

# The Captivity Epistles of the English Reformation

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## Abstract

“The Captivity Epistles of the English Reformation” was originally part of Philip E. Hughes’s book, *Theology of the English Reformers*, a selection of texts with commentaries by sixteenth-century English Reformers. “The Captivity Epistles” concludes a chapter on sanctification, thus placing the subject of martyrdom in the context of the Christian life. This section documents, through letters and narratives, the last days and martyrdoms of John Hooper, John Bradford, Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer, and Thomas Cranmer. United with their Savior and in communion with other saints, these Reformers are examples of the grace of God exhibiting fruits such as joy, perseverance, trust, a sense of honor of suffering for Christ, and love for their persecutors.

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**N**o documents of the English Reformation are more moving, or more replete with the spirit of true Christian sanctity, than are the letters which were written by Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, Thomas Cranmer, and their colleagues while they were in prison awaiting the time of their martyrdom. What more searching test of a Christian man’s sanctification could there be than to be called upon, as these and many others were at this time, to endure the squalor and solitude of prolonged imprisonment, with the expectation of a

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cruel death at the end, because of the evangelical faith which he professes? The letters of these men show them to have been more than conquerors through Jesus Christ their Lord; for they are distinguished by a spirit not merely of equanimity but also of joy and wonder that their Master should have honoured them by permitting them to suffer in this way for His cause. There is no note of regret, no plea for deliverance. Here, then, is their testimony, freely given under these harsh circumstances.

“We are still involved in the greatest dangers, as we have been for almost the last eighteen months,” Bishop Hooper writes to the Swiss Reformer Henry Bullinger on December 11, 1554.

The enemies of the gospel are every day giving us more and more annoyance; we are imprisoned apart from each other, and treated with every degree of ignominy. They are daily threatening us with death, which we are quite indifferent about; in Christ Jesus we boldly despise the sword and the flames. We know in whom we have believed, and we are sure that we shall lay down our lives in a good cause. Meanwhile aid us with your prayers, that He who hath begun a good work in us will perform it even unto the end [Phil 1:6]. We are the Lord’s; let Him do what seemeth good in His eyes ... I have a most faithful guardian and defender of my salvation in our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, to whom I have wholly committed myself. To His faithfulness and protection I commend myself: if He shall prolong my days, may He cause it to be for the glory of His name; but if He wills that my short and evil life should be ended, I can say with equal complacency, His will be done!<sup>1</sup>

To his wife, Anne Hooper, he writes (October 13, 1553) that, seeing “we live for this life amongst so many and great perils and dangers, we must be well assured by God’s Word how to bear them, and how patiently to take them, as they be sent to us from God,” and that “all troubles and adversity that chance to such as be of God by the will of the heavenly Father can be none other but gain and advantage.” In accordance with the apostolic injunction to the Colossians, as being risen with Christ, to “seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Col 3:1), he affirms that

the Christian man’s faith must be always upon the resurrection of Christ, when he is in trouble; and in that glorious resurrection he shall not only see continual and perpetual joy and consolation, but also the victory and triumph over all persecution, trouble, sin, death, hell, the devil, and all other persecutors and tyrants of Christ and of Christ’s people, the tears and weepings of the faithful dried up, their wounds healed, their bodies made immortal in joy, their souls for ever praising the Lord, and conjunction and society everlasting with the blessed company of God’s elect in perpetual joy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Hooper, *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation*, trans. and ed. Hastings Robinson, Parker Society 37 (1846; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 1:105–6.

<sup>2</sup> John Hooper, *Later Writings of Bishop Hooper*, Parker Society 27 (1852; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 580–81.

