



Samuel Rutherford on the Spiritual Life

Samuel Rutherford was born around 1600 in Nisbet, Roxburghshire. In 1621 he graduated MA at the University of Edinburgh. Such was the greatness of his learning that he was appointed Professor of Humanity there in 1623. He relinquished his post there in 1627 to be ordained Minister of Anwoth, by the Solway. It was said of him that *'he was always praying, always studying, always preaching, always visiting'*. In 1636 he was ejected from his charge at Anwoth by the local bishops because of his opposition to their Arminian doctrines. (Arminianism is a heresy which attributes the sinner's salvation primarily to the power of man's will and not God's will.) For this he was banished to Aberdeen where he remained until 1638 when the signing of the National Covenant restored the crown rights in Scotland to Christ and re-established the Presbyterian church government. Rutherford was immediately appointed Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews and in this capacity attended the Westminster Assembly as one of the Scots commissioners. Rutherford died in St. Andrews in 1661, just when the bloody persecution of the covenanted church in Scotland began.

Rutherford has always been regarded as a great and godly lover of Christ. *'Christ is the outset, the master-flower, the uncreated garland of heaven, the love and joy of men and angels'*. It was said of him that he dreamed of Christ. *'I wait on the shore until the Lord sends a full sea ... but even to dream of Him is sweet'*. Christ was the centre of the universe; all things were made by Him and for Him. He described himself as *'made of extremes'*. His soul would take soaring flights of spiritual communion but there were also complaints of bitter 'soul-sickness' upon felt absences of Christ. If he were not with Christ all the time in his heart he was pained in his spirit: *'And then for cause of absence my troubled heart I scanned'*. He was also a vehement opponent of any doctrine which disparaged the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. These extremes were the effects of love.

Such was Rutherford's soaring spirituality that the subtitle of the first edition of Rutherford's Letters was *Joshua Redivivus*, ie Joshua Returned (from spying out the promised land). The heavenly experience recognised in these Letters moved the editor, Robert McWard, to give this subtitle to suggest that Rutherford's heart had been much in heaven from where he brought back tidings to the people still travelling in the wilderness.

The nearer to Christ we live the more light we have to see Him and also in His light to see ourselves. The experience of the godly echoes the longing of Rutherford, *'Sin, sin, sin, this body of sin and corruption embittereth and poisoneth all our enjoyments. Oh that I were home where I shall sin no more'*. The knowledge of sin is an important factor in the spiritual life; it keeps us humble and near the Saviour: *'I find it hard to be a Christian'*, says Rutherford. Travelling to heaven is a great struggle. *'There is no little thrusting and pushing to get in at heaven's gates'*. Rutherford did not agree with so many nowadays who think that all their striving and wrestling is over at conversion. The New Testament speaks of watching, giving heed, running the race, striving and agonising, pressing forward, reaching forth and crying to God in relation to God's saints *after* conversion.

The Love of Christ

This love is the foundation of our salvation. We love Him because He first loved us and gave Himself for us. He also gave those whom He saved a love for Himself; it is the fruit of His Spirit (Gal. 5). It is the Spirit who teaches us the magnitude of this infinite, eternal and unchangeable love and its effects, drawing the new heart of God's elect to Himself. Rutherford spent his life

desiring to know more of this love. His prayer was that of Paul in Ephesians 3:19. *'Since he has looked upon me my heart is not my own, He has run away to heaven with it'*. He loved much because he felt much forgiven (Luke 7:47). In the believer there is simultaneously a consciousness of sin and love to Christ; both usually proportional to one another. The soul of the believer is betrothed to Christ in marriage and therefore other suitors, eg the world, are given little attention in comparison. Christ is to be loved for Himself — not the gifts but the Beloved who sends them.

'Our love to Him should begin on earth as it shall be in heaven; for the bride taketh not, by a thousand degrees, so much delight in her wedding garment as she doth in her bridegroom'. Such possession of the Bridegroom enables us to suffer losses; will restore all and with abundance. This love to Christ is the soul of self-denial and motivating purpose for holiness. It is the Spirit of Christ reflecting in the soul the image of the One gazed upon (2 Cor. 3:18). Rutherford did however warn the believer against *'idolising comfort, sense, joy and sweet felt presence'*. *'I see that in delighting in a communion with Christ we make more gods than one'*.

