

James Renwick¹

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The life and testimony of James Renwick, the last of our Scottish Martyrs, are well worth the thoughtful study of the youth of Scotland. No one laboured or suffered more than he did for Christ's crown and Covenant. Living at an eventful period in the history of the Scottish Church and Nation, nearly at the close of the twenty-eight years persecution, called the "Killing Time," when the dawn of the morning of deliverance was about to break, a peculiar interest still surrounds his memory, even two centuries after his birth.

He was born on the 15th of February, 1662, in the parish of Glencairn, in Dumfriesshire, a district called Nithsdale, because the river Nith meanders sweetly through the valley. Like more of our Scottish Worthies, he was blessed with God fearing parents. His mother, on his birth, dedicated him to the service of God, feeling that she was called to give one of her family to hold up the standard of the Covenant. His father was a weaver, but died when his son James was only fourteen years of age.

James's mother watched over her boy with much anxiety and prayer, and was greatly pleased to notice at an early age some evidences of the workings of Divine grace in his heart. Though the means of education in those days were scanty, he was diligent in learning and to read, and, when six years old, he could read the bible. At that time, he gave indications of the doubts and difficulties with which, in later years, he was troubled regarding the creation and the future world. Being, however about him gave him much encouragement to hold on in his course.

It is recorded of the great Master that "the foxes had holes, the birds of the air had nests, but the Son of Man had not where to lay His head." In the case of James Renwick, it was with the servant as it had been with the Master. Like David, the king of Israel, he was literally hunted like a partridge on the mountains.

He was pursued from city to city, villages were searched from house to house, cottages on the moors were visited, mountain ravines and recesses were penetrated, and whole counties swept by a ruthless soldiery thirsting for his blood. Proclamations were issued by the Government commanding all men

¹ This biographical sketch was issued by the Scottish Reformation Society many years ago.

without exception to assist in the pursuit, and offering on each occasion one hundred pounds sterling for his capture, dead or alive. At least fifteen searches by foot and horse soldiers over extensive districts were made within the short period of five weeks, but they were baffled in their efforts.

In spite of all, he continued to preach the everlasting Gospel, to visit the sick and the persecuted, and to counsel the adherents of the Covenant to “hold fast the beginning of their confidence steadfast unto the end.” Sometimes conventicles were held to hear him preach at midnight. On one occasion a great company of worshippers gathered at that hour on a lonely moor, when a thunderstorm broke over them. How solemn must such a scene have been!

The muttering of the thunder mingling with the song of praise, and the flashing of the lightning athwart the preacher's face!

Often, he could find no place of rest but in remote recesses on the moors, exposed to the cold blasts of winter, or in a shepherd's shiel on the mountain side. In these he would make a fire of sticks or heath, and thither children would sometimes be found resorting to him with simple food, thus doing angels' work-preserving the life of a suffering saint.

“Their home was oft the mountain cave,
Their couch the waving fern,
Their pillow oft the grey moss stone,
In moorlands dark and stern.”

The godly in those days, when they sat down to a comfortable meal, could not forget James Renwick. On one occasion, Alexander Pedon asked a blessing on his food in those words, “Lord, here is a well-covered table, and plenty of bread; but what comes of the poor, young, kindly, honest lad Renwick, that shames us all, and the poor, cold, hungry lads upon the hills; for the honour of Thine own cause let them not starve.” To give him a morsel of bread or a cup of cold water was a crime.

A touching incident is related of him regarding a visit he paid to the cottage home of John Brown of Priesthill. On a dark and stormy night in winter, wet, footsore, and hungry, he came to the Christian carrier's cottage. John Brown was not at

home, and his wife and children sat round a cheery fire, listening to the howlings of the wind. Suddenly a footstep was heard, and his little girl hastened to open the door, thinking it was her father. But it was a stranger. The mother hesitated for a little, but she soon discovered from his thoughtful and sorrowful looks that he was one suffering for the truth. Soon also the girl seemed to understand the same, and she led him all dripping wet to the fire. This genuine touch of nature brought tears to the eye of the weary pilgrim, and he said to the girl, "The blessing of him that is ready to perish be upon thy young head, dear bairn."

