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## JAMES FRASER OF BREA (1639-99): COVENANTER AND THEOLOGIAN

JUST OVER two hundred and fifty years ago, on 13th September 1699, the death took place in Edinburgh of James Fraser, laird of Brea. Though best known as a zealous Covenanter who on the Bass Rock and elsewhere suffered severely for his faith, Fraser has an even stronger claim to fame as one of the most outstanding of Scotland's native theologians. That his influence as a thinker and writer has been comparatively small is due not to any lack of ability or originality on his part but rather to the fact that he propounded a highly individual theory of universal redemption which has never commended itself to more than a few. A recent critic has called it "bizarre" and such it undoubtedly is. Thorough-going Calvinist though he was in nine-tenths of his theology, in this respect if in no other Fraser strayed far from orthodox Calvinistic teaching.

### I. EARLY YEARS

Born at Brea, in the Black Isle district of Ross-shire, on 29th July 1639, Fraser had a distinguished ancestry, and of this he was naturally proud, though he took even greater pride in the fact that both his parents were deeply religious. His father, Sir James Fraser, first of Brea, was the second son of Simon, sixth Lord Fraser of Lovat, by his second marriage. A doughty champion of the Kirk of Scotland, Sir James sat in the famous Glasgow Assembly of 1638 as a commissioner from the Presbytery of Inverness.

Young James was a delicate child and his early years were far from happy. "My disposition," he confesses in his inimitable *Memoirs*, "was sullen, and I loved not to be dawted [petted], nor to wear gaudy clothes; nor had I any wise tales like other children, so I gave no occasion to my parents to repeat them, as parents usually do with fondness; for though my parents were fond enough of their children, yet my temper was so peevish, that I was no dawtie; only at school I learned well, though now and then I stayed away."

His father died while James was still a child, leaving his

affairs in such an embarrassed condition that the family had to leave Brea and take up residence in the south. After suffering much at the hands of many private tutors James entered the University of Edinburgh at the age of fourteen as a student of Arts, "having become so familiar with the classics as to be able to understand any of them, and to speak Latin as freely as my mother tongue". He graduated on 30th June 1658.

## II. PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL

While still a student he passed through a spiritual crisis, as a result of which his faith became that rich and deep thing it was to remain for the rest of his life. But it was not until some considerable time after the completion of his University course, and partly owing to domestic and other troubles, that he decided to enter the ministry. In 1663 the family affairs became more involved than ever, and to make matters worse James fell out with some of his relations, the dispute eventually reaching the law courts. Complications of various kinds ensued, and altogether he had a very wretched time which continued for some years.

His troubles led to the deepening and strengthening of his faith and ultimately to his resolve to cast in his lot with the persecuted Church of Scotland. "About the latter end of the year 1665," he writes, "I remember the Lord put this call close to my door, told me I was to be His witness, to testify for Him against the world, to do all the good I could to mankind wherever I was called; and that I should make this my only work, and be faithful, free and full in it; that many things needed reformation and that the Lord would employ me in it."

As soon as his call was made clear he began to preach, at first to a small circle of friends drawn together in private houses, and then to a much larger company for whom his preaching proved to be a word in season. He was a popular preacher in the best sense of the term, and soon scarce a week passed that he did not hold forth in one place or another.

So far he was without ecclesiastical authorisation of any kind. But in 1672 he was licensed and ordained by the "field" Presbytery of Moray. He knew the risk involved in accepting such a commission at such a time, but to the end of his life he never regretted the step he had taken. "When I consider the effects," he confesses, "which followed on my admission to

the ministry, I am much confirmed in my call; for by preaching and discharging my duty otherwise, I myself was watered, my gifts increased, more of the Lord's will was manifested, and made known to me, and my labours were blessed to many, to whose heart and care the Lord made me many times to speak."

### III. OUTLAW AND FUGITIVE

About the middle of 1672 he was summoned to appear before the Privy Council to answer a charge of keeping conventicles. By judicious dealing with the messenger who bore the summons he succeeded on that occasion in evading the Council, but two years later, on his failure to answer a similar charge, he was outlawed as a rebel. Thenceforth his preaching was carried on under the shadow of imminent arrest, and he was forced to move rapidly from place to place.

In August 1675 letters of intercommuning were taken out against a number of the more prominent supporters of Presbytery, Fraser being one of those named. According to his own account the charges brought against him were: "dissenting from and nonconformity to the government of prelacy in the Church; not coming to church to hear such ministers and officers as did officiate by an unlawful (to me) authority; adhering to the persecuted, deserted party, who stood upon their former ground, cleaving to their former principles; and taking upon me to preach without the bishop's authority."

He was one of three men for whose apprehension a fairly substantial reward was offered, and on 28th January 1677 he was arrested in Edinburgh and charged with being a seditious person, a preacher at field conventicles, an intercommuned person and one of very bad principles; and also with having kept correspondence with some prisoners on the Bass Rock. On Archbishop Sharp's insistence it was to the Bass that Fraser himself, after a mockery of a trial, was committed. There he was to remain for two and a half years.

### IV. BASS ROCK PRISONER

Among his fellow-prisoners on the Bass were some of the most noted leaders of the Covenanting party, including Alexander Peden, M'Gilligen of Fodderty, and Hog of Kiltearn. His time was fully occupied with reading, writing and preaching. Here it was that he wrote some of the treatises which were later

to win recognition for him as a theologian of the first rank. But his time in prison, though not without its compensations, was wearisome; "prisons must be prisons, and all afflictions, though never so well sweetened, will be in some measure grievous".

