

(Biographies) John Owen

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon on John Owen highlights the theologian's profound impact on Reformed thought and the importance of emulating heroes of faith amidst life's challenges.

Duration: 1:33:02

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Psalm 119:130, Matthew 6:33, John 15:7, 1 Corinthians 15:57, 2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Peter 1:22

Topics: "God's Providence", "Christian Holiness"

Description

In this sermon, Pastor John Piper reflects on the life and legacy of John Owen, a prominent theologian and pastor. He emphasizes the lesson of trusting in God's providence, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Piper highlights Owen's passion for preaching the gospel and his commitment to holiness. He also shares a personal anecdote about how God's providence ensured that he was prepared to deliver this message. Overall, the sermon encourages listeners to learn from Owen's faith and strive for holiness in their own lives.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.desiringgod.org. If you ask the question, where you might get started in John Owen, there would be just a little bit of bibliography for you to take home. Let me tell you a story from this morning that makes me feel very loved by the Lord and that He's behind this message.

Dr. Fuller and I were exchanging miracle stories. I finished writing my talk at 1 o'clock this morning. I went to bed and felt good.

I needed another 2-3 hours to get it ready to deliver. For 5 years in this conference, I delivered the message on Wednesday morning. Wednesday morning, that's tomorrow.

That's when I thought I was to talk in this conference, when I went to bed last night. Which means that had something not intervened, about lunch time somebody would have come up to me and said, I'm really looking forward to your talk today and I would have just froze. Today? It would have been awful.

I would have just been totally unprepared. Well, Dr. Fuller called me at 4.45 this morning, because his computer wouldn't work. Now that was a dark cloud of providence, when you go to bed at 1 o'clock.

Why am I being called? This is bad. This is a bad event. And I got the computer running over the phone.

It's my computer. And I went back to bed. And as I was lying there, the thought entered my mind.

Karsten asked if he could have lunch with me this afternoon. And I said, no, I'm busy. Why did I say no, I'm busy? That's my oldest son.

This is 4.55. I've got three hours, Lord. Thank you, thank you. And I went to my study and I got ready.

Now, the lesson in this is, behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. So many things in my life happen like that. How many times must God do that, so that I don't second guess Him with telephone calls in the middle of the night? How many times must He do this to me, so I won't murmur? Philippians says, don't murmur, don't grumble, when life takes a bad, bad turn.

Felix Kulpa, the best of all possible worlds. Now, I recognized that about ten minutes after the bad thing happened. It became a glorious gift.

Ten minutes. Sometimes you have to wait ten years, and sometimes till you get to heaven. But if you believe that God's good, no phone call in the middle of the night should be murmured at.

I really feel loved by the Lord this morning. I believe it was a gift of God that Dr. Fuller couldn't make his computer work, and that he chose me to call and not one of the secretaries. Why do you do that? Because God loves me.

He didn't want me to be embarrassed with an unprepared talk, and didn't want you to have no message, or just read a boring thirty-five page, unweeded out manuscript. Okay, enough to give me encouragement, whether it helps you. I hope it does.

I want to pray one more time. Now, Lord, I believe with all my heart that you have ordained for us to have heroes. To imitate their faith, consider the outcome of their lives.

And there is one possible one we're about to talk about, and I pray that his life will not have been lived in vain even this morning, and that my labors to read him and think about him would not be in vain, but that it would build faith that we would be made a holy company of shepherds here, because of the model, the inspiration of this great man, John Owen. So come, Lord, and free my tongue, with these two or three gift hours of preparation early this morning, enable me to make plain the truth. In Jesus' name I thank you and pray.

Amen. Till this year there have been six speakers, keynote speakers at the Bethlehem Conference, and three of them, that's half of them, have said, John Owen is the most important theologian in their lives. Now that's a remarkable thing for a man who's been dead 311 years, and whose style of writing was so bad that he himself doubted that people would read it.

For example, in the death of death, in the death of Christ, perhaps his most famous work on limited atonement, he wrote in the preface something that today no marketing agent would allow him to write. Reader, if thou art, as many in this pretending age, a sign or title-gazer, and comest into books as Cato into the theatre to go out again, thou hast had thine entertainment. Farewell.

Well, J.I. Packer, Sinclair Ferguson and Roger Nicole did not say farewell. They lingered and they bear witness today in their writings, in their life, that this man is worth reading. Packer says that it's worth every effort to get through this kind of weighty, convoluted, unnecessarily prolix diction, that's his kind of word.

He says, J.I. Packer, the Puritans, this book right here is worth all the money you could spend for it. This is his tribute to the Puritans. He says in this book that the Puritans are the redwoods in the forest of theology.

I see some of you have read it. And John Owen is the greatest of the redwoods. Now, you translate that into superiority and it means he's the greatest.

That there is in Packer's mind. Roger Nicole doesn't write much. I don't know of any book Roger Nicole's written.

There probably is one. He's contributed essays all over the place. But when he was here, and I've heard it on tape as well, he said, The greatest theologian in the English language, I guess that's to set him off from Calvin and Luther, the greatest theologian, and Augustine, in the English language is John Owen.

And then with a little smile looking toward me, even Jonathan Edwards. I don't have Owen hanging on the wall in my study yet, but I do have Edwards and Dan Fuller, who by the way looked at it the other day and asked my secretary who it was, Reinhold Niebuhr. And she said, No, that's you.

It wouldn't occur to Dr. Fuller to look into a mirror. Which is a great, that's why I love him so much. We're looking elsewhere.

Well, Sinclair Ferguson, where's that book? Now these we have a bunch of. This is worth buying. It's expensive for a little book.

But all of them are today. Sinclair Ferguson, John Owen on the Christian Life. This is Ferguson's reading.

I think he's read all the 23 volumes, or at least 16. I don't know if he's read the Hebrews commentary. And he's distilled it into a book.

So if you want to get an introduction to Owen that's faithful to Owen, by a contemporary Owen, then read Sinclair Ferguson. He said, My personal interest in Owen as a teacher and theologian began in my late teenage years. You know, he's not a normal person.

I have a couple of teenagers and that's just incredible, unthinkable, impossible. But he said it, I believe it, When I first read some of his writings, like others before and since, I found that they dealt with issues which contemporary evangelical literature rarely, if ever, touched. I think that's true.