As may be supposed, in his wanderings he had many remarkable deliverances. On one occasion a countryman, seeing him wearied, gave him a horse to ride on. They soon met a party of dragoons. Those with him were taken and severely wounded, but he made off to the hills. In the pursuit he was frequently fired at, had to leave his horse, and lost his bag with its contents. Suddenly he came to a cave beneath a heap of stones into which he crept. The troopers passed, and he thus escaped, sleeping soundly there all night.

On another occasion the dragoons missed their man owing to his having put on a shepherd's dress while his own clothes were being dried. And on yet another occasion, on the dispersion of a conventicle, being one of a company of three, they engaged in prayer among some thick bushes and, when they lay prostrate among these, their pursuers passed them by.

One of the most ingenious contrivances to secure his escape from his persecutors was that of a friendly farmer who placed him in the inside of a peat stack, which was so constructed that the aperture by which he entered could be easily built up. He was thus effectually concealed.

Very often, in Galloway, he was protected by Willy Smith, already referred to, and who proved not unfrequently his guardian angel. Oftener than once the simple creature would say to the young preacher, and the dragoons will say that you "Just you walk wi' me, and the dragoons will say that you wouldna keep company wi' silly Willy Smith," and his counsel was often found to be true. Looking to his marvellous deliverances, the promise of the good old Psalm was repeatedly fulfilled in his experience: —

"The angel of the Lord encamps,

And round encompasseth,
All those about that do Him fear,
And them delivereth.”

During the last year of his ministry his sore privations told heavily on his constitution. And no wonder. Such intense fatigue and mental anxiety could not but break down the strongest of men. And yet he had such love for his work that he would preach and labour to the last. Often, though weak and sickly in body, so that he could not sit on horseback, he would go forth to preach, never complaining of any weakness while engaged in his loved work of unfolding the message of salvation.

Amidst all his distresses he wrote to a friend, “Though all the world think my case miserable, yet I think it so happy that I know not a man this day upon the face of the earth with whom I would exchange my lot.” But, although of a gentle disposition and slender constitution, his whole life was marked by a most courageous spirit. He might be called “the boy Renwick” or “the boy minister,” but he displayed all the qualities of a Luther or a Knox.

When the cause of the Covenant was at a low point, through the desertion of friends and the schisms of parties, he was as immovable as a rock. And when a leader was wanted to dare all, James Renwick was to the front. Hence, we find him leading the gallant band who marched to Sanquhar, and nailed the famous Declaration to the market cross of that ancient burgh, protesting against King James succeeding to the throne, because he was an avowed Papist, and against that monarch's design of supporting Popery.

But his work and warfare were now nearing an end. After preaching on several Sabbaths and at other times in Fife-shire, he visited Borrowstounness, where he preached his last sermon. It was from the text, “Who hath believed our report and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”

Returning to Edinburgh on the 31st of January, 1688, he went to lodge in a friend's house in the Castlehill. On that very night, he was discovered by a visitor who heard him pray in the family. The next morning the visitor returned with some others to secure this arrest; but when they sought to lay hands on him, they were foiled for a little. One of their number thereon went to the street calling for

assistance to take “the dog Renwick” to the guard. In the struggle, the Covenanter discharged a pistol over their heads, which frightened them, whereon one dealt him a heavy blow on the breast and disabled him from running fast, which he was about to do. Going down the Castle Wynd to the Grassmarket, he was pursued to the head of the Cowgate, where he was arrested. On being taken to the guardhouse, Graham, the captain, when he looked on his comely and youthful countenance, exclaimed, “What! is this the boy Renwick that the nation hath been so much troubled about?” He answered with a gentle smile, “I am.” He was then committed to the Tolbooth prison, and put in irons.

On his examination, he admitted that he was a Protestant Presbyterian, and that he adhered to the Covenants. His dear mother was not long in seeking to comfort him in his prison. To her he said that if again he was permitted to preach, he would not flinch a hair's-breadth from his testimony.

When his mother asked him how he was, he answered that since his examination he could scarcely pray. Seeing an expression of surprise on her countenance, he added, “I can hardly pray, being so much taken up with praising, and ravished with the joy of the Lord.” When she showed some concern lest his hands and head should be exposed, as those of many others had been, at the port of the city, he allayed her fears, telling her that he believed she should not see that. On the 8th of February, he was tried and condemned to be executed on the Friday following. Being offered a longer time, he answered “it was all one to him; if it was protracted, it was welcome; if it was shortened, it was welcome; his Master's time was the best.” Against his will, he was reprieved till the 17th of February.

