

David Dickson's *Sermons on Jeremiah's Lamentations* (1628)

By Matthew A. Vogan

A fresh publication of a rare book by an eminent writer often generates considerable interest. A new edition gives another lease of life to a volume that has been out of print for a long time. David Dickson's *Sermons on Jeremiah's Lamentations* were, in fact, never published. Instead, they were carefully recorded at the time of preaching by an attentive parishioner. Few have had access to them over the years. Eventually, they passed out of private hands into the special collections of the University of Glasgow Library. They were transcribed in 2017–18 and have now been prepared for publication.¹

In this rare volume, we witness Dickson's application of Scripture to a turbulent domestic and international context. It is remarkable that these expositions are being published in a year when the entire world has been afflicted by the highly contagious coronavirus for which there is, currently, no known cure or vaccine. This crisis has witnessed not only disease but large numbers of deaths and also created economic and social upheaval. Uniquely also, churches have been closed for public worship. These unprecedented circumstances have drawn some to the book of Lamentations which has often seemed remote to the Western experience of prosperity and peace.

There had been warning signs for Judah, such as the exile of the northern kingdom. But as Dickson observes, where we have not responded to lighter chastisements, heavier strokes must be applied, especially where we have received greater light and knowledge.

If God were not doing the same things from age to age, which we hear is done to the kirk, men would think it incredible. But seeing the like things are executed from age to age when His kirk provokes Him, we have reason to credit these things the better, and we have to look if this odd [*extraordinary*] stroke which lighted [*fell*] upon the kirk of the Jews make us not wise to turn to God,

[else] that we shall find the proof of the like or heavier strokes in our own experience, seeing these things are written for our learning [Rom. 15:4]. But rather, look for the like stroke to come upon this land, for we are so sleepy and secure that nothing but a heavy stroke will awaken us. Frequent telling of judgment avails not. Gentle visitations on our children, goods, and persons avails not. But [we are] as those who are overtaken with sleepiness, touched by any[one], gliffens [*glances*] up a little, but incontinent falls asleep again. Therefore, God will visit with heavy judgments. Let him that has an ear hear. We cannot set a time. But be sure that God will do all to us that He has done to His kirk in former times, and will strike with heavier judgments, seeing our light has been clearer than others' [light] has been (p. 256).

Jeremiah had also warned, but they would not pay any heed, and now he must describe in sorrowful detail

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1. ["Sermons upon Jeremiahs Lamentationes gathered from Master David Dicksons Mouth by one of his hearers: from the beginning to the end thereof" Glasgow University Library, Special Collections, GB 247 MS Gen 3. Sermons of David Dickson. The manuscript (MS) is either a refined or "fair copy" of notes taken "in situ" or a copy of such a fair copy. Dickson writes in the preface to his 1635 sermons on Hebrews that his hearers were sharing copies of his sermons from their own notes (see *On Hebrews*, p. v). An initial draft transcription of the whole text was made from this manuscript by Joanna Gillies. The draft was collated again with the original via photographs and significantly corrected, revised and edited for publication by Chris Coldwell.]

“the desolation of God’s kirk which they would never believe was to come” (p. 266). The desperate situation of Jerusalem involved devastation, severe famine, and the destruction of the temple.

To use Dickson’s own striking phrase, “the Lord has cast this book in our hand to make use of it” (p. 45). It is written for the kirk’s edification in all ages, and its teaching is “very necessary (p. 47). It shows how God chastises a church that has departed from Him in large measure and how to turn back to Him. The temporary removal of the whole system of the ceremonial law caused the greatest grief to Jeremiah, and Dickson argues that the afflictions of the Church should also cause us greatest sorrow. But he also notes how Lamentations gives those with such heavy hearts words with which to sorrow in hope.

It is not only remarkable that expositions of such appropriate truths should come to light at such a time as this but that they also come from such a remarkable expositor. Dickson’s commentaries have been valued for their concise insight and application. The same features marked his preaching. David Dickson’s outstanding pulpit ministry was accompanied by revival and a large number of conversions over an extended period. People flocked from both local and more distant

districts to hear him preach. Who was David Dickson, why was he so popular, and why is this set of sermons such a significant discovery?

DICKSON’S EARLY LIFE AND MINISTRY

David Dickson (c. 1583–1662) was one of the most significant ministers and theologians of the Second Reformation period in Scotland. He played a leading role in the events surrounding the signing of the national covenant and the Glasgow Assembly in 1638. A professor of theology at both Edinburgh and Glasgow, he published the first commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith.² He also produced and inspired many commentaries on Scripture.

John Livingstone describes him as “a man singularly gifted with an edifying way of preaching, and whose painful labours were eminently blessed with success... . He made great help at the Reformation 1638, and thereafter some books, printed both in Latin and English, declare in part what a man he was... .”³ The eighteenth-century historian and minister Robert Wodrow reports that Livingstone was once asked, “whom he took to be the greatest Gospel Minister in all Scotland. He said he thought Mr. Dickson was the greatest he ever knew.”⁴ Wodrow himself reckoned that “if ever a Scots biography and the lives of our eminent ministers and Christians be published, he will shine there as a star of the first magnitude.”⁵

Dickson was born in Glasgow, the only son of John Dick or Dickson, a wealthy and devout Glaswegian merchant.⁶ His parents were childless for several years after they married and made this a matter of prayer by themselves and with others. They vowed solemnly that if their prayers were answered with a son, they would devote him to the Lord’s service in the church. After a while, their prayers were answered, and David Dickson was born. He was sent to grammar school to learn Latin, but the vow was forgotten. Robert Wodrow records the consequences:

[T]hey sent him away to the sea to be a merchant; but he suffered great losses at sea, so that he was like to bring his parents to a very low condition.⁷ Yet they could not impute this to the youth’s mismanagement, for he was very sober. And then they began to bethink themselves what this sad outward loss at sea might really mean; and then they began to consider that they had broken their solemn vow to God: And so they took him from the sea, and sent him to the College, where he made great proficiency.⁸

2. “Caputi confessionis fidei de Scriptura continet articulos decem assortmentes 33 theses controversas,” translated by George Sinclair and published as *Truths Victory over Error* (Edinburgh, 1684). It was reprinted on various occasions and is currently published by The Banner of Truth Trust.

3. W. K. Tweedie, *Select Biographies, Edited for the Wodrow Society*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Printed for the Wodrow Society, 1845, 1847), 1.316. Antiquated spellings in quotations in this Introduction have been modernized without notice.

4. Robert Wodrow, *Analecta: Or Materials For A History Of Remarkable Providences Mostly Relating To Scotch Ministers And Christians*, 4 vols. (1842–1843) 3.8–9.

5. *Select Biographies*, 2.5.

6. *Select Biographies*, 2.5–28. *Analecta*, 3.2–12. *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae; the Succession of Ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, edited by Hew Scott, volume 1, new edition (1915), 1.64–5; 3.98. *The Records of the Commissions of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland*, ed. A. F. Mitchell and J. Christie, 3 vols., Scottish History Society 11, 25, 58 (1892–1909). *Register of the Consultations of the Ministers of Edinburgh*, 2 vols., ed. W. Stephen, Scottish History Society, 3rd ser., 1, 16 (1921–30). *Records of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. A. Peterkin (1838). D. Stevenson, *The Scottish Revolution, 1637–44: The Triumph of the Covenanters* (1973). *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, ed. D. Laing, 3 vols. (1841–2). D. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson and D. Laing, 8 vols., Wodrow Society (Edinburgh: for the Wodrow Society, 1842–9). *The Historical Works of Sir James Balfour*, ed. J. Haig, 4 vols. (1824–5).

7. Wodrow records elsewhere that he lost “several thousands” of his father’s money.

8. *Analecta*, 3.2.