Just last night, it was one o'clock, my brain was just zinging like this, so I had to read myself to sleep. So I opened Communion with God by John Owen. I thought that was a good way to get ready.

Now, how many of you have ever read anything written in the last hundred years on how to distinctly have fellowship with and commune with each independent person of the Trinity and not the whole of the Godhead at one time? How do you distinctly discern the actions of the Spirit so that there is a distinct praise and a distinct love and a distinct trust and a sweetness of communion with that distinct person? I felt like I was almost meeting the Holy Spirit at one o'clock this morning. Where? So my experience at 48 now, but I first read Owen 12 years ago as a pastor, trying to solve the L in TULIP from volume 10. This is the best book that's ever been written on the L in TULIP.

Everybody admits that. This is the most significant work that's ever been written on the L in TULIP. If you're struggling with being a 4-pointer instead of a 5 or a 7-pointer, you should buy volume 10 and read it.

It'll take a long time and you can't read it fast and it'll be hard, but it's worth it and was persuasive for me. Now, the reason I linger over these tributes here, things like the Calvin of England, one person writes, and another, the Atlas and Patriarch of Independence, Charles Bridges. I love Charles Bridges' book on the Christian ministry.

I recommend it highly. Upon the whole, for luminous exposition, powerful defense of scriptural doctrine, determined enforcement of practical obligation, skillful anatomy of the self-deceitfulness of the heart, and for a detailed and wise treatment of the diversified exercises of the Christian's heart, he stands probably unrivaled. The reason I linger over these tributes is because, like I said in my prayer, I believe in heroes.

Because the Bible says to have heroes. Namely, Hebrews 13, 7. Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you, and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. Remember them, consider them, imitate them.

That's a hero. The Bible says you should have heroes. And as I look around the scene today for living heroes, for myself, there are so few.

And the ones that I have are the ones who have heroes. Packer, Ferguson, Nicole. The people that seem to be heroic and worthy of emulating today are people who have heroes.

Most of them are dead in their lives, but they have them. So I linger over them just to get you started, get you going to say, maybe this man is worth imitating or considering. Let me turn now to an overview of his life.

Most people don't know anything about John Owen. There are a couple of reasons for that. One is that he's so hard to read that hardly anybody reads him.

There's been a little renaissance with Banner of Truth, Trust, producing the volumes. This is the way they looked when I bought them. I don't know if they're the same color now or not, but there are 16 of these white volumes, and then there are 7 more which are orange in my cabinet, which are Hebrews.

So there are 23 volumes of the collected works, and that's all there is as far as I know, except this little thing, which was published in 1970, the correspondence of John Owen. There aren't many of his letters in here. Most of these are letters to him rather than from him.

All of his diaries were destroyed. We have almost nothing on the personal life of John Owen, which when I discovered made me panic that I had planned to lecture on him because I thought this was going to be very boring, because it's the personal touch that makes these lectures worth listening to, I think. But I found enough, I hope, to interest me, and I hope it will interest you.

No diaries, a few letters, the collected works, and that's it. And it's very, very frustrating when you find out certain things about him that you would desperately like to know more about. One of his biographers says, So Owen must remain hidden, as it were, behind a veil.

His secret thoughts remain his own. And I wrote, maybe not. Because when you read mortification of sin, and the glories of Christ, and on communion with God, and you discern a heart in tune with and exalting into God, you don't need a diary anymore.

You've got the man right there in front of you. He was born in England in 1616, same year William Shakespeare died, and four years before the pilgrims set sail. That was smack in the middle of the Puritan century.

Where does it stop and start? I've heard a lecture from Packer that says the easiest way to remember it is 1560 to 1660. That's the easiest way, just roughly. 1560 to 1660, the great Puritan century, where all these pastors were preaching these profoundly heart-searching messages and unpacking the scriptures with exaltation.

Packer says this about the Puritan movement, The goal of the Puritan movement was to complete what England's Reformation began, to finish reshaping Anglican worship, to introduce effective church discipline into the Anglican parishes, to establish righteousness in the political, domestic, and socioeconomic fields, and to convert all Englishmen to vigorous evangelical faith. He was plopped right in the middle of that by the providence of God, and it ended virtually at the same time he did. He said 1660 because that was the year, 1662 was the act of uniformity, which tossed 2,000 Puritan ministers out of their parishes, and then you had that long period of persecution up until the act of toleration in 1689.

Owen died in 1683. So 1616 to 1683, the middle and a little beyond the end of the classic Puritan era. His father was a pastor.

He had a mother. He had four siblings. We know zero about them.

He never mentioned them, and he never mentioned his mother in all of his writings. He mentioned his father one time, and he said, I was bred up from my infancy under the care of my father, who was a nonconformist all his days and a painful laborer in the vineyard of the Lord. So there's one connection because Owen, if anything, was a painful laborer in the vineyard of the Lord.

Ten years old, he goes to grammar school in Oxford to get ready to go to university. At 12, he enters Queens College. You say, whoa, wow, 12, university.

Everybody was doing that in those days. It wasn't that unusual to go to Queens College at age 12. Got his bachelor's at 16, his master's at 19.

Entered the Bachelor of Divinity, which was the theological degree then. I'm glad I still got one. I didn't cash it in, didn't pay my \$20 to get an MDiv.

I still got the BD, which is the great historic degree, and he dropped out, boom, because he couldn't stand the high church, William Laud kind of Anglicanism that so dominated Oxford in those days. He never got his degree. He was awarded a DD, honorary degree, later on, but never did do any serious academic degree work after his MA.

1642, the Civil War broke out. Oliver Cromwell and the House of Commons against the House of Lords, which disappeared for 20 years in that period, called the Interregnum, and Charles I was executed. There was no king until his son, Prince Charles II, returns in 1660, and that's the golden era of Protestantism, those 20 years, and he lived right through those years.

He went to London in 1643 or 1643, I believe, and five events happened in those first early years. Now, how old is he now? 1616 to 1642 is 26 years old. The first and most important event in those early years in London, where he had a little parish, was his conversion.

At least some biographers say it was a conversion. Another one would say it was an awakening, an assurance thing, and you can't really tell, but what's so remarkable about it is that it's almost identical to Spurgeon's. You know the Spurgeon story? He's 16 years old.

He's on his way to a well-known chapel. The snow is so bad, he can't go. He stops at a little Methodist chapel.

