

# *Scattered and Kept*

*Twenty-eight lost sermons of*

Rev. Thomas Boston

Minister of Simprin and Ettrick

*He that scattered Israel will gather him,  
and keep him, as a shepherd does his flock*

Jeremiah 31:10



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# Preface

You hold in your hands a precious book. On three accounts the sermons published in this book are highly valuable.

*Firstly*, they are sermons by a man who has been described as ‘one of the most remarkable and godly ministers to adorn the church of Christ since the days of the apostles.’<sup>1</sup> Thomas Boston (1676-1732) was the godly pastor of two remote parishes in the Scottish Borders. He served first at Simprin, from 1699 to 1707, and then at Ettrick, from 1707 till his death in 1732. Boston was indefatigable in his pastoral labours – he ploughed and sowed the gospel seed in soil that lesser men would have given up on. But his labours bore fruit, both within the bounds of his parishes, and eventually throughout the world, as the sermons he preached to his humble congregations were committed to the press to become some of the best-known books in the annals of Christian publishing – titles such as *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* and *The Crook in the Lot*.

In the theological world, Boston is hailed as the rediscoverer of ‘Marrow doctrine’ – the teachings popularised in a book entitled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, first published in 1645 and, on the back of Boston’s recommendation, republished in Scotland by James Hog in 1718.

Marrow doctrine is multi-faceted but we can identify three major concerns as follows.

- (1) *The warrant to believe*. While the atonement is limited in design and application, the warrant to believe is given to all, not as the elect but as lost sinners. Though holiness is required for salvation, this holiness is part of the *gift of grace* rather than a *condition for grace*.

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<sup>1</sup> Hamilton, I (2021) Thomas Boston’s memorable last words. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*. No. 698, November, 2021. p.17.

- (2) *The believer's relationship to the law.* In Marrow doctrine the believer is freed from the requirement of the covenant of works to produce their own perfect righteousness in order to be saved. However, the moral law remains the believer's rule of life.
- (3) *The nature of faith.* As faith receives the gospel testimony, it receives the person of Christ. The full assurance concerning the Word of God is thus of the essence of faith.<sup>2</sup>

Marrow doctrine has shaped the Scottish church ever since. Often the subject of fierce debate, Marrow teaching is alternatively viewed as a weakness (whether because of imprecise expressions or because of the suspicion that it tends towards Amyraldianism or antinomianism) or a strength (the preaching of the 'whole Christ').<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas M'Crie (the younger) summarised Marrow teaching as follows (taken from, but with minor editing for sense: M'Crie, T (1875) *The Story of the Scottish Church*. Blackie and Son, London, UK. pp. 458-459):

- (1). All precepts are included under the moral law, and that the gospel, strictly viewed, has no precepts, but consists simply of promises of mercy and salvation.
- (2). Though personal obedience is necessary to salvation, yet holiness is rather to be regarded as a part of salvation, than as the condition of obtaining it.
- (3). Believers are delivered from the commanding power of the covenant of works, in the sense of an obligation to seek a perfect righteousness in their own persons for eternal life.
- (4). Faith must, from its very nature as a reception of the Divine testimony, imply an appropriation of the Saviour, or a cordial embracing of him and his salvation as ours, not indeed in possession but in the offers and promises of the gospel; and that, fixing on the Divine Word alone as its warrant and ground, faith must involve a full assurance of its truth.
- (5). While the purchase and application of redemption are peculiar to the elect, the warrant to believe is common to all men, not as elect but as lost sinners.
- (6). The believer's obedience flows from filial love and gratitude, and that neither the hope of heaven as the reward of obedience, nor the fear of hell, are evangelical motives, but slavish, legal, and mercenary.

Another useful summary of Marrow teaching is found in: Brown, J (1827) *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated*. Munro, Canonsburgh, USA. Appendix II, pp. 328-332.

