.

Kidnapped by friends

Over the next three years, the argument about indulgences became an argument about everything. At Leipzig in 1519, the brilliant debater Johann Eck pushed Luther into admitting that popes and church councils could be wrong. Only Scripture, Luther now said, had final authority.

In 1520 he poured out three short books that set Germany alight. He called on German princes to reform the church themselves. He attacked the church’s system of seven sacraments as a “Babylonian captivity.” And in *The Freedom of a Christian*, he wrote a gentle, beautiful summary of the gospel: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

That summer the pope issued a document threatening to excommunicate him. On 10 December 1520, Luther and his students lit a bonfire outside Wittenberg’s town gate and he threw it into the flames. The formal excommunication followed in January. Then came the summons to Worms.

After his stand before the emperor, Luther was given safe conduct home, but Charles V soon declared him an outlaw. Anyone could kill him without punishment. On the road through the Thuringian forest, his wagon was stopped by armed horsemen who dragged him off. Many feared he was dead.

In fact his own prince, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, had arranged the kidnapping to keep him safe. Luther was taken to the Wartburg, a castle high above Eisenach. He grew a beard, dressed as a knight and went by the name Junker Jörg, or Knight George.

He was miserable there, lonely and plagued by illness and temptation. But he put the time to astonishing use. In about eleven weeks he translated the entire New Testament from Greek into German. He wanted it to sound like ordinary people actually spoke, so he listened to “the mother in the home, the

children in the street, the common man in the market." Published in September 1522, it sold thousands of copies within months and helped shape the modern German language itself.

In March 1522, against Frederick's wishes, Luther came out of hiding. Without him, some reformers in Wittenberg had begun smashing images and forcing changes on unwilling people. In eight days of sermons he calmed the town down. Change must come, he said, through the preaching of the Word, not by force. "I did nothing," he said. "The Word did everything."

Katie, beer and a mighty fortress

At Easter 1523, a group of nuns escaped from a convent near Grimma, smuggled out by a merchant who delivered herring to the convent, hidden, so the story goes, among his barrels. Several ended up in Wittenberg, and Luther helped find homes and husbands for them. One, a sharp and capable young noblewoman named Katharina von Bora, turned down every match offered. She let it be known she would marry Dr Luther.

On 13 June 1525 she did. Luther was forty-one and she was twenty-six. He said he married partly to please his father and spite the pope. But he came to love her deeply, calling her "my Lord Katie." She ran their household in the old monastery like a small business, farming, brewing beer, keeping animals and feeding a constant stream of students and guests. They had six children. When their daughter Magdalena died at thirteen, Luther held her in his arms and wept.

The years after Worms were not all triumph. In 1525 German peasants rose in revolt, partly inspired by talk of Christian freedom. Luther first urged the lords to listen to them, then, as the violence spread, wrote a savage tract urging the princes to crush them. Thousands died, and many ordinary people never forgave him.

The Reformation also began to split. In 1525 Luther clashed with the great scholar Erasmus over whether the human will is free to turn to God, and replied with *The Bondage of the Will*, which he considered one of his best books. In 1529, at Marburg, he met the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli.

They agreed on fourteen of fifteen points but could not agree on how Christ is present in the Lord's Supper.

And still he worked. He wrote hymns, including "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." In 1529 he published his Small Catechism so that fathers could teach their families the faith at home. In 1534 the complete German Bible appeared. He preached, lectured and wrote with staggering energy. His collected works fill more than a hundred large volumes.

There is a dark side to his later years that must be told honestly. Ill, in pain and increasingly bitter, Luther wrote vicious attacks on Jews, most notoriously in 1543, urging that their synagogues be burned. Those words were later exploited by the Nazis. Many Lutheran churches have since formally rejected them.

In early 1546, Luther travelled in winter weather to Eisleben, the town of his birth, to settle a dispute between two local counts. He succeeded, but his heart was failing. Asked on his deathbed whether he still stood by the teaching he had preached, he answered clearly, "Yes." He died in the early hours of 18 February 1546.

On a scrap of paper found afterwards were his last written words: "We are beggars. That is true."

Why Luther matters

Luther did not set out to split the Western church, but within his lifetime it had split, and Europe would never be the same. Every Protestant church today traces its story back to the questions he asked in Wittenberg.

His lasting gift was a rediscovery: that sinners are made right with God not by their efforts but by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as taught by Scripture alone. He also put the Bible into ordinary people's hands in their own language, and taught them to sing the faith at home and in church. He was coarse, stubborn and sometimes cruel. He was also courageous, funny and utterly gripped by the mercy of God.

In his own words

> *"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of Scripture or by clear reason… my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. God help me. Amen."*
>
> Speech at the Diet of Worms, 18 April 1521

> *"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."*
>
> The Freedom of a Christian, 1520

> *"Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times."*
>
> Preface to Romans, 1522

> *"Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly."*
>
> Letter to Philip Melanchthon, 1521. Often quoted out of context: Luther meant that no sin is too great for Christ's forgiveness, not that sin does not matter.

> *"We are beggars. That is true."*
>
> His last written words, February 1546

Often attributed to Luther, but doubtful: "Here I stand, I can do no other" appears in the earliest printed accounts of Worms but not in the official record, so he may not have said it. "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree" is not found in his writings at all, and first appears in the 1940s.

Key dates

Year	Event
1483	Born 10 November in Eisleben, Saxony
1505	Thunderstorm near Stotternheim; enters the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt
1507	Ordained a priest
1510–1511	Visits Rome
1512	Doctor of theology; professor of Bible at Wittenberg
1517	Writes the Ninety-five Theses, 31 October
1519	Leipzig Debate with Johann Eck
1520	Burns the papal bull, 10 December
1521	Excommunicated; stands before Charles V at Worms; hidden at the Wartburg
1522	German New Testament published
1525	Peasants' War; marries Katharina von Bora
1529	Small Catechism; Marburg meeting with Zwingli
1534	Complete German Bible published
1546	Dies 18 February in Eisleben

Further reading

- Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520). Short, warm and the best way into his thought.
- Martin Luther, *Table Talk*. Lively sayings recorded by his students at the dinner table.
- Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. The classic popular biography.
- Quotations from Luther are given in fresh translations of his public-domain originals.

Chapter Three



William Tyndale

c. 1494–1536

God's Outlaw

Engraved portrait of William Tyndale, unknown artist, c. 1820. National Library of Wales. No portrait from his lifetime survives.

A boy that drives the plough

Around 1522, at a manor house in the Cotswold hills, a dinner table argument got out of hand.

The house was Little Sodbury Manor, home of Sir John Walsh, a Gloucestershire knight. The tutor to his children was a quiet, sharp-witted Oxford scholar in his late twenties named William Tyndale. Sir John liked to invite local churchmen to dine, and Tyndale liked to argue with them about the Bible. He usually won, because he knew it better than they did.

That did not make him popular. One evening a learned guest, worn down by Tyndale's arguments, burst out that it would be better to be without God's law than without the pope's.

Tyndale's reply would become one of the most famous sentences in English religious history. "I defy the Pope and all his laws," he said. "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost."

It sounded like an idle boast. In England at that time it was a crime to translate the Bible into English, or even to own a portion of it in English, without a bishop's permission. People had been burned for it. Tyndale was a junior scholar with no money and no patron.

But he meant every word. He spent the rest of his life keeping that promise, and in the end it cost him everything.

A scholar with a gift for words

We know surprisingly little about Tyndale's early life. He was born around 1494 in Gloucestershire, probably near the villages of Slimbridge or North Nibley, into a family of prosperous farmers and wool traders. Growing up in the Severn valley, he heard the plain, vivid English of ordinary country people, and he never lost his ear for it.

He went to Oxford, where he took his BA in 1512 and his MA in 1515. He was a gifted linguist. One German scholar later said he knew seven

languages so well that whichever one he spoke, you would think it was his native tongue. Tyndale was not impressed by Oxford's theology course, which made students study centuries of medieval commentary before they were allowed near the Bible itself. He may also have spent time at Cambridge, where Luther's ideas were being discussed in secret.

In 1516 the great scholar Erasmus published the New Testament in its original Greek, alongside a fresh Latin translation. For the first time, scholars across Europe could easily read what the apostles actually wrote. Erasmus wrote that he wished the Scriptures could be read by everyone, that "the farmer might sing snatches of them at his plough." Tyndale took him at his word.

After his stay at Little Sodbury, in 1523, Tyndale went to London. He hoped to win the support of Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, a fine scholar and a friend of Erasmus. With the bishop's blessing, a translation could be made legally. To prove his skill, Tyndale brought along a translation of a speech by the Greek orator Isocrates.