A no-name, the pastor isn't even there, a no-name layman stands up, takes Isaiah 45, 22, look to me, all the ends of the earth, and be saved. He says it over and over again, 20 times, Spurgeon says. He's so stupid, he doesn't have anything to say but the Scriptures, and God, that's what Spurgeon calls him, stupid, and then God saves Charles Spurgeon, and he never even finds out who the man is.

That's exactly the way it happened with John Owen. He's on his way to hear Edmund Calamee at St. Mary's Church, Aldermanbury, with his cousin, because this is a great preacher in those days, evidently, I'd never heard of him, and he's not there. Calamee didn't show up, and his cousin said, let's go down the street to, I forget what other big-name church, and Owen, for some reason, says, let's not, let's just stay.

And a simple preacher took the text, Matthew 8, 26, Why are you fearful, O you of little faith? And it was God's appointed word, and appointed time, and there was, like Wesley says, a strange warming, and all of his doubts vanished, all of his fears disappeared, he had the assurance that he was born of God, and that stamped the rest of his life. Now, let me just put in a parenthesis here. I've often wondered, when I talk on these big shots, whether it can cast a pall of discouragement, as well as encouragement, because we all know that we're not a John Owen.

Absolutely no way is anybody in this room, nobody, absolutely no exceptions, Dan Fuller, or anybody is going to be a John Owen, and produce this quantity of work, and have it last 300 and some years. So, here we hold him up, and you all go out, you know, like this. Now, here's the lesson, you can hear it coming.

Charles Spurgeon and John Owen came into being, by two people that history never even named. Okay, so we're not going to be John Owens. But I'll tell you, every Sunday I stand in this pulpit, I believe I might create one.

Or something a little less, or a thousand a little less, or somewhere in there, and I'd be real happy, if history forgot me, and one person came out of my ministry like Billy Graham. There's another no name. But Billy Graham did remember that evangelist.

But he was a nobody, virtually, in history. So don't hear all this as saying, I'll never be a John Owen, so why should I listen to all that stuff. There are all kinds of reasons to listen besides that.

But I thought that was an encouraging one for me. Second thing that happened, conversion was number one. Second thing was marriage.

To marry Rook. Married 31 years to this woman, then she died before he did. We know absolutely nothing about her.

But this stunning fact. They had 11 children. And they all died.

Ten of them in infancy, or childhood. One daughter lived to marry as a young adult. The marriage broke up, she came home, she died of consumption.

He outlived 11 children and a wife. That's one child born and dead every three years of his adult life. That's all we know.

We don't hear one echo in his writings of that. Now that's what I call frustrating. That's when I want a diary.

That's when I want to get inside his heart and say, How did you survive? Knowing what I know about what's coming in his life. When I read that fact years ago, I kind of put it over John Owen and said, Anybody that just goes on ministering, losing a child every three years. I don't know if they all died that conveniently, you know, spaced out.

I know two sons died in the 55 plague. Two little boys. But how anybody just goes on ministering with glory.

Like you read in his latter day works of meditations on the glory of Christ. Something's going on in that man's heart I want to know about. Just with that fact alone, something is going on that I want to know about.

Number three event that happened in those early years in London in his late 20s. The publishing of his first book. He lived just a few years after the big hubbub in Holland between the remonstrance, the Armenians and the Calvinists with the production of the five points and then the Senate of Dort.

And he studied all of that. And that was hot on his agenda. And so he wrote a book with this preface like title, a display of Arminianism being a discovery of the old Pelagian idol free will with the new goddess contingency, advancing themselves into the throne of God in heaven to the prejudice of his grace, providence and supreme dominion over the children of men.

That's the title of the book. And you don't need to read it. You know exactly what he thinks.

Except that Owen is one of the most exegetical of the Puritans. And therefore, if you care about biblical foundations, which you ought to do, then you will want to read that or another. So that launched him into his public career.

He was now a controversialist and a well-known Puritan pastor. So the fourth thing that happened, that was the third. The fourth thing that happened in those days was he became a pastor.

He got a little church, a small parish in Fordham, Essex. July 16, 1643, 27 years old, he gets his first parish. He had been making money by being chaplains and tutors until that time.

Now, that's important because he was a pastor all of his life, essentially. He's going to be more than that. But these books that you read here, most of them, I don't know if that's true, the practical ones anyway, came out of his pastoral preaching ministry.

He was a pastor, especially the last 20 years of his life. Keep that in mind. He's not a professional theologian making money by teaching in a university.

He is a pastor. And the fifth thing that happened in those days was the invitation to speak in Parliament. In 1646, he's now 30 years old.

An extraordinary honor to be asked to address the House of Commons. There was no House of Lords in that period. And he, well, maybe there was.

I'm thinking of another period. But 1646, at any rate, he's addressing Parliament. And he was catapulted then not only into a controversialist role theologically, but a political role.

And he was a political animal for the next 14 years. He was known in the political circles. Oliver Cromwell, the protector, the substitute for the king during those 20 years or so, made John Owen his chaplain as he went up and slaughtered the Scots and went over and slaughtered the Irish.

And he took along Cromwell to preach to his troops and to give theological justification for what he was doing, which Owen was happy to do. He believed very much that God's hand was on Oliver Cromwell and that what was happening against the Presbyterianism of England and the protectorate was of the devil. And therefore, he interpreted all of those military victories as divine victories.

And maybe they were. He even was asked to preach the day after Parliament executed Charles I. And he did. And he called it just retribution from God because of the sins of Charles I. So you can see how entangled this man was in the contemporary politics of his day.

Then Cromwell made him the dean of Christ Church, Oxford. That's both a college and a cathedral. And from 1651 to 1660, he was the dean of this school.

And about, let's see, four of those years, I believe, or five, he was elevated also simultaneously to the vice chancellorship of Oxford. Now, when I began to read this stuff about chaplain, military entanglements, speaking to Parliament, traveling to Scotland and Ireland, a dean of a school, a vice chancellor of a university, I said, and this man is studying theology and writing the likes of the death of death in the death of Christ? When? When does he do that? The question I began to pose is, how do you even be a Christian in that atmosphere, let alone study, let alone write, let alone write stuff that lasts 300 years? I just kind of took my breath away as I saw what this man's life began to look like. Let me give you a summary here.

