

Short Talk about Oliver Cromwell

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Date: 14 May 2017

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[0 : 00] Again, I want to add my thanks to the church here. I'll give you an Americanism. I think you knocked it out of the park today, so thank you for that. What I want to do, really, just for a few moments...

Can you hear me? Do we need that? Okay. Just for a few moments, as the tour group knows, and as I'm sure many of you know, we are on a trip around the UK looking at sites of the Reformation. And sites of Puritanism. And so we've traveled down from Scotland. We're heading in the direction of London. And tomorrow we're heading to Ely and on to Oliver Cromwell's house.

So we'll also see some of the sites related to Oliver Cromwell later in the week in London, of course. So we're not really expecting too much of a spiritual dimension at these places. And so what I wanted to do is look at the very controversial character of Cromwell and his life, but not really look at those controversial parts, but look at what do we know about his spiritual state.

[1 : 16] So I'm very, very well aware of the debates about Cromwell. He's a love-hate character. But what can we find in his writings, in his speeches, in the letters of others, about his faith, about his thought process as this 17th century period progressed.

So I just want to do that just for a few minutes, very well aware that we do need to leave soon. But you can find everywhere, in books, across the internet, those who love this man.

He's one of the top Britons who ever lived, but also he's one of the most wretched, disgusting characters ever. You get the full spectrum, and there's not that much in the middle, really, when you look at it.

So Cromwell, Oliver Cromwell, was born at the end of the 16th century, quite a well-off family, but with Puritan influence. Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire. He studied under a series of godly, Puritan, Calvinistic men.

So we know that. He was at places which became hotbeds of Puritanism, good, solid places, and ended up at Cambridge University, but had to cut short his time there after the death of his father in 1617, and the young man had to go back and provide for his family.

[2 : 40] What do we know about his conversion? Not much is the answer at the time. What we do have is a letter, a single letter, written to his cousin, whom he calls Mrs. St. John, in 1628, after the fact, when he was age 29.

This is what he says in his letter to his cousin. Blessed be his name for shining upon so dark a heart as mine. You know what manner of life hath been.

Oh, I had lived in and loved darkness and hated the light. I was a chief, the chief of sinners. This is true. I hated godliness, yet God had mercy on me.

Oh, the riches of his mercy. Praise him for me. Pray for me, that he who hath begun a good work would perfect it to the day of Christ. That's his own account of his salvation.

We know he was an independent. He was Calvinistic. He was a congregationalist Puritan who regularly refers to Scripture in his speeches and in his letters.

[3 : 48] He had a political career, of course. He was a member of Parliament during the time when there was a back and forth with Charles I and the Civil War.

And in 1643, on the instructions of Parliament, the Westminster Assembly convened and he rose to prominence as a military leader with his strongly independent and Puritanical New Model Army.

That's who he led with a 100% success record in battles. He refers to his horse troop as the gathered church. They were fighting for the cause of God in a holy war in his mind.

And one writer said that this army was composed almost wholly of zealous Puritans. We'd like to dig in and understand what he means by that word, Puritans.

But Cromwell's most famous and often quoted and borrowed statement is keep your faith in God and keep your powder dry, your gunpowder dry.

[4 : 53] And his men were well prepared. They were trained. They were motivated. But also trusting in the sovereign will of God. That balance there between God's sovereignty and human responsibilities.

He most definitely saw his victories as providential. And it seems that his religion was the central motivation behind his actions.

Well, Charles eventually surrendered and was imprisoned in 1646. That ended the first civil war. He eventually escaped and began negotiating with numerous different parties in an attempt to restore his power on the throne.

More battles ensued and sadly this time brothers in Christ found themselves fighting each other. One historian said how tragic that God-fearing, psalm-singing Scots Presbyterians should be locked in combat with God-fearing, psalm-singing English Puritans.

Again, the new model army conquered all before them and eventually Charles was captured for a second time, tried for treason and executed with the approval of Cromwell in January 1649.