It seems that it was about this time that David Dickson also came under concern of soul. His experience seems to have given him a lifelong concern and sympathy for those with spiritual trials, particularly in relation to salvation and assurance. Wodrow records an oral account of this:

Mr Dickson was much exercised when he was young, and went to several Ministers and Christians and discoursed with them; and used to say, when he was going to believe in Christ, he saw an army of Devils standing between him and Christ; and never a person satisfied him till he came to that great and worthy person, the Laird of Carleton, John Cathcart; and the expression he had to Mr Dickson was this, "Though you heard a voice from heaven saying to you, 'Mr David Dickson, see that ye believe not on my Son, Jesus Christ,' you are not to regard it, for you have the written word to warrant you to believe; for if we or an angel from [heaven] preach another Gospel than that you have received, let him be accursed!"⁹

After graduating MA from the University of Glasgow, Dickson taught there as a regent or professor of philosophy for eight years. On 31 March 1618, he was ordained minister of Irvine, Ayrshire. During the first decades of the seventeenth century, King James VI (and I of England) was determined to bring greater conformity between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. Bishops were introduced, and a greater degree of ceremony. This did not cause any great concern to Dickson at first and it seems he was relatively comfortable with the situation.

The year Dickson had been ordained was the very year that some of the most significant changes were forced on the Church of Scotland. A General Assembly was held in Perth in August of that year, and under manipulation and compulsion from the king, the Five Articles of Perth were passed. These introduced the Roman Catholic sacrament of episcopal confirmation that had been explicitly rejected by the Scottish National Covenant (King's or Negative Confession) of 1580–1. It was required that the Lord's Supper should be received in a kneeling posture, something that the Scottish Church had always regarded as giving idolatrous reverence to the elements. Private baptism and communion were also instituted, as well as the festivals that the Church of Scotland had excluded at the Reformation: Christmas, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost.

PREACHING IN A TIME OF PERSECUTION

Within a year or so of having begun his ministry, Dickson became seriously ill with fever. At this time, he was, as Wodrow puts it, brought to see the "evil of prelacy."¹⁰ In 1621 Dickson himself said that since the Perth Assembly of August 1618, he had been "considering the controversies of our kirk, as the Lord had enabled him; and found, that with a good conscience he could not obey these injunctions."¹¹

Dickson began to speak out publicly against the Articles and to join with others in resisting them. He later describes them as the yoke of popish ceremonies being imposed on his ministry, and no doubt this was the drift of his remarks. He was known for this by October 1620 when he was one of seven on a "leit" [list] of potential ministers to be called to a vacant charge in Edinburgh. Dickson's position as a nonconformist was clear when enquiries were made.¹²

In 1621 the Articles were ratified by the Scottish Parliament, but not without significant opposition. Ministers from around the country gathered in Edinburgh while the Parliament was in session. When they were then banished from the city by royal decree, the ministers convened at a large house near Edinburgh called the Sheens and engaged in prayer together. Wodrow records that "they were all the time greatly straitened [*inhibited*] in prayer till once the Articles of Perth were ratified." After a while, Dickson, a young man, was asked to lead in prayer.

[H]e prayed with great liberty and enlargement of spirit; showing in prayer his great faith and assurance of God's dispersing that black cloud, and that he would once more gloriously appear in his [] ([])

9. *Analecta*, 3.11. John Cathcart of Carleton (1540–1612) was a leading supporter of the Reformation. He built the castle of Killochan near Girvan, Ayrshire.

10. Wodrow, *Analecta*, 3.9. The experience of Robert Blair (almost the same age as Dickson) is comparable. Robert Blair tells us that there was "little controversy in religion in the Kirk of Scotland" before the Articles of Perth. "Though there were bishops, yet they took little upon them, and so were very little opposed until Perth Assembly." In this sense, James over-reached himself with the Articles. Blair was still relatively young at this time and had not investigated matters of church government deeply. The abuses carried out at the Perth Assembly to ensure that they were passed hardened him against Episcopalianism. *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair, minister of St. Andrews, containing his autobiography, from 1593–1636: with supplement of his life and continuation of the history of the times, to 1680 by his Son-in-Law, Mr. William Row*, ed. Thomas M'Creie, D. D. (Edinburgh: for the Wodrow Society, [1848]), 12.

11. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 7532.

12. Calderwood, *ibid.*, 7.448.

present,) told Mr James Rouat, Minister at Kilmarnock, who told it me, that when Mr Dickson had prayed, they were all as sure of a glorious delivery as if they had it in their hand.¹³

Samuel Rutherford later spoke of David Dickson as one that “both prayeth and doeth for our dying kirk.”¹⁴ Dickson was going to be required to add suffering to his prayers and actions. During the period 1618–1625, forty-three ministers were summoned for nonconformity, and of these thirty were imprisoned, confined, deprived or suspended. This draconian approach proved ultimately to be counter-productive. The more that the authorities proceeded against the ministers, the more such proceedings were publicised and the more it became difficult to impose effective sanctions in the face of growing public opinion. The reign of Charles I would witness further similar actions.

On 8 June 1620, an act of the Privy Council was passed for “a proclamation for keeping the acts of the last Assemblies of the Kirk,” in which every minister who violates the said acts, it is stated, does so under the pain of being “called and convened before the Lords and others of the High Commission, and other ordinary judges of the kirk, and to be punished by deprivation, suspension, confining, and warding, at the discretion of the said judges of the Kirk.”¹⁵ Now, in 1621, with the weight of legislation behind the king’s agenda, the net was closing around those who resisted. About the end of October, Spottiswoode (Bishop of St Andrews) intimated that he had received a letter from the king. It gave instructions that all ministers, readers and schoolmasters without exception, must conform to the Articles of Perth or be deposed. John Murray, minister of Dunfermline, and John Row of Carnock were confined.

13. *Analecta*, 3.11–12. The bracketed spaces for missing words are original.

14. Letter XXII to John Kennedy dated Feb. 2, 1632, in *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, ed. Andrew A. Bonar (Edinburgh, 1891).

15. The High Commission was a court established in 1610 specifically for dealing with nonconformists. It was, of course, a civil court and not ecclesiastical, despite being composed largely of bishops. Some people referred to it as the Scottish Inquisition, and this comparison was not entirely hyperbolic. Its powers were not limited by law, and it was not answerable to parliament or any other public body. “This commission,” says David Calderwood, “and execution thereof, as it exalted the aspiring bishops far above any prelate that ever was in Scotland, so it put the king in possession of that which he had long time hunted for; to wit, of the royal prerogative, and absolute power to use the bodies and goods of the subjects at pleasure, without form of process of the common law.” Calderwood, *History*, 762.

16. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 7531.

17. Calderwood, *ibid.*, 7532.

It was therefore clear what was awaiting Dickson when he encountered the Bishop of Glasgow while in that city on 6 December 1621. The bishop showed Dickson a letter from the king instructing him to put Dickson and others on trial. This was “not only because they had not embraced the ceremonies, but also because they had done what they could to hinder the enacting of the articles of Perth Assembly at the parliament.”¹⁶ The bishop said that he was “loathe to trouble [Dickson] because he was diligent in his ministry,” but that Dickson would be deposed if he did not conform. David Dickson responded: “If ye will trouble me, I trust in God I shall have peace in my suffering.” The bishop wanted to know his reasons for opposing the Articles of Perth. He referred to Dickson’s time teaching philosophy at Glasgow. “I wonder that one whom I know to understand reason ... should have taken such a course as ye have done.” Dickson responded with a robust defence of the regulative principle of worship. He said, “whatsoever is imposed upon the flock of Christ, universally, solemnly, and ordinarily, to be done in and about the worship of God, and may not be left undone, behoveth either to have a known and sufficient reason for the injunction of it, or else, lawfully a man may refuse to give obedience.”¹⁷

Dickson’s parting words to the bishop were that he “was ready, by the grace of God, to suffer what flesh and blood could do to him.” The citation to the High Commission was certain to come; it was only a matter of time. On 2 January 1622, while Dickson was engaged in prayer and fasting with others in relation to this prospect, the summons arrived. The bishop’s page delivered the message in person. Dickson was called to appear before the High Commission in Edinburgh on 9 January. It seemed as though the date had been set to prevent the ministers summoned from having a last Lord’s Day in the pulpit. They would have to begin their journey before then.

