

## Church History (47): Thomas Boston

Having considered the historical context and major issues of the Marrow Controversy, we come this week to its major figures.

### I. Thomas Boston

1. *His personal life.* "Thomas Boston was born March 17, 1676, in Duns, Berwickshire, the youngest of seven children. His parents, who belonged to the lower middle class, sent Thomas to the grammar school in Duns, where he learned to love reading the Bible and was introduced to Latin and New Testament Greek" (Beeke).<sup>1</sup> He was converted under the ministry of Henry Erskine (father of Ebenezer and Ralph) at age eleven. "Two of Mr. Erskine's first texts were, John 1:29, 'Behold the Lamb of God,' and Matthew 3:7, 'O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee.' I distinctly remember, that from this last he oftentimes forewarned of judgments to come on these nations, which I still apprehend will come. By these I judge, God spake to me; however, I know I was touched quickly after the first hearing, wherein I was like one amazed with some new and strange thing" (Boston).<sup>2</sup> Having been converted, Boston would make the four mile walk to hear Erskine regardless of weather. "I carefully attended for ordinary the preaching of the word at Revelaw, where Mr. Erskine had his meeting-house, near about four miles from Duns. In the summer time, company could hardly be missed, but in the winter time, sometimes it was my lot to go alone, without so much as the benefit of a horse to carry me. But such things were then easy, for the benefit of the word, which came with power" (Boston).<sup>3</sup> After studying at the University of Edinburgh (1691-1694), he began theological studies under the oversight of his presbytery. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Duns on June 15, 1697. "Finally, in 1699, he was called to pastor a small parish eight miles southeast of Duns, and then in 1707, he was called to pastor the parish in Ettrick (until his death in 1732)" (Beeke).<sup>4</sup> At the start of 1732, he was too weak to preach from the pulpit. "But on the first two Sabbaths he preached from the manse window, choosing most characteristically, the theme of self-examination. These were his last discourses to his people. In great weakness he lingered for a little, and on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, a Saturday – the day he commonly rested from his studies – he died, at the age of fifty-six" (Morrison).<sup>5</sup>

In was during his first pastorate, he met and married his wife. "On Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1700, I, going on twenty-five years of my age, married Katharine Brown, going on twenty-seven, as born, February 3, 1674" (Boston).<sup>6</sup> "It was the beginning of a wedded life that was to be chequered by the sorest griefs. Of the five children born at Simprin two were soon laid in the churchyard. In later years Mrs. Boston fell under a mysterious and racking disorder of the intellect" (Morrison).<sup>7</sup> Boston had five additional children while at Ettrick, four of which died young (this means he buried 6 of his 10 children). Thus, constant bereavement, chronic physical sickness, several theological controversies, and the ongoing mental distress of his wife, marked his thirty-five years of ministry. "In regard to his family, Mr. Boston showed an engrossing earnestness for the early conversion of his children. No doubt this zeal was intensified, and the burden of his responsibility became heavier, from the time that the mind of his beloved wife was shadowed by that mysterious cloud which was never removed but rather darkened, and she could no longer be his willing and happy helpmeet" (Thomson).<sup>8</sup> This led Boston,

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 222

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:12-13

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:13

<sup>4</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 224

<sup>5</sup> George Morrison, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, 33-34

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:134

<sup>7</sup> George Morrison, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, 15