For Rutherford the essence of the Christian life was this spiritual relationship with Christ. During his banishment to Aberdeen he experienced much of Christ's presence and comfort. Being in the midst of enemies and troubles does not necessarily hinder our communion with Christ or our spiritual growth. Like Daniel in hostile Babylon Rutherford grew spiritually in Aberdeen despite the adverse circumstances, writing that *'grace growth best in winter'*. In this connection he wrote of the danger of misconceptions of Christ's ways with His own and longed continually for clearer views of Christ as *'it was hard to see Christ in the storms'*. There were *'absences'* to be experienced and Rutherford sought in faith to find the loving reasons for this, and if reasons could not be found yet they existed, and so to hold fast to the fact of Christ's unchangeable love to His people. Rutherford wrote that there were benefits in *'desertions'*; they have in them a *'nourishing virtue'*, eg the experience puts an edge on hunger and *'gives faith the field ... to exercise its fingers in taking hold of what it does not see'*. *'I am a man often borne down and hungry, and waiting for the marriage supper of the Lamb'*.

Love for Christ produces desires to communicate with Christ (prayer), to hear and trust what He has to say (faith) and to be like Him, and so finally to *'see Him as He is'* (holiness). *'Estimation produceth love, even the love of Christ; love is a great favourite and is much at court and dwelleth constantly with the King. To be much with Christ, especially in secret, late and early, and to give much time to converse with Christ, speaketh much love. And the love of Christ is of the same largeness and quantity with grace, for grace and love keep proportion one with another'*.

Rutherford emphasised holiness, faith and prayer as the appointed means to stay near to Christ. *'The means used are the Lord's way of coming to us, and our way of coming to Him'*.

Holiness

Rutherford wrote to a student, *'If you would be a deep divine, I recommend to you sanctification. Fear Him and He will reveal His covenant to you'*. This was Scriptural advice (Ps. 25:9, 12, 14; Ps. 119:100, John 7:17). If the study of Scripture is not with the purpose of holiness, of conformity to the image of Christ, then it will have no spiritual profit for the student. Nor is the pursuit of holiness an easy matter: *'I know that it is our sin that we would have sanctification on the sunny side of the hill, and holiness with nothing but summer and no crosses at all'*. Rutherford thought that Christ was *'more to be loved for giving sanctification than justification for He makes us most like Himself in His own essential image in sanctifying us'* — though doubtless justification is a necessary preliminary in order to have communion with the sinner in the sanctifying process. Rutherford expresses his thought as a justified sinner desiring and trusting that Christ will make him more like Himself, and this He does in love. He describes sanctification as *'seeking that which we lost in Adam at his Fall'* (Rom. 3:23), ie the image of God' and refers to Psalm 24:6, Psalm 27:8 and Proverbs 2:4, 5. In sanctification the thoughts as well as the practices must be *'transformed'* (Jer. 4:14, Is. 55:7, Rom. 12:1, 2).

In sanctification we experience the self-inflicted wounds of sin on the conscience. This sensibility is a mark of grace. In this world we do not have the power to fulfil our desire not to sin (Rom. 7:15-21, Gal. 5:17). Sin interferes with the process between the willing and the practice. Rutherford questioned the state of those who never spent *'a sick night for sin'* and argued that the lack of such experience proved they only had a *'cheap conversion'*. *'Such are nearest Christ who are always complaining of sin, and think themselves to be furthest from Him; for whole folks need not Christ, only those who are sick'*.

The Spirit uses the written Law of God to guide the new heart in *'the paths of righteousness'*. All those who are sanctified by the Lord, whose natures are being prepared for heaven, are *'led'* this way. We must daily mortify sin for *'watchful, strict and accurate walking with God'*.

'The believer, married to the second and better husband Christ, is not freed from the rule and directing power of the law to lead us in the ways of sanctification and holiness ... But not one word of the Old or New Testament frees us from the law as our rule of righteousness; and all the Scriptures that speak of our freedom from the law do directly speak of our freedom from the curse and condemnation of it, because we cannot be justified thereby, Galatians 3:10'.

Those who are born again, as the result of the Covenant of Grace, long for holiness. Law and love are not contrary, as Antinomians do imagine. Christ has united, not only persons, but also graces and virtues — holy walking, as performed by that efficacious grace promised in the Covenant of Grace (Jer. 31:33 & 32:38). There is no merit in this *'holy walking'* — all the power to do so is drawn from Christ. Therefore the believer must be much in prayer. In his pursuit of holiness the believer will experience the resistance of sin (Romans 7) and thus repentance continues as a lifelong duty. He will also encounter opposition from the devil and engage in spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare is an aspect of sanctification — to fight against sin and the author of it. This is the *'good fight of faith'* and the believer can only overcome through the power of God (2 Cor. 10:4). The same power which overcomes the dominion of sin at regeneration also enables the believer to battle against the rebellion of the heart and so enter into glory, free at last from sin's polluting presence in the soul. One of the main purposes of the devil is to make you doubt of your union to Christ the Lord, just as he tempted the Lord Jesus to doubt His relationship to His Father — *'If Thou be the Son of God?' 'All that the devil would be at in his temptations is to make us doubt that Christ is ours. But never give it over when all is done, but evermore take Christ for thine ... Let the believer's Christ be where He will, yet He is theirs ... He is a forsaking Lord, eg to David, Psalm 22:1, and yet He is their Lord when all is done'*. To seek Strength for the battles for the new life we must pray.

