

# Samuel Rutherford and Some of His Extremes

by Alexander Whyte

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*The sermon explores the life and writings of Samuel Rutherford, emphasizing the extremes that shaped his character and theological insights.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 139:23, Romans 5:20, 2 Corinthians 12:9, James 5:16, 1 Peter 5:10

**Topics:** "Christian Biography", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

Alexander Whyte reflects on the life of Samuel Rutherford, a man of extremes who displayed a unique combination of strength and tenderness, beauty and disorder, and intellectual freedom alongside ecclesiastical narrowness. Rutherford's letters reveal his deep self-awareness, acknowledging his own sinful nature while experiencing the grace and love of God. Despite his struggles with extremes in intellect, morality, and emotions, Rutherford's life serves as a comforting example to believers, showing that even great saints like him faced similar challenges and contradictions.

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## Transcript

'I am made of extremes.'-Rutherford.

A story is told in Wodrow of an English merchant who had occasion to visit Scotland on business about the year 1650. On his return home his friends asked him what news he had brought with him from the north. 'Good news,' he said; 'for when I went to St. Andrews I heard a sweet, majestic-looking man, and he showed me the majesty of God. After him I heard a little fair man, and he showed me the loveliness of Christ. I then went to Irvine, where I heard a well-favoured, proper old man with a long beard, and that man showed me all my own heart.' The little fair man who showed this English merchant the loveliness of Christ was Samuel Rutherford, and the proper old man who showed him all his own heart was David Dickson. Dr. M'Crie says of David Dickson that he was singularly successful in dissecting the human heart and in winning souls to the Redeemer, and all that we know of Dickson bears out that high estimate. When he was presiding on one occasion at the ordination of a young minister; whom he had had some hand in bringing up, among the advices the old minister gave the new beginner were these:--That he should remain unmarried for four years, in order to give himself up wholly to his great work; and that both in preaching and in prayer he should be as succinct as possible so as not to weary his hearers; and, lastly, 'Oh, study God well and your own heart.' We have five letters of Rutherford's to this master of the human heart, and it is in the third of these that Rutherford opens his heart to his father in the Gospel, and tells him that he is made up of extremes.

In every way that was so. It is a common remark with all Rutherford's biographers and editors and commentators what extremes met in that little fair man. The finest thing that has ever been written on Rutherford is Mr. Taylor Innes's lecture in the Evangelical Succession series. And the intellectual extremes that met in Rutherford are there set forth by Rutherford's acute and sympathetic critic at some length. For one thing, the greatest speculative freedom and theological breadth met in Rutherford with the greatest ecclesiastical hardness and narrowness.

I do not know any author of that day, either in England or in Scotland, either Prelatist or Puritan, who shows more imaginative freedom and speculative power than Rutherford does in his Christ Dying, unless it is his still greater contemporary, Thomas Goodwin. And it is with corresponding distress that we read some of Rutherford's polemical works, and even the polemical parts of his heavenly Letters. There is a remarkable passage in one of his controversial books that reminds us of some of Shakespeare's own tributes to England: 'I judge that in England the Lord hath many names and a fair company that shall stand at the side of Christ when He shall render up the kingdom to the Father; and that in that renowned land there be men of all ranks, wise, valorous, generous, noble, heroic, faithful, religious, gracious, learned.'

Rutherford's whole passage is worthy to stand beside Shakespeare's great passage on 'this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.' But persecution from England and controversy at home so embittered Rutherford's sweet and gracious spirit that passages like that are but few and far between. But let him away out into pure theology, and, especially, let him get his wings on the person, and the work, and the glory of Christ, and few theologians of any age or any school rise to a larger air, or command a wider scope, or discover a clearer eye of speculation than Rutherford, till we feel exactly like the laird of Glanderston, who, when Rutherford left a controversial passage in a sermon and went on to speak of Christ, cried out in the church-'Ay, hold you there, minister; you are all right there!'

A domestic controversy that arose in the Church of Scotland towards the end of Rutherford's life so separated Rutherford from Dickson and Blair that Rutherford would not take part with Blair, the 'sweet, majestic-looking man,' in the Lord's Supper. 'Oh, to be above,' Blair exclaimed, 'where there are no misunderstandings!' It was this same controversy that made John Livingstone say in a letter to Blair that his wife and he had had more bitterness over that dispute than ever they had tasted since they knew what bitterness meant.

Well might Rutherford say, on another such occasion, 'It is hard when saints rejoice in the sufferings of saints, and when the redeemed hurt, and go nigh to hate the redeemed.' Watch and pray, my brethren, lest in controversy--ephemeral and immaterial controversy--you also go near to hate and hurt one another, as Rutherford did.

And then, what strength, combined with what tenderness, there is in Rutherford! In all my acquaintance with literature I do not know any author who has two books under his name so unlike one another, two books that are such a contrast to one another, as *Lex Rex* and the Letters. A more firmly built argument than *Lex Rex*, an argument so clamped together with the iron bands of scholastic and legal lore, is not to be met with in any English book; a more lawyer-looking production is not in all the Advocates' Library than just *Lex Rex*. There is as much emotion in the multiplication table as there is in *Lex Rex*; and then, on the other hand, the Letters have no other fault but this, that they are overcharged with emotion. The Letters would be absolutely perfect if they were only a little more restrained and chastened in this one respect. The pundit and the poet are the opposites and the extremes of one another; and the pundit and the poet meet, as nowhere else that I know of, in the author of *Lex Rex* and the Letters.