At Oxford, his responsibilities were for the services of worship. He preached in the cathedral and the college chapel. He was responsible for the choice of the students, the appointment of the chaplains, the provision of the tutorial facilities, the administration of discipline, the oversight of the property, the collection of the rents and tithes, the gift of the livings and the care of the almsmen of the church hospital.

And he was trying to establish the whole thing under the Word of God with frequent ministry of the Word. His life was simply overwhelmed with pressure. I can't imagine what his family life must have been like.

He was losing children. 1655 was the middle of his tenure at the university, and we know two of his sons died in the plague that year. In his closing address, when he was relieved of his duties, finally when the end of the interregnum came and Charles II returned, he gave this closing address.

Labors have been numberless, besides submitting to enormous expense, often when brought to the brink of death on your account. One thing you'd say to a university community, I have been brought near to death on your account. I have hated these limbs and this feeble body which was ready to desert my mind.

The reproaches of the vulgar have been disregarded. The envy of others has been overcome. In these circumstances, I wish you all prosperity and bid you farewell.

Twenty-two published works during those nine years. I don't think he slept. I really believe, in fact, we know that he recorded at age 56, that he regretted as a student at Oxford only sleeping four hours a night because it was taking its toll on his health as a middle-aged man.

So I assume the same thing was probably true. When did he write his books? When everybody else went to bed. That's my guess.

I don't know how else he might have done it. One of the books that he published during that time was *The Saints' Perseverance*. I don't think I brought that along.

Six hundred and sixty pages to settle that issue. And one biography called it *The Most Masterly Vindication of the Perseverance of the Saints in the English Tongue*. While he was dean and vice-chancellor, and losing his children, and disciplining vulgar students who made him want to die, he was so depressed.

Most of us, you know, think if we experienced something like that, we'd have to ask for a leave of absence. We couldn't preach the next Sunday, let alone write six hundred and sixty pages. This man was made of something strange, for God was doing something unusual.

He wrote *The Mortification of Sin* during those years. This is where I recommend that you start, if you haven't read any of Owen. He wrote *Of Communion with God*, one of the sweetest of books, during those Oxford years.

He wrote *Of Temptation*, the nature and power of it, during those years. In other words, he wasn't just writing doctrinally controversial stuff, he was writing stuff that when you read it, make you feel like he was a monk, exulting in his personal communion with God, which is in fact what he was doing. I'm going to get to that later on.

Well, he was fired, because when the king returned, his standards of Puritan life and thought were no longer what the king wanted, and he was relieved, and for the next 20 years, 1660 until he died, 23 years, he was a kind of fugitive pastor. Hard to get a handle on how it worked in those days, but evidently he kind of moved around, because it was dangerous to be a Puritan pastor. You couldn't preach to more than X number of people, and you couldn't preach within certain miles and so on, and so he just kind of moved around, which must have also destroyed his family life, but he didn't ever go to jail like John Bunyan did.

We'll talk about that in a minute too. One of the interesting things that happened during his life was that he shifted from being a Presbyterian to a Congregationalist. He did this by reading John Cotton, pastor in Boston, John Cotton's book, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, and when he read it, he was changed.

He gave up his Presbyterianism, he embraced Congregationalism, and became known as the Atlas and Patriarch of Independence. It also bumped him up very high in the echelon of those who were crying out for toleration. Nothing like the toleration we would think of today, toleration within Orthodoxy.

He basically wanted Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and so on, to be able to be free to worship according to their own desires in England. And he wrote books. You can find them in the collected works, arguing for this.

One of his students was William Penn, who became a Quaker, who came over and preached toleration in the States. And another interesting thing for me, a Baptist, is that there's a letter in here written to the

governor of Massachusetts in 1669, pleading with him and his Congregational peers to stop making life hard for the Baptists. So that gives you a flavor.

Back when he was dean, he had total legal authority to put a stop to all Anglican worship as a Puritan in Oxford. And he permitted, right across the hall from his own rooms, a little Anglican convent to go to worship every Lord's Day. So Owen was an interesting guy.

He'll preach a sermon after the execution of Charles I and call it the will of God. But he has this tolerant strain in him that says within orthodoxy, we shouldn't persecute Presbyterians or Congregationalists or Anglicans. He was a pastor during these years and he loved his people, even though he was on the run, moving around.

And even when he couldn't be with them, he wrote things like this to them. Although I am absent from you in body, I am in mind and affection and spirit present with you and in your assemblies, for I hope you will be found my crown and rejoicing in the day of the Lord. He said the first and principal duty of every pastor is to feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word of God.

And I assume that's what he made his top priority and that's where many of these works come from. It isn't clear to me why he didn't go to jail. I can't figure out how it worked that some Puritans and Independents in those years between 1660 and 1689 when the Act of Toleration was passed, why some of them went to jail and some didn't.

For example, John Bunyan was a contemporary and spent, as you know, 12 years in the Bedford jail. Now there's a really interesting story here I've got to tell you because this is another glorious illustration of behind a frowning providence, there hides a smiling face. And we need all the stories we can get because we are spring loaded not to believe that.

John Bunyan was a great preacher, but he was a tinker. He was simple. He had no education.

And King Charles, who for one reason or another did respect Owen even though he didn't like his principles, asked him one time, why do you go to hear Bunyan preach? An educated, university trained, world class scholar like you. And his answer was, could I possess the tinker's ability for preaching, please your majesty, I would gladly relinquish all my learning. Owen finds out that Bunyan is in prison.

He works and works and works with all his connections in high places to get him released. And he fails. Bad, right? Bad.

The biography I was reading that told this story said, and after his failure in 1676, Bunyan walks out of the bed for jail with a manuscript, the worth and importance of which can scarcely be comprehended. Was the failure to get Bunyan out of jail a failure? Ask yourself. After the Bible, there is no other book in the world, I believe, printed so often, or having such a widespread Christian influence, as Pilgrim's Progress.

Had Owen succeeded, we wouldn't have it. Probably. Brothers, you must not judge quickly your prison experiences.

You must not judge them quickly. This morning I learned within ten minutes the smile behind the frowning phone call. I bet Bunyan died, he died five years after Owen, without knowing that it would have been worth it.

The story is not over. Owen reads the manuscript and says, I think this is worth something. But, here's a tinker, he knows zero about the publishing industry, he doesn't know any, got no connections, Owen knows everybody in London, he's a big wheel, he doesn't get persecuted because he's got such connections, he finds Nathaniel Ponder, who's been publishing his books now for, what, a dozen years, and he says, Ponder, publish this book.