Tunstall politely turned him away. His house was full, he said. Tyndale stayed in London for about a year, preaching and living in the home of a cloth merchant, Humphrey Monmouth. Slowly he came to a bitter conclusion. There was no room in the bishop's palace to translate the New Testament, he wrote, "and also that there was no place to do it in all England."

Smuggled in bales of cloth

In the spring of 1524 Tyndale sailed for Germany, with money from Monmouth and other London merchants. He would never see England again.

He probably spent time in Wittenberg, where Luther's German New Testament had just appeared. By 1525 he was in Cologne with a finished translation and a printer at work on it. Then disaster struck. A Catholic scholar named Johann Cochlaeus overheard printers boasting over drinks that England would soon be Lutheran whether the king liked it or not. He alerted the city authorities, who raided the print shop.

Tyndale and his assistant grabbed the printed pages they could carry and fled up the Rhine by boat. Only one incomplete copy of that first Cologne

printing survives today, in the British Library, breaking off partway through Matthew's Gospel.

In the city of Worms, in 1526, Tyndale finally succeeded. A printer named Peter Schoeffer produced the complete New Testament in English, translated straight from the Greek, in a small pocket-sized edition. It was the first printed English New Testament ever made. About three thousand copies were printed.

They were smuggled into England hidden in bales of cloth and sacks of grain, and sold quietly through a network of merchants. Ordinary people could now hold the words of Jesus in their own language and read them for themselves.

And what words they were. Tyndale wrote for the ear, in short, plain, rhythmic English. "Let not your hearts be troubled." "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find." "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." "Fight the good fight of faith." These phrases sound as if they have always been part of English. Most of them were first written by William Tyndale.

Burned books and a war of words

The English church responded with fury. In October 1526 Bishop Tunstall preached against the translation at St Paul's Cross in London and had copies thrown on a bonfire. Agents searched ships and warehouses. People caught with Tyndale's books were forced to recant publicly, and some were later burned.

Tunstall even tried to buy up the whole supply abroad. A chronicler tells a delightful story about it. A London merchant in Antwerp named Augustine Packington offered to buy all the copies Tyndale had for the bishop to burn. Tyndale agreed, because the money would pay for a new and better edition. "And so forward went the bargain," the chronicler wrote: "the bishop had the books, Packington had the thanks, and Tyndale had the money."

Moving between hiding places in the Low Countries, Tyndale also wrote books of his own. *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) argued that the Bible should be in the people's hands and that kings, not popes, were God's

appointed rulers. Anne Boleyn reportedly showed a copy to Henry VIII, who declared, “This book is for me and all kings to read.”

The royal favour did not last. In 1530 Tyndale wrote *The Practice of Prelates*, which opposed Henry’s plan to divorce Catherine of Aragon. From then on the king wanted him brought back to England in chains.

His most formidable opponent was Sir Thomas More, the brilliant lawyer and author who became Lord Chancellor. In 1529 More published a long attack on Tyndale, accusing him of twisting Scripture to spread Luther’s heresy. Tyndale answered him in 1531, and More replied with a vast *Confutation* running to nearly half a million words. Both men were brilliant, both were sincere, and both would die for their convictions.

Through all this, Tyndale kept translating. In exile he learned Hebrew, a language almost no one in England knew. In 1530 he published the first five books of the Old Testament in English, followed by the book of Jonah. In 1534 he published a thoroughly revised New Testament, which became the basis for almost every English Bible that followed.

Betrayed

By 1534 Tyndale was living in Antwerp, in a house kept for English merchants by a man named Thomas Poyntz. It was as safe as anywhere could be. The merchants protected him, and he spent his days translating and his free time helping poor English refugees and the sick. He set aside two days a week, Monday and Saturday, for visiting those in need.

That spring a charming young Englishman named Henry Phillips arrived in Antwerp and made friends with him. Phillips had gambled away money stolen from his own father, and someone in England, we still do not know who, was paying him to hunt Tyndale down. Tyndale trusted him completely and lent him money.

In May 1535 Phillips invited himself to dinner, then led Tyndale down a narrow alley outside the house where officers were waiting. Phillips pointed at him, and they seized him. Even the arresting officers were said to have pitied the gentle scholar.

Tyndale was taken to the great castle of Vilvoorde, near Brussels, the state prison of the Low Countries. He spent about sixteen months there. Thomas Poyntz tried desperately to save him and was arrested himself for his trouble.

One letter in Tyndale's own hand survives from that prison. Written in Latin to an official, probably the governor of the castle, it asks for a warmer cap, a warmer coat and a piece of cloth to patch his leggings, because he was suffering badly from the cold. Then it asks for something more: a lamp in the evening, because it was tiresome to sit alone in the dark, and above all "the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study." Even in prison, awaiting death, he was still translating.

He was tried for heresy, condemned in August 1536, and stripped of his priesthood. Early in October 1536, traditionally on 6 October, he was led out to the place of execution. As was the custom for a condemned scholar, he was tied to a stake and strangled, and then his body was burned.

According to John Foxe, his last words were a loud, fervent prayer: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Why Tyndale matters

Tyndale's prayer was answered faster than anyone could have imagined. Within a year of his death, Henry VIII licensed an English Bible, the so-called Matthew Bible of 1537, which was largely Tyndale's own work under another name. In 1539 the Great Bible, also built on Tyndale, was placed in every parish church in England by royal order.

When scholars produced the King James Version in 1611, they kept so much of Tyndale's wording that roughly four-fifths of its New Testament is his. Phrases like "let there be light," "the salt of the earth," "my brother's keeper," "the powers that be" and "a law unto themselves" all come from him. He even coined words, including "Passover," "scapegoat" and "atonement."

The ploughboy got his Bible. Tyndale gave it to him, in English so clear and strong that it shaped the language of Shakespeare, Milton and Bunyan, and the faith of millions who have never heard his name.

In his own words

> *"If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost."*
>
> To a learned churchman at Little Sodbury, c. 1522, as reported by John Foxe

> *"I had perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."*
>
> Preface to his translation of the Pentateuch, 1530

> *"Most of all, I beg and beseech your clemency… that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study."*
>
> Letter from prison at Vilvoorde, 1535

> *"Lord, open the King of England's eyes."*
>
> His last words at his execution, 1536, as reported by John Foxe

A note on these sayings: the ploughboy boast and his last words both come to us through John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, written about thirty years later from the memories of people who knew him. They fit everything else we know of Tyndale, but they are reported speech, not his own writing. The prison letter survives in his own hand.

Key dates

Year	Event
c. 1494	Born in Gloucestershire
1512	BA at Oxford (MA 1515)
1516	Erasmus publishes the Greek New Testament
c. 1521–1523	Tutor at Little Sodbury Manor; the “ploughboy” boast
1523	Turned away by Bishop Tunstall in London
1524	Leaves England for good
1525	Cologne printing raided
1526	First printed English New Testament, at Worms; copies burned in London
1528	*The Obedience of a Christian Man*
1530	The Pentateuch in English; *The Practice of Prelates*
1531	*Answer* to Thomas More
1534	Revised New Testament
1535	Betrayed by Henry Phillips in Antwerp; imprisoned at Vilvoorde
1536	Strangled and burned at Vilvoorde, traditionally 6 October
1537	Matthew Bible, largely Tyndale’s work, licensed by Henry VIII

Further reading

- William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*. Available free in public-domain editions.
- John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (the *Book of Martyrs*), the account of Tyndale.
- David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography*. The standard modern life, full of love for Tyndale’s English.

Chapter Four



John Calvin

1509–1564

My Heart I Offer

Anonymous French school, *Portrait of John Calvin*, c. 1550. Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht.

One night in Geneva

In the summer of 1536, a slight, serious French scholar of twenty-seven arrived in Geneva planning to stay a single night.

John Calvin was on his way to Strasbourg, where he hoped to settle into a quiet life of study and writing. War between France and the Holy Roman Empire had closed the direct road, so he had taken a long detour south. Geneva was just a place to sleep.

But someone recognised him. Only a few months earlier he had published a small book in Latin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and it had made his name among Protestants across Europe. Word reached William Farel, a fiery, red-bearded preacher who had been leading the Reformation in Geneva. The city had just voted to throw out the Mass and live by the gospel, and Farel was desperate for help.

Farel went straight to Calvin's inn. He begged him to stay. Calvin refused. He was not a preacher, he said. He was shy. He wanted only to study.

Farel's patience snapped. Calvin remembered the moment for the rest of his life. Farel declared that God would curse his retirement and the quiet studies he wanted, if he walked away when the need was so urgent. "By this imprecation," Calvin wrote, "I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken."