Dickson preached in Irvine the day after receiving the summons. His first sermon at Irvine had been on 2 Corinthians 5:11, “Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.” Calderwood says, “It was ever his earnest desire since that time, that before it pleased the Lord to remove him, either by death or otherwise, it might please His majesty to enable him to teach the other half of the verse.” The remainder of the verse is, “But we are made manifest unto God.” His sermon on this text was accompanied by “extraordinary power and singular movings of emotions.” Evidently, there was a significant bond between pastor and congregation.

During the whole time of the sermon, there was weeping and lamentation: scarce one within the doors could hold up their heads. That whole day, the women were going up and down the kirk-yard, and under stairs, greeting [*crying*], as if their husbands had been newly buried.¹⁸

The next morning Dickson set off on horseback accompanied with the same degree of weeping. The town authorities and others sent representatives with a supplication subscribed by most citizens "bearing testimony to his faithful labours and holy conversation; and, consequently, to let the Commission see how injurious they would be to God and their souls if they removed him." Initially, it seemed that this overture had some impression on the bishops, but ultimately it was ignored. When they broke their journey at Linlithgow, a message came from the bishop of Glasgow that Dickson could remain in his parish if he would request to continue until he came to clearer conclusions on the matter at stake. If Dickson continued obstinate, he would be banished to over a hundred miles distance. Dickson sent back the response that while he desired to remain with his flock, he could not pretend to be unclear since he was "fully resolved in that matter."¹⁹

Dickson declined (refused to acknowledge the authority of) the jurisdiction of the High Commission court since he was being tried in relation to a purely ecclesiastical matter. The Archbishop of St Andrews attacked him, saying, "ye are led by the spirit of the devil; there is more pride in you, I dare say, than in all the bishops of Scotland. I hanged a Jesuit in Glasgow for the like fault" (presumably referring to John Ogilvie, who was hanged for treason in 1615). Speaking to the men of Irvine, Spottiswoode called Dickson "a schismatic, an Anabaptist, one that had misled them, and filled them with fantasy." He continued with more invective towards Dickson directly accusing him of pride and rebellion. Dickson responded, "I have been eight years a regent in the College of Glasgow, and four years a minister: these amongst whom I have lived knows I am not the man ye call me. Say to my person what ye please; by God's grace it shall not touch me."²⁰

Enduring the reality of slander against one's person is a form of suffering that must not be underestimated, and Dickson is conscious of this. Christ says, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake." Dickson later commented on these words:

[1.] Reviling or speaking any manner of evil against Christ's servants is, in our Lord's estimation, persecution, for so he expounds it, saying, when men revile you and persecute you.

[2.] Christians must beware to give just ground for troubling of themselves, for that is not persecution when ill is spoken against men truly and justly, but when ill is spoken against them falsely, and for Christ's cause. Therefore Christ says, Blessed are ye when they speak ill of you falsely for my sake...²¹

Dickson goes on to write, "Whosoever endures any trouble, were it but so much as evil words for Christ's cause, he shall be enrolled among the martyrs and holy prophets, who from the beginning of the world have suffered for righteousness. This is our Lord's reckoning, saying, "For so persecuted they the prophets which were before you."

He was sentenced to be removed from his parish the day immediately following the trial and confined to Turriff, Aberdeenshire. "The will of the Lord be done," said Dickson. "Though ye cast me off, yet the Lord will take me up. Send me where ye please. I hope my Master shall go with me; and as he hath been with me heretofore, he will be with me still, as with his own weak servant." Dickson had liberty to preach, but the ground was not so fertile spiritually. He found greater difficulty in getting his sermons prepared at Turriff compared to Irvine. He "used to say that the devils in the north were much worse than the devils in the west; for, studying one day would have served him at Irvine, but he would take two days studying for preaching at Turriff."²²

Many representations were made to bring him back to his charge again, but Dickson would not do anything that would involve compromise and eventually came back to his parish after eighteen months without any conditions. He was permitted to return to Irvine at the end of July 1623.²³ It evidently did not hinder him from continuing to criticise the agenda pursued by the king and bishops. In these sermons on Lamentations (preached in 1628), he breaks out, "What schisms and

18. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, 7532.

19. Calderwood, *ibid.*, 7533.

20. Calderwood, *ibid.*, 7540.

21. David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of ... According to Matthew* (1651), 43.

22. *Analec̄ta*, 3.3. Calderwood, *ibid.*, 7540.

23. K. D. Holfelder, 'Dickson, David (c.1583–1662)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.nls.idm.oclc.org/view/article/7614, accessed 16 Nov 2017].

errors are creeping in our kirk—things adjured and cast out, taken in again?”²⁴

PREACHING IN A TIME OF REVIVAL

Revival had already begun in the district in the parish of Stewarton, which was not far from Irvine.²⁵ Robert Blair, who went to Ulster about the time that Dickson returned to Irvine, records that he was involved in this revival, having been invited to preach in the pulpit by the minister of the parish, William Castlelaw. It was a place says Blair, “where the Lord had a great work in converting many. Numbers of them were at first under great terrors and deep exercise of conscience, and thereafter attained to sweet peace and strong consolation. I preached often to them in time of the college vacation, residing at the house of that famous saint the Lady Robertland, and had much conference with them, and profited more by them than I think they did by me; though ignorant people, and proud secure livers, called them the daft people of Stewarton.”²⁶

Mr Robert Boyd ... came from his house in Carrick to meet with them; and having conferred with them, both men and women, he heartily blessed God for the grace of God in them. The Countess of Eglinton did much countenance them, and persuaded her noble lord to spare his hunting and hawking some days, to confer with some of them whom she had sent for to that effect. His lordship, after conference with them, protested he never spoke with the like of them; he wondered at the wisdom they manifested in their speech. As many of them as were able to travel went to the Monday market of Irvine with some little commodities such as they had; but their chief intention was to hear the lecture that ended before the market began, and by their example many of that parish (their minister encouraging them to it) and out of other parishes went thither, whereby the power of religion was spread over that part of the country. I bless the Lord that ever I was acquainted with that people, and for the help I

had by interchanging letters with blessed Mr Dickson after he left the college.²⁷

From references given by Robert Fleming and Robert Wodrow, this revival seems to have been at its height in the years 1624–25, though it lasted for some years. Wodrow records that Dickson “had for several years great and wonderful success, especially about 1624, as to a great work of conversion, more than he had at any place he was in afterward, either Glasgow or Edinburgh.”²⁸

This seal upon the ministry of David Dickson seems to be a signal instance of the principle: “Them that honor me, I will honor” (1 Samuel 2:30). People under soul concern flocked to his house after the sermon. On Monday, the Church was even more full than the Sabbath as people from the district came to hear his expositions. Others moved to Irvine from as far away as England to be under Dickson’s ministry. “They came to Irvine from all places of the land, yea even from England. There he opened up the Covenant of Redemption more clearly and distinctly than any that had gone before him.²⁹ He was made use of as a great instrument in a work of conversion in Stewarton, among the people there, which was called by the wicked of that time, and profane, “the Stewarton sickness;” and they said to me, that blessed work was carried on and much cherished by Christians meeting frequently for prayer and mutual Christian conference.”³⁰

Robert Fleming also describes the development of the revival:

This was by the profane rabble of that time, was called the Stewarton sickness, for in that parish first, but after through much of that country, particularly at Irvine, under the ministry of Mr Dickson, it was remarkable; where it can be said, (which divers ministers and Christians yet alive can witness) that for a considerable time, few Sabbaths did pass without some evidently converted, or some convincing proofs of the power of God accompanying his word; yea, that many were so choked and taken by the heart, that, through terror, the Spirit in such a measure convincing them of sin, in hearing of the word, they have been made to fall over, and thus carried out of the church; who after proved most solid and lively Christians. And, as it was known, some of the most gross, who used to mock at religion, being engaged upon the fame that went abroad of such things, to go to some of these parts where the gospel was then most lively, have been effectually reached before their return, with a visible change following the same. And truly this great spring-tide (as I may call it) of the gospel,

24. See page 51.

25. *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair*, 19.

26. *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair* 19.

27. *The Life of Mr. Robert Blair* 19–20.

28. *Analec̄ta*, 4.3.