In the summer of 1679, after what he calls "the unhappy, rash and unadvised attempt at Bothwell", an Indulgence was granted to all prisoners who had not been implicated in that affair, or who had been sentenced primarily for nonconformity. He was among those released, but toward the end of 1681 he was once more arraigned before the Privy Council for his preaching activities, and sentenced to be "sent to prison at Blackness, and to continue there until he paid the fine of five thousand merks, and gave security not to preach any more, or go off the kingdom".

After seven weeks of unrelieved misery, due mainly to the brutality of the governor, he was set free from Blackness on condition that he left Scotland and did not return without permission from the king or the Privy Council.

On 16th June 1682, after a rather eventful sea voyage, he reached London, and at once threw himself into the work of preaching in company with, among others, the Calamys; but imprisonment was again to be his lot. On 21st July 1683, following the Rye-House Plot, he was committed to Newgate where he remained till early in 1684. His time in Newgate was much more tolerable than the weeks he had spent in Blackness, though some of his fellow-prisoners were "notional, unlearned, and obstinate", the "free-willers", as he calls them, being a particular trial to him.

#### V. LATER YEARS

Some time after the Revolution Settlement he returned to Scotland, and took up residence within the bounds of the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale. Early in 1689 he began to hold services in the meeting-house at Culross in Fife, and in May of the same year was appointed minister of the parish, the previous incumbent having been deprived of his office because of his refusal to read the Proclamation of the Committee of Estates against owning James II, and requesting prayer to be made for William and Mary.

Fraser's settlement at Culross was not without incident.

The Earl of Kincardine and the magistrates of the town, being Jacobites and having the keys of the church, opposed his entrance, and two companies of soldiers had to be summoned in order that the proceedings might be completed without hindrance.

Between 1695 and 1698 efforts were made to have him settled as one of the ministers of Inverness—a collegiate charge—but partly owing to the opposition of local parties, and partly as a result of certain stipulations which Fraser himself made, the negotiations came to nothing.

At Edinburgh, on 13th September 1699, between nine and ten at night, he died “full of the consolations of Christ”.

#### VI. HIS WRITINGS

Fraser was a voluminous writer, but the circumstances of his time were such that none of his works appeared in print until several years after his death. The first of his major works to be published was the *Treatise Concerning Justifying or Saving Faith* (1722). This was followed in 1749 by his *Treatise on Justifying Faith*, a continuation of the earlier work. The *Memoirs* appeared in 1738, and at various dates between 1713 and 1744 several smaller works were published, e.g. *Prelacy an Idol*, and *Prelates Idolaters* (1713), *Meditations on Several Subjects in Divinity* (1721), *Some Choice Select Meditations* (1726), and *The Lawfulness and Duty of Separation from Corrupt Ministers and Churches Explained and Vindicated* (1744).

Fraser's claim to fame as a theologian rests on the *Faith* treatises. These reveal an acute and richly-stored mind, an independent turn of thought, great originality, and a deeply religious spirit. In them one finds elaborated the decidedly unorthodox theory of universal redemption commonly associated with his name, which led among other things to a breach in the Reformed Presbytery (the Cameronians) in 1753, when the M'Millans of Balmaghie, father and son, together with a majority of the Presbytery, to whom Fraser's theory was anathema, were confronted by an equally resolute minority who thought otherwise.

Fraser's theory also caused no little stir among the Anti-Burghers, and led to the deposition of a minister of the Secession. According to Dr. James Walker the most important result of the publication of the theory was the theological discussions which it drew from the pen of the redoubtable Adam Gib.

It is not possible in a few words to give any adequate exposition of Fraser's theory, but one sentence from his second Treatise may serve to indicate its main outline: "Christ did by one infinite, indivisible satisfaction, and ransom, satisfy divine justice for the sins of all mankind, tho' with different intentions and ends according to the different objects thereof." Walker sums up the theory, on the whole quite fairly though not, according to some, with entire justice to the author, in the following words: "Christ dies for reprobates, that they may fall under a more tremendous doom, as on the other hand, He dies for the elect that theirs may be all-transcendent blessedness."

#### VII. A DEVOTIONAL CLASSIC

It is by his *Memoirs*, however, that Fraser will continue to live in the minds of his fellow-countrymen. As a classic of the soul's quest this book is almost without equal, at any rate in Scottish literature. It is the best we have to offer in the class headed by *Grace Abounding*, and in some respects even Bunyan's classic has nothing finer to offer than one finds in Fraser's autobiography. Dr. Alexander Whyte, no mean judge in such matters, said this of it: "It is an analysis, and a delineation, and a depictment of the inward state of his own soul, of such a kind that I know nothing to approach it in any language that I read. . . . It is a book of such intricacy, and sinuosity, and complication, and reticulation, and convolution, that in all my experience of such books it stands simply unparalleled and unapproached."

Many editions of the *Memoirs* have appeared since the book was first published in 1738, the most recent being that issued by Melven Brothers, of Inverness, in 1889, with a reprint in 1891. The time is surely ripe for the publication of a new edition of this great work in order that Scotland may be re-introduced to one of the most outstanding of her sons.

DUNCAN FRASER.

*Invergordon.*