He stayed. Apart from one stormy exile, he would spend the rest of his life in Geneva, and from that small city on a lake his influence would spread to France, the Netherlands, Scotland, England and eventually America.

A lawyer's son from Noyon

Jean Cauvin was born on 10 July 1509 in Noyon, a cathedral town in Picardy, northern France. ("Calvin" comes from the Latin form of his name, Calvinus, which scholars used.) His father, Gérard, was a lawyer and administrator who worked for the cathedral and the bishop. His mother, Jeanne, was known for her piety. She died when John was a small boy.

Gérard had connections, and he used them. Paid for by church income, the boy went to Paris at about fourteen to study at the Collège de Montaigu, a famously harsh college with bad food and strict discipline. He was brilliant and intensely serious. Fellow students supposedly nicknamed him "the Accusative Case" for the way he corrected their behaviour.

His father had planned a career in the church for his son. Then he fell out with the cathedral clergy and changed his mind: law paid better. So Calvin went to Orléans and Bourges to study law, worked himself into poor health with late-night study, and mastered Greek on the side. When his father died in 1531, he was free to follow his real love, classical literature. His first book, in 1532, was a learned commentary on the Roman philosopher Seneca. It barely sold.

Meanwhile, the ideas of Luther were spreading in France, and Calvin was drawn in. He tells us very little about his conversion, except that it was sudden. He had been, he says, "obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery," until "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame." It probably happened around 1533.

On 1 November that year, Calvin's friend Nicolas Cop, the new rector of the University of Paris, gave an opening address that sounded alarmingly Lutheran. Uproar followed. Cop fled, and Calvin, suspected of helping write the speech, slipped out of Paris too. One story says he escaped through a window using knotted sheets.

A year later, in October 1534, Protestant posters attacking the Mass appeared overnight across Paris, one reportedly even on the king's bedroom door. King Francis I was furious. Arrests and burnings followed. Calvin, now a marked man, left France for the Protestant city of Basel in Switzerland.

A book, an exile and a wife

In Basel, living under a false name, Calvin finished the book that made him famous. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* appeared in March 1536. It was a compact handbook of Protestant belief, written in elegant Latin. Calvin opened it with a bold letter to Francis I, defending the French Protestants the king was persecuting as loyal, peaceful believers, not rebels.

He kept revising and expanding the *Institutes* for the rest of his life. The final edition of 1559 was about five times longer than the first. Its opening sentence is still one of the most quoted in Christian theology: "Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

After Farel's curse kept him in Geneva, Calvin began as a lecturer on the Bible and soon became a pastor. He and Farel pushed hard for reform. They wanted every citizen to sign a confession of faith, and they wanted the church, not the city council, to decide who could come to the Lord's Supper. Many Genevans had thrown off the bishop to gain their freedom, not to swap one set of rules for another.

At Easter 1538, Calvin and Farel refused to give communion to the whole city, saying it was in too disorderly a state. The council's response was swift. The two preachers were given three days to leave Geneva.

Calvin was relieved. He went where he had wanted to go in the first place, to Strasbourg. The reformer Martin Bucer, a warm and generous man, made him pastor of a congregation of French refugees. Calvin later called these the happiest years of his life. He preached, taught, wrote commentaries, and introduced congregational singing of the Psalms in French.

His friends also decided he needed a wife. Calvin was not romantic about it. He wanted a woman who was modest, thrifty, patient and likely to care for his health. In 1540 he married Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children from a family he had helped bring to the Protestant faith. By every account it was a loving marriage. Their only son, Jacques, was born in 1542 and died within days.

The struggle for Geneva

Without its preachers, Geneva drifted. A cardinal named Jacopo Sadoleto wrote an open letter inviting the city back to Rome, and no one there felt able to answer it. Calvin did, from Strasbourg, in a few days. His *Reply to Sadoleto* (1539) was so effective that Genevans began to wonder why they had let him go.

In 1541 the city council begged him to return. Calvin dreaded it. “There is no place under heaven of which I can have a greater dread,” he wrote to Farel. But he went, arriving in September 1541, and almost immediately presented a plan for organising the church.

His *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* set up four kinds of church officers: pastors to preach, teachers to instruct, elders to oversee the people’s conduct, and deacons to care for the poor and sick. A body called the Consistory, made up of pastors and elders, met every week to deal with moral problems in the city, from drunkenness and fighting to wife-beating and gambling.

It was not a peaceful arrangement. Calvin was never Geneva’s ruler. He was a foreigner who could not even vote until he was made a citizen in 1559. Powerful old families resented the Consistory poking into their lives. People named their dogs after him and hecklers fired guns outside his house. For fourteen years he fought for the church’s right to discipline its own members.

In 1549 Idelette died after a long illness. Calvin wrote to a friend that he had lost “the best companion of my life.” He never remarried, and threw himself even harder into his work.

The darkest episode of his career came in 1553. Michael Servetus, a Spanish doctor and scholar, had written books denying the Trinity, a crime punishable by death across Catholic and Protestant Europe alike. He had already escaped from a Catholic prison in France, where he had been condemned to burn. Then, for reasons no one fully understands, he turned up in Geneva and was recognised in church.

Calvin pressed the charges and acted as a witness against him. The city council, after consulting other Swiss Protestant churches, sentenced Servetus to death. Calvin asked that he be beheaded rather than burned, as a more merciful death. The request was refused. On 27 October 1553 Servetus was burned alive outside the city.

Most people at the time, Catholic and Protestant, approved. Today almost everyone, including Calvin’s admirers, sees it as a terrible wrong. In 1903 the Reformed descendants of Geneva put up a monument on the spot, calling it “an error which was that of his century.”

A school for Europe

In 1555 Calvin's opponents overreached in a street riot and were driven out of power. For his last nine years, Calvin finally had the support of the city council. Geneva became a magnet for Protestants fleeing persecution. Thousands of refugees poured in from France, Italy, the Netherlands, England and Scotland, swelling the population dramatically.

Among them was the Scottish preacher John Knox, who called Geneva "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles." English exiles there produced the Geneva Bible of 1560, with its helpful study notes. It became the Bible of Shakespeare, of the Puritans and of the Pilgrims who sailed on the *Mayflower*.

In 1559 Calvin opened the Genevan Academy to train pastors and teachers, with his friend Theodore Beza as its first rector. Its graduates went back to their homelands, many of them to France, where they planted secret churches at great personal risk. Some were caught and executed. Calvin wrote to prisoners awaiting death, encouraging them to stand firm.

His workload was crushing. He preached twice on Sundays and, in alternate weeks, every weekday too, working steadily through whole books of the Bible. He lectured, wrote commentaries on most of the Bible, kept up a huge correspondence across Europe, and met with the Consistory every week. All this while suffering migraines, kidney stones, lung disease, gout and fevers.

By early 1564 he could barely walk. He was carried to church and to council meetings. On 25 April he dictated his will. On 28 April he called the pastors of Geneva to his bedside to say farewell, admitting his faults, including his quick temper, and thanking them for their patience. He died on the evening of 27 May 1564, aged fifty-four.

At his own request, he was buried in a common cemetery in an unmarked grave. He did not want his tomb to become a shrine. No one knows today exactly where he lies.

Why Calvin matters

Calvin's name is often reduced to a single doctrine, predestination, and to the image of a grim ruler of a gloomy city. The real man was shy, sickly, affectionate to his friends, quick-tempered and astonishingly hardworking. He did hold a strong view of predestination, but the heart of his theology was the glory and goodness of God, and the believer's union with Christ.

His influence is hard to overstate. The Reformed and Presbyterian churches of France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Scotland and beyond all trace their roots to Geneva. Through the Puritans his ideas crossed to England and America. The *Institutes* remains one of the most important works of theology ever written, and his commentaries are still read by preachers today.

In his own words

> *"Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."*
>
> Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 1, chapter 1

> *"The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols."*
>
> Institutes, Book 1, chapter 11

> *"My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely."*
>
> Calvin's personal motto, shown on his seal with a hand holding out a heart

> *"Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence."*
>
> Institutes, Book 4, chapter 1

Often attributed to Calvin, but not his: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!" This was said by the Dutch Calvinist Abraham Kuyper in 1880. "The world is the theatre of God's glory" is a fair summary of Calvin's thought, since he often calls creation a theatre, but the exact sentence is a later paraphrase.