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: His Life & Times*, 7

toward the end of his life, to preach a short series of sermons on suffering and God's sovereignty. Prior to his death, he formed these sermons into a treatise entitled, *The Crook in the Lot*, subtitled, *The Sovereignty and Wisdom of God in the Afflictions of Men*. "The three themes of the book are: first, whatever crook there is in one's lot, it is of God's doing; second, whatever God mars, no one will be able to mend; and third, seeing the crook in one's lot as the work of God is the only way to true contentment" (Beeke).<sup>9</sup> In a letter written on May 21, 1726, Boston wrote to comfort a friend at the death of a child: "Dear Sir, I had yours, with the much-affecting account of your loss of a dear child. I travelled that gloomy road six times. The next time you see your child, you will see him shining white in glory, having been washed in the blood of the Lamb, who was an infant, a child, a boy, a youth, as well as a grown man, because He came a Savior of infants, little children, etc., as well as of persons come at age. I hope the Lord has taught you and your spouse resignation to the will of Him who does all things well. O how difficult it is to get our *how's* and *why's* crucified, and to resolve all into, and rest satisfied in infinite wisdom tempered with covenant-love!"<sup>10</sup> Boston wrote two years before to the same man: "It is a very sweet view of affliction, to view it as the discipline of the covenant; and so it is indeed; and nothing else to the children of our Father's family. In that respect it is medicinal; it shines with many gracious purposes about it; and, end as it will, one may have the confidence of faith, that it shall end well. And O how happy would we be if we could always maintain the confidence of faith! The soul in that case would be like that babe in the shipwrecked woman's arms on the plank, smiling amidst the waves, unconcerned with the hazard."<sup>11</sup>

Within the last decade of Mr. Boston's life, his beloved wife was smitten with an insanity which brought her mind under dark eclipse, and shadowed the formerly bright and happy home at Ettrick. That fine spirit, so full of love and tenderness, and lighted up with wisdom, had become like a defaced and ruined temple. Her husband touchingly speaks of her as, during those past years, having been as 'the slain that lie in the grave, and are remembered no more'. And he goes to say that, 'being overwhelmed with bodily maladies, her spirit dried up with terror by means of her imagination in a particular point, and harassed with Satan's temptations plied against her at that disadvantage.' We learn, however, that there came at times lucid intervals, in which 'the Lord had given her remarkable visits in her prison, and manifested his love to her soul'. And it seemed as if the soul-music had come back again to the old Ettrick home, 'proving that the reality of grace was in her, and could not be quenched'. She even said, 'Who knoweth but that the Lord will bring us again to the land of the living?' And her husband had welcomed the gleam of hope, as the weary traveller through the long midnight welcomes the dawn. 'Now,' says he, 'we were with our broken ship within sight of the shore, and I was like one stretching out his hand and crying, Help forward, help forward. But, behold, a little time after, the storm rose anew, and the ship was beaten back into the main ocean, out of sight of land again.' But, continuing 'to hope against hope', we find the meek and enduring sufferer writing thus, at a later period, of his wife and himself: 'I was helped to believe that we would both stand on the shore yet and sing, notwithstanding our swelling seas.' The hope was to be exceeded a hundredfold in a heavenly sense ere many years had run their course.<sup>12</sup>

2. *His pastoral life*. "Ordained to the ministry of the Church of Scotland, Boston served two congregations, first in the parish of Simprin (1699-1707), then in the parish of Ettrick (1707-1732)"

<sup>9</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 234

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:485-486

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:485-483

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: His Life & Times*, 11

(Beeke).<sup>13</sup> The first thing Boston did in Simprin was to visit every family in his parish. "The diagnoses was disappointing and saddening. The whole truth had not been told him. Their ignorance was such that they needed to be instructed in the simplest elements of divine truth, and their indifference to everything spiritual and heavenly was in proportion to their ignorance" (Thomson).<sup>14</sup> Boston set out to lay a foundation. "The forenoon and afternoon Sabbath services, which had long been irregularly and fitfully observed, were instituted anew; the smallness of the parish having this advantage, that it made attendance easy even for the most remote parishioner" (Thomson).<sup>15</sup> "It was here at Simprin, that Boston established his methods of devotion and study. He gave the first hours of every Monday in prayer. It shames us yet to read of his passion for study, that no broken weeks and no scarcity of books could quench. With little help from any summa or commentary, he faced some of the stiffest questions in theology, and answered them with a surprising depth and fullness. A life like that is bound to tell. No pulpit work won by such prayer and fasting and study can long be powerless" (Morrison).<sup>16</sup> Boston preached his farewell sermon in May of 1707 on John 7:37 ('If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink'). Boston said of that final sermon: "And as the Lord was with me in that place during my ministry there, so He left me not then, but was with me at that close of it, and much of God's power appeared in it."<sup>17</sup>

