

**J. I. Packer's Introduction
to an Abridgement of John Owen's Hebrews Commentary**

From *Hebrews*, by John Owen, ed. Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer, The Crossway Classics Commentaries (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998), 9-10.

INTRODUCTION

John Owen (1616-1683), sometimes chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and vice-chancellor of Oxford University, was by common consent the greatest of the Puritan theologians. He was a prolific and masterful writer, as his treatises on trinitarian faith and life, the person and work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, justification by faith, the Christian's communion with God, the eternal security of the saints, and the nature, life, and order of the church abundantly shown. Built on mainstream Reformed covenant theology and buttressed by polemics against Arminianism, Roman Catholicism, and Socinian unitarianism, these works have classic status, and it is for them that Owen is chiefly remembered by the minority (it is, alas, a quite small minority) who know his name today.

But Owen the theologian was first and foremost a Bible-man. All his theology, like Calvin's (which it closely resembles), rests on biblical texts exegeted in their context. And in Owen's own estimate, his main legacy to the ongoing church was not any of the book referred to above but his massive two-million-word exposition of Hebrews, which fills seven of the twenty-three volumes of the standard edition of his works and is boiled down for our convenience in the following pages.

John Owen wrote on Hebrews with several purposes in mind. In the first place, the glory of Jesus Christ as the divine Savior and Lord of Christians and churches was always his supreme theological, devotional, and doxological concern, and he wanted to expound Hebrews because of all the New Testament epistles it seemed to him to display that glory most fully and directly. We do not have to follow him in supposing that Paul wrote it to concur with him in his estimate of it. Then, too, he wanted to bring out the vast quantity of instruction on living by faith in Christ that he found in its pages; and on top of that he wished to vindicate the true meaning of the letter as a sermon on sovereign grace against the mishandlings of Socinian commentators who, to his mind, dishonored Christ directly by their Arian account of who and what he was and their Pelagian denial of original sin and God's renewing work in the human heart. To get through this agenda he first spent half a million words on introductory topical essays ("exercitations" as he called them) and then dug into the text itself in minutest detail and on the grandest scale. Nothing to match Owen's achievement was done before him, nor has been done since his day.

"After all my searching and reading, prayer and assiduous meditation have been my only resort, and by far the most useful means of light and assistance. . . . I always went nakedly to the Word itself, to learn humbly the mind of God in it, and to express it as he should enable me." So wrote Owen in his preface to the work. Of his achievement

Thomson declared: “It is like some vast minister [medieval cathedral] filled with solemn light, on whose minuter details it might be easy to suggest improvement; but whose stable walls and noble columns astonish you at the skill and strength of the builder the longer you gaze.” “This greatest work of John Owen,” Thomas Chalmers told his students, “. . . is a work of gigantic strength as well as gigantic size; and he who has mastered it is very little short . . . of being an erudite and accomplished theologian.”

Today’s evolutionary mind-set makes us expect Puritan Bible-work to be cruder and shallower than ours, but this classic work joins hands with Matthew Henry’s great exposition of the entire Bible to prove us wrong, even when downscaled as drastically as it is in this abridged version. To present it this way, in a form more palatable for modern readership, is for me a privilege indeed.

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