Faith

Rutherford in his Catechism describes faith as *'a resting and hanging upon Christ with all the heart for salvation ... a leaning upon God, as if a sinner were a lame man who cannot stand by himself but must lean upon Christ as his staff and hold'*. Because it is an act of dependence, faith must pray; it cannot look to itself, it seeks Another.

The believer, dwelling in a sinful world and living with indwelling sin, finds himself continually in an environment of conflict, which exercises his faith. Faith therefore requires constant watchfulness and dependence on the guidance of the Word of God. We live among carnal minds which are at enmity against the advance of the Kingdom of God and have the devil as our perpetual enemy. Faith grows by experience and these experiences are given by God to His people as means, often involving trials and sufferings, for its growth. God always secretly supports those whom He afflicts and it is only as our strength increases that He increases the severity of our trials.

The believer finds it difficult to walk by faith alone. Rutherford exhorted his hearers,

'Whereas we should walk by faith, we walk much, even in our spiritual walk, by feeling and sense. We have these errors in our faith; we make not the Word of Promise the rule of our faith, but only God's dispensation (towards us). Now, God's dispensation is spotless and innocent and white, yet it is not Scripture to me. Nor is all that that dispensation and

providence seem to speak, the Word of God ... All that sense and comfort saith, is not canonic Scripture. It is adultery to seek a sign, because we cannot rest on our Husband's word'.

Faith will always be tried and can be severely put to the test by our experiences in God's Providence. The woman of Canaan (Mt. 15) did not strive with Christ when He would not answer her; *'He is Master of His own answers'* and also Master of her experiences on the journey from earth to heaven. Yet His silence does not weaken her duty of worshipping and praying. *'But when she is reproached as to her interest in Christ — "It is not meet to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs" — she mildly, yet in the boldness of faith, contradicts Christ. Suppose Christ out of His own mouth should deny a child of God to be a child of God, there is place for a holy striving and contradicting of Him'.* There may also be much seeking and using of the means of grace, and yet no sensible experiences of spiritual influences, as in Song of Solomon 3:1-2. Mary Magdalene was at the sepulchre but could not find Christ, until He was pleased to reveal Himself. When the Lord hides His face from us, it is a time of severe trial (Ps. 22:1-2, Ps. 69:1-3).

There is always the temptation to let our feelings overbear our faith. We need patience in our suffering and also to look to God in faith that our situation is entirely under the control of God. Our faith involves distrusting our own strength and looking beyond the things which are seen and felt. Faith strives to wait patiently for the fulfilment of God's promises and to justify God in the midst of circumstances that seem to contradict His faithfulness.

Prayer

The principle exercise of faith is prayer. Prayer is faith expressing love and desire towards God. The same Spirit who produces faith in the heart also constrains the believer to pray. Indeed, faith is kept alive and active by prayer. Prayer is a grace and a response to grace; an echo of the Word of grace in the heart. Only prayer made in the name of Christ as Mediator is acceptable to God.

The believer seeks to harmonise his prayers with the intercession of Christ and thus the importance of the mind of God revealed in the Scriptures for our guidance in prayer. Heavenly mindedness in prayer is when we are conscious of being in the presence of God. Thanksgiving is a constant theme in prayer and reflects God's purpose in creating us. The *'poor and needy'* abound in thankfulness, expressing their absolute dependence on God in prayer. We ought not to be discouraged by the many difficulties we experience in prayer (Romans 8:26), including distracting thoughts. Rather, we should make known to God our perplexities in our prayers.

Rutherford wrote that prayer is a fruit of adoption, a grace whereby we cry to our spiritual Father who has made us His children in Christ, to whom we are to come with reverence and faith. As a means of grace it is a *'chariot to bring us to God'*. Prayer can be counterfeited. *'Praying must have some spiritual quality in it, since it is a work of the Spirit: for speaking of words is not praying. The legion of devils in the possessed man (Mt. 8) spake words and made a suit to Christ, but they prayed not. David's enemies cry, even to the Lord (Ps. 18:41) but pray not. The damned in hell speak words to God, but they blaspheme and quarrel with holy justice, and pray not'.* Prayer can be crying (Ps. 22:1-2, Ps. 69:3), breathing (Lam. 3:56), lifting up the eyes (Ps. 5:3, Ps. 69:3), groaning (Is. 38:14, Jer. 31:18, Ezek. 7:16, Rom. 8:26), sighing (Ps. 102:20), stretching out the hands (Ps. 88:9, Ps. 143:6), tears and weeping (Ps. 6:8). The Lord counts such to be prayer and welcomes them, though words fail us.