29. It seems likely that this was the basis for the book *Therapeutica sacra, seu, De curandis casibus conscientiae circa regenerationem, per foederum divinatorum prudentem applicationem*. (London, 1656). Dickson’s translation was published posthumously as *Therapeutica sacra shewing briefly the method of healing the diseases of the conscience, concerning regeneration* (Edinburgh, 1664).

30. *Analec̄ta*, 3.2–3.

was not of a short time, but for some years continuance; yea thus like a spreading moor-burn,³¹ the power of godliness did advance from one place to another, which put a marvellous lustre on these parts of the country, the savour whereof brought many from other parts of the land to see the truth of the same.³²

At the same time as the Stewarton revival (1625–30), there were stirrings in Ulster, just over the Irish Sea. Dickson would have had close acquaintance with this since Irvine was a key place for travel to Ireland. He was also a close friend of men like Robert Blair, who had gone there to minister. Robert Fleming gives an account of what took place in Ulster.

I shall here also instance that solemn and great work of God, which was in the church of Ireland about the year 1628, and some years thereafter, which, as many grave and solid Christians yet alive can witness, who were there present, was a bright and hot sun-blink of the gospel, yea, may with sobriety be said to have been one of the largest manifestations of the Spirit, and of the most solemn times of the down-pouring thereof, that almost since the days of the apostles hath been seen; where the power of God did sensibly accompany the word with an unusual motion upon the hearers, and a very great tack [*catch*] as to the conversion of souls to Christ; the goings of the Lord then full of majesty, and the shout of a king was heard in the solemn meetings of his people, that as a judicious old Christian, who was there present did express it, he thought it was like a dazzling beam and ray of God, with such an unusual brightness, as even forced bystanders to an astonishment; a very effectual door opened, with more than ordinary enlargement, which the ministers of Christ there did find in the preaching the word, whilst the people might be seen hearing the same in a melting frame, with much tenderness of spirit; surely this was the very power of God, a convincing seal to the truth and ministry of his servants, who were then persecuted; yea, a thing which, as it was known, had an awful impression, and was a terror to their adversaries. I remember amongst other passages, what a worthy Christian told me, how sometimes in hearing the word, such a power and evidence of the Lord's preface was with it, that he hath been forced to rise, and look through the church, and see what the people were doing, thinking from what he felt in his own spirit, it was a wonder how any could go away without some change upon them. And then it was sweet and easy for Christians to come thirty or forty miles to these solemn communions which they

had, and there continue from the time they came, until they returned, without wearying, or making use or sleep, yea, but little either meat or drink, and, as some of them professed, did not feel the need thereof, but went away most fresh and vigorous, their souls so filled with a sense of God.³³

By 1628, when Dickson was preaching these sermons on Lamentations, the stirrings of spiritual life appeared to be declining, at least in the town of Irvine.³⁴ By October of that year, when preaching some of the final sermons on the book, he observes with sorrow that preaching did not appear to be having the same effect. He notes that "albeit truth be preached by the most part, yet it is not effectual to work a change because the Lord has drawn back His hand and His glory is departing."

Especially you Irvine, that have been a congregation as much labored in as any in the land, also frequently watered with the dew of heaven. Your table has been covered with the best bread, the water of life has flowed abundantly to you as any. But now you have taken a surfeit of it. You are fallen in love with other follies which are poisonous and are not likely to seek a purgation. You are not likely to be humbled nor break your heart in secret. Therefore, you have great need to fear that a sore fall is preparing for you: either the removing of the gospel or God's ministry ... we may well get a meeting with our Lord in our chambers, but cannot find Him in the assembly with you, and this because you are deceived with meikle [*much*] preaching. You have stopped your ears and heard as the voice of a musician [Ezek. 33:32]. How long shall I protest unto you who are asleep in security? How long shall I tell you that God is displeased at your coldrife [*lukewarm*] affections? How long shall I tell you that God is offended with your drawing near with your likes [*sic lips*] when your heart is away? How long shall I challenge your backslidings? Why has your worldliness bewitched you? Shall not your chambers and fields be witness against you, where sometimes you have sought God in secret, who are become secure sluggards? (see page 249).

31. *Moor-burn* (muir-burne): Moorland with the heather on fire.

32. Robert Fleming, *The Fulfilling of the Scripture*, 2 vols. (1661; Edinburgh: John Greig, Johnston & Hunter, 1845, 1850), 95–96.

33. Fleming, *ibid.*, 96–97.

34. Apparently, the impact of the revival on the local population was brief. "I hear it observed that Mr David Dickson, when in Irvine, had much more success in conversion among strangers who flocked to him, than among these of his own charge." *Analecta*, 2.262.

Some perhaps had been encouraged to show more religious interest during the time of revival, but now those temporary effects were wearing off when there was less stirring. “There were some of you that had some tasking of reading, seeking of God in secret prayers in your families, but now these are left off, and instead of these, swearing, backbiting, and the most part of you eat your morsels as beasts without {giving thanks}... . You have cast off Christ’s yoke and bound yourselves in the bonds of sin” (see page 259).

Perhaps Dickson was observing this at the time that reports of spiritual revival were coming from Ulster. Yet in comparison with parishes where there was no gospel preaching, Irvine remained a blessed place.

What is the cause that there is an odds between one congregation and another, but because God is pleased to erect His gospel more in one place than another, so that to a spiritual eye that place is but a barren wilderness, where there is either a fruitless or feckless ministry and God not appearing there. But where the Word is clearly and powerfully preached, where the sceptre of the Word bears sway? This is a beautiful place, where the staff of beauty and bands are not broken, but men are ruled by the Word and discipline; that is a comely thing when people are going the highway to heaven following the lamb Christ whithersoever He goes. That is beautiful indeed. We crave open eyes that you may see this glory and beauty shining among you, for you have here a light shining which may show you the way to heaven.

35. William Struthers, *Scotlands warning, or a treatise of fasting containing a declaration of the causes of the soleme fast, indyted to bee kept in all the Churches of Scotland, the third and fourth sundayes of this instant moneth of May Anno 1628. & the weeke dayes betwixt them, as they may be goodly kepted in Townes. Together with a direction how to proceed in the religious obseruation of any soleme fast* (Edinburgh, 1628).

36. See Struthers, p. 21.

37. Trinity College kirk, Edinburgh session records, National Archives of Scotland, CH2/141/1 f.32, quoted from Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven, 2002), 347.

38. *The History of the Church and State of Scotland from the Accession of Charles I to the year 1649* (Edinburgh, 1840), 113. At a meeting of the commissioners of the church held the previous year on 17 July 1627 to call a public fast for August 1627, the commission had also declined to act on petitions regarding ministers who had been suspended or banished for their opposition to the Articles of Perth. The bishop tabled these as appropriate for a meeting of the General Assembly. This was merely an evasion since general assemblies had not met since 1618 and would not meet again until the Second Reformation in 1638. “Proceedings of the Commissioners of the Kirk, at a meeting held at Edinburgh in July 1627,” *The Bannatyne Miscellany*, Volume 3 (1845 [sic 1855]), 221.

Seeing this is your commendation among others, and is given to you out of the Lord’s rich bounty, acknowledge your privilege and prerogative and be thankful for it. (see page 259).

Clearly, the closing prayer of Lamentations “turn us” and “renew our days as of old” was highly appropriate. “It is the kirk’s prayer for those within her who seemed to be converts not yet converted and that herself who was converted might be yet more converted.” “In great mercy, turn us O Lord out of this misery and let us rejoice in and enjoy the former joy, peace, favor, and prosperity which sometimes we had” (see pages 293 and 294).

PREACHING IN A TIME OF FASTING

The year 1628 was marked by a time of fasting as well as revival in Scotland. The last two weeks of the month of May were observed as a solemn fast in every church in the land. This was in response to the many reasons for humbling themselves before God as a nation. William Struthers, one of the Edinburgh ministers, had been appointed to publish some of these causes.³⁵ These included the distressed Reformed churches in continental Europe facing war and persecution.

