

## ENDORSEMENTS

“In the compass of this small volume, Douglas Bond somehow manages to corral all the mysterious paradoxes of John Knox: the thunderous pulpit and the closet intercessions, the soaring intellect and the humble home life, the boldness and the meekness, the might and the weakness. In other words, Bond has captured the very essence of this remarkable model for reformational ministry.”

—DR. GEORGE GRANT  
Pastor, East Parish Presbyterian Church  
Franklin, Tennessee

“I am delighted to recommend Douglas Bond’s latest book, *The Mighty Weakness of John Knox*. Bond has written many, mainly children’s, books on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scottish church history. He writes with the passion of a man who believes that the church today needs, for its spiritual good and sanity, to learn about the church of yesterday. In choosing to write a book on John Knox, Bond has done the church today a great service. Knox was the towering figure of the Scottish Reformation. In many ways, he was a reluctant hero, conscious as he was of his own weaknesses. However, as the title of the book makes plain, Knox’s sense of weakness was overwhelmed by his sense of God’s greatness. Indeed, as Bond shows us throughout his book, it was Knox’s constant sense of his own weakness that enabled the Lord to use him so mightily in His service. When Knox was asked to account for the wonderful success of the Scottish Reformation, he replied, ‘God gave his Holy Spirit in great abundance to

simple men.' Read this book. Learn from this book. Thank God for men like John Knox. Above all, pray that God would raise up like-minded and like-hearted men in our own day, and once again give His Holy Spirit in great abundance to men who are deeply conscious of their own weakness."

—REV. IAN HAMILTON  
Pastor, Cambridge Presbyterian Church  
Cambridge, England

"Though I love John Knox, I rarely enjoy reading about John Knox. Most biographers leave me feeling like a pathetic worm beside this mighty lion of Scotland. But to my great surprise, this book lifted my spirits and even inspired me. Why? Because Douglas Bond has captured and communicated the secret of John Knox's power—a genuinely felt and openly confessed weakness that depended daily and completely on the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. Mighty weakness—what an encouraging message for all worms who want to be lions."

—DR. DAVID P. MURRAY  
Professor of Old Testament and practical theology  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan

"Another volume appears in the Long Line of Godly Men Profiles series, this time a profile of John Knox by Douglas Bond. To this very interesting book about a very interesting man, Bond brings his compelling narrative style, honed in his previously written novels. The preface ('John Knox: A Weak Man Made Mighty') sets the tone for the volume, as Bond demonstrates in a variety of ways how God took Knox's several weaknesses to make him one of the Reformation's strongest figures. Citing Knox's

greatest strength in his submission to Christ, Bond then traces ‘power’ in Knox’s life, whether it be power of prayer, pen, or predestination, or power in Knox’s preaching. For those wondering whether the Pauline mystery of strength in weakness can become true for them, Bond’s portrait of Knox will prove as edifying as it is instructive.”

—DR. T. DAVID GORDON  
Professor of religion and Greek  
Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania

**The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles**

Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

*The Expository Genius of John Calvin*

by Steven J. Lawson

*The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards*

by Steven J. Lawson

*The Mighty Weakness of John Knox*

by Douglas Bond



A **Long Line of Godly Men** Profile

The Mighty Weakness of

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**John Knox**

DOUGLAS BOND



*Reformation Trust*  
PUBLISHING

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To my wife

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# Followers Worthy to Be Followed

**D**own through the centuries, God has raised up a long line of godly men whom He has mightily used at critical junctures of church history. These valiant individuals have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. They have arisen from all points of this world—from highly visible venues in densely populated cities to obscure hamlets in remote places. Yet despite these differences, these pivotal figures, trophies of God’s grace, have had much in common.

Certainly each man possessed stalwart faith in God and the Lord Jesus Christ, but more can be said. Each of them held deep convictions as to the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in championing the doctrines that magnify the sovereign grace of God in His saving purposes in the world. To a man, they

upheld the essential truth that “salvation is of the Lord” (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9).

How did these truths affect their lives? Far from paralyzing them, the doctrines of grace inflamed their hearts with reverential awe for God and humbled their souls before His throne. Moreover, the truths of sovereign grace emboldened these men to further the cause of Christ on the earth. This fact should not surprise us, as history reveals that those who embrace these truths are granted extraordinary confidence in their God. With an enlarged vision of Him, they step forward and accomplish the work of many men, leaving a godly influence on generations to come. They arise with wings like eagles and soar over their times in history. Experientially, the doctrines of grace renew their spirits and empower them to serve God in their divinely appointed hours.

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles aim to highlight key figures from this procession of sovereign-grace men. It is the purpose of this series to explore how these figures used their God-given gifts and abilities to further the kingdom of heaven. Because they were stalwart followers of Christ, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

In this volume, Douglas Bond introduces to us the Scottish Reformer John Knox. Knox’s voice thundered throughout Scotland in a day when the church stood in great need of revival. Despite personal weakness and timidity, Knox was marked by stout faith in Christ. As the Lord empowered Knox’s leadership, the Scottish “kirk” became one of the

FOLLOWERS WORTHY TO BE FOLLOWED

strongest expressions of the kingdom of God the world has ever witnessed. To this day, Knox remains the greatest of all Scots, eminently worthy to be profiled in this series.

As you read this book, may the Lord use it greatly to shape you like Knox, that you too might be one who leaves an indelible influence on this world. May you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling.