In another letter (undated) “to certain godly persons, professors, and lovers of the truth,” Hooper refers to the act of parliament, passed in November 1553, whereby the Reformed religion was outlawed, and tenderly advises them how they should conduct themselves now that “the wicked idol the mass is stablished again by law.” “We must give God thanks,” he says,

for that truth He hath opened in the time of His blessed servant King Edward the Sixth, and pray unto Him that we deny it not, nor dishonour it with idolatry, but that we may have strength and patience rather to die ten times than to deny Him once. Blessed shall we be if ever God make us worthy of that honour to shed our blood for His name’s sake ... Let us pray to our heavenly Father that we may know and love His blessed will and the glorious joy prepared for us in time to come, and that we may know and hate all things contrary to His blessed will and also the pain prepared for the wicked men in the world to come.<sup>3</sup>

On June 14, 1554, in a similarly addressed letter, he writes:

I do not care what extremity this world shall work or devise, praying you in the bowels of Him that shed His precious blood for you, to remember and follow the knowledge ye have learned of His truth. Be not ashamed nor afraid to follow Him; beware of this sentence, that it take no place in you: “No man (saith Christ) that putteth his hand to the plough and looketh backward is meet for the kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup> ... Seeing the price of truth in religion hath been always the displeasure and persecution of the world, let us bear it, and Christ will recompense the charges abundantly. It is no loss to lack the love of the world and to find the love of God, nor no harm to suffer the loss of worldly things and find eternal life. If man hate and God love, man kill the body [cf. Matt 10:28] and God bring both body and soul to eternal life, the exchange is good and profitable. For the love of God use singleness towards Him. Beware of this foolish and deceitful collusion, to think a man may serve God in spirit, secretly to his conscience, although outwardly with his body and bodily presence he cleave, for civil order, to such rites and ceremonies as now be used contrary to God and His Word.<sup>5</sup>

True to his Master’s example and instruction, Hooper does not neglect to pray for those who persecute and spitefully use him [cf. Matt 5:44]—who, in his own words, written in a letter dated September 2, 1554 to friends of his in London, “have taken all worldly goods and lands from me and spoiled me of all that I had, have imprisoned my body, and appointed not one-halfpenny to feed and relieve me withal. But I do forgive them,” he continues,

and pray for them daily in my poor prayer unto God, and from my heart I wish their salvation, and quietly and patiently bear their injuries, wishing no farther extremity to be

<sup>3</sup> Hooper, *Later Writings*, 589.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 9:62.

<sup>5</sup> Hooper, *Later Writings*, 596.

used towards us. Yet, if it seem contrary best unto our heavenly Father, I have made my reckoning, and fully resolve myself to suffer the uttermost that they are able to do against me, yea, death itself, by the aid of Christ Jesus, who died the most vile death of the cross for us wretches and miserable sinners. But of this I am assured, that the wicked world, with all its force and power, shall not touch one of the hairs of our heads without leave and licence of our heavenly Father [cf. Matt 10:30], whose will be done in all things. If He will life, life be it; if He will death, death be it. Only we pray that our wills may be subject unto His will ... Dearly beloved, if we be contented to obey God's will, and for His commandment's sake to surrender our goods and ourselves to be at His pleasure, it maketh no matter whether we keep goods and life, or lose them. Nothing can hurt us that is taken from us for God's cause, and nothing can at length do us good that is preferred contrary unto God's commandment.<sup>6</sup>

On January 21, 1555, less than three weeks before his martyrdom, Hooper wrote a last letter to his friends, from which we take the following:

Now is the time of trial, to see whether we fear more God or man. It was an easy thing to hold with Christ while the prince and world held with Him: but now the world hateth Him, is the true trial who be His. Wherefore in the name, and in the virtue, strength, and power of His Holy Spirit, prepare yourselves in any case to adversity and constancy. Let us not run away when it is most time to fight ... Imprisonment is painful: but yet liberty upon evil conditions is more painful. The prisons stink; but yet not so much as sweet houses where the fear and true honour of God lacketh. I must be alone and solitary: it is better so to be, and have God with me, than to be in company with the wicked. Loss of goods is great; but loss of God's grace and favour is greater ... It is better to make answer before the pomp and pride of wicked men than to stand naked in the sight of all heaven and earth before the just God at the latter day. I shall die then by the hands of the cruel man: he is blessed that loseth his life full of mortal miseries and findeth the life full of eternal joys. It is a grief to depart from goods and friends; but yet not so much as to depart from grace and heaven itself. Wherefore there is neither felicity nor adversity of this world that can appear to be great, if it be weighed with the joys or pains in the world to come. I can do no more but pray for you; do the same for me for God's sake. For my part (I thank the heavenly Father) I have made my accounts, and appointed myself unto the will of the heavenly Father: as He will, so I will, by His grace.<sup>7</sup>

On February 9, having been taken from his prison in London, John Hooper was burnt at the stake in the cathedral city of Gloucester, where he had formerly been bishop.