To these were added concern at prevailing iniquity in the land.³⁶ The Edinburgh kirk session, for instance, instructed the people of the city to “abstain from their own ordinary callings the said day and to repair every one to their own parish kirks before and afternoon in most humble and devout manner to put up prayers to almighty God that he might be pleased to avert his most fearful judgments in the threatened agonies against us for our sins.”³⁷

The Presbyterian ministers decided to add their own causes, which included the way that the king and bishops had sought to deform the Church of Scotland and the persecution of faithful ministers and preachers. The historian Andrew Stevenson, a contemporary of Robert Wodrow, refers to this: “To these some few added other causes; as, the innovations, made upon the discipline and worship of our church, the prosecuting of many honest ministers for their opposition to these innovations, and the like; which did not a little foment the differences betwixt the opposite parties.”³⁸

The Victorian historian W. M. Hetherington assumes that this event would have been enlivening to the Presbyterian cause. The evidence he uses for this inference is not altogether clear, but certainly, Dickson’s sermons place an emphasis on mourning for the Church’s condition as well as humbling and strengthening for the future.

Much of the searching power of the Holy Spirit seems to have been granted to both ministers and people during their solemn fast, and many felt that in humbling themselves before God and making an earnest confession of sin, both national and individual, they obtained strength not their own, a spiritual strength preparing them for greater sufferings, and giving earnest of final deliverance.³⁹

Despite revival, the wider situation seemed bleak with the decline in reformation commitments within the Church of Scotland. Gospel preaching was being hindered through episcopal control of parishes that excluded those who were faithful. There was evident concern about the future as these conditions would only grow worse, humanly speaking. Dickson gives vent to this in expounding the book of Lamentations from his pulpit.

The door of the entry to faithful men to the ministry is closed, and preachers that are in, waits [wots; knows] not how long their opposers will give them leave to preach. When void places are to be filled, what ado to get them filled, except this and yon [that] come, the B[ishop] and the P[relate] be pleased, and hardly will any honest man be found to please them, and so churches lie waste, and people as desolate as sheep having no shepherd, or else some hirelings put in. These things are not marked [observed] as the forerunners of Christ's flitting [leaving]. I persuade you He is going to flit ... ye shall be forced to say, "this flitting of Christ was foretold us, and we would not believe or mark [it]." Woe to Scotland when Christ flits. Woe to them that are behind (p. 51.).

At some point during 1628 (probably August) Dickson had decided to expound the book of Lamentations, having come to the end of Jeremiah.⁴⁰ It appears that Dickson was preaching on Lamentations in both the morning and afternoon (see p. 55). Perhaps the causes of the two week fast during May had directed his mind to the immediate application of the book. "The sword rages without and famine and pestilence within," he preached in the course of his sermons. These few words neatly summarise how the exhortations and observations given in these sermons engage with Scripture against the dark backdrop of turbulent times. They offer a unique view of how preaching connected with this period of Scottish history.

It is also possible that there was a further local fast in the autumn in relation to the developing situation in France, especially La Rochelle (August to October

1628).⁴¹ A local fast day was appointed in Edinburgh for the "distressed estate of La Rochelle" and "distress of God's Church everywhere in all Europe. This was similar to a fast the previous year for success for the king's armies and navies (the first La Rochelle expedition of June 1627).⁴² A national fast was called in response to the increase of popery and sin in the kingdom, to prevent a famine, to pray for the distressed Reformed churches of Bohemia, German and the Palatinate and for the king's "most necessary and lawful war" for the maintenance of the "true religion."⁴³

19 July 1627

In every parish of this kingdom the pastors shall exhort their people to humble themselves before the Lord in true repentance, with tears and fasting, for these special causes,—

1. Because of the great increase of popery, and of all sorts of sin in all degrees of persons within this land, both against law and gospel; which increase, being in the time of so clear a light, cannot but provoke God's heavy wrath against us, which cannot be averted without true and sincere repentance.
2. For the distress and cruel persecution of the Reformed kirks in Bohemia, and the adjoining provinces in Upper and Lower Germany, and the Palatinate, to entreat God that he would be appeased towards his people, and pity them, who are by the enemies' designs destinate to death, and whose blood is shed as water in the streets; that he would cut the cords of the wicked, and turn the rage of his enemies to his praise.
3. Because our King's Majesty is embarked in a most necessar[y] and lawful war, and has armies both by sea and land for the maintenance of the true religion and

39. William M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1842), 239.

40. James Mitchell of Dykes records that Dickson was expounding Jeremiah 2:2 on a fast day on 26 January 1628. *Memoirs of the Life of James Mitchell of Dykes, in the Parish of Ardsrossan* (1759), p. 29. Dickson notes having just finished Jeremiah in sermon one (see p. 45, other dating clues, pp. 235, 272). It is not impossible judging by the number of verses covered per sermon twice a week in Lamentations, that Dickson completed Jeremiah in August 1628.

41. Church records from Irvine from this period do not appear to have survived, and it has not been possible to examine the Burgh records.

42. Trinity College Kirk, Edinburgh session records, CH2/424/1 n.f. and CH2/141/1 ff. 19v., quoted from Margo Todd, *ibid.*, 351.

43. "Proceedings of the Commissioners of the Kirk," *ibid.*, 3.223.

his royal alliance, to pray to the Lord of Hosts that he would lead these and all other armies for the defense of the truth, and pour shame upon his enemies, and smite them through the thigh, that they be not able to stand against him.

4. Because of the extraordinar[y] rains, which now threaten rotting of the fruits of the ground before they be ripe, and so a fearful famine upon this land in so dangerous a time, when the seas are closed be the enemies, and no hope of help from other countries, if God shall send a famine, to entreat the Lord that He would cause the heaven answer the earth, and the earth to answer the corn, and the corns to answer our necessity, and us to answer His will, in faith, repentance and obedience.

PREACHING IN A TIME OF WAR

The May 1628 national fast gave a prominent place to the international context. Dickson seeks to apply the book of Lamentations to the ecclesiastical and social troubles of Scotland against the dark backdrop of the Thirty Years War in Europe. In some ways, it was a further outgrowth of what was experienced in the Netherlands as the Eighty Years' War or Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648). The Scots viewed the war in Europe that had been raging since 1618 as part of the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. “Wonder not,” remarks Dickson, “to see papiſts seek to root out true professors and to stir up the emperor and King of France for that end” (p. 278).

The Thirty Years War is still regarded as one of the most brutal and destructive conflicts in human history. Eight million people died from either violence, famine, or plague. Many countries in Europe (including Scotland) were drawn into the conflict by supplying troops.

This war began with the crushing of a Protestant revolt in Bohemia. Further phases that caused greatest grief in Scotland were those in the Upper and the Rhine Palatinate of Germany, particularly when Mannheim and Heidelberg fell in 1622. By 1628, things looked especially bleak for Protestants as the Danish forces were repelled, culminating in their defeat in the Battle of Wolgast (September 2, 1628). The Anglo-French War (1627–29) was triggered by a Huguenot revolt at La Rochelle. This town was besieged from August 1627 and was finally captured on October 28, 1628, after various English fleets had failed to provide relief and assistance. Apparently, Buckingham's first expedition carried 3,000 Scots troops led by the Earl of Morton (see p. 59).

Some of these events are referred to in the sermons

that David Dickson preached on Lamentations. These and associated events were uppermost in the reasons for the national fast called in Scotland during May 1628. It is noteworthy that in the following passage from his elaboration of the causes for fasting, Struthers quotes from the opening words of Lamentations as best able to express the condition of continental reformed churches.

First the most lamentable estate of the reformed Churches of Germany, and other Countries in Europe: Where the Gosſpel did shine, and God's worship was exercised fruitfully to his glory: But now by the cruelty of the prevailing Papiſts, fearful desolation is wrought in these places, God's saints bereft of their lives, their blood spilt as water in the streets, their women shamefully abused, their goods taken from them: And the estate of them who have escaped the rage of the sword, worse than the slain. Their liberties lost and themselves either driven from their dwellings or compelled to forsake their God and religion, and take themselves to Romish idolatry, or to banishment. And under the name of an imperial reformation, there is nothing but a godless deformation, setting up the abomination of ignorance, and error where the light hath been.

How many provinces sometimes pleasant, in a peaceable professing of the truth, as the paradise of God, are now turned in a wilderness: And the houses of God prepared sometime on the top of the mountains, and exalted above the hills, whereunto people did flow, are destroyed: And the Lord's displayed banner, under which many did march in comely order, is cast down, and many mothers in Israel, famous colleges and universities are scattered, and the abomination of desolation erected in them.