*Soli Deo gloria!*

—*Steven J. Lawson*  
Series editor

# John Knox: A Weak Man Made Mighty

“John Knox felt toward [Scotland’s] idolaters,” wrote historian Roland Bainton, “as Elijah toward the priests of Baal.”<sup>1</sup> Bainton’s comparison of Knox and Elijah is an apt one. Elijah was called, by the express command of God, to draw his sword and cut down 450 deceitful priests of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40). Men called to be prophets—to do feats such as Elijah was called to do—are not generally touchy-feely, kinder-and-gentler metro males. In redemptive history, the Elijahs have been tortured voices crying in the wilderness, lonely figures called to stand against teeth-gnashing critics, men charged with the profoundly unpopular task of declaring God’s Word to people who have taken their stand with the enemies of that Word. Though he was not a biblical prophet, Knox was cast in this mold.

Is it mere hyperbole to say that “Knox was a Hebrew Jeremiah set down on Scottish soil”?<sup>2</sup> With the zeal of a Jeremiah, Knox thundered against the “motley crowd of superstitions” that infested religious life in sixteenth-century Scotland, for he considered his country’s devotion to such errors to be far worse “than the idols over whose futility Hebrew prophets made merry.”<sup>3</sup>

When God’s messengers have mounted the rooftops to decry people’s transgressions against Yahweh—Hebrew ones or Scottish ones—the multitudes have responded, not surprisingly, with rancor and violence. Elijah, for example, drew the wrath of Queen Jezebel. For his Elijah-like zeal, Knox is—like his spiritual, theological, and pastoral mentor, John Calvin—“as easy to slander as he is difficult to imitate.”<sup>4</sup> As is the case for any mere man besieged by controversy in turbulent times and called to do significant things that affect the fortunes of many,<sup>5</sup> critics have found much in Knox to attack.

## HOSTILITY AND NEGLECT

In his lifetime, Knox was denounced by regents, queens, and councils, and his effigy was hoisted high and burned at the Mercat Cross in Edinburgh.<sup>6</sup> Ridiculed as “Knox the knave” and “a runagate Scot,” he was outlawed and forbidden to preach by the archbishop of St. Andrews, and orders were issued that he be shot on sight if he failed to comply.

Knox did not comply. Years later, a would-be assassin fired a shot through a window of Knox's house in Edinburgh, narrowly missing his mark.<sup>7</sup> Still Knox preached.

What of his legacy since his death in 1572? The English Parliament, 140 years after Knox's death, condemned his books to public burning. In 1739, George Whitefield was ridiculed for preaching "doctrine borrowed from the Kirk of Knox" (*kirk* being the Scottish equivalent of the English *church*). Perhaps more than any other, he has been portrayed as "the *enfant terrible* of Calvinism,"<sup>8</sup> and has been characterized in books and film, and at his own house, now a museum, as a "blustering fanatic."<sup>9</sup> Moderns dismiss him as a misogynist for his untimely treatise against female monarchs and for his unflinching stand before charming Mary, Queen of Scots, denouncing her sins and calling her to repent.

In 1972, the four hundredth anniversary of his death, it was decided that such a man as Knox was an inappropriate subject to commemorate on a Scottish postage stamp. As a crowning blow, the Edinburgh Town Council ordered the removal of the stone marking his grave, relegating his earthly resting place to obscurity under a variously numbered parking stall.<sup>10</sup> In my most recent visit to Edinburgh, the "JK" once legible on a small square marker was obliterated. As faithless Israel resented Jeremiah's prophecy of doom and destruction for her whoredom against the Lord, so, for the most part, Scotland has resented the life and ministry of Knox.

## WHY JOHN KNOX?

However, Knox himself would have been little troubled by such neglect, even hostility. It seems to be an essential quality in truly great men of God that they care far more for the glory of Jesus Christ than for themselves, which is reason enough to examine closely the life of such a man as Knox.

Furthermore, when Knox is stripped of his God-given might and the thundering power of his calling, what remains is a mere mortal, a small man, “low in stature, and of a weakly constitution,”<sup>11</sup> one who, when first called to preach, declined, and when pressed, “burst forth in most abundant tears” and fled the room.<sup>12</sup> In this, too, he was like Elijah, who cowered in a hole, feeling sorry for himself and begging God to deliver him from his enemies—even *after* his judgment on the priests of Baal (1 Kings 19:1–8). Yet, by the grace of God, who alone makes weak men strong, Elijah and Knox lived lives that were characterized far more by power and influence than by weakness and obscurity.

The life of Knox, then, is not just for people who like shortbread and bagpipes, kilts and oatcakes. Neither is it just for Presbyterians or people whose names begin with Mac (or who wish they did). Knox is a model for the ordinary Christian, especially the one who feels his own weakness but who nevertheless wants to serve Christ in a troubled world. Knox is eminently relevant to all Christians who have ever been forced to come face to face with their own littleness.

Who has not felt deep within him that he was too simple a man with too little to contribute to so great a cause as that of Christ and His church? What young woman, wife, mother, grandmother, or aged spinster has not wrung her hands, fearful and weak against the enemies of her soul and the church? Who has not thought that his gifts were too modest, that others could serve far better, and that he was too frail and timid to help advance the gospel of our Lord Jesus? Or who has not felt that he was being unjustly maligned by critics, assaulted by the mighty, mocked and insulted by the influential? So it was for Knox, but as he wrote of the Reformation in Scotland, “God gave his Holy Spirit to simple men in great abundance.”<sup>13</sup> His contemporary, Thomas Smeaton, said of Knox after his death, “I know not if God ever placed a more godly and great spirit in a body so little and frail.”<sup>14</sup>

## CONTENTMENT WITH WEAKNESS

*The Mighty Weakness of John Knox* is intended to be a practical biography. The first chapter is an overview of his life and legacy, while the following chapters investigate how he was transformed from weakness to strength in various dimensions of his character and ministry. These chapters examine Knox as a Christ-subdued man of prayer, as a preacher, as a writer, as a theologian, and as a shaper of worship, education, and public life in sixteenth-century Scotland and beyond.