In June of 1707, Boston accepted the call to the larger parish of Ettrick (about 45 miles from Simprin). "Mr. Boston's first impressions of the people of Ettrick as he found them were not encouraging, but the reverse. The parish had been without a minister, or the regular observance of the public ordinances of religion of any kind, for the previous four years. It was impossible that a people numbering many hundreds, and left for so long a time to wander as sheep without a shepherd, should not, in such circumstances, have greatly degenerated. The neglected and apparently forsaken parish had become morally and spiritually like an unploughed field which was covered with tangled weeds and thorns, and sheltered many foul creatures" (Thomson).<sup>18</sup> Boston began his ministry at Ettrick, with a series of sermons on "the parable of the wise and foolish builders." "From the time of my settling here, the great thing I aimed at in my preaching, was to impress the people with a sense of their need of Christ, and to bring them to consider the foundations of practical religion" (Boston).<sup>19</sup> He then interviewed each member to discern their spiritual condition. "The first communion had fifty-seven participants; however, by the time Boston last celebrated it in 1731, there were 777 communicants—which, to his joy, included all four of his surviving children" (Beeke).<sup>20</sup>

3. *His theological life.* Boston's *Works* were first published in 1767, and later reprinted in 1773. They contain twelve volumes of sermons and treatises of various length (most of which were originally sermon series). The first two volumes consist of an exposition of the *Shorter Catechism*, and other volumes contain sermon series on a number of topics, with a constant eye to Christ as a free and willing Savior. For example, he preached ten sermons on Isaiah 9:6 ('For unto a Child is born, unto us a Son is given'), ten sermons on Isaiah 61:1-3 ('The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me'), and six sermons on Matthew 11:28 ('Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden'). He also preached sermons exposing hypocrisy, *Amiable Professors Falling Short of Heaven* (seven sermons), and also warning sinners, *The Dangers in Delaying Repentance* (five sermons). Without exception, his sermons are the

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<sup>13</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 222

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: His Life & Times*, 4

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: His Life & Times*, 4

<sup>16</sup> George Morrison, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, 13-14

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:195

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: His Life & Times*, 5

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 12:209

<sup>20</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 226-227

perfect balance of clear and orthodox theology, and plain pastoral application. This led Johnathan Edwards to describe Boston as "a truly great divine" and Beeke said "his entire life revolved around developing vigorous theological preaching with pointed application."<sup>21</sup> Fewer sets of sermons are more helpful than the *Complete Works of Thomas Boston*.

(1) Human nature in its Fourfold State. "Boston's most influential work, *Human Nature in tis Fourfold State*, first published in 1720, consists of sermons preached at Simprin and amplified at Ettrick. A second, revised edition of this work appeared in 1729. *The Fourfold State* has been printed more than one hundred times and translated into several languages" (Beeke).<sup>22</sup> "In these 'sermons on the Fourfold State,' Boston carefully traced the story of humanity through the four stages of created perfection, fall into sin, redemption in Christ, and eternity in heaven and hell" (Ryken).<sup>23</sup> "There are four things very necessary to be known by all that would see heaven: 1. What man *was* in the state of innocence, as God made him. 2. What he *is* in the state of corrupt nature, as he has unmade himself. 3. What he *must be* in the state of grace, as created in Christ Jesus unto good works, if eve he be made a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light. 4. What he *will be* in his eternal state, as made by the Judge of all, either perfectly happy, or completely miserable, and that forever" (Boston).<sup>24</sup>