On July 1, 1555 John Bradford was burned at Smithfield after a long period of imprisonment in the Tower of London. During the previous year he had sent from his cell a letter "to certain godly men" which concluded with the following sentiments:

O that we considered often and indeed what we have professed in baptism! Then the cross and we should be well acquainted together, for we are "baptized into Christ's

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<sup>6</sup> Hooper, *Later Writings*, 598.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 618–19.

death”<sup>8</sup> ... O that we considered what we be, where we be, whither we are going, who calleth us, how He calleth us, to what felicity He calleth us, whereby He calleth us! ... O Lord God, “open Thou our eyes” that we may see the hope whereunto Thou hast called us. Give us eyes of seeing, ears of hearing, and hearts of understanding ... O dear Father, kindle in us an earnest desire to be with Thee in soul and body, to praise Thy name for ever, with all Thy saints, in Thy eternal glory. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

“Away with dainty niceness!” he says in his *Exhortation to the Brethren in England*, dated February 11, 1555.

Will ye think the Father of heaven will deal more gently with you in this age than He hath done with others, His dearest friends in other ages? What way, yea, what storms and tempests, what troubles and disquietness found Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and good Joseph! Which of these had so fair a life and restful times as we have had? Moses, Aaron, Samuel, David the king and all the good kings, priests, prophets in the Old Testament, at one time or other, if not throughout their life, did feel a thousand parts more misery than we have felt hitherto. As for the New Testament, Lord God! how great was the affliction of Mary, of Joseph, of Zacharias, of Elizabeth, of John the Baptist, of all the apostles and evangelists, yea, of Jesus Christ our Lord, the dear Son and darling of God! And, since the time of the apostles, how many and great are the number of martyrs, confessors, and such as have suffered the shedding of their blood in this life, rather than they would be stayed in their journey, or lodge in any of Satan’s inns, lest the storms or winds which fell in their travellings might have touched them! And, dearly beloved, let us think what we are, and how far unmeet to be matched with these; with whom yet we look to be placed in heaven ... Ye shall see in us, by God’s grace, that we preached no lies nor tales of tubs [that is, fairy tales] but even the very true Word of God, for the confirmation whereof we, by God’s grace and the help of your prayers, will willingly and joyfully give our blood to be shed, as already we have given our livings, goods, friends, and natural country: for now be we certain that we be in the highway to heaven’s bliss ... This wind will blow God’s children forwards and the devil’s darlings backward. Therefore like God’s children, let us go on forward apace: the wind is in our backs; hoist up the sails; “lift up your hearts and hands unto God”<sup>10</sup> in prayer, and keep your anchor of faith to cast out in time of trouble on the rock of God’s Word and mercy in Christ by the cable of God’s verity ... Affliction, persecution, and trouble are no strange thing to God’s children, and therefore it should not dismay, discourage, or discomfort us; for it is none other thing than all God’s dear friends have tasted in their journey to heaven-wards.<sup>11</sup>

Three days earlier Bradford had written to Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Ridley and Latimer, with whom a year previously he had shared the same cell in the Tower of London for some weeks, and who were now imprisoned in Oxford:

<sup>8</sup> Rom 6:3.

<sup>9</sup> John Bradford, *The Writings of John Bradford*, Parker Society 5–6 (1848, 1853; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 1:384.

<sup>10</sup> Lam 3:41.

<sup>11</sup> Bradford, *Writings*, 1:417–18.