And Ponder makes a myth and sends John Bunyan's book into orbit. So, Owen succeeded after he failed, or succeeded. He succeeded painfully and he succeeded pleasantly.

And life is just made up like that for Christians. That's all we do is succeed. Either painfully and regretfully or pleasantly.

He died 1683, August 24, was buried in Bunhill Fields and five years later, Bunyan is buried in the same place today. Which I thought was just a tremendous little providence of the Lord to say, Hey, here's a man who lived his whole life for toleration's sake and here's a Baptist tinker and they're lying dead beside each other and both of them today speaking majestically, but Bunyan speaking a lot louder than the scholar. Now I want to step back from this life and ask this question.

What made him tick? What was the core? What was the center? The essence of the man's life? J.I. Packer and Sinclair Ferguson say that they were most influenced by his spiritual insight into the nature of the heart and how it works in holiness. In fact, Packer, you may have heard this story. You can read it in the introduction to Houston's edition of Mortification from Multnomah.

When Packer was a student at Oxford, I believe, not sure about that, a new convert, young adult, he came under the influence of some very perfectionistic people in the holiness movement. He had no categories for understanding his ongoing temptations and sins in this group. He said he came this close to suicide and the rescue was John Owen.

He tells that story. I've heard it on tape. I've seen it in two books.

He loves that story. I'll read you. I think I have a sentence here on it.

No, I don't. It's way back in the beginning. But he says, I think I would have lost my head or either gone into some kind of crazy fanaticism if it hadn't been for John Owen on the mortification of sin and the nature, power, and prevalency of indwelling sin.

Owen gave him a category to understand his heart. I think what made Owen unique was his mingling of holiness with his great achievements. Here's his own testimony to what is main in his life.

This is from the Preface to the Mortification of Sin, Volume 6. If you're going to get one volume of the works, get Volume 6. I hope I may own in sincerity that my heart's desire unto God and the chief design of my life When I ever read something like that, I underline it. That's a big statement. The chief design of my life and my heart's desire are that mortification and universal holiness may be promoted in my own and in the hearts and ways of others to the glory of God so the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ may be adorned in all things.

And the same note was struck 25 years later in 1681 when he published The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded. So for 25 years at least he was driven by this passion to mortify the sin in his life and to grow in holiness and to do whatever he could do in parliament among the military, among the university in

the churches, among the independents to foster holiness. To adorn the gospel to the glory of God.

That's his life. Sinclair Ferguson says in this little book that I held up here Everything he wrote for his contemporaries in other words, both the controversial things and the practical things everything he wrote had a practical and pastoral aim in view. The promotion of true Christian living.

In other words, mortification of sin and holiness. And it was his burden for the university as well as everywhere else. He talked about aspiring after godliness with the students.

It was his aim in politics. If you ask, why would this man so schooled in theology a born pastor, preach to parliament and get so involved with the military and do all that. His answer was the people of Israel were at the height of their fortunes when their leaders were godly.

He did not have a mainly political agenda. He had a godliness agenda. When he preached to parliament his point was, if I can get you men to be godly God will be upon this nation.

So that's why he preached to parliament. Godliness, holiness was his passion. Same thing with missions.

When he went to Ireland Cromwell took him along to look at Trinity College Ireland, in Dublin. Any hope for this university? Can we do anything here? And while he was looking at the university Cromwell took his army out and actually decimated an army. Just slaughtered them.

The blood ran thick. And Owen came back and he preached to parliament these words. How is it that Jesus Christ in Ireland that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies and none to hold him out as a lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends.

Is this to deal fairly with the Lord Jesus? Call him out to do battle and then keep away his crown? God has been faithful in doing great things for you. Be faithful in this one. Do your utmost for the preaching of the gospel in Ireland.

Now we may not like the entanglement of that politics and religion but I think you can hear coming through the heartbeat of this man. Ok, he was there he analyzed the university, he preached to the troops he said, God's hand is on Cromwell Yes, Providence brought the victory. Maybe it was to be done that way, maybe not.

But one thing was for sure. He wanted to know how is the gospel faring in Ireland? Do these poor souls out here have anybody preaching the truth of the gospel? Let Christ get his crown now that he has won the victory over his enemies. And so the preaching of the gospel to the end of holiness was a missionary passion as well.

And in his own life. His funeral sermon by David Clarkson his ministerial associate the key sentences in it I think are this A great light has fallen one of eminency for holiness learning, parts, abilities a pastor, a scholar a divine of the first magnitude holiness gave a divine luster to his other accomplishments I think that's a very, very essential statement. Holiness gave a divine luster to his other accomplishments it shined in his whole course and diffused through his whole life.

So what I want to do now, if we're on to the right track here, that the key to this man's life, what made him unique gave luster to all his accomplishments was his passion for holiness in himself and others I want to ask the question next Well, why should we listen to this man? Why should his talk in life about holiness

arrest our attention more than other holy people that we know about in life or in church history? And here's my answer to that question. There aren't many people today who say what he said. Namely personal holiness is an essential component of worthy leadership Our president certainly does not believe that.

I hope I'm not saying anything than what I read on the front page of the Tribune when our president refused to deny the allegations of his own misconduct lack of holiness and simply said that's irrelevant John Owen would have dropped dead at that stage If he stood up before the Congress of the United States of America the issue would be adultery the issue would be holiness God will not bless he would say a nation whose leaders are unholy no matter how much savvy they have in the world That's one reason I think we need to take a man like this seriously. There aren't many around. Not in the church either I mean, who would you look to today as statesman like church leaders who are known for the fact that they put personal holiness above church growth There are many pastors who believe that.

But where are the leaders who are known for that note? There aren't many. You've got to go to dead people to get heroes. Well, Owen is a good one, I think.

A third reason why I think he's valuable today to listen to is because he achieved his holiness not as a hermit I mean, when I get excited about holiness and spiritual mindedness and communion with God my first inclination is take a break ask for a month off go away from the trouble He never went away Richard Baxter didn't like Owen They were contemporaries He called him the great doer It was a scornful word This guy's always doing Who's Baxter to tell? Goodnight What he achieved He wrote a lot more than Owen did He was involved in academic administration He was involved in politics up to his ears He was involved in the leading military officers He was embroiled in every controversy from the authenticity of the Hebrew vowel points He wrote an awful work on that which history has wonderfully buried and the authenticity of the epistle to Ignatius all the way up to whether or not a church should be congregational or Presbyterian and whether the doctrine of justification should be Catholic or Protestant He was embroiled in almost every controversy of his day He'd hear John Goodwin say something about perseverance and boom!

