



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

<http://www.puritansermons.com/>

Thomas Shepard

by Alexander Whyte,

from *Thirteen Appreciations*

Jonathan Edwards, 'one of the greatest of the sons of men,' has given us his Appreciation of Thomas Shepard in a most eloquent and impressive way. I know no such complete and conclusive appreciation in all literature as when Jonathan Edwards on every page underbuilds and establishes and illustrates his spiritual masterpiece, the *Religious Affections*, with constant references to the *Ten Virgins*, the *Sound Convert* and the *Spiritual Experiences*, and with no less than innumerable quotations from those so experimental Puritan books. I know no instance of the *laudatur a laudato* principle at all to compare with that of Thomas Shepard and Jonathan Edwards. Now, though I cannot speak with an atom of the authority of Edwards, at the same time I am not on that account wholly shut out from making my own humble acknowledgment of what I also owe to this great Pilgrim Father. I am not debarred from laying my own loyal tribute at the feet of the man on whose head Jonathan Edwards has set such a crown.

Thomas Shepard has been one of my favourite authors ever since the year 1861 when my honoured friend Dr. Williamson of Huntly wrote my name on his own copy of the *Parable of the Ten Virgins*. I think I must have read Shepard quite as often as Spurgeon had read Bunyan; quite as often at any rate as Jowett had read Boswell. And I am still reading Shepard as if I had never read him before. As a proof of that take this little confidence of mine. The week before one of my holidays I had read Professor Churton Collins's delightful paper on *The Tempest* that had appeared some time previously in the *Contemporary Review*. And so impressed was I with the learned Professor's paper that I took to the country with me Dr. Furness's variorum and monumental edition of that exquisite work, promising myself a great revel over the great text and over the extraordinary rich mass of explanatory and illustrative notes. But would you believe it? With such a temptation lying on my table all the time I never once opened the seductive volume. For, as God would have it, as John Bunyan was wont to say, I had taken Thomas Shepard also with me, and I read the *Ten Virgins*, and the *Sound Believer*, and the *Sincere Convert*, and the *Saint's Jewel*, and the *Select Cases*, and the *Spiritual Experiences* over and over again; execrable English and all. And instead

of repenting myself for my neglect of Shakespeare and his monumental editor, I came home thanking God again for His so notable and so exceptional servant Shepard. And more than that, I came home more settled and resolved than ever to do all I can to make you know something of Shepard's matchlessly pungent lessons in spiritual and experimental religion. And to reassure me I took out of my desk and read again a postcard bearing the Aberdeen postmark, which I received some years ago and which runs thus: 'A thousand thanks for pressing Thomas Shepard on our attention. After long looking for it, I have at last got a copy of the Parable, and I can scarcely lay it down. It is proving itself a very book of life to me. This is the preaching that our day needs. A Free Church Minister.'

I dare say you will remember that I was always besieging you to buy and to read and to read all your days, as also to distribute, the *Pilgrim's Progress* and the *Grace Abounding*. But you will have perfect peace of mind concerning Thomas Shepard and his works. For I shall never ask any of you to spend one penny on Shepard, such is his atrocious English. Bunyan and Shepard are at one in the deepest things, but they stand at opposite poles in the matter of their English style. Shepard at his very best wrote an all but unrecognisable English. But after the New England printers and then the Aberdeen printers had put Shepard's best book through their hands, if hands they could be called, Shepard came forth absolutely unreadable, unless to a few resolved and relentless and irresistible readers, such as Mrs. Black of Dunnikier Manse, and Dr. Foote of Brechin, and Dr. Williamson, and myself. Much as I respect William Greenhill's judgment, I cannot follow him when he says of Shepard that 'here is a cornfield without cockle or thorns or thistles.' I know quite well what Greenhill means when he says all that, and I wholly subscribe to his deep meaning. But if I were to repeat his words without some warning, you might be led into advertising for the old book, which you would no sooner open than you would throw it down in disgust and in indignation both at Shepard and at Greenhill and at me. 'Polybius,' says Dr. Butcher, 'pays the penalty attaching to neglect of form; he is read by few.' At the same time I will say this. As we find Principal Rendall quite frankly acknowledging the heavy cramped vocabulary, and the deadness of expression, and the formless monotony of clause that all combine to weigh down the First Book of Marcus Aurelius: while at the same time he stands up against Matthew Arnold when that critic says that the Emperor's style lacks distinction and physiognomy, so will I stand up for Shepard's distinction and for his physiognomy. The truth is, while repeating and exaggerating all the stoic Emperor's faults of style, Shepard's mental countenance is even more unmistakable to me than is that of the royal author of the immortal Thoughts. There is no possibility of our ever mistaking a page or a paragraph or even a sentence of Thomas Shepard's. Not only because of its unparalleled

shapelessness, but much more because of its Paul-like hands and feet. For Shepard, once he has got on your track, will follow hard after you all your days. And once he gets a real hold of you, as Luther said of Paul, you will never be able to shake him off again. But when all is said that can be said about Shepard's sluggard's-garden of a style, if you will go with me into the resolved study of this great Puritan I will promise you many a sweet and fragrant flower out of his crannied and crumbling walls, and many a medicinal herb out of his stoniest places, and many a cup of wine well refined out of his most gnarled or crabbed vinestocks. Just gird up your loins and come with me and see if it will not be so. And as the saintly David Brainerd says, 'We shall see what passed for soul-saving religion with that so excellent and so venerable Pilgrim Father Thomas Shepard, the author of the *Sound Convert*, the *Spiritual Experiences*, and the *Parable Unfolded*.'