Key dates

Year	Event
1509	Born 10 July in Noyon, Picardy
c. 1523	Goes to Paris to study
1528–1531	Studies law at Orléans and Bourges
c. 1533	“Sudden conversion”; flees Paris after Cop’s address
1534	Affair of the Placards; leaves France
1536	First edition of the *Institutes*; Farel keeps him in Geneva
1538	Expelled from Geneva; moves to Strasbourg
1540	Marries Idelette de Bure
1541	Returns to Geneva; *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*
1549	Idelette dies
1553	Servetus executed in Geneva
1559	Final edition of the *Institutes*; Genevan Academy opens
1564	Dies 27 May in Geneva

Further reading

- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Quotations here are from Henry Beveridge’s public-domain translation of 1845.
- Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*. A short memoir by his friend and successor.
- Bruce Gordon, *Calvin*. A fair and readable modern biography.

Chapter Five



John Owen

1616–1683

The Prince of Puritans

Portrait of John Owen, c. 1668, attributed to John Greenhill. National Portrait Gallery, London.

The preacher who never came

One Sunday in 1642, a young man in his mid-twenties walked into the church of St Mary Aldermanbury in London hoping to hear a famous preacher.

John Owen was brilliant, well educated and deeply unhappy. For years he had been wrestling with a question that would not leave him alone: was he truly a Christian? He knew the Bible and could argue theology with anyone. But he had no settled peace with God, and the struggle had at times left him so depressed he could barely speak to people.

The preacher that morning was supposed to be Edmund Calamy, one of the best-known ministers in London. Owen and his cousin waited. Calamy never appeared. Instead, an unknown preacher from the country climbed into the pulpit. Owen's cousin wanted to leave and hear someone better. Owen, tired, decided to stay put.

The stranger announced his text, Matthew 8:26: "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" It was the question Jesus asked his disciples in a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Owen had been in a storm of his own for years.

No one knows what the preacher said, and Owen never even learned his name. But by the time the sermon ended, the doubts that had haunted him were gone. He walked out of that church with a peace that never left him.

The young man who had nearly walked out to find a better preacher would go on to become one of the greatest theologians England has ever produced. People would one day call him "the prince of the Puritans."

A vicar's son at Oxford

John Owen was born in 1616, the year Shakespeare died, in the Oxfordshire village of Stadhampton. His father, Henry, was the local vicar and a Puritan, one of the many English Protestants who believed the Church of England's reformation had stopped halfway and needed to go further.

John was precocious. At about twelve he was sent to Queen's College, Oxford. He earned his BA at sixteen and his MA at nineteen. He was also a

keen athlete who threw the javelin, jumped, rang church bells and played the flute. Early biographers say he drove himself so hard that he slept only four hours a night, a habit he later regretted for the damage it did to his health.

In the 1630s, Archbishop William Laud was tightening control over the Church of England and its universities. He required new ceremonies and forms of worship that Puritans believed were unbiblical and dangerously close to Roman Catholic practice. Owen could not accept them in good conscience. Around 1637 he left Oxford, giving up what had looked like a glittering academic career.

He found work as a private chaplain in the households of wealthy families. It was during these years that his inner crisis deepened, until that unexpected sermon in London in 1642 brought it to an end. The same year, England slid into civil war between King Charles I and Parliament. Owen's own life was about to be swept up in it.

Cromwell's chaplain

In 1643 Owen published his first book, an attack on Arminian theology, which taught that salvation ultimately depends on human free will. Parliament's leaders liked it, and he was given the parish of Fordham in Essex. In 1644 he married Mary Rooke. Three years later he moved to the larger market town of Coggeshall, where crowds of up to two thousand came to hear him preach.

In 1647 he published *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, a dense defence of the belief that Christ died specifically to save his people. More than three centuries later it is still in print and still argued over.

On 30 January 1649, King Charles I was beheaded in London. The very next day, Owen was the preacher appointed to address Parliament. He chose his words carefully and did not mention the execution directly, but his presence there tied him to the new regime. A few months later, Oliver Cromwell heard him preach, put a hand on his shoulder and told him he must come with him.

Owen went with Cromwell as chaplain on his campaign in Ireland in 1649, and to Scotland in 1650. In Ireland he was moved by the spiritual need he saw

and urged Parliament to send preachers there.

In 1651 Parliament made him Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, the university's grandest college. The next year he became vice-chancellor of the whole university. Oxford was in a sorry state after the war, and Owen worked hard to restore it. He protected scholars of different views, including some royalists and Anglicans who might have been thrown out.

The Puritan vice-chancellor also defied the dour stereotype. One critic complained that he went about with powdered hair, lace bands, a fashionable cloak and Spanish leather boots.

These were also the years of some of his most loved books, which began as sermons to students: *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (1656), *Of Communion with God* (1657) and *Of Temptation* (1658). In 1658 he helped write the Savoy Declaration, a statement of faith for Congregational churches. His friendship with Cromwell cooled, partly because Owen opposed the proposal in 1657 to make Cromwell king.

The tinker's preaching

Cromwell died in 1658, and within two years the Puritan experiment was over. In 1660 Charles II returned as king and the old Church of England was restored, bishops and all. Owen had already lost his post at Christ Church. Now he lost much more.

In 1662 the Act of Uniformity required every minister to use the Book of Common Prayer and accept ordination by a bishop. About two thousand ministers refused and were thrown out of their churches on St Bartholomew's Day, 24 August 1662. This became known as the Great Ejection. Further laws made it a crime for these "nonconformists" to hold their own services or even live near the towns where they had preached.

Owen could have had a comfortable life. He was offered positions, reportedly even a bishopric, if he would conform. He refused, and spent the rest of his life as a nonconformist pastor, mostly in London, preaching to a congregation that sometimes had to meet in secret. He used his learning and his connections with powerful friends to plead for toleration, and to help other dissenters in trouble.

One of them was a poor tinker from Bedford named John Bunyan, who spent twelve years in prison for preaching without a licence. Owen tried to win his release. When Bunyan wrote a book called *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Owen introduced him to his own publisher, Nathaniel Ponder, who brought it out in 1678. It became one of the best-selling books in the English language.

There is a well-known story that King Charles II once asked Owen why a learned man like him went to hear an uneducated tinker preach. Owen is said to have replied: "Could I possess the tinker's abilities for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning."

Through these hard years Owen wrote at a staggering rate. His greatest project was a commentary on the letter to the Hebrews, published in four large volumes between 1668 and 1684, and seven in modern editions. He also wrote major works on the Holy Spirit, on the person of Christ and on how believers are made right with God.

Seeing the glory

Owen's public life was full of achievement. His private life was full of grief. He and Mary had eleven children. Ten died in infancy or childhood. Their one surviving daughter married, but the marriage failed, and she came home to her parents and died of tuberculosis as a young woman. Owen outlived every one of his children.

Mary died in 1676 after more than thirty years of marriage. The following year Owen married Dorothy D'Oyley, a widow, who cared for him through his last years.

Those years were hard on his body. He suffered from asthma, kidney stones and other illnesses, and was often unable to preach. But his mind turned more and more towards heaven. His last book, *Meditations on the Glory of Christ*, was written as he was dying. In it he argued that the believer who will see Christ's glory in heaven should begin to look at it by faith now.

In the summer of 1683 he moved to a house in Ealing, just west of London. A friend, William Payne, came to tell him that the book was being printed. Owen replied, "I am glad to hear it. But, O brother Payne, the long-

wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world."

He died on 24 August 1683, St Bartholomew's Day, exactly twenty-one years after the Great Ejection. He was buried in Bunhill Fields, the burial ground for London's nonconformists, where John Bunyan would be laid to rest five years later.

Why Owen matters

Owen was the greatest theologian of the English Puritans, a movement that shaped the faith of Britain and America for generations. His books are not easy reading. Even in his own day people found his long sentences heavy going. But readers who persist find a writer of rare depth, who never separated hard thinking from warm devotion to Christ.

His little books on sin, temptation and communion with God are still reprinted and still change lives. Through them, a seventeenth-century Oxford scholar continues to teach ordinary Christians how to fight sin honestly and how to enjoy God.

In his own words

> *"Be killing sin or it will be killing you."*
>
> Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers, 1656

> *"The vigour, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh."*
>
> Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers

> *"The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay upon the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him, is not to believe that he loves you."*
>
> Of Communion with God, 1657, in lightly modernised wording

> *"O brother Payne, the long-wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world."*
>
> To his friend William Payne, days before his death in 1683

Often attributed to Owen, but uncertain: his famous reply to Charles II about Bunyan's preaching comes from a story first recorded long after both men died, so it may be a legend. "What a minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more" is widely credited to Owen, but no one has found it in his writings.

