

Puritan Spiritual Narratives, 1637-1648¹

These narratives of spiritual experience were written down in church books in Cambridge, Massachusetts, c. 1637-1648. They were told by lay men and women when they applied for church membership. These testimonies mirror the preaching of the ministers about the “steps” or “way” to salvation. Although God’s will in choosing some to be saved was mysterious, the preachers taught that “election” was an event or process the saints would actually experience. No confession or “relation” reports a single, concentrated moment of transformation. Instead, the narratives describe a multistage process.

William Andrews

A freeman and therefore a church member by 1634, William Andrews was also an occasional officeholder in Cambridge, and fairly wealthy.

I was brought up of godly parents with whom I remained till seventeen years of age; instructed in the principles of religion. After that bound prentice in Ipswich in a religious family and had not much knowledge living out. But I came into godly men’s company so that I grew to some knowledge and thought my estate very good and had some comfort in it, performing duties. Yet by sermons of worthy men as Mr. Carter of Bramford, *If righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly appear* [1 Pet. 4:18][?] Upon the burial of a very godly man, where he showed the difficulty of being saved and so how that good men came to heaven, one could come at no time to him but reading or praying or

¹ David Hall, ed., *Puritans in the New World: A Critical Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 119-126. From *Thomas Shepard’s Confessions*, ed. George Selement and Bruce Woolley, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 58 (Boston, 1981), 33-34, 106-9, 111-13, 133-35.

hearing or living in his calling. And if such a man hardly to heaven as if an eel should go through a hole and leave her skin behind her. Now this did mightily strike me, although before I thought my estate good and old Mr. Rogers preaching on 5 Deuteronomy how they promised yet they broke all.²

So out of 22 of Genesis of Abra[ha]m gave up Isaac his only son, of a promise,³ and hence showed a man ought to slay his dearest sins though as dear as his only son. Now I knew I was guilty of some sins and hence it did lay hold on me. So Matthew 5[:20] - except your righteousness exceed [the] righteousness of scribes and Pharisees - and if such so strict not saved, what would become of others whose hearts were vile and lives too?

Hence cast down by this, I was laid up under great torment of conscience. And a long time going to sea, yet being persuaded that those promises [in] Matthew 5 did belong to me - blessed be them that mourn and thirst.⁴ And indeed I had oft temptation to kill myself hence durst not carry a knife about me nor go near water. And after some comfort, fell from it again as out of 57 of Isaiah preached by Mr. Phillips [v.] 15: I dwell with contrite spirit. This stayed my heart and made me resolve against every known sin. Yet I lay long under trouble and loath to eat much as unworthy of them. And at sea I got books, searching between a true believer and a temporary, as Dike and Rogers’s *Seven Treatises*.⁵ And I sought to God to give peace and searched after promises that he

² Probably Richard Rogers.

³ “(O)f a promise” refers to the events in Genesis 17 and 18 when God tells Abraham that Sarah, Isaac’s mother, will bear a son in her old age.

⁴ Matt. 5:4, 6, Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁵ Richard Rogers, *Seven Treatises* (London, 1603); the second reference is possibly to Daniel Dyke’s *The Mystery of Self-Deceiving; or, A Discourse of the Deceitfulness of Man’s Heart* (London, 1615).

would take away stony heart. And lying long thus and bring some promise to light to give me comfort. And at last the Lord sent me thus such a measure of comfort that I could not contain, which did cast me down more than any other things that the Lord should manifest such mercy to me. And it did much astonish me that the Lord should look upon me at that time. Afterward I doubted whether these comforts were right because men might taste of heavenly gift [Heb. 6:4-6] and hence afraid of unpardonable sin [Matt. 12:31].

And by another book I saw difference between comfort of hypocrites and others. The one did cast them down which stayed me.

And after this in Spain I fell very sick and sought the Lord but could find no comfort. And some of my men read Psalms 16[:5-6]- my lines are fallen in a pleasant place-which gave me much joy and so I desired my men to carry me and cast me into sea if I died because I thought papists would dig me up or no. And so I bless God for what I have found here.