<sup>3</sup> Vandoodewaard, in his *The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition* (2011; Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, USA) demonstrates how John Dick (1764-1833) rejected certain aspects of Marrow teaching, possibly in

As Boston was the pre-eminent Marrow theologian of his time, his sermons, including those in the present volume, bear the unmistakable tincture of Marrow teaching.

Within the church Boston stood for truth – at times the lone voice in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He sighed and cried for the abominations done in the land, but more especially within the church, and in the hearts of the Lord’s backsliding sheep. The labours of a pastor’s heart are evident in these sermons. Indeed, they would be valuable simply on the account of the love for souls with which they are saturated, without any of the other reasons for which their author should have our attention.

We cannot do justice to Boston in a short introduction here, but for anybody who has never read it, we highly commend Boston’s own account of his life, as published in *Memoirs of the life, time and writings of the Reverend and Learned Thomas Boston*.

*Secondly*, the sermons deal with the sins of the church and nation, issuing a call to repentance, and a promise of mercy to returning backsliders. They seem particularly pertinent to the situation we find ourselves in today, and their rediscovery is timely. The church is, and has been, under the judgement of God. We have become materialistic and lukewarm, doctrinal fidelity is at a low ebb, low views of God have led to innovation and worldliness in worship, we hold the Word of God with a loose hand. God is dealing with us as he dealt with his people in the kingdom of Judah when he scattered his people under his judgements. But that was not the end of them. He still had a purpose of grace towards them – thoughts of peace – and to that end, when his chastising hand had produced good fruit, he gathered his people back to himself once more. All his dealings

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response to a movement towards a universal atonement in some of his peers, such as George Lawson (1749-1820). Such a response mirrored the concerns expressed by those who rejected the Marrow in the General Assembly of 1720. For a thorough treatment of the preaching of the ‘whole Christ’ see: Ferguson, SB (2016) *The Whole Christ*. Crossway: Wheaton, Illinois, USA.

with them ensure and reflect the fact that they are *kept* (1 Peter 1:5). Readers today must confront the same question as Thomas Boston put to his hearers: is the response of our souls to God's judgements one of repentance and seeking his mercy?

Although Boston's sermons in this book were preached at different times and on different occasions, when collected together they seem to provide an extended commentary on the church's timeless confession about our Saviour: 'He that *scattered* Israel will *gather* him, and *keep* him, as a shepherd does his flock' (Jeremiah 31:10). These sermons clearly expose the reasons for God scattering his people, and the solemnity of experiencing God's displeasure. They also preach the means of God gathering his scattered people – the glorious message of the gospel. And they proclaim the faithfulness of God who keeps his once straying and now recovered sheep. Such preaching is very much needed in the church today.

*Thirdly*, despite Boston's 'complete' or 'whole' works being published in the past (the former in twelve volumes, at least three times in the last 170 years), the sermons reprinted here have not been republished in the last 250 years. This fact is quite astounding, given the high value placed on all of Thomas Boston's writings by the Lord's people. We can discern no significant difference in the quality of these sermons, compared to those published in Boston's *Complete Works*.

In the *Complete Works*, some material appears twice within the twelve volumes, while the contents of this volume were entirely omitted.<sup>4</sup> Of course, without today's technology, the work involved in editing and producing twelve large volumes in the 1840s was considerable and this probably explains the non-inclusion of the material republished here. Today's facilities for searching in texts, and the availability of digital copies of rare books from libraries all over the

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<sup>4</sup> The material in question is: V pp. 586-632, duplicated in VII pp. 547-592; and II pp. 672-672, duplicated in XII pp. 453-454.



world, have made the work of an editor much easier. It is possible that the nineteenth century editor of the *Complete Works* was unaware of the existence of this material, as he makes no reference to these sermons anywhere, and he gives no reason why he has not included them.

The omission of these sermons from the *Complete Works* may raise the question whether they are genuine Boston? There is one published sermon known to be wrongly attributed to Boston.<sup>5</sup> Were these omitted because the editor of the *Complete Works* believed them to be fakes? This does not seem likely, for the following reasons.