So pull up your footstool—or wheelchair—and learn



from the mighty weakness of John Knox. Take heart, all who have cowered at the enemies of Christ and His gospel. Read Knox's life and resolve with the apostle Paul, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Weakness, in Paul's theology of ministry, is an essential prerequisite to being used of Christ. The Almighty is in the business of raising up simple, frail, and little people, and empowering them to be strong in Christ. Though few will be called to champion the cause of reformation in an entire country, Knox's life teaches that the most timid saint becomes a formidable giant when strengthened by the almighty power of God in Christ alone.

I am grateful to Dr. R. C. Sproul, Ligonier Ministries, and Reformation Trust for their unrelenting commitment to getting the gospel right, and for their commitment to this profile series as a way of contributing to that high goal. Dr. Steven J. Lawson, series editor, has set the bar high with his volumes on John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, and his work has been a source of inspiration and encouragement. I am grateful for his passion and leadership in the profile series.

I am equally grateful for the editorial skill and patience of Greg Bailey, director of publications for Reformation Trust. Greg consistently reflects the grace and beauty of the gospel as he generously misses nothing, and as he sends me back to check this source, recast that sentence, or consider slashing this or that entire paragraph. I have never been so warmly

critiqued or so encouragingly scrutinized as when the e-mails started coming thick and fast from Greg. When he must uncoil his editorial whip, it never stings, but always feels as if it is wielded by a friend who never deviates from the ultimate goal of getting the gospel right, which for Greg includes getting every jot and tittle right. Partnering with him in this volume has been a delightful experience.

The brothers who make up Inkblots, our men's writing gathering, deserve my gratitude for their listening ears and critical comments, especially Doug McComas, the founder of the 'Blots. I am deeply indebted to my mother, Mary Jane Bond, who is the first to read almost everything I write, and who offers valuable proofreading and brings a lifetime of literary experience to her many comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to the Scots-loving Spear family, who read this volume and offered many helpful suggestions.

I am equally grateful to my colleagues at Covenant High School for their encouragement on this volume, and to Dick Hannula and the board for making church history central to our curriculum and for providing me with many opportunities for travel and research that have enriched my appreciation of John Knox.

Above all, I am deeply grateful for my wife, Cheryl, who supported me in writing this volume in many essential and loving ways.

# Knox's Life and Legacy

*O Lord Eternal, move and govern my tongue to speak  
the truth.*<sup>1</sup>

—JOHN KNOX

**I**ronies began right away for John Knox. It has been said there was “no grander figure in the entire history of the Reformation in [Scotland], than that of Knox.”<sup>2</sup> Yet he likely was born into a simple working-class family.

Almost nothing is known for certain of his early life, not even his birthday—or his birth year. The only thing historians agree about is that he was born sometime between 1505 and 1514 in Haddington, about seventeen miles east of Edinburgh. Knox wrote nothing about his early years, and the obscurity in which he was raised was such that no one else bothered to record much about it either.<sup>3</sup>

Neither do historians agree about where Knox was educated. Some insist that he studied under John Major at the University of Glasgow, while others maintain that he studied at the University of St. Andrews, it being in the ecclesiastic jurisdiction of his birthplace.<sup>4</sup> Either way, Knox likely was subjected to the popular educational sophistry of the time, which was preoccupied with speculative absurdity along these lines: Will all of a man's toenails clipped throughout his lifetime rejoin the man at the resurrection of his body?<sup>5</sup>

In all likelihood, Knox never completed his degree, perhaps because of such pedagogic nonsense; nevertheless, historical records indicate that he was ordained a priest in his twenty-fifth year. The next years are silent ones, from which he emerges bearing a two-fisted broadsword as a bodyguard for the intrepid preacher George Wishart.<sup>6</sup>

Of his conversion, we are left largely to speculation. Some argue that he was converted under the preaching of the friar Thomas Guilliame in 1543. Knox wrote little about it, though words he uttered on his deathbed hint that a certain biblical text may have been instrumental in his conversion. "Go, read where I cast my first anchor," he said to his attentive wife as he lay dying. She read from John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."<sup>7</sup>

Knox's world was a turbulent one. There was perhaps no place in sixteenth-century Europe more in need of reformation than Scotland. Iain Murray has described it as "a brutal,

backwater kingdom, dominated by covetous, bloated clerics as well as by a corrupt civil power.”<sup>8</sup> Yet God was providentially at work in this world. John Wycliffe’s Lollards had proclaimed the gospel of Christ in Scotland since the late fourteenth century, and more recently, a zealous young nobleman’s son, Patrick Hamilton, had preached Christ, for which he had been arrested, tried, and subjected to a gruesome six-hour burning before San Salvator’s College in 1528. Martin Luther’s teaching on justification by faith alone was making its way into Scotland by his books and pamphlets.<sup>9</sup> Devoted smugglers were spirit-ing English Bibles into Scotland by cartloads, and *sola Scriptura* and the Reformed gospel were penetrating the corrupt universities of the realm. Meanwhile, peasants were singing popular ballads exposing clerical abuses and celebrating gospel truth.<sup>10</sup>