With respect to the state of innocence, Boston described man's original righteousness as universal, "both respect to the subject of it, the whole man, and the object of it, the whole law," natural, "not that it was essential to man, as man, for then he could not have lost it, without the loss of his very being, but it was natural to him as he was created with it, and it was necessary to the perfection of man, as he came from the hand of God," and mutable, "it was a righteousness that might be lost, as is manifested by the doleful event."<sup>25</sup> Boston then provided "some of those things which accompanied or flowed from the righteousness of man's primitive state:" "1. Man was then a very glorious creature. We have reason to suppose, that as Moses' face shone when he came down from the mount, so man had a very lightsome and pleasant countenance, and beautiful body, while as yet there was no darkness of sin in him at all. But seeing God Himself is 'glorious in holiness,' surely that spiritual comeliness which the Lord put upon man at his creation, made him a very glorious creature."<sup>26</sup> "2. He was the favorite of Heaven. He shone brightly in the image of God, who cannot but love His own image, wherever it appears."<sup>27</sup> "3. God made him lord of the world, prince of the inferior creatures, universal lord and emperor of the whole earth."<sup>28</sup> "4. As he had a perfect tranquility within his own breast, so he had a perfect calm without. His heart had nothing to reproach him with; conscience then had nothing to do, but to direct, approve, and feast him: and without, there was nothing to annoy him."<sup>29</sup> "5. Man had a life of pure delight and unalloyed pleasure, in this state. Rivers of pure pleasures ran through it. The earth, with the product thereof, was now in its glory; nothing had yet come in to mar the beauty of the creatures. God placed him, not in a common place of the earth, but in Eden, a place eminent for pleasantness, as the name of it imports."<sup>30</sup> "6. He was immortal. He would never have died if he had not sinned; it was in case of sin that death was threatened, which shows it to be the consequences of sin, and not of the sinless human nature."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 228

<sup>22</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 233

<sup>23</sup> Philip Ryken, *The Devoted Life: An Introduction to the Puritan Classics*, 272-273

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 37

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 43-45

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 45-46

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 46-48

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 49-51

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 51

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 51-52

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 52-53

With respect to the final state, Boston discussed death, the resurrection, heaven, and hell. Concerning heaven, Boston took for his text Matthew 25:34 ('Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'). Boston provided ten descriptions of the kingdom of heaven, the ninth being, "The Society in this kingdom." "What would royal power and authority, ensigns of royalty, richest treasures, and all other advantages of a kingdom, avail, without comfortable society?"<sup>32</sup> He then suggested, saints will have a threefold society in heaven: "1. The society of the saints, among themselves, will be no small part of heaven's happiness. The communion of saints on earth is highly prized by all those who are travelling through the world to Zion. But in the general assembly of the first-born in haven, none of all the saints, who ever were or will be on the earth, shall be missing. They will be all of them together in one place, all possess one kingdom, and all sit down together to the marriage supper of the Lamb."<sup>33</sup> "2. The saints will have the society of all the holy angels there. An innumerable company of angels shall be companions to them in their glorified state. Happy were the shepherds who heard the song of the heavenly host when Christ was born! But thrice happy they, who shall join their voices with them in the choir of saints and angels in heaven, when He shall be glorified in all who shall be about Him there!"<sup>34</sup> "3. They shall have society with the Lord Himself in Heaven, glorious communion with God in Christ, which is the perfection of happiness." "First, the saints in heaven shall have the glorious presence of God and of the Lamb: God Himself shall be with them, and they shall ever be with the Lord." "Secondly, the saints in heaven shall have the full enjoyment of God and of the Lamb. This is it that perfectly satisfies the rational creature; and here is the saints' everlasting rest." "Thirdly, from this glorious presence and enjoyment shall arise an unspeakable joy, which the saints shall be filled with."

The saints in heaven shall see Jesus Christ, God and man, with their bodily eyes, as He will never lay aside the human nature. They will behold that glorious blessed body, which is personally united to the divine nature, and exalted above principalities and powers and ever name that is named. There we shall see, with our eyes, that very body which was born of Mary at Bethlehem, and crucified at Jerusalem between two thieves: the blessed head that was crowned with thorns; the face that was spit upon; the hands and feet that were nailed to the cross; all shining with inconceivable glory. They shall see God. They will be happy in seeing the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, not with their bodily eyes, in respect of which, God is invisible, but with the eyes of their understanding; being blessed with the most perfect, full and clear knowledge of God, and of divine things, which the creature is capable of. This is called the beatific vision, and is the perfection of understanding, the utmost term thereof. It is but an obscure delineation of the glory of God, that mortals can have on earth; a sight, as it were, of 'His back parts.' But there they will see His face. They shall see Him in the fulness of His glory, and behold Him fixedly; whereas it is but a passing view they can have of Him here.<sup>35</sup>