- (1) We can find no evidence of the objection ever having been raised.
- (2) Some of the sermons are mentioned in Boston's *Memoirs*, both the occasion of their preaching, and in a few cases the content (these are noted in the text).
- (3) All the sermons appear to have the same source – autograph manuscripts in the possession of Michael Boston, Thomas's grandson and editor of his *Memoirs*.
- (4) The original manuscripts of four of the sermons on Revelation 21:22 are in the John Rylands Library, Manchester.<sup>6</sup> They once belonged to Alexander Fletcher (1787-1860) who has written in the front of the manuscript book that his brother-in-law, John Brown of Whitburn (1754-1834), authenticated the manuscript as being in Boston's own hand.

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<sup>5</sup> A sermon entitled *The Sinner's Sobs, or the way to Zion*, on Acts 2:37, is attributed to Thomas Boston (printed twice: Edinburgh, 1818; Kilmarnock, 1820). The sermon is not by Boston, but was originally published by Matthew Killiray in 1667. This sermon is not included in Boston's *Complete Works*.

<sup>6</sup> English MS 402. Thanks are due to Anne Anderton, librarian, for providing photographs of this item. A brief comparison (a full comparison has not been undertaken) of the manuscript and printed version confirms that the printed edition is faithful to Boston's own notes.

# The duty of redeeming the time in evil days, illustrated and enforced

*Preached at Ettrick, May 27th, 1722, being the Lord's day immediately  
following the rising of the General Assembly that year*<sup>7</sup>

*Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.* (Ephesians 5:16)

IN the preceding verse, the apostle exhorts the Ephesians to *walk circumspectly*, that is, accurately, exactly, and precisely, endeavouring in the most minute things in their walk to be regular and holy; showing withal, that true wisdom requires such exactness of life. Our text points out one thing wherein their spiritual wisdom should especially appear, *viz.* 'redeeming the time, because the days are evil.' In which words we have,

1. A duty enjoined, 'redeeming the time.' The expression is metaphorical, taken from merchants who wait the market to improve the season of making gain; and if at any time they have lost by their negligence, they bestir themselves to catch the season again when it offers. Thus should we do with the time, or season, of grace and good works, the season for doing or getting good. That time is often misspent, the season is slipt<sup>8</sup>; and we must endeavour to buy it back again, by doubling our diligence in the present time, as the traveller who has gone too slow through the day labours to redeem the time by mending his pace, when it grows towards evening.

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of the General Assembly, see: *A General Account*. pp. 260-261; *Complete Works XII*. pp. 333-334; *Memoirs*. pp. 365-366. This sermon was also reprinted as a chapbook by S. Crawford, Kilmarnock, in 1810.

<sup>8</sup> Scots: neglected, wasted.

2. The reason of the duty, 'because the days are evil.' Not that any days are in themselves evil or unlucky, more than others; but that they were days wherein much evil fell out and was to fall out. The days the apostle speaks of were evil, in respect of the great evils going on in them among men, which put professors in hazard of sinning or suffering. They were ensnaring days, both in respect of principles and practices. False doctrine was vented by many, the resurrection was denied, justification by faith alone opposed, and the purity of the gospel overthrown by many; scandalous practices were introduced; and persecution was raised in several places, and was on the growing hand.

The scope and meaning of the words may be summed up in the following doctrinal note, *viz.*

DOCTRINE. *When men's lot falls in evil days, the evil of these days calls aloud to them to redeem time, and double their diligence.*

For the illustration of this doctrine, I shall,

- I. Show what it is to redeem time.
- II. Show why the evil of the days wherein men's lot is cast should move them to redeem time.
- III. *Lastly*, Apply the subject in a use of exhortation and of reproof.

