

~Other Speakers S-Z: Alexander Whyte:

'Grace groweth best in winter.'—Rutherford.

Elizabeth Melville was one of the ladies of the Covenant. It was a remarkable feature of a remarkable time in Scotland that so many ladies of birth, intellect and influence were found on the side of the persecuted Covenanters. I do not remember any other period in the history of the Church of Christ, since the day when the women of Galilee ministered of their substance to our Lord Himself, in which noble women took such a noble part as did Lady Culross, Lady Jane Campbell, the Duchess of Hamilton, the Duchess of Athol, and other such ladies in that eventful time. We had something not unlike it again in the ten years' conflict that culminated in the Disruption; and in the social and religious movements of our own day, women of rank and talent are not found wanting. At the same time, I do not know where to find such a cloud of witnesses for the faith of Christ from among the eminent women of any one generation as Scotland can show in her ladies of the Covenant. Lady Culross's name will always be held in tender honour in the innermost circles of our best Scottish Christians, for the hand she had in that wonderful outpouring of God's grace at the kirk of Shotts on that Thanksgiving Monday in 1636. Under God, that Covenanters' Pentecost was more due to Lady Culross than to any other human being. True, John Livingstone preached the Thanksgiving Sermon, but it was through Lady Culross's influence that he was got to preach it; and he preached it after a night of prayer spent by Lady Culross and her companions, such that we read of next day's sermon and its success as a matter of course. I cannot venture to tell a heterogeneous audience the history of that night they spent at Shotts with God. It is so unlike what we have ever seen or heard of. There may be one or two of us here who have spent whole nights in prayer at some crisis in our life, going from one promise to another, when, in the Psalmist's words, the sorrows of death compassed us, and the pains of hell gat hold upon us. And we, one or two of us, may have had miracles from heaven forthwith performed upon us, fit to match in a private way with the hand of God on the kirk of Shotts. But even those of us who have such secrets between us and God, we, I fear, never spent a whole Communion night, never shutting our eyes but to pray for a baptism of spiritual blessing upon to-morrow's congregation. What a mother in Israel was Lady Culross, with five hundred children born of her travail in one day!

I have not found any of Lady Culross's letters to Samuel Rutherford, but John Livingstone's literary executors have published some eight letters she wrote to Livingstone, her close and lifelong friend.

And Lady Culross's first letter to John Livingstone is, in every point of view, a remarkable piece. It has a strength, an irony, and a tenderness in it that at once tell the reader that he is in the hands of a very remarkable writer. But it is not Lady Culross's literature that so much interests us and holds us, it is her religion; and it is its depth, its intensity, and the way it grows in winter. After a long and racy introduction, sometimes difficult to decipher, from its Fife idioms and obsolete spelling, she goes on thus: 'Did you get any heart to remember me and my bonds? As for me, I never found so great impediment within. Still, it is the Lord with whom we have to do, and He gives and takes, casts down and raises up, kills and makes alive as pleases His Majesty. . . . My task at home is augmented and tripled, and yet I fear worse. Sin in me and in mine is my greatest cross. I would, if it were the Lord's will, choose affliction rather than iniquity.'—Yours in C., E. Melvil.'

It was now winter with John Livingstone. The persecution had overtaken him, and this is how her ladyship writes to him:

'My very worthy and dear brother: Courage, dear brother: it is all in love, all works together for the best. You must be hewn and hammered and drest and prepared before you can be a Leiving-ston fit for His building. And if He is minded to make you meet to help others, you must look for another manner of strokes than you have yet felt, . . . but when you are laid low, and are vile in your own eyes, then He will raise you up and refresh you with some blinks of His favourable countenance, that you may be able to comfort others with those consolations wherewith you have been comforted of Him. . . . Since God has put His work in your weak hands, look not for long case here: you must feel the full weight of your calling: a weak man with a strong God. The pain is but a moment, the pleasure is everlasting, . . . cross upon cross. the end of one with me is but the beginning of

another: but guiltiness in me and in mine is my greatest cross.' And after midnight one Sabbath she writes again to Livingstone: 'You cannot but say that the Lord was with you to-day; therefore, not only be content, but bless His name who put His word in your heart and in your mouth, and has overcome you with mercy when you deserved nothing but wrath, and has not only forgiven your many sins, but has saved you from breaking out, as it may be better men have done; but He has covered you and restrained you; has loved you freely and has made His saints to love you; who will guide you also with His counsel, and afterwards receive you to His glory.'