### PERSECUTION BEGINS

Medieval churchmen were not amused. There were few “bloated clerics” more corrupt than David Cardinal Beaton of St. Andrews. Beaton was a tyrant “and inquisitor, sumptuous and ruthless, with his guards and his ladies and his seven bastard children.”<sup>11</sup> Determined to stamp out the rising tide of Reformation, Beaton influenced the passage of a savage parliamentary act against “damnable opinions contrary to faith and the laws of Holy Kirk.”<sup>12</sup> To give the new policy teeth, on January 26, 1544, Beaton ordered four men hanged for breaking Lent and refusing to pray to saints. Not satisfied, he arrested

one of the men's wives, a young mother, for the "crime" of praying in Christ's name instead of Mary's during her labor pains. Beaton's henchmen seized the woman's newborn infant and condemned the mother to public drowning.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, Wishart ranged far and wide, preaching throughout the Lowlands of Scotland. Young men such as Knox began gathering around him, captivated by his gospel message. Nobles in Kyle, Cunningham, and Ayrshire welcomed the dauntless preacher; the Lockharts of Bar entertained Wishart and heard him preach in the barrel-vaulted hall of their ancestral keep.<sup>14</sup> In spite of Beaton's repressions, the Ayrshire neighborhood—from moorland farmers to the earl in his fortress—drank in the preacher's message of forgiveness and grace in Christ. Wishart gained a hearing as well from the Campbells in Loudoun Castle, just across the River Irvine, the earls of which had for several generations embraced Lollard Christianity and would later champion the Covenanting cause.

Enraged at the growing popularity of Wishart, Beaton sent out friar spies to infiltrate congregations thronging to hear the man preach. To give legitimacy to his schemes, Beaton spread rumors that Wishart was plotting an assassination attempt against the cardinal.<sup>15</sup>

As night fell on January 16, 1546, Wishart showed Knox, one of his zealous protectors, a letter he had received earlier in the day from some of the nobles of Ayrshire. The noose was tightening and, fearful of Beaton, they had decided not to

risk another public gathering to hear Wishart preach. Bewildered, Knox observed the anguish of his mentor, recalling his frequent foretelling of “the shortness of the time he had to travail, and his death, the day whereof he said approached nearer than any would believe.”<sup>16</sup>

Ordering Knox to hand over the broadsword he carried in the preacher's defense, Wishart “held comfortable conversation on the death of God's chosen children,” led his followers in singing Psalm 51, expressed his desire that “God grant quiet rest,” and then sent the young men away from him. When Knox protested, Wishart said: “Nay, return to your bairns, and God bless you. One is sufficient for a sacrifice.”<sup>17</sup>

Near midnight, Wishart was arrested by Beaton's agent, the earl of Bothwell. He was thrown into the infamous Bottle Dungeon in St. Andrews Castle, then tried, convicted, and condemned to death by burning. Worried that supporters might attempt to rescue Wishart at the stake, Beaton ordered armed soldiers to surround the scene and, from the battlements of the castle, trained cannons on the crowd. Beaton then made himself comfortable, watching the spectacle from “the castle windows, hung with rich hangings and velvet cushions.”<sup>18</sup>

“For this cause I was sent,” Wishart said as the executioner chained him to the stake, “that I should suffer this fire for Christ's sake. I fear not this fire. And I pray that you may not fear them that slay the body, but have no power to slay the soul.” Wishart then turned and kissed the executioner,

saying: “Lo, here is a token that I forgive thee. Do thine office.”<sup>19</sup> Wishart died prophesying the imminent downfall of the cardinal who gazed with satisfaction at the flames. It was March 1, 1546.

### KNOX’S CALL TO PREACH

Knox had dutifully returned to his “bairns,” the boys to whom he was a private tutor in the town of Longniddry. Hence, he was not in St. Andrews to witness Wishart’s burning two and a half months after his arrest, but word of the tragic event traveled rapidly, stirring up many throughout Scotland “to damn and detest the cruelty that was used,” as Knox records in his history.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, it was impossible for Knox to vacillate. It was known that he was a supporter of Wishart and that he had carried a broadsword in his defense. Unrelenting as Beaton was in his determination to stamp out reformation, there was great danger for any who had publicly supported it. Thus, Knox was a marked man.

For a time, he continued his teaching duties, instructing Francis and George, the sons of Hugh Douglas, and another young man, Alexander Cockburn. In the course of this teaching, Knox developed an informal catechism based on Scripture, and he began lecturing on the gospel of John. Others came to hear these lectures, and before long they developed into exhortations. One thing was certain to any who eavesdropped



on those sermons: Knox was a preacher, one with particular gifts not unlike those of his late mentor. Soon men began to say, "Master George Wishart spake never so plainly, and yet he was burnt: even so will Knox be."<sup>21</sup>

Then word arrived that in the early hours of May 29, 1546, several noblemen's sons had finagled their way into St. Andrews Castle and had given the night porter a thump on the head and a dip in the moat in the process. One of Beaton's mistresses, Marion Ogilvy, had only just been let out the postern gate. The men burst into the bedchamber of the reclining Beaton. "I am a priest!" he cried. "You will not slay me!" In reply, James Melville called him to repent of the slaying of Wishart, "that notable instrument of God," and after calling him "an obstinate enemy against Jesus Christ," ran him through with his sword. Beaton's dying words were: "I am a priest. All is gone."<sup>22</sup>

The ill-prepared laird's sons attempted to secure the castle and negotiate with Mary Guise, the queen regent and mother of the young Mary, Queen of Scots. Meanwhile, the Castilians, as they were called, urged Knox to join them and be their chaplain. Though he had taken no part in the slaying of Beaton, Knox made no apology for rejoicing at "God's just judgments" on the fornicating tyrant.<sup>23</sup> He agreed to join the young men occupying the castle.