(2) The Covenant of Works and Grace. "In 1721 and 1722, Boston delivered an elaborate series of discourses to his Ettrick flock on the two Covenants – the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. They show much of the learning and manner of Witsius, while they excel him in freshness and fervor" (Thomson).<sup>36</sup> *A View of the Covenant of Grace* was first published in 1734, and *A View of the Covenant of Works* soon followed. "As man's ruin was originally owing to the breaking of the covenant

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 446

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 446-448

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 448-449

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, 452-355

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Thomson, *Thomas Boston: His Life & Times*, 11

of works, so his recovery, from the first to the last step thereof, is owing purely to the fulfilling of the covenant of grace; which covenant, being that wherein the whole mystery of our salvation lies" (Boston).<sup>37</sup> For Boston, the covenant of works was between God and Adam (as the head of the human race), wherein eternal life was promised and eternal death was threatened. Thus, had Adam obeyed God (during a trial of a definite length), he would have earned eternal life for himself and his seed (Gen.3:22). And yet, according to Boston, the paradise earned for us by the Last Adam, is superior to that forfeited by the first Adam, in at least four ways:<sup>38</sup> "1. The additional sweetness of the enjoyment that arises from the experience of want and misery. Two men are set down at the feast; the one never knew what hunger and want meant; the other never got a full meal all his days, but want and hunger were his daily companions. Which of the two would the feat be sweetest to? The case is plain." "2. The fairest flower in heaven to be seen by bodily eyes, would have been wanting in innocent Adam's heaven, namely, the man Christ. It is a groundless, anti-scriptural notion, that the Son of God would have been incarnate, though man had never sinned. It was for sinners the Savior was sent." "3. The charter, written with blood, securing the enjoyment of heaven's happiness. Adam would have had good security indeed for it, by the fulfilled covenant of works; but behold a more glorious charter, the covenant of grace, written with the blood of the Son of God." "4. The manner of living, as members of the mystical body of Christ. Innocent Adam would have lived forever in heaven as the friend of God; but the saints shall live there as members of Christ."

For Boston, the covenant of grace was founded in eternity past between the Father and Son, wherein "the second Adam entered into covenant with God on behalf of His elect; He stood where the first Adam stood but succeeded where the first Adam failed" (Beeke).<sup>39</sup> Thus, Boston understood the covenant of grace as conditional only from Christ's perspective (as it was conditioned upon his life and death), but unconditional for the elect. Christ, through His perfect life and substitutionary death, secured everything needed for His people's salvation (regeneration, conversion, justification, sanctification, perseverance, temporal benefits, glorification, and eternal life). Thus, while the covenant is offered to all men without exception, if Christ be received by humble faith, Christ secured for His people the certainty of their salvation. "Faith and obedience are benefits promised in the covenant, and, in virtue of the promises of the covenant, they are produced in the elect: therefore they cannot be the condition of the covenant. Howbeit, the condition of the covenant must needs be performed, either by themselves who are saved, or else by another in their stead. Therefore Christ's fulfilling all righteousness, which is the only obedience performed in their stead, must be the alone proper condition of the covenant." (Boston).<sup>40</sup>

In the order of the covenant of grace, forasmuch as the having of the Spirit must go before faith, faith before justification, justification before sanctification, holiness before heaven's happiness; these may be called conditions of certain connection; this belongs to the established order of the promises of the covenant. Howbeit such conditions can in no proper sense be called the condition or conditions of the covenant of grace, more than the buyer's receiving of the commodity can be called the condition of the covenant or bargain of sale. But the condition of the covenant of grace, properly so called, is, Christ in the form of a bond-servant, as last Adam, Representative, Kinsman-redeemer, Surety, and Priest, His fulfilling all righteous owing, in virtue of the broken covenant of works, unto God by His Spiritual Seed (Matt.3:15).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 8:379

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 8:205-206

<sup>39</sup> Joel Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 232

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 8:437-438

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Boston, *Works*, 8:436