Temptation - I built a new ship and my mind much upon it even upon the Sabbath. And I desired to deliver me from this whatever he did with me. But that ship was split and all drowned but a few, four of my men myself naked upon the main topsail in very cold weather and on a morning some on the shore came with a boat. And glad I was that I lost my ship and so lost my sin.

After that I heard of New England. I came hither, God making way, and when I saw the people my heart was knit to them much and thought I should be happy if I should be joined and united to them. And when I came, God made way both in removing the minister and also in selling off all that I had. And sat down at Charlestown where I was received. Afterward my wife in my absence came hither, which I bless God for.

Brother Moore's Wife

The narrator is probably Joan, wife of Golden Moore, a woman in her twenties.

I thought my condition was good though I lived in a profane place from my father. And my father asking me if I would come to New England I refused, which the Lord hath made sad to me since.

And hearing Romans 8: 7 - carnal heart is enmity against God - and there I saw I was carnal and not subject to the will of God. And so hearing out of Lynn⁶ Romans 6[:23], that wages of sin is death showing a wicked man wrought for devil as one for his wages. And hearing lest sin deserve death much more I that had committed so many. And I saw I could not satisfy wrath of God and the Lord discovered sin of nature enough forever to condemn me.

And hearing Christ came to save sinners [1 Tim. 1:15], my heart was somewhat quickened. And so I saw my own emptiness and poverty of spirit and hearing out of Matthew 5, poor in spirit were blessed which supported my heart somewhat. And Mr. Whiting preaching out of Mark 13:35 - watch - and out of Matthew 5 - hungry blessed-I doubted whether that promise belonged to me.

But I desired to wait upon God in means till he should reveal himself more sufficiently to me. And hearing out of Isaiah 30:18 - blessed are those that wait for him - he showed it was good for some to wait all their days to humble them.

And out of Isaiah 55 - come and buy wine and milk⁷ - I could not but wonder at the freeness of God's grace which did much break my heart.

⁶ Lynn, Massachusetts, where Samuel Whiting (to whom she subsequently refers) was minister.

⁷ sa. 55:1, Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

And out of that place - with everlasting kindness I'll embrace thee [Isa. 54:81] - which did much affect me and so I resolved to turn from my sin to the Lord.

And so hearing - let unrighteous forsake his ways and turn and I'll have mercy [Isa. 55:7]. And when I came hither out of John 13:19 and of doubtings and differences between [believing] and hearing of that it stayed my heart.

So when Mr. Burr taught out of Isaiah and hearing of spiritual pride and I felt I could not mourn and feared Lord had given me up to hardness of heart. And speaking to my husband how knew it viz. if not affected with hardness of heart. Being fearful of being humbled enough - out of [the] depths I have cried to the Lord [Ps. 130:1] - that it was a mercy to be free from depths. And from 30 of Exodus when the Lord had laid foundation, nothing between Christ and the soul.⁸

And so when the Lord filled the temple I found Lord had filled my soul with glorious apprehensions of himself.

Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God", 1741⁹

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was one of the most influential American preachers of the Great Awakening, a major outpouring of religious activity in the American colonies. This sermon was delivered in Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741, and is one of his most famous.

...The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. -- That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but do not see the hand of God in it; but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw his hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more

⁸ Exodus 30 describes the specifications for building and maintaining the altar.

⁹ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>

influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock...

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: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours...

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment...

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. Oh that you would consider it, whether you be young or old! There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity. We know not who they are, or in what seats they sit, or what thoughts they now have. It may be they are now at ease, and hear all these things without much disturbance, and are now flattering themselves that they are

not the persons, promising themselves that they shall escape. If we knew that there was one person, and but one, in the whole congregation, that was to be the subject of this misery, what an awful thing would it be to think of! If we knew who it was, what an awful sight would it be to see such a person! How might all the rest of the congregation lift up a lamentable and bitter cry over him! But, alas! instead of one, how many is it likely will remember this discourse in hell?...

And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing! To see so many rejoicing and singing for joy of heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart, and howl for vexation of spirit! How can you rest one moment in such a condition?...

Therefore, let every one that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the wrath to come. The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation. Let every one fly out of Sodom: "Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed."