



The Life of Thomas Boston

In 1676, Thomas Boston was born into a devout Presbyterian home in Duns, Scotland. Thomas's father, John, suffered imprisonment for refusing to conform to government impositions on church life. In 1687, an Act allowing Presbyterians to hold worship services in homes was passed, and the Boston's attended Henry Erskine's preaching.

Boston went to school close to his home; his *"schoolmistress ... treated him kindly"* and *"often expressed her hope of seeing me in the pulpit."*¹ *"By the time I was seven years old I read the Bible, and had delight in reading it ... and got the Bible sometimes into the bed with me, and read there..."*² Boston reflects, *"I am thankful that it was at all made my choice early, and that it has been the study of my ripest years..."*³ In 1684, he went to grammar school in town; he loved to play soldiers and mustered his fellow school boys for mock military exercises with as much energy, he later reflected, *"as sometimes I have preached."*⁴

Despite Bible reading and a godly environment, Boston was generally unconcerned about the state of his soul until 1687. That summer, the Lord awakened him. He became personally aware of the extent of his sin: *"My lost state by nature and my absolute need of Christ being thus discovered to me, I was set to pray in earnest,"* and carefully listened to the preached Word.⁵ Boston's own father and Henry Erskine played influential roles in Boston's life, including during his later preparation for the ministry.

After completing grammar school, Boston had two years of life trials. First, lack of money kept him from desired further education. Second, an older minister and family friend was found in adultery. It left Thomas shaken and deeply disappointed. And then, third, *"it pleased the Lord to remove my mother by death."*⁶ She became ill suddenly and died quickly; her death was a great blow to the whole family. Boston went with his siblings to his mother's burial, his father too sick to come himself. Boston himself contracted the disease, but he and his father both recovered.

Finally, Thomas, aged 15, managed to gain work with a lawyer and this financially opened the way for his entrance at the University of Edinburgh.

*"Thus the Lord, in my setting out into the world, dealt with me, obliging me to have recourse to Himself for this very thing, to do it for me. He brought it through many difficulties ... at length carried it to the utmost point of hopelessness, seemed to be laying the gravestone upon it at the time of my mother's death; and yet after all He brought it to pass; and that has been the usual method of Providence with me all along in matters of the greatest weight."*⁷

Boston later marveled at how God ordered things so that he was indebted only to God for his education. In his second year of college, he developed spells of severe dizziness, returning home to recuperate. Once well, he completed his studies.

Returning home from university, he came under care of Presbytery as a student for the ministry; in 1695, he returned to Edinburgh to study divinity, supporting himself by teaching. During this time, mentorship of godly older believers blessed him: *"I bless the Lord who gave me counsel then and afterwards to seek and value conversation with serious Christians, in the places where my lot was cast; being confident I had much advantage thereby towards my preaching the gospel."*⁸ Boston's desire to preach increased and he wrestled with a call to the ministry, hesitating to take his "trials" and struggling with assurance of salvation. Finally in 1697, almost 21, he *"found myself helped, in prayer, to particular trust and confidence, that God would actually grant what I sought."* He preached his student sermon and was examined before the Presbytery; *"I was that day licensed to preach the gospel as a probationer for the holy ministry, nearly three years from my entering on study for holy*

divinity."⁹ Boston began to preach regularly, and at one point spoke with an older minister of the strain he felt in preaching; the minister replied, *"But if you entered on preaching of Christ you would find it very pleasant."* Boston took this to heart:

*"This had an effect on me that immediately I did somewhat change my strain where I had occasion to enter on a new text ... I have often since that time remembered that word of Mr. Dysert's as the first hint given me, by the good hand of my God, towards the doctrine of the gospel."*¹⁰

At the time, there were tendencies in the Church of Scotland to hyper-Calvinism and legalism – the idea that Christ was to be offered only to those who evidenced election in conviction of sin. Many saw this as a necessary precursor – to be evident in hearers before they could be pointed to Christ.

In 1699, Boston was called and ordained to the ministry at Simprin. He served here for eight years before taking a call to Ettrick, where he ministered until his death.¹¹ Just one year into his ministry at Simprin, Boston continued struggling with assurance, and wondered how he ought to preach the gospel. At times, he felt great love to Christ and a desire to proclaim Him; at other times, he wrestled with preaching, feeling unsettled when struck with his own hard-heartedness.