Our dear brother Rogers hath broken the ice valiantly, and as this day, I think, or tomorrow at the uttermost, hearty Hooper, sincere Saunders, and trusty Taylor end their course and receive their crown. The next am I, who hourly look for the porter to open me the gates after them, to enter into the desired rest. God forgive me mine unthankfulness for this exceeding great mercy, that amongst so many thousands it pleaseth His mercy to choose me to be one in whom He will suffer ... O what am I, Lord, that Thou shouldest thus magnify me, so vile a man and miserable as always I have been! Is this Thy wont, to send for such a wretch and a hypocrite as I have been in a fiery chariot, as Thou didst for Elijah? ... For my farewell, therefore, I write and send this unto you, trusting shortly to see you where we shall never be separated.<sup>12</sup>

On June 24, 1555, one week before his martyrdom, John Bradford writes to his mother:

I die not, my good mother, as a thief, a murderer, an adulterer, etc., but I die as a witness of Christ, His gospel and verity [cf. 1 Pet 4:15–16], which hitherto I have confessed, I thank God as well by preaching as by imprisonment; and now, even presently, I shall most willingly confirm the same by fire. I acknowledge that God most justly might take me hence simply for my sins, which are many, great, and grievous: but the Lord, for His mercy in Christ, hath pardoned them all, I hope. But now, dear mother, He taketh me hence by this death, as a confessor and witness that the religion taught by Christ Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles, is God's truth. ... Therefore, my good and most dear mother, give thanks for me to God that He hath made the fruit of your womb to be a witness of His glory ... I confess to the whole world I die and depart this life in hope of a much better, which I look for at the hands of God my Father, through the merits of His dear Son Jesus Christ. Thus, my dear mother, I take my last farewell of you in this life, beseeching the almighty and eternal Father, by Christ, to grant us to meet in the life to come, where we shall give Him continual thanks and praise, for ever and ever.<sup>13</sup>

In these and the other letters of the martyrs there is no suggestion of self-pity or pessimism. Rather, we find that the sanctifying Spirit has brought them to the experience of that “good cheer” which accords with Christ's encouragement to His disciples: “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33). It is this spirit of Christian joy despite affliction that shines so clearly through these letters from prison. “Dearly beloved,” says Bradford in his *Exhortation to the Brethren in England*,

although to lose life and goods, or friends, for God's Gospel sake, it seem a bitter and sour thing; yet in that our “Physician” who cannot lie (Jesus Christ I mean) doth tell us that it is very wholesome, howsoever it be untoothsome, let us with good cheer take the cup at His hand and drink it merrily. If the cup seem unpleasant and the drink too bitter, let us put some sugar therein, even a piece of that which Moses cast into the bitter water,

<sup>12</sup> Bradford, *Writings*, 2:190–91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:249–51.

and made the same pleasant.<sup>14</sup> I mean an ounce, yea, a dram of Christ's afflictions and cross which He suffered for us. If we call this to mind, and cast of them into our cup (considering what He was, what He suffered, of whom, for whom, to what end, and what came thereof) surely we cannot loathe our medicine, but wink, and drink it lustily.<sup>15</sup>

And this good cheer survived the final and most searching test of all. On the afternoon of Sunday June 30, the keeper's wife suddenly burst in, breathless and much distressed, and said (the scene is as recounted by Foxe):

"O Master Bradford, I come to bring you heavy news." "What is that?" said he. "Marry," quoth she, "tomorrow you must be burned, and your chain is now ready, and soon you must go to Newgate." With that Master Bradford put off his cap, and lifting up his eyes to heaven said: "I thank God for it; for I have looked for the same a long time, and therefore it cometh not now to me suddenly, but as a thing waited for every day and hour: the Lord make me worthy thereof"; and so, thanking her for her gentleness, departed up into his chamber.