When he arrived, Knox began teaching his young charges in the castle chapel while the queen regent's army made ready to besiege the fortress. However, Beaton had left an

unintentional boon to the young reformers now in control of his stronghold. Paranoid of vengeance from his many adversaries, Beaton had reinforced his palace into an impregnable castle and had sumptuously provisioned it to sustain all but the most prolonged siege.<sup>24</sup> Tensions mounted as Melville and his men wrote letters to Henry VIII begging for military support from the English crown, and Mary Guise petitioned the French court to send its fleet to support her army.

During this time, Knox was increasingly called to expand his private instruction of his students into public preaching to the entire castle garrison, which he declined out of hand, refusing “to run where God had not called him.” However, determined to make Knox their preacher, one of the men at last spoke for them all:

In the name of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ, and in the name of these that presently call you by my mouth, I charge you that you refuse not this holy vocation, but that you have regard to the glory of God, the increase of Christ’s kingdom, and the edification of your brethren . . . that you take upon you the public office and charge of preaching, even as you look to avoid God’s heavy displeasure, and desire that he should multiply his graces with you.<sup>25</sup>

Hearing this exhortation, the man who one day would preach like a trumpet blast before monarchs, thundering

without a tremor, broke into tears and hurried from the room. However, he finally accepted the call and delivered his first official sermon on Daniel 7:24–25, in which “he showed the great love of God for his Church,” and how the true church hears “the voice of its own true pastor, Jesus Christ.”<sup>26</sup> As he commenced the high calling that would so occupy the remainder of his life and ministry, Knox prayed, “O Lord Eternal, move and govern my tongue to speak the truth.”<sup>27</sup>

## DEFEAT AND ENSLAVEMENT

“England will rescue us.”<sup>28</sup> So thought the zealous Castilians, but aging Henry VIII failed to come to the aid of Knox and the young reformers in the castle. Meanwhile, France sent a formidable armada, twenty-one heavily gunned galleys, and a vast army, and began bombarding the fortress from the sea.

Untrained though they were, the Castilians enjoyed a degree of initial success, nearly sinking a French ship with one of the castle’s cannons. Gleeful, they boasted of their victory and of the thickness of the castle walls; Knox, however, predicted that the walls would crack like “eggshells” and that those who survived the siege would be carried off as prisoners.

Determined to crush her foes, the queen regent ordered “cannons royal,” massive double-barreled pieces, to commence a ferocious barrage, which did, indeed, begin reducing the walls of the castle to rubble. Soon, Knox and the Castilians began to despair. Hemmed in by land and sea, outgunned by

trained soldiers and seamen, the young men began desperate negotiations for their lives.

Finally, July 31, 1547, Knox and the Castilians surrendered to the French-backed forces of Mary Guise. Knox and the other survivors were transported in chains to the French fleet, then across the sea to Rouen at the mouth of the River Seine. There, the Scots prisoners were divided up; Knox and several others were sentenced to serve as galley slaves, each chained to an oar of a ship.<sup>29</sup>

Rowing in the sixteenth century was no Ivy League sport. Knox was “bound with chains, and treated with all the indignity usually offered to heretics, in addition to the ordinary rigors of captivity.”<sup>30</sup> Nineteen cold, drenching months of bad food, putrid water, and backbreaking labor left their mark on his health for the remainder of his days. Like John Calvin, Knox would suffer throughout his life from kidney stones, insomnia, and other ailments.<sup>31</sup>

Through it all, he was tormented by French Catholics attempting to convert him. He recounts an episode that took place on the Loire River near Nantes, where French officers attempted to force him to venerate a painted wooden image of Mary. “Trouble me not,” Knox said. “Such an idol is accursed, and, therefore, I will not touch it.” At this, his persecutors “violently thrust it to his face, and put it betwixt his hands.” Ever careless of temporal consequences, Knox took the idol and cast it into the river. “Let our Lady now save herself,” he said. “She is light enough. Let her learn to swim.”<sup>32</sup>

During his slavery, Knox made two voyages back to Scotland. On the second, as the ship lay at anchor between Dundee and St. Andrews, Knox was so weak with disease that others were certain he was about to die. Fearing that Knox had slipped into delirium, a fellow Scot slave, James Balfour, asked him whether he recognized where they were. "Yes, I know it well," Knox replied. "For I see the steeple of that place where God first opened my mouth in public to His glory, and I know, no matter how weak I now am, that I shall not die until I shall glorify His godly name in the same place."<sup>33</sup>

## MINISTRY IN ENGLAND

In early 1547, Henry VIII died and his only son was crowned Edward VI, a boy king under the tutelage and influence of godly men such as Hugh Latimer. After more than a year and a half of negotiations, Protestant advisors in Edward's court managed to secure the release of Knox and the Scottish prisoners taken at St. Andrews. There was one exception: Melville, the first to strike Beaton with his sword, had died in a castle dungeon in Brest.<sup>34</sup>

In February 1549, Knox, free and back on English soil, was welcomed enthusiastically by leaders of reforming efforts under way in the Church of England. The Cambridge Reformation that had begun at the White Horse Inn was reaching its height with the preaching and writing of Latimer, Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley,

and others. They taught what Knox had been teaching: that redemption was perfectly accomplished by Christ, that while the Roman Catholic Church had “revived the kingdom of the law,” nevertheless by the power of God, “the Reformation was now reviving the kingdom of grace.”<sup>35</sup>