I. The first thing proposed is, to show what it is to redeem time. It imports,

1. A conviction of misspending of time, and mis-improving seasons of grace.

Those will never set themselves to redeem time, who are not duly convinced of their squandering it away, selling it off, and not enriching themselves with the price. We have seen better days than now they are; glorious days of the Son of man have been in Scotland, in purity, plenty, and peace. But may not the looking back to the

improvement made of them, fill us with convictions of misimprovement? And,

(1.) How many are there, who to this day are out of Christ, and have no saving interest in the covenant of grace, but are ‘aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world?’ (Ephesians 2:12) If the market of free grace were closed, they, poor souls, have as yet bought none of Christ’s wares, for as long as they have stood in the market-place.

(2.) What have ye done for God, and what have you done for eternity, in the time which ye have had? God’s glory is the end of your creation; the work he has put in your hand to fill up your time with is to ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ (Philippians 2:12). Ye were not set down in the world, as the leviathan in the sea, to play yourselves; but to honour God, and see to your eternal salvation. Now much of that time is over. Ye have done much to advance your worldly interest, to satisfy your lusts, to dishonour God, and to ruin your own souls; but what have ye done for God’s glory and your souls salvation?

(3.) Who of us all have done for God what we might have done, and what we have had opportunity to have done? Have we not slipt<sup>9</sup> many precious occasions that might have been improved for the honour of God? Has not a vain world often cheated us, and spiritual slothfulness cast us into a deep sleep and an inactive frame and disposition, while fair and promising occasions have slipped through our fingers?

(4.) Has any of us got that victory over our corruptions, or made such advances in holiness of heart and life, as are answerable to the time that we have had under the means of grace? Have we grown up in grace, answerable to the years of our standing in the Lord’s vineyard?

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<sup>9</sup> Scots: neglected, wasted.

(5) Are ye provided for a time of trial, and furnished for a wilderness-journey? If not, surely it is neither for want of warning, nor want of time and opportunity; but by misspending of time. A day of common calamity seems to be making haste upon us; but are our chambers of protection provided by us to enter into? A darkness, a mist is arisen in the way to Zion; are you so acquainted with the way in the clear day, as to be capable to know the road even in a mist?

(6.) *Lastly*, Are your evidences for heaven clear? We know not how soon we are to pass off into another world; but, alas! it is to be feared, that many have no evidences at all for a better world; and that such as have, theirs are very dark.

These things may suffice to convince of misspending of time, the redeeming of which imports a conviction of.

2. To redeem time, imports activity and application to our great work which we have to do in the world. Thus we find the spouse setting herself to redeem time, 'By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth' (Canticles 3:1-2). We must at length bestir ourselves, shake off sloth, be denied to our carnal ease, and ply our work in good earnest. Merchants who through their own slothfulness have missed their market at a time, will do so that they may get their loss made up; and Christians must do so too, who mind to redeem their time; for there is no getting sleeping to heaven.

3. It imports catching of seasons that offer themselves again for procuring or increasing our spiritual stock. We must 'be sober, and watch unto prayer' (1 Peter 4:7). We must do as Benhadad's servants did, 'Now the men did diligently observe whether any thing would come from him, and did hastily catch it' (1 Kings 20:33). As men who being to go a long voyage, but have slept while wind and tide served, and so missed the occasion of setting off, will watch the first opportunity thereafter, and lay hold on it when it comes. Many a fair

occasion for Immanuel's land has been neglected; O that at length we were wise to let no more slip!

4. *Lastly*, It imports improving the present time diligently, as men who have a great loss to make up. Thus did the spouse, 'It was but a little that I passed from them, but I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me' (Canticles 3:4). There is no other way of redeeming past time, but by better improving the present time while it is among our hands. We should then be more frequent and more fervent in spiritual exercises, carefully laying out ourselves, that the time remaining may be filled up to the best advantage. Time is precious, let us not be lavish of it anymore.

II. The second head of discourse is to show why the evil of the days wherein men's lot is cast should move them to redeem time.