The next day as the flames were kindled around him in the presence of a great concourse of onlookers he turned to the young apprentice, John Leaf, who was suffering with him and exclaimed: "Be of good comfort, brother; for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night!"<sup>16</sup>

Bradford had been chaplain to Ridley when the latter was Bishop of London, and when Ridley received the news of his sentence, he wrote to him as follows:

Oh, dear brother, seeing the time is now come when it pleaseth the heavenly Father, for Christ our Saviour His sake, to call upon you and to bid you come, happy are you that ever you were born, thus to be awake at the Lord's calling ... Where the martyrs for Christ's sake shed their blood and lost their lives, oh what wondrous things hath Christ afterward wrought to His glory and confirmation of their doctrine! If it be not the place that sanctified the man, but the holy man doth by Christ sanctify the place, brother Bradford, then happy and holy shall be that place wherein thou shalt suffer, and shall be with thy ashes in Christ's cause sprinkled over withal. All thy country may rejoice of thee that ever it brought forth such a one, who would render his life again in His cause of whom he had received it ... We do look now every day when we shall be called on, blessed be God! I ween I am the weakest many ways of our company; and yet I thank our Lord God and heavenly Father by Christ that since I heard of our dear brother Rogers' departing and stout confession of Christ and His truth even unto the death, my heart (blessed be God!) so rejoiced of it that since that time, I say, I never felt any lumpish heaviness in my heart, as I grant I have felt sometimes before. O good brother, blessed be God in thee, and blessed be the time that ever I knew thee! Farewell, farewell!<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Exod 15:23–25a.

<sup>15</sup> Bradford, *Writings*, 1:431.

<sup>16</sup> See *Ibid.*, 2:xxxix, xlii.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Ridley, *The Works of Nicholas Ridley*, Parker Society 42 (1841; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 377–78.

Another letter written from his cell in the Bocardo, Oxford, was addressed by Ridley to “the brethren remaining in captivity of the flesh and dispersed abroad in sundry prisons, but knit together in unity of spirit and holy religion.” (The degree to which, as revealed in these letters composed by men appointed to die, the thoughts and concerns of the Reformers were turned, not inwards upon themselves and their own afflictions, but outwards to others, whether individuals or groups or the nation as a whole, is quite remarkable.) With complete conviction he affirms the rightness of their cause before God:

We never had a better or a more just cause either to condemn our life or shed our blood: we cannot take in hand the defence of a more certain, clear, and manifest truth. For it is not any ceremony for which we contend; but it toucheth the very substance of our whole religion, yea, even Christ Himself ... If any therefore would force upon us any other God besides Him whom Paul and the apostles have taught, let us not hear him, but let us fly from him and hold him accursed. Brethren, ye are not ignorant of the deep and profound subtleties of Satan; for he will not cease to rage about you, seeking by all means possible whom he may devour: but play ye the men [cf. Mart. Pol. 9.1], and be of good comfort in the Lord. And albeit your enemies and the adversaries of the truth, armed with all worldly force and power that may be, do set upon you, yet be not ye faint-hearted, and shrink not therefor: but trust unto your captain Christ, trust unto the Spirit of truth, and trust to the truth of your cause, which, as it may by the malice of Satan be darkened, so can it never be clean put out. For we have (high praise be given to God therefor!) most plainly, evidently, and clearly on our side all the prophets, all the apostles, and undoubtedly all the ancient ecclesiastical writers who have written until of late years past. Let us be hearty and of good courage therefore, and thoroughly comfort ourselves in the Lord.

He exhorts them, too, to think kindly and pray for the salvation of their persecutors:

Good brethren, though they rage never so fiercely against us, yet let us not wish evil unto them again; knowing that, while for Christ's cause they vex and persecute us, they are like madmen, most outrageous and cruel against themselves, heaping hot burning coals upon their own heads: but rather let us wish well unto them, “knowing that we are thereunto called in Christ Jesus, that we should be heirs of the blessing.”<sup>18</sup> Let us pray therefore unto God that He would drive out of their hearts this darkness of errors and make the light of His truth to shine unto them, that they, acknowledging their blindness, may with all humble repentance be converted unto the Lord, and together with us confess Him to be the only true God, who is the Father of lights,<sup>19</sup> and His only Son Jesus Christ, worshipping Him in spirit and verity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Pet 3:9.

<sup>19</sup> Jas 1:17.

<sup>20</sup> Ridley, *Works*, 342, 344–45.