Paid a salary out of the royal coffers, Knox preached every weekday, and in 1551 he was invited to preach the gospel before Edward VI at St. George’s Chapel, Windsor Castle. So warmly was his preaching received that the English offered Knox the pastorate of All Hallows, Bread Street, an influential pulpit in London, which he declined. Not to be put off, royal advisors presented Knox with the bishopric of Rochester, which he also declined. It was said of Knox, “No money could buy him.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps he agreed with Latimer that “the most diligent bishop in England is the devil.”<sup>37</sup>

Knox was suspicious of bishops and of those who had power to install them, and he soon found himself in sharp disagreement with Cranmer. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the archbishop had prescribed kneeling as a suitable posture for partaking of the Lord’s Supper. For Knox, kneeling before the elements of the supper smacked of the medieval Mass, “a human invention.”<sup>38</sup> He felt that kneeling too easily turned the elements into idols. “The moving of the body outward,” as his mentor Wishart termed it, “without the inward moving of the heart is naught else but the playing of an ape and not the true serving of God.”<sup>39</sup>

At last it was decided that Knox might be used best farther north, away from London and nearer Scotland. He was sent to Berwick-on-Tweed, a crossroads border city infamous for loose living and corruption. In accepting the post, Knox turned his back on an influential bishopric, on daily contact with men of rank and stature, and on the opportunity to preach before the king of England. Such a downward career move was roughly equivalent to moving from the position of chief executive officer of a bank to that of an entry-level bean counter. Many preachers today likely would see such a move as a great setback in their professional careers. But though Berwick-on-Tweed was on the wrong side of the tracks, the worldly folly of such a move eluded Knox.

He threw himself into his new duties with zeal, “publicly to preach the [gospel] of Jesus Christ, and to feed the flock, which He hath redeemed with His own blood, and has commended the same to the care of all true pastors.”<sup>40</sup> The Spirit of God had prepared the way for Knox, and the firstfruits of his preaching was the conversion of Elizabeth and Marjory Bowes, the wife and daughter of the governor of Norham Castle, the latter of whom would become Knox’s wife.<sup>41</sup>

Knox’s preaching of the gospel of grace in Christ alone aroused the displeasure of the bishop of nearby Durham, Cuthbert Tunstall, the man who had snubbed William Tyndale more than thirty years before by refusing to help sanction an English Bible, even burning a pile of Tyndale’s New

Testaments before St. Paul's Cathedral in London.<sup>42</sup> Such was the incompleteness of the English Reformation that a man of Tunstall's gospel hostility could retain his comfortable bishopric.

Knox was summoned to appear before Bishop Tunstall, where he gave a thundering Bible-alone defense, delivered fearlessly before ecclesiastics of every rank:

O God Eternal! Hast thou laid none other burden upon our backs than Jesus Christ laid by His Word? Then who hath burdened us with all these ceremonies, prescribed fasting, compelled chastity, unlawful vows, invocations of saints, with the idolatry of the Mass? The Devil, the Devil, brethren, invented all these burdens to depress imprudent men to perdition.<sup>43</sup>

### EXILE IN GENEVA

Precisely what would have happened to Knox at the hands of Tunstall was left to speculation by the untimely death of King Edward VI, "that most godly and virtuous king,"<sup>44</sup> as Knox termed him. Edward's death in 1553 was followed by the ascension of Edward's half-sister, Mary Tudor, who soon earned the title "Bloody Mary." An ardent Roman Catholic who may have never quite recovered from Henry VIII's divorce of her mother, Catherine of Aragon, Mary commenced the persecutions of Protestants for which she is infamous in history.



With characteristic directness, as if filling his lungs for a trumpet blast, Knox wrote of her rise to power:

After the death of this most virtuous Prince, of whom the godless people of England for the most part were not worthy, Satan intended nothing less than that the light of Jesus Christ utterly to have been extinguished within the whole Isle of Britain; for after him was raised up, in God's hot displeasure, that idolatress Jezebel, mischievous Mary, of the Spaniard's blood; cruel persecutrix of God's people.<sup>45</sup>

Knox fled for his life to continental Europe "with less than ten groats in his pocket,"<sup>46</sup> a near-penniless fugitive. His exile was made the more burdensome because it separated him from the woman he loved and to whom he was now betrothed, Marjory Bowes. During the dark years of Mary's reign (1553–58), when she burned 280 Christians, some of them Knox's close friends, he was at times near despair.

Calvin, the French Reformer, had heard of the refugee Scot preacher and warmly welcomed him to the work in Geneva, Switzerland. But his time there was not lengthy. On September 24, 1554, Knox received a call to become pastor of an English-speaking church in Frankfurt, and with Calvin's encouragement, he accepted. He soon discovered, however, that the Frankfurt congregation was dominated by those who insisted on an Anglican form of worship, and for Knox the

central event of Anglican worship was little different from the idolatrous Mass of Roman Catholicism.<sup>47</sup> He had little patience for any liturgy, by whatever label, that did not place the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ at its center.