Key dates

Year	Event
1616	Born in Stadhampton, Oxfordshire
1628	Enters Queen's College, Oxford, aged about twelve
c. 1637	Leaves Oxford rather than accept Laud's reforms
1642	Finds assurance through a substitute preacher in London; civil war begins
1643	First book; becomes vicar of Fordham, Essex
1644	Marries Mary Rooke
1647	*The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*
1649	Preaches to Parliament the day after Charles I's execution; chaplain to Cromwell in Ireland
1651	Dean of Christ Church, Oxford
1652–1657	Vice-chancellor of Oxford University
1656–1658	*Mortification of Sin*, *Communion with God*, *Of Temptation*
1662	Great Ejection; continues as a nonconformist pastor in London
1676	Mary dies
1678	Helps John Bunyan publish *The Pilgrim's Progress*
1683	Dies 24 August in Ealing; buried in Bunhill Fields

Further reading

- John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. Short and searching. Quotations here are from his public-domain works.
- Sinclair Ferguson, *The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen*. A short, friendly introduction to his thought.
- Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism*. The best modern scholarly biography.

Chapter Six



John Bunyan

1628–1688

The Tinker's Dream

Thomas Sadler, *John Bunyan*, 1684. National Portrait Gallery, London.

A voice on the village green

One Sunday afternoon in the early 1650s, a young tinker was playing a game of tip-cat on the green of Elstow, a village in Bedfordshire.

Tip-cat was a rough, noisy game. You struck a small piece of wood called the cat so that it flew up in the air, then hit it again as far as you could. John Bunyan was good at it, and he loved it. He also knew that playing games on the Sabbath was a sin. That morning the parish priest had preached against exactly this kind of Sunday sport, and Bunyan had gone home feeling guilty. After a good dinner, he shook the feeling off and went out to play.

He had just struck the cat once and was about to hit it a second time when something stopped him in mid-swing.

"A voice did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul," he wrote later, "which said, Wilt thou leave thy sins and go to heaven, or have thy sins and go to hell?"

Bunyan stood frozen on the green, the stick still in his hand. He looked up to the sky and felt, as he put it, as if the Lord Jesus were looking down on him, very displeased.

Then he made a decision that tells us a great deal about the young John Bunyan. He concluded it was too late for him. He was already lost, so he might as well enjoy his sins while he could. He went back to his game.

But the voice would not go away. The young man swinging a stick on a village green would one day write one of the most widely read books ever written in English.

The tinker's son

John Bunyan was baptised in Elstow on 30 November 1628. His father, Thomas, was a brazier, or tinker, who mended pots and pans, travelling around the villages with his tools on his back. The family was poor but not destitute. John was sent to school long enough to learn to read and write, then joined his father in the trade.

By his own account, he was a wild boy. He swore so fluently that even a woman of loose life once told him he was the ungodliest fellow for swearing she had ever heard, and that he would spoil all the youth of the town. He was also tormented, even as a child, by terrifying dreams of devils and hell.

In 1644, when he was fifteen, his mother died. His sister died a month later, and within another month his father had remarried. Not long afterwards, at sixteen, John was drafted into Parliament's army in the Civil War and posted to the garrison at Newport Pagnell.

He saw little real fighting, but one incident stayed with him. He was picked to go on a siege, and another soldier asked to take his place. Bunyan agreed. While standing sentry, the man was shot in the head by a musket ball and died. Bunyan later saw it as one of the many times God had spared his life.

After leaving the army in 1647, he married a young woman whose name we do not know. She was as poor as he was. "We came together as poor as poor might be," he wrote, "not having so much household stuff as a dish or spoon betwixt us both." But she brought two books as her dowry, both popular Puritan guides to the Christian life: *The Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and *The Practice of Piety*. She also told him stories of her godly father. Bunyan began to read, and to go to church twice every Sunday.

Their first child, Mary, was born blind in 1650. Bunyan loved her with a special tenderness all his life.

Through the Slough of Despond

After the voice on the green, Bunyan tried hard to reform himself. He gave up swearing, then bell-ringing, which he had loved, and finally dancing. Neighbours were amazed at the change. Bunyan was quite pleased with himself too. He thought, he said later, that no man in England could please God better than he.

Then, one day, working in the streets of Bedford, he came upon three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, talking about God. They spoke of being born again, of how God had visited their souls with his love, and of how they had been comforted against the temptations of the devil. Bunyan

listened and realised he understood none of it. “They spake as if joy did make them speak,” he wrote. They seemed to him to live in a different world.

The women belonged to a small independent church in Bedford led by John Gifford, a former royalist officer and gambler who had been dramatically converted himself. Gifford took Bunyan under his wing. But what followed was years of spiritual agony that Bunyan later described in his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666).

He swung between hope and despair, sometimes many times a day. Verses of the Bible seemed to rise up and either comfort him or condemn him. Worst of all, he became convinced that he had committed the unforgivable sin. A thought kept pressing on him, “Sell him, sell him,” meaning Christ, until one morning in bed he caught himself thinking, “Let him go, if he will.” For two years afterwards he believed he was damned.

Relief came at last, again out of doors. Walking in a field, troubled in conscience, he suddenly heard in his mind the sentence, “Thy righteousness is in heaven.” He saw, he said, with the eyes of his soul, Jesus Christ at God’s right hand as his righteousness. His goodness or badness made no difference to it, because his righteousness was Christ himself, “the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.”

“Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed,” he wrote. “I was loosed from my affliction and irons.”

Bunyan was baptised and joined Gifford’s church. Before long its members noticed his gift for speaking and asked him to preach. Crowds came to hear the tinker. Around 1658 his first wife died, leaving him with four young children, including blind Mary. A year or so later he married again. His second wife, Elizabeth, would prove to be one of the bravest women of her age.

Twelve years in Bedford gaol

In 1660 the monarchy returned and Charles II became king. The new government moved quickly against the independent churches that had flourished under Cromwell. It became illegal to hold religious meetings outside the Church of England.

On 12 November 1660, Bunyan was due to preach at a farmhouse at Lower Samsell, near the village of Harlington. Friends warned him that a warrant was out for his arrest and urged him not to go ahead. Bunyan refused to run. If he fled, he reasoned, the weaker believers would think he was a coward. He began the meeting with prayer, and a constable walked in and arrested him.

All he had to do to go free was promise to stop preaching. He would not. At his trial in January 1661 he was sentenced to prison. Told he would stay in prison unless he gave up preaching, Bunyan gave the answer that sums up his whole life: "If I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel again tomorrow, by the help of God."

Elizabeth fought for him. She was pregnant when he was arrested, and the shock caused her to go into labour early; the baby died. In August 1661, still a young woman, she went three times to plead with the judges at the assizes in Bedford. At the third attempt she stood before them in a crowded room and spoke for her husband. "My lord," she said, "I have four small children that cannot help themselves, of which one is blind, and have nothing to live upon, but the charity of good people." One of the judges, Sir Matthew Hale, was moved, but he told her nothing could be done unless Bunyan promised to stop preaching. She left in tears.

Bunyan stayed in the county gaol in Bedford for twelve years, from 1660 to 1672. Conditions were grim, but not as harsh as in some prisons. He was sometimes allowed out, and once even visited London. To support his family, he made long tagged shoelaces by the hundred for them to sell. Tradition says blind Mary brought him his soup each day.

The hardest thing was the separation. "The parting with my wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling the flesh from my bones," he wrote, "…especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides."

Tradition says he had two books with him: the Bible and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. He preached to his fellow prisoners and he wrote. In his prison years he produced a stream of books, including *Grace Abounding*, the story of his own conversion. In 1672 Charles II issued a Declaration of Indulgence relaxing the laws against dissenters, and Bunyan walked free.

The dream

The Bedford church had already chosen Bunyan as its pastor, and in 1672 he was licensed to preach legally. He travelled widely around the villages of Bedfordshire and beyond, and preached in London to crowds of thousands. Even a busy working day in winter could draw over a thousand people at seven in the morning to hear him. People affectionately called him "Bishop Bunyan."

The freedom did not last. In 1676 he was arrested again and spent about six months in prison. John Owen, the great Puritan theologian who had long admired Bunyan's preaching, is said to have helped secure his release. It was probably during one of his imprisonments that Bunyan began writing a story that had been growing in his mind.

It was published in London in 1678 by Owen's own publisher, Nathaniel Ponder. Its full title was *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*. It opens with a line that has become one of the most famous in English literature: "As I walk'd through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a Den; and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a Dream." The "den," he explained in a note, was the gaol.

In his dream he sees a man named Christian, with a great burden on his back, who flees the City of Destruction to find the Celestial City. On the way he falls into the Slough of Despond, loses his burden at the foot of the cross, climbs the Hill Difficulty, fights the monster Apollyon, walks through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, is tried at Vanity Fair, where his friend Faithful is martyred, and is locked in Doubting Castle by Giant Despair. At last, with his friend Hopeful, he crosses the river of death and enters the city.