It was from his silent prison in Aberdeen that Samuel Rutherford wrote to Lady Culross the letter in which this sentence stands: 'I see that grace groweth best in winter.' Rutherford had had but a short and unsettled summer among the birds at Anwoth. His wife and his two children had been taken from him there, and now that which he loved more than wife or child had been taken from him too—his pulpit and pastoral work for Jesus Christ. He felt his banishment all the more keenly that he was the first of the evangelical ministers of Scotland to be so silenced. He will have plenty of companions in tribulation soon, if that will be any comfort to him; but, as it is, he confesses to Lady Culross that it was a peculiar pang to him to be 'the first in the kingdom put to utter silence.' The bitterness of banishment has been sung in immortal strains by Dante, whose grace under banishment also grew to a fruitfulness we still partake of to this day

'Thou shalt leave each thing
Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft
Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove
How salt the savour is of other's bread,
How hard the passage to descend and climb
By other's stairs. But that shall gall thee most
Will be the worthless and vile company
With whom thou must be thrown into these straits.'

But all this, to use a figure familiar among the Puritans of that day, only made Rutherford's true life return, like sap in winter, into its proper root, till we read in his later Aberdeen letters a rapture and a richness that his remain-at-home correspondents are fain to tone down.

Not only does true grace grow best in winter, but winter is the best season for planting grace. 'I was to be married, and she died,' was a young man's explanation to me the other day for proposing to sit down at the Lord's Table. The winter cold that carried off his future wife saw planted in his ploughed-up heart the seeds of divine grace; and, no doubt, all down the coming winters, with such short interludes of summers as may be before him in this cold climate, the grace that was planted in winter will grow. It is not a speculation, it is a personal experience that hundreds here can testify to, that the Bible, the Sabbath, the Supper, all became so many means of grace to them after some great affliction greatly sanctified. The death of a bride, the death of a wife, the death of a child; some blow from bride or wife or child worse than death; a lost hope quenched for ever—these, and things like these, are needful, as it would seem, to be suffered by most men before they will wholly open their hearts to the grace of God. 'Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept Thy word.'

At the same time, good and necessary as all such wintry experiences are, their good results on us do not last for ever. In too many cases they do not last long. It is rather a start in grace we take at such seasons than a steady and deep growth in it. The growth in grace that comes to us in connection with some sore affliction is apt to be violent and spasmodic; it comes and it goes with the affliction; it is not slow, constant, steady, sure, as all true and natural growth is. If one might say so, an unbroken winter in the soul, a continual inward winter, is needed to keep up a steady, deep and fruitful growth in grace. Now, is there anything in the spiritual husbandry of God that can be called such a winter of the soul? I think there is. The winter of our outward life—trials, crosses, sickness and death are all the wages of sin; and it is among these things that grace first strikes its roots. And what is the continual presence of sin in the soul but the true winter of the soul, amid which the grace that is planted in an outbreak of winter ever after strikes deeper root and grows? Once let a man be awakened of God to his own great sinfulness; and that not to its fruits in outward sorrow, but to its

malignant roots that are twisted round and round and through and through his heart, and that man has thenceforth such a winter within him as shall secure to him a lifelong growth in the most inward grace. Once let a poor wretch awake to the unbroken winter of his own sinfulness, a sinfulness that is with him when he lies down and when he rises up, when he is abroad among men and when he is at home with himself alone: an incessant, increasing, agonising, overwhelming sense of sin, and how that most miserable of men will grow in grace, and how he will drink in all the means of grace! How he will hear the word of grace preached, mixing it no longer with fault-finding, as he used to do, but with repentance and faith under any and every ministry. How he will examine himself every day; or, rather, how every day will examine, accuse, expose and condemn him; and how meekly he will accept the exposures and the condemnations! That man will not need you to preach to him about the sanctifying of the Sabbath, or about waiting on this and that means of grace. He will grow with or without the means of grace, but he will be of all men the most diligent in his devotion to them. He will almost get beyond the Word and within the Sacrament, so close up will his corruptions drive him to Christ and to God. Till, having provided for that man so much grace and so much growth in grace, God will soon have to give him glory, if only to satisfy him and pacify him and lift him out of the winter of his discontent. And then, Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw herself; for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.'