He'd dash off 660 pages to prove that he's wrong This man was just constantly churning stuff He was looked to by thousands of congregational independents as the main spokesman in England of his day while all the while pastoring people in the last 23 years of his life So my point is the holiness of this man was not cultivated by having long summer breaks which a lot of senior pastors enjoy Take 10-12 weeks off because the pressures are heavy and then you can be holy You can get more holy because you've got more time on your hands Something is fishy here If Owen can pull this off and have him known so that commentator after commentator says his holiness equaled his erudition That's one quote I saw around Why?

How did he do it? Not only that add this to it When you have that kind of leadership and you're embroiled in those kinds of controversies you are absolutely stormed with criticism and it can really hurt For example He was in an argument with a fella named Parker and he bested him Parker got worsted Those are words I read in these books He got worsted because he was bested by Owen and so he resorted to doing what most people today do when in the public arena they get bested We don't even have discourse to get bested in today.

We just start with name calling The great bellwether of disturbance and sedition A person who would have vied with Mohammed himself both for boldness and imposture A viper so swollen with venom that it must

either burst or spit its poison Now how much of that can you take in public before people start believing it about you and you start trying like Jonathan Edwards said to take every criticism seriously and find the germ of truth in it you know you stay up half the night saying now is what that person said true I mean how do you survive that kind of and add this to this this is all just to show you how the achievement of holiness blows my mind away not only did he experience criticism from his enemies he got a letter this is just a little example from John Elliot the missionary in New

England another one of my heroes and he had misunderstood Owen I mean I don't know what all the facts were there's just a letter in here and you don't know what's behind it but he criticized Owen for something unholy and Owen is so stung he writes what I have received from you hath printed deeper and left a greater impression upon my mind than all the virulent revilings and false accusations I have met with with all from my professed adversaries that I should now be apprehended to have given a wound unto holiness in the churches it is one of the saddest frowns in the cloudy brows of divine providence so he didn't just have to deal with his enemies he was being misunderstood by his friends and that went deeper he said than anything the enemies said add this to it it was a pre-technological

age he had no lights he had no indoor plumbing he had no computer, no pens no ordinary paper that we have add that the plague two plagues one in 55, one in 65 in 65, 70,000 people out of a half a million died in his, in London among many in his I mean many in his parish among them add that that he was living outside the law this whole time, couldn't settle down into an ordinary ministry and let the church grow too big because then he's going to go right to jail between 62 and 89 and I conclude he's worth listening to if this man becomes holy and is known for his communion with God and his spiritual mindedness and his purity of heart and his integrity above his erudition I want to know how he did it that's the kind of question I ask when I'm reading Bible so that's my closing thing here

how did he pursue holiness and I know what I'm about to say is terribly inadequate I'm no Owen scholar, I've read two biographies and three or four of his books, that's all I've done to get ready here, nothing you couldn't do in a few months like I did but I'll tell you what I found and what I think is true even though limited and maybe lopsided I have four answers to the question how he pursued and achieved such a degree of holiness that he was known this way, number one Owen humbled himself under the mighty hand of God he was a very well known influential famous person who hobnobbed with even the king when the king was his enemy but when he came to die, two days before he died, he was with Charles Fleetwood and this is what he said to assess his own life, I'm leaving the ship of the

church in a storm but while the great pilot is in it the loss of a poor under rower will be inconsiderable I don't think that was mock humility it was said in private to a friend a poor under rower will scarcely be missed in his book on mortification he wrote to keep our souls in a constant state of mourning and self abasement is the most necessary part of our wisdom that's about the most unmodern thing he could say but he'll say a hedonistic thing in 30 seconds and it is so far this abasement and mourning are so far from having any inconsistency with those consolations and joys which the gospel tenders unto us in believing as that it is the only way to let those joys into the soul in a due manner you see why it's hard to read but in a nutshell if you don't keep yourself in a self abased

mourning frame you won't be as happy as you should be I learned a lot of my christian hedonism from people that write like this which is why I never felt it was a frothy simple light glib frivolous thing to talk about joy with regard to his immense learning and his tremendous insight he said something that I think is so remarkable he said I make no pretense of searching into the bottom or depths of any part of this great

mystery of godliness God manifest in the flesh they are all together unsearchable unto the limit of the most enlightened minds in this life what we shall farther comprehend of them in the other world God only knows now here's the amazing thing about that sentence to me Owen was the kind of person Edwards was another one who had climbed so high up the steeps of wonder

revealed in the scriptures that he could pull his face up over the ridge to see the ridges most people are down here looking up at that first ridge carping at intellectuals who try to understand it the people who really know how low they are are the ones who climb high enough in biblical revelation to see over the first ridge to the other ones that disappear into the clouds these people down here who never got to the top of the first ridge they might be a little impressed but they haven't even begun to see what Owen saw when he climbed up over 16 volumes worth into God and said I haven't even touched it I think he was a humble man and I think his humility opened him to the greatest visions of God and he believed 2nd Corinthians 3.18 that we may be gradually transformed into the same glory

by beholding glory number 2 second means by which I think he went after holiness he grew in knowledge of God by obeying what he already knew he increased in life transforming knowledge of scripture by obeying what he already knew in other words holiness was not only the goal of his life it was the means of pursuing the goal of his life the spiral here is what he wrote the true notion of holy evangelical truths will not live at least not flourish where they are divided from a holy life as we can learn no as we learn all to practice I put little exclamation parts after that to say Sinclair Ferguson was right everything he wrote was practical he meant it to change practice that's what he just said here as we learn all to practice so we learn much by practice that's a typical puritan way of

talking Owen is not good at it the other puritans are a lot better than Owen little sentences like that they just shove into a sentence so much we learn all to practice so we learn much by practice and here in alone we can come under the assurance that what we know and learn is indeed the truth and here by will they be led continually into farther degrees of knowledge for the mind of man is capable of receiving continual supplies in the increase of light and knowledge if they are improved into their proper end in obedience unto God but without this the mind will be quickly stuffed with notions so that no streams can descend into it from the fountain of truth my second point is I think Owen advanced continually in holiness because in all of his studies he studied to obey he never studied