'Speak to the Lord as ye can, and I will assure you He will not find fault with your prayers for lack of order and method and because ye lack logic in them; for it is the heart the Lord looks to ... But He cares for no sort of expression that can be used where the spirit is not humbled in His sight. But where the spirit is humbled before Him, Oh, but the least expression that such can make is very welcome to Him, if it were but a sigh or a sob, or a lifted-up head or hand or eye; till more come He will accept of that, and will not let it go without an answer'.

We are exhorted to *'pray without ceasing'* and Rutherford admonishes us not to be deflected from prayer by our conviction of sin or unworthiness. We do not approach God because we are worthy

to (that would be the Pharisee's prayer), it is by grace. *'This Man receiveth sinners!'* (Lk. 15:2). He does not deal with us as our iniquity deserves (Ps. 103:10) but according to His gracious love. Faith must be exercised, in clinging to God's revealed Truth and not to our subjective feelings.

Assurance

While the believer is assured of Christ's ability to save him, (which is essential to faith, eg 2 Tim. 1:12) he sometimes lacks the subjective assurance of comfort within that state of salvation. There are different views about assurance. Rutherford agreed with the Westminster divines that assurance is not automatically enjoyed by faith: it does not belong to the essence of faith (Westminster Confession XVIII:3). *'But know this, assurance is not kept but by watching and prayer'*. To one cast down by the hardness of his heart and inability to rise out of this condition he gave this counsel:

'Hold on, in feeling and bewailing your hardness; for that is softness to feel hardness ... Bid the Spirit do His office in you; and remember that faith is one thing and the feeling and notice of faith another. God forbid that ... this were good reasoning — "no feeling, no grace" — I am sure you were not always these twenty years by past actually knowing that you live! Yet all this time you are living. So it is with the life of faith'.

Assurance does not mean that faith enjoys constant peace or that holiness prevents attacks by indwelling sin. *'Full assurance that Christ has delivered Paul from condemnation — yea, as full and real as produceth thanksgiving and triumphing in Christ (Rom. 7:25, 8:1-2) — may and does consist with complaints and outcries of a wretched condition for the indwelling of the body of sin (Rom. 7:14-16, 23, 24)'.*

In his Catechism, Rutherford combines the doctrines of assurance and perseverance. He grounds the assurance of salvation firstly in God Himself, ie God has decreed to save us, we have God's power towards us, we have His promise and covenant and Christ prays for us so that our faith does not fail. Secondly, we have ground because we have His Spirit dwelling in us to the end and Christ has promised to fulfil His part of the Covenant and ours (Jer. 32:40, 42). We are assured in our own conscience of our continuance in grace by the witness of God's Spirit with our spirit (Rom. 8). This witness of the Spirit accompanies the Word and *'it is the knowledge and feeling that my renewed mind and heart has of God's unchangeable love to me in Christ, as the wife amongst a thousand strangers knows her husband's voice, howbeit she cannot make others know it as she does (Song of Sol. 2:8)'.*

What are the marks for the soul that this knowledge does not deceive us? — *'I have joy as a man that has found a treasure (Acts 8:39; 1 Pet. 1:8; Acts 9:17) and wonder why my God should love me rather than others (John 14:12 & 4:29; Acts 9:21). I love and desire God's love to do his will (Song 5:8 & 1:7; Ps. 116:12; 1 John 4:9; 2 Cor. 5:1, 2; Phil. 2:2, 3) and prize this world at nothing for Him (1 Pet. 2:11; Mt 13:44)'.*

The Maintenance of the Spiritual Life

The spiritual life in the believer shall last as long as it's Author (John 14:19) and this life shall abide forever because such is the duration of the indwelling Spirit of Life (John 14:16). The Word is the rule of our duty, the Spirit the real efficient Cause.

'God has our seeking of Christ, and all our supernatural works of that kind, in His own hand. We believe, pray, repent, seek after Christ and His Spirit, praise, hear, read aright etc, as long as Christ holds us by the hand ... When we are employed about these spiritual duties we are out of our natural element. And if the Lord take away His hand from the strongest of His children ... (we shall fall like Samson, David or Peter). Thank God for any good thing that thou hast, and that thou art kept in a good state'.

The words of Dr. John Duncan aptly sum up Rutherford's teaching on the spiritual life, *'A man should be active about it while passive in it'*. Or, better still, *'Watch and pray'*.

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