So we may say with the prophet, *Come, and behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath wrought in the Earth.* Psal. 16.8. *The heathen are come in the inheritance of the Lord, his holy temple have they defiled, and made Jerusalem heaps of stones: The dead bodies of God's saints have they given to be meat to the fowls of heaven and the flesh of thy saints to the beasts of the earth: Their blood have they shed as water about Jerusalem, and there was none to bury them: They have devoured Jacob, and made his dwelling place waste.* Psal. 79.1.3.4.

God hath forsaken the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among them: He delivered his strength in captivity, and his glory in the enemies hand. Psal. 78.61.

And we may lament with *Jeremy*. *How doeth the city remain solitary, that was full of people? She is a widow: She that was great among the nations, And princess among the province is made tributary.* And we may wish with that same prophet, *Oh, that mine head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night, for the slain of the daughter of my people.* Jerem. 9.1.

This work is a part of Antichrist's persecution, for now he is both breathing threatenings and slaughter, against the reformed churches, and executeth his cruelty against them, because of their obedience to God's voice in coming out of Babel, and that according to the bloody decrees of the Counsel of Trent.⁴⁴

News of the war on the continent was in significant demand in both England and Scotland, and popular publications continued to be printed throughout the period.⁴⁵ Over the course of these sermons, David Dickson mentions specific incidents in the siege of La Rochelle as it progressed. This seems to indicate that news was being received without too much delay and in reasonable detail.⁴⁶ Irvine was a port with trade links to Bordeaux and other ports on the Continent. Town cross news (word of mouth) and personal correspondence or reports from other ministers who may have had contacts would have provided other sources of news.⁴⁷ Newspapers from the continent were also directly available.

Edinburgh booksellers and clergy had links, particularly with the churches and book trade in Amsterdam, Leiden, Veere, Middelburg and Antwerp. A direct connection with George Veseler ... meant the Scots were not dependent upon London for a supply of Dutch corantos.⁴⁸

With an estimated 50,000 Scots fighting in Europe between 1618 and 1648, interest was very high.⁴⁹ Scotland was also not without its own anxiety of foreign invasion, and a system of beacons was ordered for the east coast in 1627, which would signal early warning of enemy ships. There were reports of enemy ships being sighted.⁵⁰ These concerns must have especially alarmed a coastal port such as Irvine.

The spiritual lessons Dickson draws from the war and its calamities are rather similar to those that Struthers advances. He sees it as a chastisement on the wider international reformed church for their sins and decline.

What lifts up the emperor, the king of Spain, etc., that the kirk has provoked God to make them strong? Our sins put the sword in the emperor's hand and gives them victory; sin is the means of the kirk's weakness and the greatest means of her adversary's strength (p. 62).

The great danger for the church in Scotland is that it will fail to draw these lessons and mourn for both the calamities of the reformed churches and the sins at home. "Albeit when news comes, they listen a little to it, but few lay it to heart."

We are like drunken men lying in the end of a house that is burning and the burnt timber is falling, yet they lie still and stir not, because the fire has not overtaken them. So now when the other end of Christ's kirk is burnt and a little part of it standing, yet we neither mourn for it nor are afraid. Therefore, it portends a fearful desolation and utter downfall to come upon us ... (p. 47).

"Are not the forerunners of the like coming on ourselves?" (p. 115), he asked ominously. Dickson's growing fear was that war would not be far away for Britain also. Perhaps he saw the unfolding policies of Charles I and Archbishop Laud pointing in this direction. He anticipates accurately the wars that would begin only a decade later.

[T]his land shall be found to be a bloody land. I speak plain talk. The sword shall rage in this land, and the fire that is begun in the kirk and the commonwealth, and is little marked or regarded, shall turn to the overthrow of all ranks and estates (p. 118).

44. Struthers, pp. 5–6.

45. For instance, the following ballad, *A lamentable list of certaine hidious, frightfull, and prodigious signes, which have bin seene in the aire, earth, and waters, at severall times for these 18. yeares last past, to this present* (London, 1638). The following pamphlets also demonstrate the interest: Philip Vincent, *The lamentations of Germany* (London, 1638); L. Brinckmair, *The vvarnings of Germany* (London, 1638).

46. See especially Dickson pages 235 and 272 and the lengthy note on page 53.

47. Dauvit Horsbroch surveys the sources and networks that kept Scotland informed: letters, books, sermons, travelers' tales, even popular songs, familiarized the home public with the war in Europe. 'Wish You Were Here? Scottish Reactions,' in *Scotland and the Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648*, ed. Steve Murdoch (Brill, 2001), 245–270.

48. Jayne E.E. Boys, *London's News Press and the Thirty Years War*, Studies in Early Modern Cultural, Political and Social History (The Boydell Press, 2011), 10.

49. *Scotland and the Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648*, 14.

50. RPCS, 2.1, 620. See the note in these sermons on p.106 and RPC2.2, xiv; RPC2.1, xxix.

Despite this dark and bleak backdrop, Dickson could derive hope for the church from the book of Lamentations. There was even hope for the protestant churches of continental Europe being severely devastated to the point of extinction. He emphasises the words “we are not consumed” (Lamentations 3:22). “God may well correct His kirk and children very sorely, but He will not consume them.” Like Rutherford, who uses this imagery often,⁵¹ he draws encouragement from the bush that Moses saw, which was burnt but not consumed (Exodus 3:2). There is hope in the midst of the darkness that the Lord is working out a purpose that will be for the Church’s good.

All that the Lord does in afflicting His [people] is only to purge away their dross... . Let this comfort the godly against hard afflictions and against the sore strokes which the kirks in France and Germany have gotten, for they shall not be consumed. For the Lord shall reserve a remnant and a seed for a new generation, albeit the whole world combines against His kirk [Ps. 2:2]... . The reason of the not consuming of His kirk and saints is because His compassions fail not, which lets us see that the kindness of the Lord to a people or person fails not, for His compassion and kindness is an enduring and lasting kindness which wears not [away] (pp. 177–178).

PREACHING IN A TIME OF FAMINE

A relatively poor country during this period, Scotland was experiencing economic crisis at this time. Due to

51. Rutherford returns to use this image of the church not destroyed by affliction and persecution dozens of times in his letters, using it first in his second letter dated April 23, 1628, almost exactly contemporary with Dickson’s sermons. In use from the start of the Reformation, it was aptly adopted in 1583 by the persecuted French Huguenot church as an emblem.

52. Matters concerning food prices and poor laws were a recurring concern for the King’s Privy Council in Scotland at this time, especially around 1625, see RPCS, 2nd ser., i, 160–62, and i, 156.

53. *Scottish Population History*, ed. M. Flinn (Cambridge, 1977), 117. Quoted in Laura A. M. Stewart, “Poor Relief in Edinburgh and the Famine of 1621–24,” *International Review of Scottish Studies* 30 (2005): 5–41, 5. See also R. W. Hoyle, “Famine as Agricultural Catastrophe: The Crisis of 1622–4 in East Lancashire,” *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 63, no. 4 (2010): 974–1002.

54. Kevin Hall, “The Great Famine of 1623,” *History Scotland* (June 2018), 120.

55. John Row, *The Historie of the Kirk of Scotland, M.D. LVIII.–M. DC. XXXVII* (Edinburgh: For the Maitland Club, 1842), 330; Calderwood, *History*, 7:377.