just to stock his mind with a new thought or defeat an argument we'll see more of that in a minute number three Owen passionately pursued a personal communion with God he passionately pursued personal communion with God it is incredible to me that Owen was able to keep writing edifying weighty books and pamphlets under the pressures of his life and I think the key was his ongoing personal communion one of his early biographers Andrew Thompson wrote this it is interesting to find the ample evidence which his work on mortification affords that amid the din of theological controversy the engrossing and perplexing activities of a high public station and the chilling dance of a university he was yet living near God and like Jacob amid the stones of the wilderness maintaining secret intercourse

with the eternal and invisible Packer comments communion with God was a great thing to to the Puritans to evangelicals today it is a small thing the Puritans were concerned about communion with God in a way that we are not the measure of our unconcern is the little that we say about it when Christians meet pastors meet they talk to each other about their Christian work and Christian interests and their Christian acquaintances the state of the churches and the problems of theology but rarely of their daily experience of God you feel that?

I feel it that is mainly what I talk about with you guys at pastors gatherings it is not because of any one bad person in this room it is because we breathe a non God air we breathe a make it happen air what is interesting in this country and what is interesting to talk about is what you have made to happen not who you know in heaven and what you tasted of him last night at one o'clock I am going to make you all uncomfortable now around the table but that is ok because my guess is in this room there are such sweet and wonderful and terrible insights into God in the last say three weeks that some of you ought to just dare to break in at the table and say can I tell you about something I saw three weeks ago in God and what it meant to me try it try it we need to help each other I don't do

it very well I have sat at the table as often as you have and I haven't done it yet I might have tried one little thing my little miracle story what God did this morning we are not good at this we are not comfortable talking about our personal communion with God that is not good we should be comfortable we should be comfortable he wrote in a letter when he was sick in 1674 Christ is our best friend and ere long will be our only friend I pray God with all my heart that I may be weary of everything else but communion with Him may I be weary of everything else but communion with God and so God was using illness to drive this man to communion he will do what he must do to get us there I believe in the ministry but he was very intentional he didn't just respond to Providence he also was

aggressive and intentional about communion with God he wrote friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits right Rob Rob has got some great insights on friendship friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits and these the more free and less occasioned by urgent business that's the way he knew his God he made many visits to his Lord he was talking about God in that context not human friends he made many visits he didn't just go with petitions didn't just go with pleas for deliverance he went to contemplate Christ the last book he wrote he was working on it when he died it was published after his death it was called meditations on the glory of Christ and in it he said the revelation of Christ deserves the severest of our thoughts I like that phrase severest of our thoughts and

best of our meditations and our utmost diligence in them what better preparation can there be for our future enjoyment of the glory of Christ than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the gospel there are two things in his mind that are involved in that contemplation which leads to holiness one is severe thought or best meditation he calls it in another place assiduous meditation severe assiduous meditation on the word of God and the other thing is relentless prayer let me illustrate these two from his comment about his commentary on Hebrews biggest book that has ever been written on Hebrews in the history of the world seven volumes on Hebrews I would love to know why why Hebrews why not Romans if I had time to read it I would find out why

he said this about his work on Hebrews came out in four volumes over his life well first of all he said when it was done now is my time to die but here's what he said how he got it written I must now say that after all my searching and reading and he knew Aramaic Hebrew Greek English French Dutch he read everything he knew everything that was being written about Hebrews in his day from every language I must now say that after all my searching and reading prayer and assiduous meditation have been my only resort and by far the most useful means of light and assistance by these my thoughts have been freed from many an entanglement now if you said that it might not be impressive because you haven't written seven volumes on Hebrews but when a man finishes writing seven volumes on Hebrews that

have stayed in print for 300 years and when I dip into them like I did the other day to find out what he thought it meant that the one who has the power of death had been put to naught I found more help there

than all the other academic commentaries in my in my library and when a person who writes that kind of book says the most important thing was assiduous mulling over the Greek text in my heart and mind and prayer for divine assistance I listen brothers you know if you're acquainted with these men the Puritans that most commentaries written today are absolute fluff absolute fluff and the more footnotes the more fluff by and large and and I can't even communicate that with the men who write them because they don't know what I mean they don't know what I mean they haven't evidently

bathed in six or eight pages of meditation on what it means for the devil to be put to naught and yet still be active but does that mean how does it make a difference in our life well you read through it just like that in F.F.

Bruce just poof just like that it's like poof I mean it's just I suppose I can say that being a pastor instead of teaching anymore but I I I really think it's sad that the academic world has developed the means of producing accolades for froth prayer I suppose he said this may be fixed on as a common principle of Christianity namely that constant and fervent prayer for the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit is such an indispensable means for attaining the knowledge of the mind of God in Scripture as that without it all others will not avail brothers do you pray over every paragraph you read in commentaries and in the Bible repeatedly repeatedly asking for assistance, that you will see things.

I won't go into the details, but having read all this stuff, I was preaching last Sunday on 1 Peter 1.23-25. And there's a phrase in there that says, Therefore, having cleansed your souls by obedience of the truth unto brotherly love, love one another eagerly from the heart.

I said, now, what does it mean? I argued that cleanse your heart by obedience of the truth meant cleanse your heart by faith, Acts 15.9. Obedience to the truth being faith. If that's true, what he's saying is, put faith in the gospel and thus cleanse your heart unto Philadelphia. The commentaries, what does that mean? Do it unto Philadelphia.

How many of you at age 6, I was saved at age 6. How many of you at age 6 put your faith in Jesus unto brotherly love? What does it even mean to put your faith in Jesus unto brotherly love? To be obedient and cleanse the heart unto brotherly love. Because you see, it's followed by a command to love. So it's talking about something you already did.

You cleansed your heart unto brotherly love, now agape, now love. See, two different words. I went to the commentaries, no help.

They're not even wrestling with my problems half the time. And I prayed. I just shut all my books and I said, Lord, I'm not really asking you to say a loud word in my brain.

I'm just asking you to take all I've studied here and bring something together so that I get some insight on unto brotherly love. And then I was silent. I was waiting.

And I got an idea. I got an idea. I will tell you what my idea was.

