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Oliver Cromwell
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Oliver Cromwell

A copy of the portrait by Sir Peter Lely.

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Huntingdon.

OLIVER CROMWELL

Cromwell was, and still is, a man whose name arouses much contention. He died in 1658 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. But at the time of the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 his body was removed from the Abbey, beheaded and hung at Tyburn, and it is believed that his last resting place is at the foot of Tyburn. Bitter hatred is still shown to him today. He is accused of being a hypocrite, a usurper, a dictator and a cruel tyrant who massacred the population of Drogheda in Ireland. But it is not impossible to demonstrate that he was a man of God; that what Christ said in his life was and is true of him, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me." The words of Christ are true of him, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." From a Christian position it is possible to believe that Cromwell lives today, and that he was one of the redeemed followers of the Lord Jesus and is now at the right hand of God in heaven, and that his dust lying at Tyburn waits in this earth the morning of the resurrection.

One of his earliest extant letters is dated 13th October, 1638, and is written from Ely in the Fens to his cousin Mrs. Oliver St. John in Essex. It reads:-

"I thankfully acknowledge your love in your kind remembrance of me upon this opportunity. Alas, you do too highly prize my lines, and my company. I may be ashamed to own your own expressions, considering how unprofitable I am, and the mean improvement of my talent.

Yet to honour my God by declaring what He hath done for my soul, in this I am confident, and I will be so. Truly, then, this I find: That He giveth springs in a dry and barren wilderness where no water is. I live (you know where) in

Meschek, which they say signifies 'prolonging'; in Kedar which signifieth 'blackness': yet the Lord forsaketh me not. Though He do prolong, yet He will (I trust) bring me to His tabernacle, to His resting place. My soul is with the congregation of the first-born, my body rests in hope; and if here I may honour my God, either by doing or by suffering, I shall be most glad.

Truly no poor creature hath more cause to put himself forth in the cause of his God than I. I have had plentiful wages beforehand; and I am sure that I shall never earn the least mite. The Lord accept me in His Son and give me to walk in the light, and give us to walk in the light, as He is in the light! He it is that enlighteneth our blackness, our darkness. I dare not say, He hideth his face from me. He giveth me to see light in His light. One beam in a dark place hath exceeding much refreshment in it; blessed be His Name for shining upon so dark a heart as mine! You know what my manner of life hath been. Oh, I 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. O the riches of His mercy! Praise Him for me. Pray for me, that He who hath begun a good work would perfect it in the day of Christ."¹

How do we judge the contents of this letter? Does it not echo the experience of John Bunyan? It speaks of the realities of Christian experience: 'One beam in a dark place hath exceeding much refreshment in it.' It reveals a man who knew what he had been: 'I hated godliness,' 'I lived in and loved darkness'. What he was: 'An unprofitable servant'. What he hoped for: 'Yet He will, I trust, bring me to His tabernacle, to His resting-place'. Poignant when one considers the future was the experiencing for him: 'My soul is with the congregation of the first-born, my body rests in hope, and if here I may honour my God either by doing or by suffering, I shall be most glad.'

The course of history shows how he did honour His God by doing and suffering; by doing in Parliament and on the battlefield and suffering many a blow from Royalist and Puritan. In April 1640, when he was forty-one he was returned as Member of Parliament for Cambridge to serve in what was known as the 'Short Parliament.' He had previously been in Parliament in 1628 as M.P. for Huntingdon

and had made his maiden speech on 11th February, 1629. In March 1629 this Parliament was abruptly ended by Charles I and another not called until 13th April 1640. In this period Cromwell managed a small farm in the Fens, living at St. Ives and Ely and taking an interest in local affairs. (The letter just quoted comes from this period. It was a time of preparation). In April 1640 the call came to attend the House of Commons. The Short Parliament lasted only three weeks. But in November 1640 a second Parliament was called and Cromwell was again M.P. for Cambridge. This month of November 1640 marked the beginning of the key period in the history of Cromwell's life, extending from the opening of the 'Long Parliament' to his death on 3rd September, 1658, so brief a period comparatively, a mere eighteen years, and yet of such magnitude for himself and for his country.

The Long Parliament of the Civil Wars was finally dissolved by Cromwell's own hand in 1653, by which time it had become known as 'The Rump' on account of its decreasing numbers, through the secession of the Royalists and the exclusion by the army of the Presbyterian Party. In the years 1640-1642 Parliament tried to come to an agreement with the King but failed. The First Civil War began in August 1642, when Charles I raised his Standard at Nottingham, and lasted until 1646. It witnessed an indecisive battle at Edgehill in 1642 and two victories for Parliament in 1644 and 1645 at Marston Moor and Naseby. Oxford, the Royalist centre of control, finally surrendered in 1646, which ended the war. Charles I fled and gave himself up to the Scots. They in turn handed him over to Parliament. There then followed a struggle between the Army and the Long Parliament, until the Army took possession of the King and kept him at Hampton Court from where he escaped to Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight. While at Carisbrooke he took advantage of the contention between Parliament and the Army to negotiate secretly with the Scots. In 1648, on his behalf, they invaded England, but were defeated by Cromwell at Preston. Before this, the Second Civil War, the Army leaders had held a prayer meeting at Windsor and it was felt after that meeting that 'Charles Stuart, that man of blood' must be called to account for his treacherous behaviour in starting a second war. The King was tried, and executed in Whitehall on 30th January, 1649. Cromwell then went to Ireland to suppress a Catholic insurrection there, when the Scots proclaimed Charles II as King of

Scotland and he returned in 1650 to invade Scotland. He defeated the Scots at Dunbar on 3rd September that year and went on to Edinburgh where he had a serious illness and was delayed from further fighting until June of the following year. He then advanced up the east coast of Scotland but an army led by Charles II by-passed him on the west coast and crossed into England. The final victory came at Worcester, 3rd September, 1651, when Cromwell defeated this Army led by Charles II.

The Civil Wars were now over. In some respects it had been a three cornered fight. The Royalists had taken advantage of the differences between the Presbyterian and Independent sections of the Puritans. The Long Parliament had contained a large section of Presbyterians, while the New Model Army formed in 1645 under Sir Thomas Fairfax and Cromwell had been composed largely of Independents. The Presbyterians had been more favourable to the Monarchy than the Independents and had been willing to treat longer with the King. This was apparent among the Presbyterians in Scotland as well as in England and had led to the Scots supporting Charles I and Charles II, and to the sad sight of Puritan ministers of religion being present in both armies at Dunbar. The Scots were to realise their mistake in the years 1660-1685, when many thousands perished on the Moors of Scotland at the hand of the Stuarts, which family they had helped to keep on the English Throne.

In England after 1651, the Army faced the Parliament, the so-called 'Rump'. Throughout 1652 they disagreed over the payment and disbanding of the Army. In 1653 Cromwell went down to the House of Commons with some of his officers and forcibly ejected the fifty-three contentious members, all that remained of the Long Parliament of 1640. A Council of Army Officers was now set up to govern the country and a Parliament was made up of Puritan ministers and able men nominated by Cromwell and his Council of Officers. This Parliament eventually proved unsatisfactory. Religious fanaticism raised its head and it resigned its powers to Cromwell within a year. 'The Rump' had been the last constitutional part of the English Government machinery after the removal of the monarchy and the disintegration of the House of Lords. The Army leaders now produced a new constitution for the State called 'The Instrument of Government' by which Cromwell was appointed Lord Protector of the