After sentence, Episcopal bishops and Popish priests were permitted to visit him in prison, but his friends were not, Bishop Paterson expressed his surprise at his tenacity, and that it was a pity he held such principles, because he was “a pretty lad.” The Popish priests declared him an obstinate heretic, and his short answer to them led to a byword among the prison officials, “‘Begone,’ as Mr. Renwick said to the priests.”

On the morning of his execution, he was visited by his mother and sisters, with whom he partook of a light refreshment. Giving thanks at food, he said, “O Lord, now Thou hast brought me within two hours of eternity, this is no matter of terror to me, more than if I were to lie down on a bed of roses, nay, through grace, to

Thy praise I may say I had never the fear of death since I came within this prison.” He said to them, “I have many times counted the cost of following Christ, but never expected it would have been so easy. And, now, who knows the honour and happiness of that word, ' He that confesseth Me before men, him will I confess before the Father?’ When his mother wept, he exhorted her to remember that they who loved anything better than Christ were not worthy of Him. “If you love me, rejoice that I am going to my Father.”

He went to the scaffold, which was erected in the Grassmarket, very cheerfully, as one in a transport of joy. The greatest crowd of spectators was present at his execution that had ever been seen before on such an occasion. Drums were beat the whole of the time to prevent the people hearing him speak, but many heard and witnessed all the proceedings. On going up the ladder, he said, “Lord, I die in the faith that Thou wilt not leave Scotland, but that Thou wilt make the blood of the witnesses the seed of the Church, and return again, and be glorious in our land!” A curate near him said, “Mr. Renwick, own our king, and we shall pray for you.”. He replied, “I will have none of your praying. I am come here to bear my testimony against you, and all such as you are. I am within a little to appear before Him who is King of kings and Lord of lords, who shall pour shame, contempt, and confusion upon all the kings of the earth that have not ruled for Him.”

He then sang part of Psalm 103, and read Revelation 19. In prayer he commended his soul to God, through the Redeemer, and his confidence that His cause would be vindicated in His own time. He also gave thanks that he was honoured with the crown of martyrdom, “an honour which is denied to angels, as they are incapable of laying down their lives for my princely Master.” “I leave my testimony,” he said, “against Popery, Prelacy, Erastianism, profanity, and everything contrary to sound doctrine, and the power of godliness” In the picture you see him with open arms, and an air of triumph on his countenance addressing the crowd, and saying, “Ye that are the people of God, do not weary to maintain the testimony of the day in your stations and places, and whatever ye do, make sure an interest in Christ. You that are the strangers to God, break off your sins by repentance, else I will be a sad witness against you in the day of the Lord.”

It was thus that James Renwick, on the 17th February, 1688, who had just completed the 26th year of his age, sealed his testimony with his blood. “They overcame by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.” His remains were interred in the north-east corner of Greyfriars' Churchyard, where rests the dust of many others who suffered for righteousness' sake.

“How bright these glorious spirits shine!
Whence all their white array?
How came they to the blissful seats
Of everlasting day?
Lo! these are they from sufferings great,
Who came to realms of light,
And in the blood of Christ have washed
Those robes which shine so bright.
Now, with triumphal palms, they stand
Before the throne on high,
And serve the God they love, amidst
The glories of the sky.”

The young reader may ask, for what did James Renwick, and many thousands of others in those days, suffer even to the death?

The answer is well known to all acquainted with the history of the Scottish Church and Nation. These noble men held — 1. That the Lord Jesus Christ is the Sole and Supreme Head of the Church, and that He alone ought to regulate its affairs. 2. That God alone is Lord of the conscience, and that no king, priest, or government, has a right to interfere in matters of faith or worship. 3. That Popery is a system wholly opposed to the Word of God, and that no Papist ought to rule over a Protestant or Christian people.

That the youth of Scotland may hold fast these principles - that they may cherish the memories of the Reformers and Covenanters — and even remain steadfast “followers of them who, through faith and patience, inherit the promises” - is the prayer of all who love the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. May we not add, in the striking language of Mr. C. H. Spurgeon, “Better than Scotland were hacked by Claverhouse for cleaving to the Lord, than that she should be flattered by infidels for her gradual departure from the faith. Let not the blood of the Covenanters be spilt in vain. ... Oh, that Scotland may stand fast in the evil day!” J. G.