He continued sharing fellowship with godly men, especially his father. When asked *"What may be the marks of true saving faith?"*, his father answered, *"Love to Christ ... (T)his love must be to Christ not only for his benefits, but chiefly for himself."*¹²

Yet *"the bent of my heart to preach Christ continued all along ... but for a considerable time I met with many rubs in my way ... As for the doctrine of grace, how the Lord was pleased to give my heart a set toward the preaching of Christ, and how I had several convictions of legality in my own practice, is already narrated ... (M)y thoughts turned that way, that I might understand somewhat of these things; some light, new to me seemed to break from the doctrine of Christ; but then I could not see how to reconcile the same with other things ... And I think that among the first rays of light was a notion, that the sins of believers in Christ, even while yet not actually repented of, did not make them, being in a state of grace, liable to eternal punishment..."*¹³

Soon after, on a pastoral visit to an elderly veteran of the English Civil War, he noticed a book on the shelf: the English Puritan work on the relationship of law and gospel, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Boston borrowed it, read it, and was transformed. *"I found it to come close to those points I was in quest of...and to show the consistency of these, which I could not reconcile before: so that I rejoiced in it, as a light which the Lord had seasonably struck up to me in my darkness."*¹⁴ He would realize that he had been *"confused, indistinct, and hampered in, and as to the free, open, and unhampered access of sinners to Christ."*¹⁵ Growing in understanding, he had *"new eyes"* as he looked to Scripture. He had growing delight and peace in preaching Christ despite ongoing trials. His sermons saw a significant transformation: Christ was now proclaimed more and more fully, as all-sufficient for every sinner, freely to all without qualification!

Fifteen years later in ministry, Boston recommended the *Marrow* to other ministers, which led to its first republication in 1717. The Church of Scotland quickly became divided over the *Marrow* and its proclamation of Christ's full sufficiency and the free offer of His gospel to save any sinner who comes to Him. Boston took a leading role in defending the *Marrow* against charges and remains remembered for his role in the controversy due to both his republication of the *Marrow* with large explanatory notes (1726) and his other theological writings. Together these earned him the enduring reputation of being the theologian of the Marrow brethren.¹⁶ Alongside his significant theological writing during this period he continued steadily in pastoral and preaching ministry in Ettrick to his death in 1732.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Thomas Boston, *Memoirs of the Life, Times and Writings of Thomas Boston...* (Glasgow: John M'Neillage, 1899), 6.
- ² Boston, *Memoirs*, 6.
- ³ Boston, *Memoirs*, 7.
- ⁴ Boston, *Memoirs*, 7.
- ⁵ Boston, *Memoirs*, 8.
- ⁶ Boston, *Memoirs*, 12.
- ⁷ Boston, *Memoirs*, 14.
- ⁸ Boston, *Memoirs*, 20.
- ⁹ Boston, *Memoirs*, 27–28.
- ¹⁰ Boston, *Memoirs*, 30.
- ¹¹ David Lachman, "Thomas Boston" in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 88–89; Hew Scott, "Thomas Boston" in *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, Vol. II (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1917), 174–75.
- ¹² Thomas Boston, "Cases of Conscience discoursed on at the weekly meeting for prayer and Christian fellowship ... Tuesday January 23, 1700" in *MSS. Rev. Thomas Boston of Ettrick* (MS 3245, Special Libraries and Archives, King's College, Aberdeen), 77–82.
- ¹³ Boston, *Memoirs*, 59, 159–62.
- ¹⁴ Boston, *Memoirs*, 160.
- ¹⁵ Boston, *Memoirs*, 161.
- ¹⁶ Discussion of Boston's theology continues. Recent works include: A.T.B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1997); William J.U. Philip, "The Marrow and the Dry Bones: Ossified Orthodoxy and the Battle for the Gospel in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Calvinism" in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 15:1 (Spring 1997), 26–37; Philip Graham Ryken, *Thomas Boston as Preacher of the Fourfold State* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1999).