Some men create ripples. Knox created tsunamis. In the face of Knox's opposition to the Anglican liturgy, several leading English refugees in Frankfurt suddenly became loyal Englishmen, devoted to Mary's crown. Never one to mince words, Knox had referred to Mary as "Jezebel" and to her husband, Holy Roman Emperor Philip II of Spain, as "Nero." The English who were looking for a way to rid themselves of Knox plotted to betray him to one or both of these rulers. Fearing the fallout to their city of the tension, the magistrates of Frankfurt warned Knox of his danger and urged him to flee.<sup>48</sup>

In a letter to Knox, Calvin rejoiced that "in the management of the dispute [he had] been more courteous and tractable" than the English, but Calvin nevertheless exhorted him to appease those with "rankling feelings" or a "lurking grudge," and to "cultivate a holy friendship" with the English at Frankfurt.<sup>49</sup> Calvin then invited Knox to rejoin him and take up preaching and pastoral duties among the English-speaking refugees in Geneva. Ministering close by Calvin's side in Geneva, Knox learned more of *solus Christus*, the truth that salvation is by Christ alone, and how to pastor and preach in the humility of Christ. Along with his preaching duties, Knox

in all likelihood contributed to the translation and study notes for the Geneva Bible.

Throughout his ministry, Knox considered Calvin his spiritual father, and he sought the counsel of the Genevan Reformer in correspondences. So influential was Calvin in Knox's life and faith that when he lay dying, he asked his wife to read Calvin's sermons on Ephesians to him.<sup>50</sup>

Knox's time in Geneva was life-shaping. He wrote, "It is the most perfect school of Christ on earth since the days of the apostles."<sup>51</sup> Still, Knox loved Scotland and ached to return: "I feel a sob and a groan, willing that Christ Jesus might openly be preached in my native country, although it should be with the loss of my wretched life."<sup>52</sup>

"Openly be preached" meant that, for Knox, a day of fierce conflict with the Scottish crown lay ahead. While in Geneva, he began forming his understanding of the roles of church and state, and he came to the conviction that a monarch was unfit to rule over civil matters if she openly condoned idolatry in the church. He consulted Calvin on whether the Scottish church might openly rebel against "a magistrate who enforces idolatry and condemns true religion." Calvin counseled restraint.<sup>53</sup> But in the cause of Christ and the gospel, "restraint" was not in Knox's vocabulary.

So not surprisingly, in 1555 (the same year that Bloody Mary burned his friends Latimer and Ridley in Oxford), when John Erskine of Dun, David Forrest, Elizabeth Adamson, and

other Scots nobles pleaded with Knox to return to Scotland, dangerous though it was, he went home and began preaching openly.<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to imagine a more hazardous or fearless preaching crusade. Predictably, Mary Guise, the queen regent, saw Knox's open preaching as throwing down the gauntlet, but he stayed one step ahead of her henchmen. He wrote: "Our Captain, Christ Jesus, and Satan His adversary, are now at open defiance, their banners are displayed, and the trumpet is blown on both sides for assembling their armies."<sup>55</sup>

During this commando preaching crusade, Knox took the opportunity to marry his betrothed, Marjory Bowes. Meanwhile, the more the Roman Catholic clerics and the queen regent condemned his preaching, the more support he gained from Scotland—from men of rank such as the illegitimate brother of the queen, James Stewart, Earl of Moray, down to the lowliest crofters. When he was burned in effigy in Edinburgh, the marriage was complete: Scotland had found her earthly champion in Knox.<sup>56</sup>

Urged to return to Geneva, Knox continued his ministry alongside Calvin from 1556 to 1559, during which time he wrote his poorly timed *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), a scathing denunciation of female tyrants. It was intended for Bloody Mary, but it was Mary's Protestant successor, Elizabeth I, who read it. To say that it did not ingratiate Knox to the new female monarch of England would be understatement.<sup>57</sup>

## RETURN TO SCOTLAND

In 1559, Knox was summoned by the Lords of the Congregation, the Reformed-leaning nobility of Scotland. Taking leave of his friend and mentor, Calvin, Knox sallied forth once more to his homeland, where the queen regent readied her defenses for his return.

Knox burst on Scotland like a world-class sprinter when the gun sounds. Feeble in health though he was and surrounded by the French-supported army of the queen regent, Knox was nevertheless determined to preach Christ. "I cannot, in good conscience, delay preaching tomorrow, if I am not detained by violence," he wrote. "As for fear of danger to my person, . . . my life is in the hand of him whose glory I seek, and, therefore, I fear not their threats. I desire the hand and weapon of no man to defend me."<sup>58</sup> In the aftermath of Knox's sermons, men and women were converted to living faith in Christ by the power of the gospel, and statues of saints and of Mary were toppled.

Mary Guise, fatally ill, did her best to stop him, but the effect was like that of a hummingbird on a jumbo jet. Undaunted even by her efforts to halt him with military might, still Knox preached. The archbishop of St. Andrews threatened that if Knox preached, he would be shot on sight. Knox preached anyway, from Perth to Fife and beyond. As a result, the summer of 1559 saw an extraordinary revival spread throughout Scotland.<sup>59</sup>

In November 1559, the queen regent rallied her army and attacked Protestant forces and people at worship in Leith. Some were killed. Still Knox preached. Fourteen priests in St. Andrews renounced their popery, repented of their sins, and professed faith in Christ alone. Knox preached on, and thousands more were brought to a living faith in Jesus.<sup>60</sup>

In a world of hype, such as ours, church-growth experts wonder how Knox managed such success without high-tech glitz and PowerPoint. Knox himself provided the answer: “By God’s grace, I declare Jesus Christ, the strength of His death, and the power of His resurrection.”<sup>61</sup> Perhaps never before in one country were there so many converts to Christ in so short a time. Of the rapid spread of the gospel in Scotland under Knox’s leadership, Calvin wrote: “As we are astonished at such incredible progress in so brief a space of time, so we likewise give thanks to God whose singular blessing is signally displayed herein.”<sup>62</sup>