Take these, then, as some specimen and characteristic headings, sometimes of short entries, and sometimes of whole chapters, in Shepard's *Spiritual Experiences*: 'No one who ever came under my shadow prospered.' 'The more I do the worse I am.' 'My idle words in my preaching, in my praise, and in my prayer.' 'The

sins of one day I forget the next day.' 'I come to see that God is having His whole Name in Exodus 34 fulfilled and adorned in me.' 'For His sake I am killed all the day long.' 'I keep a private fast for the conquest of my pride.' 'My sins are sometimes crucified, but they are never mortified.' 'I am salted with suffering.' '*Fiat experimentum in corpore vili*.' 'I abhor myself.' 'You ask me what cured me of being an infidel.' 'Some remorse of an old ministry.' 'Surely I have always laid my pipe far short of the Fountain,' and so on, through the whole unique book. Now, I will appeal to all readers of the best literature to say if they ever came upon more penetrating and more pungent titles and topics than these. At any rate, the immortal author of the *Freedom of the Will*, and the *True Virtue*, and the *Religious Affections* never did; and his splendid appreciation of Thomas Shepard runs accordingly.

When matters were not going well with Shepard himself in his family life, in his pain and remorse he would sometimes say that he thought the Pope had the right way of it with his preachers and pastors. At any rate, he would sometimes say, I wish I had remained a celibate along with my own soul all my days. Other men, he was wont to say, might not always manage their family life with the most perfect success; but a minister's breakdown at home was to Shepard the greatest of all domestic tragedies. He had known many ministers, both in Old England and in New England, whose family life was a great success in every way. But not his

own. As for himself, neither wife, nor child, nor servant, nor visitor prospered spiritually under his baleful shadow. So he enters it, again and again, on occasions, in his secret journal which he kept alone with God. Nobody but himself thought such things about Thomas Shepard. All the same, never was there more sincerity or more poignancy in any private journal than there was in his. Thales was so fond of children that nothing would persuade him to become a father. And though Thomas Shepard became the father of more children than one, he both loved and pitied his children so much that he would sometimes wish they had never been born, at any rate to him.

Altogether, substitute Thomas Shepard, the New England Puritan, for Santa Teresa, the Spanish Superior, and you will have his exact case in his home life, as he so often saw and felt it to be. Thomas Shepard could not express himself nearly so well as Santa Teresa could; but in substance and in essence they both said exactly the same thing. 'My children,' said the saint on her death-bed, 'you must pardon me much. You must pardon me most of all the bad example I have given you. Do not imitate me. Do not live as I have lived. I have been the greatest sinner in all Spain. I have not kept the laws that I laid down for other people. But, then, is not this written in David expressly for me, The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart God will not despise? Thomas Shepard and Teresa of Jesus would not have spoken to one another on earth. But they are now praising God together in glory; and for their family shame they are now having the double, as they sing together before the throne, and say: By Thy great grace to us, O God, here are we ourselves, and all the children that Thou didst give us.

When Dr. Chalmers was out at Skirling on one occasion he went to the village school and gave the children an elementary lesson in optical science. Taking the blackboard and a piece of chalk he drew a long diameter on the board, and then he ran a large circumference around the diameter. And then turning to the wondering children he said to them in his own imaginative and eloquent way, 'You must all see that the longer the diameter of light the larger is the surrounding circumference of darkness. And in like manner the shorter the diameter of light the smaller is the circumference of the surrounding darkness.' Now, all we have to do in order to explain and illustrate one of Thomas Shepard's most startling self-accusations is to carry over Dr. Chalmers's mathematical and optical blackboard into the region of moral and spiritual things. 'The more I do,' says Shepard oftener than once, 'the worse I am.' That is to say, the longer the diameter of Shepard's duty done the larger is the circumference of duty he has still to do. And the holier and holier his heart and life become the more sinful the remaining corruption of

his heart and life becomes to him, till he is constrained to cry out with the holiest of men, O wretched man that I am!

And then, carrying up all his own experience of the spiritual life therewith to deepen and strengthen and enrich his pulpit work, the great preacher would say: 'There is no difference. I am as you are, and you are as I am. Just try the thing yourselves. Just begin to love God with all your heart, and you will soon see that the more you try to do that the less will you feel satisfied that you succeed. And, in like manner, when you begin to love your neighbour as yourself you will begin to get a lesson with a vengeance in the spiritual life. Just try to rejoice in all your neighbour's well-being as much as you rejoice in your own. Just try to relish and enjoy all other men's praises of your neighbour as you relish and enjoy all other men's praises of yourself. Just try to take delight in all your neighbour's rewards, promotions, prosperities as you take delight in your own. And go on trying to do that toward all men around you, friend and foe, and you will get a lesson in the infinite and exquisite holiness and spirituality of God's law of love, and at the same time a lesson in the abominable and unspeakable corruptions of your own heart that will make you wiser in all these matters than all your teachers.' In such homecoming homiletic as that Shepard made pulpit and pastoral application of his own experiences in the spiritual life. Till he became a foremost master in all these holy matters, and till men like Edwards and Brainerd sat as his scholars at his feet in New England, and till his name became a tower of truth and power in the old England from which he had been exiled.

[While this does not seem to be the end of his lecture, the text ends here.]

Visit *Fire and Ice: Puritan and Reformed Sermons* at
<http://www.puritansermons.com/>