I didn't preach it. It was so new and so fresh and I'm so skeptical of my own subjectivity that I waited. And we'll let you put it back on me.

But I think maybe what Peter is saying is, everybody should become a believer with a view to joining a family. And never with a view to isolation. There is no becoming a believer and cleansing your heart unto

independence.

It is always unto fill up. And then he shifts the word to Agape in the next verse. Has a lot to do with evangelism.

If you take that seriously, having by obedience to the truth cleansed your heart unto Philadelphia, now love the brotherhood. Love each other earnestly from the heart. So back there when you all became Christians, you became Christians unto a family.

That's what it means to become a Christian. To join a family. Now, God gave me that in answer to prayer.

It's probably in a book somewhere. But I'm using this to illustrate prayer. Waiting upon the Lord when you're stuck.

He won't. He's never. I've been preaching this book for 13 years.

I've never been without a message. And I've never been so stuck over a text that I couldn't find enough glorious truth in it to exalt. In fact, we around Bethlehem right now have got this new phrase we like.

I like it anyway. Called expository exaltation. That's my definition of preaching now.

Expository exaltation. Just exalting in the stuff you turn up in Greek. And if you exalt in it, your people will get excited about it.

And it will be valuable to them if it's valuable to you. He struggled. He really struggled.

He wrote to John Elliot. I do acknowledge unto you that I have a dry and barren spirit. And I do heartily beg your prayers that the Holy One would, notwithstanding all my sinful provocations, water me from above.

So he pleaded for prayer. He didn't just pray him himself. So I think the chief source of all of Owen's holiness was communion with God.

That has as its core assiduous meditation and prayer. Now let me close with the last one, number four, quickly. Then we'll take just a few minutes for questions.

Owen was authentic in commending in public only what he had experienced in private. Owen was authentic in commending in public only what he had experienced in private. Now why do I think that's important enough to end on? As a pastor, the longer I preach, the easier words get for me.

I am a word man now. After thirteen years of preaching and six years of teaching before that, I'm a word man. Words are my trade.

I minister by means of words. And they come relatively easy for me. That's dangerous.

That's incredibly dangerous. Because you can start preaching on mystery without standing in awe. And you can preach on purity without feeling pure.

And you can preach on zeal without spiritual passion. There can be like, who said it this morning, Ray? There can be John Piper passion. That comes pretty natural.

Without God passion, probably only the old saints in the church see the difference sometimes. You can preach on God's holiness and not tremble. You can preach on sin without sorrow.

You can preach on heaven without eagerness. And a terrible hardening moves into the life because you're so good with this thing called words. Which means, if you're going to be holy, if you're going to have integrity in your life, you've got to find a way not to preach what you don't feel and experience.

Now, let me just give you some illustrations of what he meant by that. He said, our happiness consisteth not in knowing the things of the gospel, but in doing them. So doing what he learned was important.

He wrote, I hold myself bound in conscience and in honor, not even to imagine I have attained the proper knowledge of any one article of truth, much less publish it, unless through the Holy Spirit, I have had such a taste of it in its spiritual sense. That's what's missing from most of contemporary writing. They don't even know that distinction.

Knowing something with a spiritual sense, knowing something just notionally. Now, I've lost this awful sentence. Taste of it in spiritual sense, that I may be able from the heart to say with the psalmist, I have believed and therefore I spoke.

In other words, I'm not going to preach anything that I haven't spiritually tasted. Well, now that produces authenticity. If you can pull that off, there's authenticity.

In his exposition of Psalm 130, 8 verses, 320 pages on those verses, Andrew Thompson says, when Owen laid open the book of God, he laid open the same time the book of his own heart and of his own history and produced a book which enriched golden thoughts, is instinct with the living experience of one who spake what he know and testified what he had seen. He preached to his own heart and then he preached to his congregation. This is what he wrote, a man preacheth that sermon well unto others which preacheth itself to his own soul and he that doth not feed and thrive in the digestion of the food which he provides for others will scarce make it savory unto them.

Yea, he knows not but the food he hath provided may be poison unless he hath freely tasted of it himself. If the word do not dwell with power in us, it will not pass with power from us. And so he was authentic through and through when he spoke.

His heart, as he says, was cast into the mold of the doctrine that he spoke. So let me close with this key sentence. When the heart is cast into the mold of the doctrine that the mind embraces, when the evidence and necessity of the truth abides in us, when not the sense of the words only in our heads, but the sense of the thing abides in our hearts, when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for, then we shall be garrisoned by the grace of God against all the assaults of men.

When I read that I thought, there's the key. There's the key to his life. Surrounded by academic pressure, political pressure, ecclesiastical pressure, family pressure.

And he says, when we have communion with God in the doctrine we contend for, then we are garrisoned about against the assaults of men. At the end of his life, Oh brother pain, the long wished for day has come at last, in which I shall see the glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world. And he saw it.

The primary lesson I get from this survey is that in all of our enterprises and in all of our projects, the primary goal for us in ministry should be the display of God's glory in our own personal holiness. And the indispensable means of that holiness is the cultivation of personal, deep, authentic communion with God. And what that means in full, I leave to you to investigate in his books.

Communion with God and the glories of Christ and the others. So I'm going to stop here and take 10 minutes for questions and then dismiss you at 3.30. If you need to go, I understand you can walk out. I might have told you all I know, but I'll try to answer.

The question is, is there anybody writing commentaries nowadays that do help me? I'm counting on Tom Schreiner with Romans. Yes, I do get some help, especially on historical issues and some grammatical issues. Although I'll tell you, when I'm stumped with a grammatical or syntactical or logical flow in Paul, I go to Henry Alford.

Henry Alford mostly answers. He comes closer more consistently than any other human commentator to asking my kinds of questions. John Murray on Romans is a great commentator.

He's a Puritan. And I get tremendous help. Broadus on Matthew.

Great help there. There are others, I'm sure. I don't use commentaries very often, frankly.

If I think I'm unsure about what I've seen, I'll check it out. By and large, a pastor only has so much time to get ready for Sunday morning. If you've got a block of ten to twenty hours, wherever you fit in there, and you can only do so much, assiduous meditation on the original languages and prayer are much more important than reading six commentaries.

Both is better. Because you might guard yourself from some really stupid mistake if you check it out with another mind. But if you've got to choose, I choose assiduous meditation.

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