Ridley's call came on October 16 of that same year, 1555, at Oxford, outside Balliol College. A little while before he wrote a letter of last farewell "to all his true and faithful friends in God." He spoke to them "as a man minding to take a far journey." It is a letter, too, of farewell to his countrymen, to his Church of England, to Cambridge, his university where he had studied and taught, to Kent and London where he had ministered as pastor and bishop, and to the peers of the realm, amongst whom he had sat in the House of Lords. "I warn you, all my well beloved kinsfolk and countrymen," he writes,

that ye be not amazed or astonished at the kind of my departure or dissolution: for I assure you that I think it most honour that ever I was called unto in all my life; and therefore I thank my Lord God heartily for it, that it hath pleased Him to call me of His great mercy unto this high honour, to suffer death willingly for His sake and in His cause; unto the which honour He called the holy prophets, and His dearly beloved apostles, and His blessed chosen martyrs. For know ye that I doubt no more, but that the causes wherefor I am put to death are God's causes and the causes of the truth, than I doubt that the gospel which John wrote is the gospel of Christ or that Paul's epistles are the very Word of God. And to have a heart willing to abide and stand in God's cause and in Christ's quarrel even unto death, I assure thee (O man) it is an inestimable and honourable gift of God, given only to the true elect and dearly beloved children of God.

Here again the victorious note of "good cheer" is dominant:

All ye that be my true lovers and friends, rejoice and rejoice with me again, and render with me hearty thanks to God our heavenly Father that for His Son's sake, my Saviour and Redeemer Christ, He hath vouchsafed to call me, being else without His gracious goodness in myself but a sinful and a vile wretch, to call me (I say) unto this high dignity of His true prophets, of His faithful apostles, and of His holy, elect, and chosen martyrs: that is, to die, and to spend this temporal life in the defence and maintenance of His eternal and everlasting truth.<sup>21</sup>

It is, Ridley emphasizes, for their comfort that he is writing, lest the manner of his death should be a cause of confusion and sorrow to them; "Whereas," he urges them,

ye have rather cause to rejoice (if ye love me indeed) for that it hath pleased God to call me to a greater honour and dignity than ever I did enjoy before, either in Rochester or in the see of London, or ever should have had in the see of Durham, whereunto I was last of all elected and named. Yea, I count it greater honour before God indeed to die in His cause (whereof I nothing doubt) than is any earthly or temporal promotion or honour that can be given to a man in this world ... I trust in my Lord God, the God of mercies and the Father of all comfort, through Jesus Christ our Lord, that He who hath put this mind, will, and affection by His Holy Spirit in my heart, to stand against the face of the enemy in this cause, and to choose rather the loss of all my worldly substance, yea, and

<sup>21</sup> Ridley, *Works*, 395, 397–98.

of my life too, than to deny His known truth, that He will comfort me, aid me, and strengthen me evermore even unto the end, and to the yielding up of my spirit and soul into His holy hands.<sup>22</sup>

On the night prior to his martyrdom, Ridley announced to Mistress Irish, the wife of his keeper, and the others who were taking supper with them, that on the next day he was to be married, and “so showered himself to be as merry as ever he was at any time before.” When Mistress Irish wept at the prospect of his painful death he gently but cheerfully comforted her with the assurance that, “though my breakfast be somewhat sharp and painful, yet I am sure my supper shall be more pleasant and sweet”; and when his brother offered to watch all night with him he replied: “No, no, that you shall not; for I mind (God willing) to go to bed and to sleep as quietly to-night as ever I did in my life.”<sup>23</sup>

The following day, bound back to back with Ridley at the same stake was his fellow-bishop, Hugh Latimer. Latimer, too, had endured a prolonged imprisonment prior to his martyrdom, and it was during this period that he sent a letter to an unnamed fellow-Christian who, like him, was a captive for the profession of the gospel and whom he wished to encourage to persevere in steadfastness. “The wise men of the world can find shifts to avoid the cross,” he writes,