[6 : 09] And Cromwell became Lord Protector in 1653 until his death in 1659. And during that time he was also surrounded by good influences, chaplains, Thomas Goodwin, John Owen.

He installed good men in important positions in Oxford where they influenced many of the next generation. And what we find at that time is there's a level of religious toleration not seen before because of this situation.

And one writer notes that his life's ambition was to promote the unrestricted preaching of the gospel and the practice of godliness. Another states that he had an honest and sincere aim towards the glory of God, the good of his people, and the rights of the nation.

And from his writings, I think we can come to our conclusion that he was a reluctant, burdened, religious, penitent man motivated by his desire to serve his God rather than self-interest.

He said this another time, I think I am the poorest wretch that lives, but I love God or rather am beloved of God. And we see throughout both his letters and speeches that he believed God was blessing him in victory and he ascribed all his success to divine providence.

[7 : 33] He continually justifies his actions and those of his fighting men along similar lines by appealing to the will of God as his ultimate motivation. But Cromwell's own epitaph was that this was a work of the divine spirit carried out by an imperfect but desperately sincere man in his own words.

Shortly before his death he's recorded as saying this, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And then Friday 3rd of September after a short illness in 1659 he uttered his last words amplifying, confirming much of what we've seen already.

This is what he said, Lord, though I am a miserable and wretched creature I am in covenant with thee through grace and may I, I will, come to thee for thy people.

Thou hast made me though very unworthy a mean instrument to do some good and thee service and many of them have set too high a value upon me though others wish and would be glad of my death.

Lord, however thou do dispose of me continue and go on to do good for them. Teach those who look too much on thy instruments to depend more on thyself.

[8 : 53] Pardon such a desire to trample upon the dust of a poor worm for they are thy people too and pardon the folly of this short prayer even for Jesus Christ's sake and give us a good night if it be thy pleasure.

Amen. Writer John Milton famously brands Cromwell as our chief of men. At another time it stated it was his design to do good in the main and to promote the interest of God more than any had done before him.

After he died there was the restoration of the Stuart line Charles II Great Ejection 1662 does that mean Cromwell failed? Was everything positive lost in the 1660s?

Well the answer is a categorical resounding no. Much had now changed and we backtrack for a moment 11 years to the execution of Charles I where one historian asserts that as the head of the king rolled on the scaffold the old feudal monarchy expired forever.

In 1649 a great mark was set in the course of this nation's life. The old rule was now behind it the new rule before it.

[10:12] That death of the king was called a cruel necessity and it seemed to Cromwell to be an action demonstrating that England had freed itself from a tyrant in a way which Christians in after times will mention with honour and all tyrants in the world will look at with fear.

That was his own conclusion. One says Cromwell's work was done. He'd shattered the throne which threatened the liberties of England and the church which was incapable of admitting the rights of conscience when the throne was restored as it shortly was it now rested on a parliamentary basis and was then forth to be limited by the people's will.

And therefore the statute book wasn't wiped clean when the Stuart line came back. Many laws that were passed during Cromwell's time remained and importantly the growing independence of the House of Commons continued under Cromwell's protection.

Independence had grown stronger and it had struck lasting blows against the absolute supremacy of the king of the monarch. And impressions more importantly had now been made on the hearts of men because not only had the law changed but also the mindset of liberty and conscience of many had been altered and it provided a seedbed which in time gave birth and relative freedom to the Whitfields and others of the next century.

It allowed Puritanism to flourish and solidify. Historian Michael Hakin says finally Oliver Cromwell's spirituality along with that of his fellow Puritans made a lasting impact on the nature of English speaking evangelicalism and continued to honour God long after his death.

[12:11] You see God through Oliver Cromwell changed the course of history to allow numerous other Puritans to freely serve to thrive in their ministries surely an exponential effect on Christianity through this one man in God's providence which still impacts us greatly today.

Thank you.