

Footprints



CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

GREAT PREACHERS

THE LIFE OF



SAMUEL RUTHERFORD

BISHOP WARWICK COLE EDWARDES

One can imagine Rutherford urging his young friend to rise to his feet in defense of the truth and the story is told of the occasion when Gillespie, with devastating brilliance, demolished all the Erastian arguments of their protagonist John Selden. With sorrowful chagrin, Selden was heard to remark. "That youth has, in a single speech, swept away the learning and labour of ten years of my life".

A mere ten years after this, George Gillespie was dying, his frail constitution no longer able to support the passionate spirit. Like some other godly men, he knew little of the comforting spirit of Christ on his death bed and Samuel Rutherford proved a true friend both by his letters and his visits. He urged his friend to rest only in Christ's imputed righteousness and to look beyond the darkness to the joyful morning. "Look to the east, the dawning of the glory is near..... the nearer the morning, the darker. Some travelers see the city twenty miles off and yet within an eighth part of a mile they cannot see it. It is all keeping that you would now have till you need it". Such words must have encouraged the dying man to say "Though the Lord allow me no comfort yet I will believe that my Beloved is mine and I am His". Would not Christ be a welcome guest to you?" asked Rutherford as he watched his dying friend.

"The welcomest Guest that I ever saw", was the simple but moving reply. And so protesting that it was "reward enough that I ever got leave to do Christ any service", this Valiant for Truth passed over, leaving Rutherford and all the Church of Christ in Scotland sorely bereft.

Other names that shine out from the chronicles of these troubled times well deserve a place among the friends of Samuel Rutherford. David Dickson, whose biblical commentaries are still valued and sought after, was powerfully used of God during his ministry in Irvine. John Howie tells us that his time there was "singularly countenanced of God and multitudes were convinced and converted so that people under soul concern came from every quarter about Irvine and attended his sermons". These sermons, Howie continues, "were solid, substantial and very scriptural and in a very familiar style: not low, but extremely strong and affecting, being somewhat akin to the style of the godly Mr Rutherford". It is little wonder, therefore, to find that David Dickson and Rutherford enjoyed a warm and close friendship. Dickson too was exiled from his church in Irvine for a period, and when Rutherford took that long journey from the slopes of Galloway to "Christ's palace" in Aberdeen he found opportunity to spend a night at Irvine on the way. We can only guess at the warmth of fellowship these two men knew that night. Dickson doubtless encouraged his friend in the confidence that Christ would sweeten his sufferings with unusual disclosures of divine love. Four letters reached the manse at Irvine from Rutherford's period of exile each demonstrating the affection that they shared. Rutherford confided his sorrows: "I am often laid in the dust with challenges and apprehensions of His anger and then if a mountain of iron were laid upon me I cannot be heavier". But he also shares his extraordinary experiences of Christ's love, I have been afraid lest I should shame

myself and cry out for I can scarce hear what I get..... had I known what He was keeping for me, I should never have been so fainthearted”.

One last letter from Rutherford to David Dickson has been preserved to us. This was written in 1640 after the loss of Dickson's son. Taught of God in the school of affliction, Rutherford was well able to console the bereaved. He himself has lost his first wife and all but one of his eight children was early laid in the grave. With great tenderness he writes to his friend, “The child hath but changed a bed in the garden and is planted up higher nearer the sun where he shall thrive better.... Dearest brother, go on, faint not. Something of yours is in heaven..... and you go after your own”.

Unhappily, Rutherford and Dickson were found on opposing sides of the controversy of the Resolutioners and the Protesters that rent the Scottish Church during the 1650's. Bitter and hurtful things were spoken and written particularly by Rutherford whose intensity of feeling led him to sin against his brother. Many godly men who supported the Resolutionist cause were sadly disillusioned when the malice and deceitfulness of Charles II were fully manifested at the Restoration in 1660. Dickson died in December 1662 and is reported to have admitted on his deathbed that the Protestors were the truest prophets at the last.

Once established on his throne, Charles II broke every pledge he had made to his loyal Scottish subjects. Four of Scotland's most distinguished sons were singled out for destruction. The Marquis of Argyll, Lady Kenmure's brother, was executed in May 1661. James Guthrie faced the scaffold in June of that year; Archibald Johnstone escaped temporarily to the Continent. Samuel Rutherford had angered the monarch by his farsighted and controversial treatise *Lex Rex* published in 1644. In this book he argued closely and powerfully against the tyrannical and arbitrary power of the King. Summons were sent out for his arrest on the charge of high treason but Rutherford was already dying when the emissaries arrived. Taking the document into his frail hand, he declared with a spark of his old vehemence “Tell them that I have a summons already from a superior Judge..... and ere your day arrives, I shall be where few kings and great folks come”.

Many of Rutherford's friends and those who owed a debt of love for long years of pastoral care gathered round his bedside to catch his dying words, Robert Blair stood among them and as the end drew near he said, “What think you now of Christ?. I shall live and adore Him”, was the low reply. Then with strange foresight he declared, “This night will close the door and fasten my anchor within the veil. I shall go away in a sleep by five in the morning”. And so he did, On March 29, 1661, just as dawn began to break, he saw at last “the Face that was more and more his Universe” and for Samuel Rutherford that sight must have been irrevocable joy.