Readers loved it from the start. It was written in plain, vivid English that a tinker could write and a ploughman could read, full of humour, danger and memorable characters. A second and a third edition followed within a year. In 1684 Bunyan published a second part, telling the journey of Christian's wife, Christiana, and their children. He also wrote *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (1680) and *The Holy War* (1682), among some sixty works.

In August 1688, a young man in Reading asked Bunyan to help him make peace with his father, who had disowned him. Bunyan rode to Reading, succeeded, and then rode on to London through heavy rain. He arrived soaked and feverish at the house of a friend, John Strudwick, a grocer on Snow Hill. He preached one last time, and then the fever took hold.

He died on 31 August 1688, aged fifty-nine. He was buried in Bunhill Fields in London, where John Owen had been laid to rest five years earlier.

Why Bunyan matters

Bunyan had almost no formal education, yet he wrote a book that has been translated into more than two hundred languages and never gone out of print. For centuries *The Pilgrim's Progress* stood next to the Bible on the shelves of ordinary homes across the English-speaking world. Missionaries carried it around the globe.

His gift was to show the Christian life as a journey that every reader could recognise, with its burdens and its doubts, its friends and its enemies, its deep valleys and its moments of joy. And behind the story stood a real man who had felt every step of it himself: a tinker who had despaired of God's mercy and found it, and who would rather sit in prison for twelve years than stop telling others about it.

In his own words

> *"As I walk'd through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where was a Den; and I laid me down in that place to sleep: and as I slept I dreamed a Dream."*
>
> Opening of The Pilgrim's Progress, 1678

> *"So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the Cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the Sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more."*
>
> The Pilgrim's Progress, 1678

> *"So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side."*
>
> On the death of Mr Valiant-for-truth, The Pilgrim's Progress, Part 2, 1684

> *"If I were out of prison today, I would preach the gospel again tomorrow, by the help of God."*
>
> A Relation of the Imprisonment of Mr John Bunyan, recalling his trial in 1661

> *"When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words, than thy words without a heart."*
>
> I Will Pray with the Spirit, 1662

Often attributed to Bunyan, but not his: "You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you" is widely quoted under his name online, but it does not appear in any of his writings.

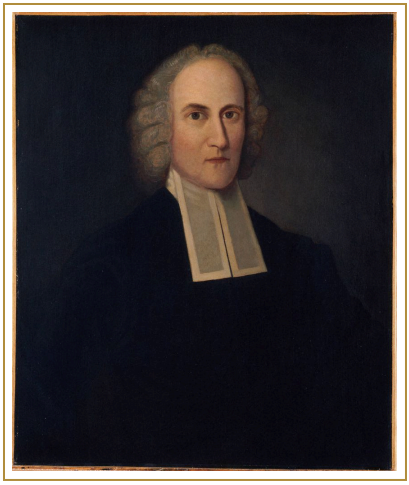
Key dates

Year	Event
1628	Baptised 30 November in Elstow, Bedfordshire
1644	Mother and sister die; drafted into Parliament's army
1647	Leaves the army; soon marries
1650	Blind daughter Mary born
c. 1650–1655	Voice on Elstow green; years of spiritual struggle; joins the Bedford church
c. 1658	First wife dies; marries Elizabeth about a year later
1660	Arrested 12 November for preaching
1660–1672	Twelve years in Bedford county gaol
1666	*Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*
1672	Released; licensed as pastor of the Bedford church
1676–1677	Second imprisonment, about six months
1678	*The Pilgrim's Progress* published
1684	*The Pilgrim's Progress*, Part 2
1688	Dies 31 August in London; buried in Bunhill Fields

Further reading

- John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. His own story of his conversion, short and raw.
- John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Best read aloud.
- Richard Greaves, *Glimpses of Glory: John Bunyan and English Dissent*. The fullest modern biography.

Chapter Seven



Jonathan Edwards

1703–1758

A Sense of the Heart

Henry Augustus Loop after Joseph Badger, *Jonathan Edwards*, 1860. Princeton University Art Museum.

The sermon he never finished

On 8 July 1741, a tall, thin, serious minister stood in the pulpit of the meeting house in Enfield, a farming town on the Connecticut River, and announced his text.

It was Deuteronomy 32:35: "Their foot shall slide in due time." The preacher was Jonathan Edwards, pastor of the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, about thirty miles upriver. He was a guest that day. Enfield had a reputation for being largely untouched by the revival sweeping through the towns around it, and Edwards had been asked to preach.

He was not a dramatic speaker. He read from a small manuscript in a steady voice, with few gestures, his eyes often fixed on the back of the room. But the words he read were overwhelming. He told his hearers that they were held over the pit of hell by nothing but the hand of God, and that only God's mercy kept them from falling.

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell," he said, "much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked." And yet, he went on, "you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open."

The effect was extraordinary. A minister who was present, Stephen Williams, wrote in his diary that before the sermon was done there was "a great moaning and crying out through the whole house." People cried out, "What shall I do to be saved?" The noise became so loud that Edwards had to stop. He never finished the sermon. Instead the ministers went down among the people to pray with them.

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God became the most famous sermon ever preached in America. It has also made Edwards a caricature: the grim Puritan dangling sinners over the flames. The real man was very different. Above all else, Jonathan Edwards was captivated by the beauty of God.

A new sense of things

Jonathan Edwards was born on 5 October 1703 in East Windsor, Connecticut, on the edge of colonial New England. His father, Timothy, was the town's minister. His mother, Esther, was the daughter of Solomon Stoddard, the most powerful minister in the Connecticut River valley. Jonathan was the only son among eleven children. He grew up with ten sisters, all of them, like him, very well educated.

He was fascinated by the natural world. As a young man he wrote a remarkable essay on the flying spiders he had watched in the woods, describing how they let out silk threads and floated on the breeze. He filled notebooks with observations on rainbows, light, colours and the mind. Throughout his life he would see the natural world as a set of signs pointing to God.

He entered Yale College in 1716, a month before his thirteenth birthday, and graduated top of his class in 1720. There he read the English philosopher John Locke with more pleasure, he said, than a greedy miser finds in gathering up handfuls of silver and gold.

For years Edwards had felt that God's sovereign choice of whom to save was a horrible doctrine. Then, in 1721, reading 1 Timothy 1:17, "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever," something changed. "As I read the words," he wrote, "there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before."

Not long afterwards, walking alone in his father's pasture and looking up at the sky and clouds, he was overwhelmed by "a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God." From then on everything seemed different. He saw God's glory in the sun, the moon, the grass and even the thunderstorms that had once terrified him.

At nineteen he served briefly as minister to a small Presbyterian congregation in New York. Around that time he began writing a list of resolutions to guide his life. He eventually wrote seventy of them. Number five reads: "Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the

most profitable way I possibly can." He read them over once a week for the rest of his life.

Sarah, Northampton and a surprising work

While teaching at Yale in his early twenties, Edwards fell in love with Sarah Pierpont, the daughter of a New Haven minister. Years before, when she was only thirteen, he had written a description of her on the blank page of a book. "They say there is a young lady in New Haven," it begins, "who is beloved of that Great Being, who made and rules the world." She would sometimes go about from place to place, he wrote, singing sweetly, and seemed to have someone invisible always conversing with her.

They married on 28 July 1727, when he was twenty-three and she was seventeen. It was a deeply happy marriage. They had eleven children, and all of them survived childhood, which was rare at the time. Sarah ran a busy household with warmth and skill, and visitors remembered the family as unusually loving.

Earlier that year, Edwards had moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, as assistant to his famous grandfather, Solomon Stoddard. When Stoddard died in 1729, Edwards became pastor of one of the largest and most important churches in New England, at the age of twenty-five.

He was a disciplined worker. He usually spent thirteen hours a day in his study, rising early. For exercise he rode on horseback or chopped wood. When an idea came to him on a ride, he would pin a small piece of paper to his coat as a reminder, and return home with notes fluttering all over him.

In late 1734 he preached a series of sermons on justification by faith alone. Something unexpected began to happen, starting among the young people of the town. Within months it seemed that almost everyone in Northampton was talking about the state of their souls. Edwards estimated that more than three hundred people came to faith in about six months, in a town of some two hundred families.

He described what had happened in *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* (1737). Published in London and Boston, it was read eagerly across the English-speaking world. In England, a young Oxford graduate

named John Wesley read it on foot as he walked from London to Oxford, and was moved. The revival was a sign of things to come.

Awakening, and a bitter parting

In October 1740, the young English evangelist George Whitefield came to Northampton on his famous preaching tour of the American colonies. Edwards wept through his sermon. Over the next two years a wave of revival swept up and down the colonies, from Georgia to Maine. It became known as the Great Awakening, and Edwards was its leading thinker. The Enfield sermon of 1741 was one of its most dramatic moments.

Not everyone welcomed it. Some preachers encouraged wild excesses, and critics, led by the Boston minister Charles Chauncy, dismissed the whole movement as emotional hysteria. Edwards found himself defending the revival against its enemies, while also warning its friends against its dangers.

His answer came in his great book *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746). Real Christianity, he argued, was not cold head-knowledge. "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections," he wrote, meaning a heart moved by love for God. But strong feelings, tears or bodily shaking proved nothing by themselves. The true test of a changed heart was a changed life, shown above all in humble, loving, persevering obedience to Christ.

In 1747 a young missionary named David Brainerd, dying of tuberculosis, came to stay in the Edwards home. He was nursed by Edwards's daughter Jerusha. Brainerd died that October, and Jerusha, who had caught the disease, died a few months later, aged seventeen. Edwards edited Brainerd's diary and published it in 1749. *The Life of David Brainerd* would inspire generations of missionaries.

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing in Northampton. Edwards's grandfather had allowed anyone of good behaviour to take communion. Edwards came to believe that only those who made a credible profession of faith should come to the Lord's table. To many in the town, this felt like an insult to Stoddard's memory and a judgement on their own souls. Old resentments made it worse, including a disciplinary case in which Edwards had publicly named young people from leading families.

In June 1750, after a long and painful dispute, the church voted overwhelmingly to dismiss him. More than two hundred men voted against him; twenty-three voted for him. After twenty-three years, the greatest theologian in America was out of a job, aged forty-six, with a large family to support. He preached a dignified farewell sermon, and remained calm and gracious through it all.

There is also a painful side to his story that must be told plainly. Like many New England ministers of his day, Edwards owned enslaved people. In 1731 he bought a teenage girl named Venus at a slave market in Newport, Rhode Island. Though he criticised the slave trade, he defended owning slaves. Some of his own followers, including his son Jonathan Edwards Jr., later became outspoken opponents of slavery.

The frontier and the final call

In 1751 Edwards took the family west to Stockbridge, a small frontier settlement in the Berkshire hills of western Massachusetts. There he became pastor to a few English families and missionary to some two hundred and fifty Mohican people, as well as a group of Mohawks. He preached through interpreters, fought hard against settlers who were cheating the Native families out of land and money, and pleaded with the authorities to fund a decent school for their children.

The quiet of the frontier also gave him time to write. In Stockbridge he produced some of the most important works of philosophy and theology ever written in America, including *Freedom of the Will* (1754), *Original Sin*, and two treatises on true virtue and on God's purpose in creating the world. His central conviction ran through them all: God created the world to display his glory, and his glory is most fully shown when his creatures delight in him.

In 1757 a letter arrived from the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University. Its president, Aaron Burr, the husband of Edwards's daughter Esther, had suddenly died. The trustees wanted Edwards to take his place. Edwards hesitated. He wrote back describing his own weaknesses, including what he called "a constitution in many respects

peculiarly unhappy," and his long list of unfinished books. But he accepted, and arrived at Princeton in January 1758.

A smallpox epidemic was raging. Inoculation, deliberately infecting a healthy person with a mild case, was new and controversial. Edwards believed in it, and wanted to set an example. On 23 February 1758 he was inoculated. At first all seemed well, but an infection set in, and the sores in his throat became so swollen that he could not swallow.

As he was dying, he gave his daughter Lucy a message for Sarah, who was still in Stockbridge. "Tell her," he said, "that the uncommon union which has so long subsisted between us has been of such a nature as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue for ever." His last words to those around him were, "Trust in God, and ye need not fear." He died on 22 March 1758, aged fifty-four.

When the news reached Sarah, she wrote to their daughter Esther: "A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it." And then: "But my God lives; and he has my heart." Within months both Esther and Sarah had died too.

Why Edwards matters

Jonathan Edwards is often called America's greatest theologian, and many would say its greatest philosopher too. His books are still studied in universities, and his account of revival still shapes how Christians think about spiritual awakening. *The Life of David Brainerd* sent missionaries like William Carey and Henry Martyn around the world.

But his deepest legacy is his vision of God. For Edwards, God was not merely to be obeyed or feared, but enjoyed. Faith was a new sense of the heart that tastes the sweetness and beauty of God, the way a person tastes honey rather than merely knowing that it is sweet. He wanted his readers not just to believe in God's glory, but to delight in it.

In his own words

> *"As I read the words, there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the Divine Being; a new sense, quite different from any thing I ever experienced before."*
>
> Personal Narrative, recalling his conversion in 1721

> *"Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live."*
>
> Resolutions, no. 6, 1722

> *"The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied."*
>
> Sermon The Christian Pilgrim, 1733

> *"True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."*
>
> Religious Affections, 1746

> *"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked."*
>
> Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, preached at Enfield, 1741

Often misremembered: Edwards is best known for *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, but it is not typical of him. He left well over a thousand sermon manuscripts, and far more of them dwell on the love, beauty and excellency of Christ than on judgement.

Key dates

Year	Event
1703	Born 5 October in East Windsor, Connecticut
1716	Enters Yale College
1720	Graduates top of his class
1721	Conversion while reading 1 Timothy 1:17
1722–1723	Pastor in New York; writes his *Resolutions*
1727	Assistant minister at Northampton; marries Sarah Pierpont
1729	Becomes sole pastor at Northampton
1734–1735	Revival in Northampton
1737	*A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*
1740–1742	The Great Awakening; Whitefield visits Northampton
1741	Preaches *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* at Enfield, 8 July
1746	*Religious Affections*
1749	*The Life of David Brainerd*
1750	Dismissed by the Northampton church
1751	Missionary and pastor at Stockbridge
1754	*Freedom of the Will*
1758	President of the College of New Jersey (Princeton); dies 22 March after smallpox inoculation

Further reading

- Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative* and *Resolutions*. Short, and the best way to meet the man himself.
- Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*. His classic on true and false spirituality.
- George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*. The standard modern biography.

Chapter Eight



Charles Spurgeon

1834–1892

The Prince of Preachers

Alexander Melville, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 1885. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Look and live

On the morning of Sunday 6 January 1850, a fifteen-year-old boy set out through the streets of Colchester in a heavy snowstorm.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon had been miserable for months. He had grown up in a devout home and knew his Bible well, but he was crushed by a sense of his own sin and could find no peace. He had gone from church to church looking for an answer. That morning he was heading for a particular chapel, but the snow was so thick that he could go no further. He turned down a side street and went into a small Primitive Methodist chapel.

There were only a dozen or fifteen people inside. The minister had not turned up, probably snowed in. At last a thin-looking man, a shoemaker or tailor, Spurgeon thought, climbed into the pulpit to preach. He was not educated. He could hardly pronounce the words properly. His text was Isaiah 45:22: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."

He did not have much to say, so he kept repeating the text. Look, he said. It doesn't take much effort to look. You don't need to lift a finger. You don't need to be a scholar. A child can look. Look to Jesus, sweating great drops of blood. Look to him hanging on the cross. Look to him rising from the dead.

After about ten minutes he had run out of things to say. Then he noticed the miserable teenager sitting under the gallery. He fixed his eyes on him and said, "Young man, you look very miserable." He told him he would always be miserable, in life and in death, if he did not obey the text. Then he lifted up his hands and shouted: "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but to look and live."

"I saw at once the way of salvation," Spurgeon wrote years later. "I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away." The cloud was gone. He walked home through the snow a different person.

That boy would become the most famous preacher in the world. By the end of his life, he had preached to millions, and he never forgot the unknown man who had preached to him.

The boy preacher

Spurgeon was born on 19 June 1834 in Kelvedon, a small town in Essex. He was the eldest of seventeen children, of whom only eight survived infancy. His father, John, was a part-time Congregational minister who also worked as a clerk. When Charles was a toddler, he was sent to live with his grandparents in the village of Stambourne, where his grandfather James had been the Independent minister for decades.

The grandparents' manse had a dark little room upstairs full of old Puritan books. The young Spurgeon spent hours there, looking at the woodcuts and later reading the books themselves. He discovered John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* there, and claimed later to have read it more than a hundred times.

When he was ten, a visiting missionary named Richard Knill took a liking to the boy. Before he left, Knill sat him on his knee in front of the family and announced that this child would one day preach the gospel to thousands, including in the London chapel of the famous preacher Rowland Hill. He made Charles promise that when that day came, the congregation would sing William Cowper's hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way." Years later, Spurgeon did preach in Rowland Hill's chapel, and the hymn was sung.

After his conversion in the snow, Spurgeon studied the New Testament for himself and became convinced that baptism was for believers. On 3 May 1850 he walked eight miles to the village of Isleham and was baptised in the River Lark. From then on he was a Baptist.

That summer he moved to Cambridge to work as an assistant teacher at a small school. One Sunday he was asked to walk out to the village of Teversham with another young man, who would be preaching. On the way, he discovered the other young man thought Spurgeon was the preacher. So Spurgeon, aged sixteen, preached his first sermon in a cottage, on "Unto you therefore which believe he is precious."

In October 1851, at seventeen, he became pastor of the Baptist chapel in the village of Waterbeach, near Cambridge. The congregation grew from about forty people to some four hundred. Drunkards became sober, and the village itself was changed. People called him "the boy preacher."

Friends urged him to train properly at a Baptist college. An interview was arranged with the principal of Stepney College, but through a servant's mistake, the two men sat waiting in separate rooms of the same house and never met. Walking home afterwards, Spurgeon seemed to hear a verse: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not." He never went to college.

Nineteen and in London

In December 1853, the deacons of New Park Street Chapel in Southwark, south London, invited the nineteen-year-old to preach. It was a historic Baptist church that had fallen on hard times. On his first Sunday, perhaps eighty people sat in a building made for twelve hundred. Spurgeon came up from the country with a huge black satin collar and a blue handkerchief with white spots, and the Londoners smiled at him. Then he began to preach.

By the evening service, word had spread and the crowd had grown. Within months he was the church's pastor, and the chapel was full to overflowing. The building had to be enlarged, and while the work was done the church rented Exeter Hall, a vast auditorium on the Strand. That too was packed, with crowds blocking the street outside. From 1855 his sermons were printed every week and sold for a penny each.

Not everyone was impressed. Newspapers mocked him as a vulgar, theatrical ranter. Cartoonists drew him as a clown or a performer. Spurgeon, who could be very funny, kept scrapbooks of the attacks.

In 1854 he met Susannah Thompson, a young woman from the congregation. At first she was put off by his country manners and his awful collar. But they became friends. At the grand opening of the Crystal Palace that June, he quietly asked her whether she prayed for the man who would be her husband. In August, in her grandfather's garden, he proposed. They married on 8 January 1856, and that September Susannah gave birth to twin sons, Charles and Thomas. Both would grow up to become preachers.

On the evening of 19 October 1856, the church hired the largest hall in London, the Music Hall in the Royal Surrey Gardens, which held some ten thousand people. Thousands more were turned away. Soon after Spurgeon

began to pray, someone in the crowd shouted “Fire!” There was no fire, but panic swept through the building. People stampeded for the exits and a staircase gave way. Seven people were killed and many more were injured.

Spurgeon was carried from the building and fell into a deep depression. For days he could not read his Bible without weeping. The press blamed him for the disaster. He would carry the memory, and a tendency to dark depression, for the rest of his life. He found his way back through a single verse that came to him in a garden, Philippians 2:9: “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name.” Whatever happened to Spurgeon, he realised, Christ was still exalted.

The Tabernacle

On 7 October 1857, a national day of prayer for the crisis in India, Spurgeon preached at the Crystal Palace to a crowd of 23,654 people, the largest indoor congregation anyone could remember. He spoke without a microphone. A few days before, testing the acoustics, he had called out from the platform, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” A workman high up in one of the galleries, who had no idea anyone was speaking, heard the words. The story goes that he put down his tools, went home and found peace with God.

It was clear the church needed a permanent home large enough for the crowds. Spurgeon insisted it be paid for before it opened. The Metropolitan Tabernacle, at the Elephant and Castle in south London, opened free of debt in 1861. It seated around five thousand people, with room for about a thousand more standing. Spurgeon filled it twice every Sunday for more than thirty years.

In his first sermon there, he told the congregation what his theme would always be: “the person of Jesus Christ.” He kept that promise. Just as every town and village in England had a road to London, he liked to say, every text in the Bible had a road to Christ.

The Tabernacle became the centre of an extraordinary network of work. Spurgeon founded a Pastors’ College to train young men who, like himself, could not afford a university education; by the end of his life it had trained

nearly nine hundred ministers. He started almshouses for poor widows, and in 1867 an orphanage at Stockwell, where children lived in family-style houses rather than grim dormitories. He sent out colporteurs to sell Christian books door to door, and supported dozens of mission halls and Sunday schools across London.

He also wrote at an astonishing rate. His weekly printed sermons sold around 25,000 copies a week and were translated into dozens of languages; eventually they filled sixty-three volumes. He wrote a seven-volume commentary on the Psalms, *The Treasury of David*, the daily devotional *Morning and Evening*, a magazine called *The Sword and the Trowel*, and books of homespun wisdom under the name John Ploughman.

He was outspoken on public matters too. He denounced slavery so strongly that American publishers cut his words from his sermons, sales in the southern states collapsed, and copies of his sermons were burned there.

The last battles

Behind the public success lay a great deal of suffering. From his mid-thirties Spurgeon was tormented by gout, rheumatism and kidney disease, often in such pain that he could not stand. He also suffered from crushing bouts of depression, and he spoke openly about them at a time when few public figures did. “I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful,” he told his congregation, “that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to.” His honesty has comforted countless sufferers since.

Susannah’s health failed too. From 1868 she was largely an invalid, often confined to her room, and for years she could rarely hear her husband preach. Instead she found her own ministry. In 1875 she started a Book Fund to send free theological books to poor pastors, and over the years it gave away some two hundred thousand volumes.

As his illnesses worsened, Spurgeon began spending the winters in the warmth of Menton, on the French Riviera, where he rested, wrote and led small prayer meetings in his hotel.

His last great battle broke out in 1887. Spurgeon became convinced that many ministers in his own denomination were drifting away from the

authority of the Bible and from core Christian beliefs, under the influence of new liberal theology. In his magazine he warned that the churches were on the "down grade." When the Baptist Union refused to take a firm stand, he resigned from it in October 1887. In January 1888 the Union formally censured him. The Downgrade Controversy cost him many old friendships, and those close to him believed it shortened his life.

He preached his last sermon at the Tabernacle on 7 June 1891. In it he spoke of Christ as the best of masters: "He is the most magnanimous of captains. There never was his like among the choicest of princes." He went to Menton that autumn for the last time, and died there on 31 January 1892, aged fifty-seven.

His body was brought back to London. Some sixty thousand people filed past his coffin at the Tabernacle, and around a hundred thousand lined the streets for his funeral procession. On top of the coffin lay his Bible, open at Isaiah 45:22, the verse preached by the unknown man in the Colchester chapel: "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."

Why Spurgeon matters

Spurgeon was the best-known preacher of the nineteenth century, and perhaps of any century. He preached to an estimated ten million people in his lifetime, without amplification, and more of his words are in print than those of almost any other Christian author. His sermons are still read every day around the world.

Yet what makes him loved, and not just admired, is his humanity. He was funny, warm, generous and plain-spoken. He suffered deeply and admitted it. He built orphanages and trained pastors for the poor. And from the snowy morning in Colchester to the open Bible on his coffin, he never stopped telling people the same simple message that had saved him: look to Christ and live.

In his own words

> *"I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away."*
>
> Recalling his conversion in 1850, Autobiography

> *"I would propose that the subject of the ministry in this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ."*
>
> First sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, 25 March 1861

> *"I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go to."*
>
> Sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle

> *"He is the most magnanimous of captains. There never was his like among the choicest of princes."*
>
> His last sermon at the Tabernacle, 7 June 1891

Often attributed to Spurgeon, but not quite his: "A lie will go round the world while truth is pulling its boots on" appears in one of his sermons, but he quoted it as an old proverb; it was not his own. "Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion. Just turn it loose" is a popular paraphrase. Spurgeon did compare Scripture to a lion that needs no defending, but not in those exact words.

Key dates

Year	Event
1834	Born 19 June in Kelvedon, Essex
1844	Richard Knill predicts he will preach to thousands
1850	Converted 6 January in Colchester; baptised 3 May; first sermon at Teversham
1851	Pastor at Waterbeach, aged seventeen
1854	Pastor of New Park Street Chapel, London
1855	Weekly printed sermons begin
1856	Marries Susannah Thompson; twins born; Surrey Gardens disaster, 19 October
1857	Preaches to 23,654 at the Crystal Palace
1861	Metropolitan Tabernacle opens
1867	Stockwell Orphanage founded
1869–1885	*The Treasury of David*
1887	Downgrade Controversy; leaves the Baptist Union
1891	Last sermon at the Tabernacle, 7 June
1892	Dies 31 January at Menton, France; buried at West Norwood Cemetery, London

Further reading

- C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*. His daily readings, still in print after 150 years.
- C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*. Warm, funny advice to young preachers.
- Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*. A short, popular life.