Then, again, what extremes of beauty and sweetness there are in Rutherford's style, too often intermingled with what carelessness and disorder. What flashes of noblest thought, clothed in the most apt and well-fitting words, on the same page with the most slatternly and down-at-the-heel English. Both Dr. Andrew Bonar and Dr. Andrew Thomson have given us selections from Rutherford's Letters that would quite justify us in claiming Rutherford as one of the best writers of English in his day; but then we know out of what thickets of careless composition these flowers have been collected. Both Gillespie and Rutherford ran a tilt at Hooker; but alas for the equipment and the manners of our champions when compared with the shining panoply and the knightly grace of the author of the incomparable Polity.

And then, morally, as great extremes met in Rutherford as intellectually. Newman has a sermon under a fine title, 'Saintliness not forfeited by the Penitent.' Samuel Rutherford's is just another great name to be added to the noble roll of saintly penitents we all have in our minds taken out of Scripture and Church History. Neither great saintliness nor great service was forfeited by this penitent; and he is constantly telling us how the extreme of demerit and the extreme of gracious treatment met in him; how he had at one time destroyed himself, and how God had helped him; how, where sin had abounded, grace had abounded much more. In one of the very last letters he ever wrote--his letter to James Guthrie in 1661--he is still amazed that God has not brought his sin to the Market Cross, to use his own word. But all through his letters this same note of admiration and wonder--that he has been taken from among the pots and his wings covered with silver and gold. Truly, in his case the most seraphic saintliness was not forfeited, and we who read his books may well bless God it was so.

And then, experimentally also, what extremes met in our author! Pascal in Paris and Rutherford in Anwoth and St. Andrews were at the very opposite poles ecclesiastically from one another. I do not like to think what Rutherford would have said of Pascal, but I cannot embody what I have to say of Rutherford's experimental extremes better than just by this passage taken from the Thoughts: 'The Christian religion teaches the righteous man that it lifts him even to a participation in the divine nature; but that, in this exalted state, he still bears within him the fountain of all corruption, which renders him during his whole life subject to error and misery, to sin and death, while at the same time it proclaims to the most wicked that they can still receive the grace of their Redeemer.' And again, 'Did we not know ourselves full of pride, ambition, lust, weakness, misery and injustice, we were indeed blind.... What then can we feel but a great esteem for a religion that is so well acquainted with the defects of man, and a great desire for the truth of a religion that promises remedies so precious.'

And yet again, what others thought of him, and how they treated him, compared with what he knew himself to be, caused Rutherford many a bitter reflection. Every letter he got consulting him and appealing to him as if he had been God's living oracle made him lie down in the very dust with shame and self-abhorrence. Writing on one occasion to Robert Blair he told him that his letter consulting him about some matter of Christian experience had been like a blow in the face to him; it affects me much, said Rutherford, that a man like you should have any such opinion of me. And, apologising for his delay in replying to a letter of Lady Boyd's, he says that he is put out of all love of writing letters because his correspondents think things about him that he himself knows are not true. 'My white side comes out on paper-- but at home there is much black work. All the challenges that come to me are true.' There was no man then alive on the earth so much looked up to and consulted in the deepest matters of the soul, in the secrets of the Lord with the soul, as Rutherford was, and his letters bear evidence on every page that there was no man who had a more loathsome and a more hateful experience of his own heart, not even Taylor, not even Owen, not even Bunyan, not even Baxter. What a day of extremest men that was, and

what an inheritance we extreme men have had left us, in their inward, extreme, and heavenly books!

Once more, hear him on the tides of feeling that continually rose and fell within his heart. Writing from Aberdeen to Lady Boyd, he says: 'I have not now, of a long time, found such high spring-tides as formerly. The sea is out, and I cannot buy a wind and cause it to flow again; only I wait on the shore till the Lord sends a full sea.... But even to dream of Him is sweet.' And then, just over the leaf, to Marion M'Naught: 'I am well: honour to God.... He hath broken in upon a poor prisoner's soul like the swelling of Jordan. I am bank and brim full: a great high spring-tide of the consolations of Christ hath overwhelmed me'.. But sweet as it is to read his rapturous expressions when the tide is full, I feel it far more helpful to hear how he still looks and waits for the return of the tide when the tide is low, and when the shore is full, as all left shores are apt to be, of weeds and mire, and all corrupt and unclean things. Rutherford is never more helpful to his correspondents than when they consult him about their ebb tides, and find that he himself either has been, or still is, in the same experience.

But why do we disinter such texts as this out of such an author as Samuel Rutherford? Why do we tell to all the world that such an eminent saint was full of such sad extremes? Well, we surely do so out of obedience to the divine command to comfort God's people; for, next to their having no such extremes in themselves, their next best comfort is to be told that great and eminent saints of God have had the very same besetting sins and staggering extremes as they still have. If the like of Samuel Rutherford was vexed and weakened with such intellectual contradictions and spiritual extremes in his mind, in his heart and in his history, then may we not hope that some such saintliness, if not some such service as his, may be permitted to us also?

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