1. Because it is the misspending of time and mis-improving the seasons of grace that brings such evil days on a church or people called by the name of Christ. That is the fixed rule of God's dispensations towards his church, 'The Lord is with you, while ye be with him, and if ye seek him, he will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, he will forsake you' (2 Chronicles 15:2). Mis-improving of seasons of grace makes sinning times, and sinning times make ensnaring and suffering times. And what is the reason of all the evils of our day, but unfruitfulness under the glorious gospel? The light has been abused, and darkness therefore comes on: we have long had light without heat and warmth of affection, and therefore the light itself is on the declining hand. And it is highly reasonable that, smarting under misspending of time, we be stirred up to redeem it.

2. Because such days threaten the removal of opportunities of doing and getting good as formerly, 'Thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth' (Ecclesiastes 11:2). The days of Noah and Lot were

evil days; and they redeemed time, the one by preparing an ark timely, the other by a timely escape out of Sodom: and had they not done so, the one had been carried away with the deluge, and the other had perished in the flames of Sodom. They that will not do when they may, may come to see the time when they shall not have opportunity when they would. When men have no use for God's candle set up among them to let them see to work, he will readily take it away, or at least it shall burn very dim. Redeem time; for God is plainly saying to you, 'Who among you will give ear to this? who will hearken, and hear for the time to come?' (Isaiah 42:23)

3. Because such days are dangerous and ensnaring days, and therefore people have the more need to be on their guard. And if they do not set themselves to row against the stream of the day, they will be fair to be carried down the stream with others. Therefore our Lord says, 'Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold' (Matthew 24:12). When a land or country is infected with the plague, everyone sees himself obliged to take more than ordinary care about himself, lest the spreading contagion catch hold of him. Now, spiritual infections in principles and practices are visibly spreading at this day; and we are like men in a throng; if we do not forcibly press forward, we cannot miss to be carried off our feet, and carried backward by the crowd. The cause of truth and holiness is so fully on the field against a declining generation that no man can stand neutral, but he must lose ground to the enemy.

4. Because God is much dishonoured in such days; and that should touch our hearts very nearly. This was David's practice, 'Rivers of waters run down mine eyes; because they keep not thy law' (Psalm 119:136). It is very natural for the children of God, when they see their Father remarkably dishonoured, that their hearts stir within them, as was the case of Paul, when he was at Athens, and 'saw the city wholly given to idolatry' (Acts 17:16). Remarkable is the story of the dumb son of Cræsus king of Lydia, who, seeing a soldier, when his father's capital city, Sardis, was taken by Cyrus the Persian, ready

to give the king, whom he did not know, a stroke upon the head with his scimitar, made such a violent effort and struggle, out of fear and tenderness for the life of his father, that he broke the strings of his tongue, and cried out, 'Soldier, spare the life of Cræsus.' The further others go from him, they will endeavour to draw the nearer to him. At such a time there is a special call from heaven, saying, 'Who is on my side?' And when the honour of God so lies at stake, in the conspiracy of a generation against it, it is sad for men to be asleep; nay, it is high time to awake.

5. Because as redeeming of time is always seasonable, so it is in a special manner seasonable when the days are evil. There is a peculiar beauty in it to be best when others are worst, to be awake when the virgins round about are slumbering and sleeping. God takes special notice of such; as in the case of Noah, of whom it is said, 'Noah was a just man, and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God' (Genesis 6:9); and also in the case of Lot, of whom the apostle Peter says, 'God delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: for that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day, with their unlawful deeds' (2 Peter 2:7-8). Redeem time in these evil days, so shall ye outshoot Satan in his own bow, and turn the cannon upon him who endeavours to carry you away with the stream. To take occasion from good to do evil is devilish, but to take occasion from evil to do good is divine.

6. Because men's own interest lies in it. They that are awake in a way of duty while others sleep shall rest in a way of privilege when the peace of others shall be broken. 'I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble' (Habakkuk 3:16). To stand at a distance from sinful courses in a sinning time, is the way to safety and comfort in a suffering time. Hence is that commission from the Lord in favour of his people, 'Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the