and the unstable in faith can set themselves to rest with the world; but the simple servant of Christ doth look for no other but oppression in the world. And then is it their most glory, when they be under the cross of their Master Christ; which He did bear, not only for our redemption, but also for an example to us, that we should follow His steps in suffering, that we might be partakers of His glorious resurrection [cf. 1 Pet 2:21, 24] ... We are now more near to God than ever we were, yea, we are at the gate of heaven; and we are a joyful spectacle become, in this our captivity, to God, to the angels, and to all His saints, who look that we should end our course with glory. We have found the precious stone of the Gospel, for the which we ought to sell all that we have in the world [cf. Matt 13:44–45]. And shall we exchange or lay to gage the precious treasure which we have in our hands for a few days to lament in the world, contrary to our vocation? God forbid it! But let us, as Christ willeth us in St. Luke, “look up, and lift up our heads, for our redemption is at hand”<sup>24</sup> ... Embrace Christ’s cross, and Christ shall embrace you.<sup>25</sup>

The last of Latimer’s letters that we have was written from prison in Oxford on May 15, 1555 “to all the unfeigned lovers of God’s truth.” It is a superb manifesto of Christian constancy and joy under persecution which

<sup>22</sup> Ridley, *Works*, 405–6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 292–93.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 21:28.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Latimer, *The Works of Hugh Latimer*, Parker Society 33–34 (1844, 1845; repr., New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 2:429–30, 433–34.

deserves to be placed among the noblest documents of the literature of our profession. This venerable white-bearded saint, whose years are now three score and ten, is as bold and true-hearted in captivity as he ever was during the time of his liberty. Silenced as a preacher, he now puts pen to paper: “Brethren,” he writes,

the time is come when the Lord’s ground will be known: I mean, it will now appear who have received God’s Word in their hearts indeed, to the taking of root therein. For such will not shrink for a little heat or sun-burning weather, but stoutly stand and grow ... I pray you, tell me, if any from the beginning, yea, the best of God’s friends, have found any fairer way or weather to the place whither we are going (I mean to heaven) than we now find and are like to find.

As Bradford had done just over three months previously,<sup>26</sup> Latimer draws attention to the afflictions and sufferings which God’s servants throughout the Old and New Testaments experienced: “See whether any of them all found any other way unto the city whereunto we travel than by many tribulations,” he challenges. “Besides this,” he continues,

if you should call to remembrance the primitive church (Lord God!) we should see many that have given cheerfully their bodies to most grievous torments rather than they would be stopped in their journey ... But if none of these were, if you had no company to go with you, yet have you me, your poorest brother and bondman in the Lord, with many other, I trust in God. But if ye had none of the fathers, patriarchs, good kings, prophets, apostles, evangelists, martyrs, holy saints, and children of God, who in their journey to heaven found what you are like to find (if you go on forwards, as I trust you will), yet have you your general captain and master, Christ Jesus, the dear darling and only-begotten and beloved Son of God, in whom was all the Father’s joy and delectation; ye have Him to go before you: no fairer was His way than ours, but much worse and fouler, towards His city of the heavenly Jerusalem. Let us remember what manner of way Christ found: begin at His birth, and go forth until ye come at His burial, and you shall find that every step of His journey was a thousand times worse than yours is. For He had laid upon Him at one time the devil, death, and sin; and with one sacrifice, never again to be done, He overcame them all ... Let us therefore follow Him: for thus did He that we should not be faint-hearted; for we may be most sure that “if we suffer with Him we shall also reign with Him”<sup>27</sup> ... Be therefore partakers of the afflictions of Christ, as God shall make you able to bear; and think it no small grace of God to suffer persecution for God’s truth’s sake ... And as the fire hurteth not the gold, but maketh it finer, so shall ye be more pure in suffering with Christ. The flail or the wind hurteth not the wheat, but cleanseth it from the chaff. And ye, dearly beloved, are God’s wheat: fear not the fanning wind, fear not the millstone; for all these things make you the meter for God’s tooth ... Dearly beloved, cast yourselves wholly upon the Lord, with whom all the hairs of your head be numbered, so that not one of them shall perish without His knowledge ... No man shall once touch you without His knowledge; and when they touch you it is for your profit: God will work

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<sup>26</sup> See above.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Tim 2:12.