After Mary Guise breathed her last in July 1560, the Lords of the Congregation, nobles of the realm, and members of the Scottish Parliament rallied to Knox’s banner and the Reformation gospel. They commissioned Knox to form a committee of theologians to craft a confession of faith, “the sum of that doctrine which they would maintain, and would desire that present Parliament to establish as wholesome, true, and only necessary to be believed and to be received within that realm.”<sup>63</sup> In four days, Knox and his committee of five completed the Scots Confession, perhaps first heard echoing

through the Great Hall of Edinburgh Castle before the assembled Parliament. It boldly declared, "Rebirth is wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit creating in the hearts of God's chosen ones an assured faith in the promise of God revealed to us in his word; by this faith we grasp Christ Jesus with the graces and blessings promised in him."<sup>64</sup> On August 17, 1560, an enthusiastic Parliament voted to approve the Protestant confession, thereby agreeing that Roman Catholicism, "the old system, was rotten to the core."<sup>65</sup>

Soon thereafter, eighteen-year-old Mary, Queen of Scots found herself a widow when her husband, Francis II, king of France, died suddenly.<sup>66</sup> Mary tearfully returned to Scotland to take up her royal duties and to restore her country to the pope—and to meet Knox for the first time. "Beautiful, self-willed, brilliant, with the hard brilliance of the diamond,"<sup>67</sup> she was counting on her feminine charm to pacify Knox, as it had other males, a monumental miscalculation that no doubt perplexed her in the struggles ahead.

There was yet another death in 1560 that had a profound effect on Knox. Marjory, his wife and the mother of his two sons, also died. Calvin wrote that "Knox's departed wife had no equal," and referenced her as his "most sweet wife."<sup>68</sup> Knox's grief, real as it no doubt was, remained private. He would remarry four years later.

Meanwhile, he pressed on, laying foundation stones for the Scottish church. "I will be of no other church except of that which hath Christ Jesus to be pastor, which hears his

voice and will not hear a stranger.”<sup>69</sup> In the Scots Confession and the two *Books of Discipline*, Knox laid a foundation for theology, worship, literacy, and preaching in Reformation Scotland. The next twelve years were ones of building and sometimes bitter fighting to bring the theory to fruition. Like the prophets of old, Knox was hated and feared by some, and honored and respected by others. But Knox was unmoved by either reaction.

### BEFORE THE QUEEN

In his clashes with the queen, Knox never budged a whisker on the centrality of Christ and the gospel. When the spiraling folly of Mary’s reign descended into love triangles, murderous plots, political schemes, and further defiance of Scotland’s Parliament and the approved Reformed confession of faith, Knox never flinched. He said, “Madam, as right religion took neither original strength nor authority from worldly princes, but from the Eternal God alone, so are not subjects bound to frame their religion according to the appetites of their princes.”<sup>70</sup>

Knox was a man of his age and could be vitriolic in denouncing those who opposed him, to which the queen reacted with dumbfounded silence or tears, depending on which best suited her objective at the moment. But one evenhanded Knox critic affirmed that, despite his thunderings, “on no one occasion do we find him influenced by selfish or venal motives. In this respect he stands alone, and pre-eminent over all men.”<sup>71</sup>



Preaching Christ at St. Giles Edinburgh, contending with monarchs and weak-willed nobles, Knox tirelessly distributed “the bread of life as of Christ Jesus I had received it”<sup>72</sup> until his last sermon, preached November 9, 1572. Too weak to walk, he was carried to and from his pulpit at St. Giles. Pain was nothing new to Knox; he had lived most of his life with it. Nevertheless, he wrote: “The pain of my head and stomach troubles me greatly; daily I find my body decay. Unless my pain cease, I will become unprofitable.”<sup>73</sup> In the excruciating days that followed, friends and supporters gathered at his bedside. “The time is approaching,” he told them, “for which I have long thirsted, wherein I shall be relieved of all cares, and be with my Savior Christ forever.”<sup>74</sup>

### DYING IN THE LORD

He was correct. Monday, November 24, 1572, was a day of hearing his wife read John 17, “where [he] cast [his] first anchor,” and 1 Corinthians 15 on the resurrection, to which he responded, “Is not that a comfortable chapter?” He also heard more read from Calvin’s sermons on Ephesians. At last he sighed deeply and said: “Now it is come. Come, Lord Jesus, sweet Jesus; into thy hand I commend my spirit.”<sup>75</sup> In the silence that followed, he was asked to give some sign that he was dying in the promises of the gospel. Knox lifted a hand heavenward, sighed again, and “without any struggle, as one falling asleep, departed this life.”<sup>76</sup>

## THE MIGHTY WEAKNESS OF JOHN KNOX

Two days later, Knox's body was laid to rest on the south side of St. Giles (at the time of this writing, under parking stall number twenty-three). From commoner to nobility, a vast crowd filled the streets of Edinburgh to pay their respects. The earl of Morton, the regent, is variously quoted as saying at his grave, "There lies one who in his life never feared the face of man."<sup>77</sup> As if to aid timorous Christians through the centuries, Knox's fellow minister, Thomas Smeaton, eulogized him by pointing to God's gracious activity on display: "I know not if God ever placed a more godly and great spirit in a body so little and frail."<sup>78</sup> Any Christian who has ever felt little and frail can take heart from God's gracious work in the life and ministry of Knox.