thereby to make you like unto Christ ... Read the tenth psalm; and pray for me your poor brother and fellow-sufferer for God's sake: His name therefore be praised! And let us pray to God that He of His mercy will vouchsafe to make both you and me meet to suffer with good consciences for His name's sake. Die once we must; how and where, we know not. Happy are they whom God giveth to pay nature's debt (I mean to die) for His sake. Here is not our home; let us therefore accordingly consider things, having always before our eyes that heavenly Jerusalem, and the way thereto in persecution. And let us consider all the dear friends of God, how they have gone after the example of our Saviour Jesus Christ: whose footsteps let us also follow, even to the gallows (if God's will be so), not doubting, but as He rose again the third day, even so shall we do at the time appointed of God.<sup>28</sup>

October 16, 1555 was the day (as has previously been mentioned) on which Hugh Latimer, aged but unbowed, in company with his younger colleague Nicholas Ridley, was given grace to seal his testimony with the blood of martyrdom. During the preceding imprisonment Ridley had written in affectionate terms to Latimer:

Methinketh I see you suddenly lifting up your head towards heaven, after your manner, and then looking upon me with your prophetic countenance, and speaking unto me with these or like words: "Trust not, my son (I beseech you, vouchsafe me the honour of this name, for in so doing I shall think myself both honoured and loved of you), trust not, I say, my son, to these word-weapons, for the kingdom of God is not in words, but in power."<sup>29</sup>

This same communication he had prefaced with this memorable prayer:

O heavenly Father, the Father of all wisdom, understanding, and true strength, I beseech Thee, for Thy only Son our Saviour Christ's sake, look mercifully upon me, wretched creature, and send Thine Holy Spirit into my breast; that not only I may understand according to Thy wisdom, how this pestilent and deadly dart is to be borne off, and with what answer it is to be beaten back; but also, when I must join to fight in the field for the glory of Thy name, that then I, being strengthened with the defence of Thy right hand, may manfully stand in the confession of Thy faith and of Thy truth, and continue in the same unto the end of my life: through the same our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.<sup>30</sup>

When they met at the stake, Ridley had "a wondrous cheerful look" and embraced old Bishop Latimer. They then knelt together in prayer as they sought for the last time the grace of God for victory in this their final trial. After they had been chained back to back at the stake, and as the faggots were lit for their burning, Latimer uttered what has been described as "the noblest sermon he had ever composed":<sup>31</sup> "Be of good comfort, Master

<sup>28</sup> Latimer, *Works*, 2:435, 437–40, 442–44.

<sup>29</sup> Ridley, *Works*, 146. Cf. 1 Thess 1:5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>31</sup> Bishop Marcus L. Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (London: Church Book Room, 1954), 132; repr., Marcus Loane, *Masters of the English Reformation* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2005), 164–65.

Ridley, and play the man: we shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out!"<sup>32</sup> And so once again the grace of God was proved sufficient and His power was made perfect in the weakness of His faithful witnesses; once again the blood of Christ's martyrs was the seed of the church.

With this testimony of the English Reformers before us, we are able to appreciate (and let us not forget that there are many in this present generation who are being called on to prove by personal experience) how true are the words written to Peter Martyr in that same year from prison by Archbishop Cranmer (who was himself to be martyred at the same spot as Latimer and Ridley on March 21, 1556) explaining how he had learnt by experience that

God never shines forth more brightly, and pours out the beams of His mercy and consolation, or of strength and firmness of spirit, more clearly or impressively upon the minds of His people, than when they are under the most extreme pain and distress, both of mind and body, that He may then more especially show Himself to be the God of His people, when He seems to have altogether forsaken them; then raising them up when they think He is bringing them down and laying them low; then glorifying them when He is thought to be confounding them; then quickening them when he is thought to be destroying them.<sup>33</sup>

What more need be said to demonstrate that the Reformers are examples to us, in their practice as well as in their preaching, in their dying as well as in their living, of that sanctification which, being the fruit of divine grace, by the evident depth of its reality adds lustre to the name of Christ?

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<sup>32</sup> John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe* (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 7:550.

<sup>33</sup> *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation*, 1:29.