56. RPCS, *ibid.*, p. xxxvi (see p. 121).

57. See, for instance, concerns about plague on a ship in 1627, RPCS, 2nd ser., i, 484–5.

crop failure, there were four periods of famine affecting food costs from 1620–1625.⁵² The years 1621–24 were known as the “Ill Years”; they were, as Michael Flinn starkly describes them, “a national disaster.”⁵³ The great famine of 1623 mainly affected Edinburgh and the east coast. A fifth to a quarter of the population of Dunfermline died.⁵⁴ Both John Row and David Calderwood, as contemporary ministers and historians, traced the providential cause of such a disastrous event to the parliamentary ratification of the Five Articles of Perth in 1621.⁵⁵

One of the reasons for a fast in August 1627 was a fear of famine, presumably in expectation of a potentially poor harvest. As Dickson observes, “but one scant year [of harvests] would make us look with a pale face” (p. 235). A letter to the King from his privy council in February of 1628, paints a “picture of a country virtually in a state of bankruptcy and with little prospects of a happier future.”⁵⁶ All this provides the background for Dickson’s direct application to his hearers of the instances of famine mentioned in Lamentations. “Provoke not this blessed God to break the staff of bread and send you cleanness of teeth, so that you have neither food of your own, nor can find it in other countries. This rod has been oft shaken above this land, but few men have stood [in] awe of it” (p. 85).

Dickson was concerned about “spiritual famine,” which is “most dangerous,” yet “marked by few.” He observed with grief that “many congregations in the land lack men to break the bread of life to them” (p. 255). There was a danger of places like Irvine being complacent about the plentiful spiritual food they were receiving. “Be thankful for the spiritual food that is daily broken,” he counsels. “Crave hungry stomachs for it.” Indeed, the two were so linked together that despising the Word could lead to a bodily as well as spiritual famine. “If you have not a stomach for spiritual food ... beware you get not cleanness of teeth [Amos 4:6] and want [*dearth*] of bodily food. If you will not eat of spiritual food, it is justice you want [*lack*] the food you would soon miss and find scarcity of bread for contempt of the Word” (p. 133).

PREACHING IN A TIME OF PESTILENCE

During this time, the bubonic plague made occasional visits to Scotland and the British Isles. Dickson refers to the 1625 plague in London, where 35,000 people had perished (p. 53). Edinburgh was also visited at the same time. Irvine was no doubt concerned about infected ships in the same way as other Scottish seaports, although many of them were on the east coast.⁵⁷ Perth

experienced severe periodic outbreaks of plague and in autumn 1622 "no familie in all the citie wes frie of this visitatioun." On average, Perth lost between ten and twenty percent of its adult population.⁵⁸

When this took place, the church authorities would proclaim a public fast.⁵⁹ They connected such epidemics (as Dickson does) with the judgment of God on the sins of the community (p. 267). Dickson uses the language of the plague to describe God's judgment. "Where the botch [*infection*] is, the cleanger's wiþ [*broom, cleanser of infected places*] must follow. So where sin and the defilement thereof like a pest is among persons, there the plague of God must come" (p. 268). Continuing the comparison between sin and the plague, Dickson observes that God exiled Jerusalem like a person infected with the plague who was quarantined in a temporary house outside of a town (p. 271).

Dickson notes that a true preacher of God's Word has such a love for souls that "if the pest [*plague*] were in the congregation, he would not leave them, but would go as near them as the Lord's law, or preservation of his own life, would permit" (p. 131). False teachers, on the other hand, are like a spiritual plague that troubles the church because they seek to indulge people in their sins (pp. 267–268).

PREACHING IN A TIME OF DECLINE

Preparations were being made for the possible coronation of Charles as King of Scotland in 1628. It was postponed by the privy council in July and in the event, it would not take place until 1633.⁶⁰ The parliament took place in September and perhaps it was thought that if it were a full parliament with the king present, greater changes would be introduced or greater conformity to episcopacy enforced. Samuel Rutherford had an evident concern at this time (July 27, 1628), urging one of his correspondents to,

be careful to present to the Lord the present estate of this decaying kirk. For what shall be concluded in Parliament anent her, the Lord knoweth. Sure I am, the decree of a most fearful parliament in heaven is at the very point of coming forth, because of the sins of the land.

Rutherford's language and sentiments in these years regarding the church is certainly echoed in Dickson's sermons. Rutherford uses the language of Lamentations to express his concerns.

Zion weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are upon her cheeks; amongst all her lovers she hath none to

comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they are become her enemies" (Lam i. 2). "Our silver is become dross, our wine mixed with water" (Isa. i. 22). "How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed! the stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter!" (Lam. iv. 1, 2). It is time now for the Lord's secret ones, who favour the dust of Zion, to cry, "How long, Lord?" and to go up to their watchtower, and to stay there.⁶¹

In these sermons, Dickson traces Judah's trajectory of decline in Scotland's experience. It is a lamentable narrative much like Rutherford's imaginative words in his letters of the time.⁶²

Scotland for a while had such glory that the nations about admired it, and many commended it in their writings, accounting Scotland to be the spot of happiest ground under heaven because God in His ordinance[s] and worship got leave to dwell there in greater liberty than any parts elsewhere. . . . His Word was taught among us in greater purity and plainness, there was greater harmony and consent among us than in any parts elsewhere. But now there is a strange [*estrangement; strain*], for our unity is turned into schism, our golden purity of worship mixed with human inventions (p. 248).

58. Anon., ed., *The Chronicle of Perth; A Register of the Remarkable Occurrences Chiefly Connected with that City from the Year 1210 to 1668* (Edinburgh, 1831), pp. 23–4, quoted in Richard D. Oram. "It cannot be decernit quha are clean and quha are foule." Responses to epidemic disease in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 30, #4, Special issue. Transformative Disorder: Scotland 1550–1650, Fall 2006/2007: pp. 21, 13.

59. See Margo Todd, 174–5.

60. See RPCS, II, p.385. Dickson makes the following reference to Charles. "When we have tolerable kings, be thankful for it and pray for his preservation and continuance and that his faults may be redressed and to be saved from anarchy or want of government" (p. 276).

61. Rutherford, *Letters*. Letter XVII is undated, but Bonar places this in chronological order after 1630. The reference to Henry Burton being imprisoned, however, dates it to 1629.

62. "Wearied Jesus, after He had travelled from Geneva, by the ministry of worthy Mr. Knox, and was laid in His bed, and reformation begun, and the curtains drawn, had not gotten His dear eyes well together, when irreverent bishops came in, and with the din and noise of ceremonies, holy days, and other Romish corruptions, they awake our Beloved. Others came to His bedside, and drew the curtains, and put hands on His servants, banished, deprived, and confined them." Rutherford, *Letters*, Letter XII, July 21, 1630.

A mark of those who were false teachers was that they were enemies to those who would have no worship or government except what God had ordained (pp. 277–278). Dickson was concerned about this rejection in practice of the regulative principle of worship through uncommanded worship (p. 261). Indeed, he identifies this as a mark of the godly—their grief is greater when God’s worship is disgraced (p. 71). The godly have a unique sorrow for the desolation of the church (p. 113). They have their eyes on the future and what will happen to the church and the cause of truth in the “succeeding age” (pp. 104–105).

Dickson refers to the defacing of God’s worship (pp. 61, 81, 117) and the innovations brought in under the Articles of Perth (pp. 51, 77, 117), which was, sadly, hardening Roman Catholics in other countries in their own idolatry. He observes the truth of the result of such corruptions in the worship of God,

Will you then expose God’s people and His glory to shame? He shall expose both you and it to shame, for there is nothing so dear to God, but He will put it in the hand of enemies when His people pollute it. He will pull away the hedge from about His worship when His worship is defiled (p. 81).

These corruptions were provoking God to leave Scotland to themselves. “God is pouring shame upon this land, and God’s glory is departed from us,” he laments. One of the key elements was the episcopal control over who could enter the ministry and which ministers could be called to which parishes. The bishops “let none in whom He would have in.” Instead, they were “thrusting in men of their own who come to the pulpit with a bag of words without the evidence of the Spirit” (p. 248).

Dickson could only anticipate an increase in the existing defection from Reformation doctrine, worship, government, and practice within the Scottish Church.

63. See page 118 for another striking passage almost prophetic of the civil wars that would begin over a decade later.

64. Holfelder. For a reasonably full list of Dickson’s writings see, Matthew Vogan, “David Dickson: Provisional Bibliography,” *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal*, 9 (2019), 1–15; *infra*, 84–92.

65. *An Exposition of all St. Pauls epistles together with an explanation of those other epistles of the apostles St. James, Peter, John & Jude* (London, 1659).

66. Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ according to Matthew* (London, 1647). *A Brief Explication of the first fifty Psalms* (London, 1653); *A Brief Explication of the other fifty Psalmes, from Ps. 50 to Ps. 100* (London, 1653); *A Brief Explication of the last fifty Psalmes, from Ps. 100. to the end* (London, 1654).

This, in turn, was bringing persecution with it, such as Dickson himself had experienced, and worse.

Wonder not to see such defection in the kirk, as corrupt teachers may be ring leaders in the persecution of the just and yet God have His own among them. It is no uncouth thing to see those who should build the church destroy the church and will persecute those who deserve least at their hand (p. 269).

Dickson anticipates times of greater trouble and conflict. “Persecution has been, and more is to be feared.” He anticipates what would indeed be fulfilled, that there would be bloodshed in the land before persecution by false teachers would cease (pp. 268–269). This would take place ten years later, but in the meantime, the darkness would deepen. His message was one of preparation for the gathering storm, using Scriptural help such as that found in the book of Lamentations.

Let us account these days of peace days of [*sic*? as] preparation for harder days and for a time to gather strength for enduring of persecution (p. 269).⁶³

DICKSON’S SERMONS ON LAMENTATIONS

Within little more than five years of preaching the sermons on Lamentations, Dickson would begin a lifelong and ambitious project to provide popular expositions of Scripture to the average reader. “In the early years of his ministry, Dickson’s expository sermons on various books of the Bible were transcribed by his auditors and widely circulated in manuscript form among the godly. In response to the demand for his sermons, Dickson developed a plan . . . to produce a series of brief popular biblical commentaries, the first instalment of which was *A Short Explanation of the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews* (Aberdeen, 1635).”⁶⁴ It is interesting that while Dickson’s consecutive pulpit exposition provided the basis for his published work, comparatively few of his sermons have been published.

In 1645 he published a Latin commentary on all of the apostolic epistles, *Expositio Analytica Omnium Apostolicarum Epistolarum* (1645), later translated in 1659.⁶⁵ After producing a commentary on Matthew, he also published his three-volume *Brief Explication of the Psalms* (London, 1653–4).⁶⁶

The careful concern to explain clearly the words of Scripture demonstrated in these volumes can also be witnessed in the Lamentations sermons. There was a condensed brevity owing to the fact that the expositions

were designed to be concise explanations for the benefit of the ordinary reader rather than scholarly or exegetical.

It is the quality of suggestive but rich brevity that drew the attention of C. H. Spurgeon, who wrote of his published expositions, "Dickson is a writer after our own heart." "For preachers he is a great ally." Spurgeon regarded Dickson's work as "more suggestive of sermons than almost any other we have met with." This "holy savour and suggestiveness" was the primary attraction. One could find "abundance of suggestions for profitable trains of thought." "There is nothing brilliant or profound; but everything is clear and well arranged, and the unction runs down like the oil from Aaron's head."⁶⁷

Dickson's sermons on Lamentations seem to fit with his usual practice. It is said that he preferred "to take three or four verses for his text." He felt that God's people needed a substantial serving of the Word. He said, "God's bairns [*children*] should get a good blade [*large slice*] of his own bread; and, when the steward, the Minister, was distributing the food, he should sit down and take part of the meat to himself with the bairns!"⁶⁸ He preferred a simple approach to preaching. Not everything could or should be expounded, only that which was most necessary and profitable.

When a man came to a text, it was like a man's coming to a tree; a man should shake the tree, and then that which is ripe would presently fall and come off, and that which was green would bide upon the tree; so a man should not take all out of a text that might be drawn!⁶⁹

In these sermons, Dickson does not bring out all possible interpretations, but focuses on the one to which he is committed. Neither does he seek to parade learning and knowledge of the original language more than what is absolutely necessary. Dickson brings out the fact that Lamentations is written in Hebrew acrostic poetry, a fact which would not have been obvious to his congregation. There are only around four instances in these sermons where he adverts to the meaning of the Hebrew original.

He was not for Ministers bringing out to the people various senses and expositions upon a text; he was only for bringing that which they thought the true meaning of a text; for Ministers bringing out several senses to the people, which they did not like and approve, was just like a cook bringing up a piece of meat to the table, and saying, "This is a good piece of meat, but you must not eat it nor taste it!"— and then he brings another, and

says the same, The cook should bring up no meat but what he is to give them to eat. He was altogether against Ministers bringing Latin sentences and high learned expressions to the pulpit, among poor common people; "for their bringing learned sentences to the people in a pulpit, was like a cook's bringing up the spit and racks to the table! These are fit to be kept in the kitchen, to make ready the meat, but they are not to be brought to the table."⁷⁰

Similar sentiments are clearly found in the Lamentations series of sermons.

Then, here is a rule to discern a good preacher . . . if he be studying to dress his language and to vent his learning to tickle the ear and not to reform the mind, though he were never so learned, yet he is but a vain, foolish preacher. For what use serves his blades [*fragments*] of Greek and Latin and sentences of the fathers but to let people know that he is well-read? If he seeks to express his variety of learning and seeks not, by all means, to draw to repentance and a new life, he is but a vain man, albeit he wear a velvet gown.⁷¹

These sermons convey Dickson's homely manner of preaching. One striking feature that is strongly evident in these sermons is the pithy aphorisms that he uses. These proverbial expressions would have been suitably memorable for his flock. Proverbs have a unique power with oral cultures, and so these would have been especially effective with those who were illiterate or semiliterate. Sometimes he quotes an actual proverb (pp. 278–279),⁷² but more often, it seems to be a phrase that he himself has coined, such as: "get God and get all, tyne [*lose*] God and tyne all" (p. 276). Many of these proverbial statements reinforce his application, "as wide as is the measure of sin, as wide are the vials of God's wrath" (p. 77). "His anger is more bitter than any pleasure can be sweet. It is more fearful to have God angry

67. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (1876; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 84, 157, 168, 186.

68. Wodrow, *Analecta*, 3:7.

69. *Analecta*, 3:9.

70. *Analecta*, 3:9.

71. See page 139.

72. Let the godly have patience seeing the wicked shall not be spared forever, for they shall greet [*cry*] sore after noon, as those who were stricken before noon (page 279). Another common proverb to both Scotland and England (see Samuel Ward, *Sermons and Treatises*, 1636; repr. 1862. p. 99) is, "blind men swallow many flies" (p. 270). Dickson's favored proverb in these sermons, which he makes use of several times, is, "It is good to learn at other men's cost" (see page 287).

than pleasant to get our own will” (p. 90). He ruefully observes that “when religion is made bitter, all things are made bitter in that land” (p. 62).

Robert Wodrow also records that “Mr Dickson laboured to find Christ in every text that he preached on.”⁷³ This is consistent with what Dickson says in this series. “All doctrine that edifies not, builds not on Christ and drives not to faith, repentance and a new life, will not abide the fire” (p. 139). Although there is scarcely an explicit mention of Christ or the Messiah in the book of Lamentations, Dickson carefully draws Christ-centric application. He refers not only to how the temple sacrifices and altar pointed forward to Christ but also how the Nazarites were types of Christ. He also shows how Christ is the true King of whom all the kings of Israel were types. Lamentations 4:20 refers to “The breath of our nostrils, the anointed of the Lord.” Dickson explains this and applies it in a beautiful Christological way without straining the text.⁷⁴

He is called the breath of their nostrils because as [by] the breath of a man his life is kept in, so by the king’s preservation is the preservation of the whole kingdom, and they had promise of the preservation of the kingdom and continuation thereof in David’s house. Therefore, a king of that house being preserved, they think the kingdom shall continue, and they shall have rest under his shadow. If this they expected to be true in any, then especially in Christ the true King of Israel whom all the rest of the kings typified. He indeed is the breath of man’s nostrils, and while He is to you, for the life of all is preserved, even life eternal.

USE. If the Christ of God be the breath of all nostrils, then draw life from Him breath for breath, for a man cannot live if his breath be stopped. So neither can you

73. *Analec̄ta*, 3.8.

74. See page 274.

75. See page 245.

76. These would include Calvin, Lyra, Osiander, Brenz, Ferus, Pareus, Selnecker, Melancthon, Vermigli, Bullinger, and Oecolampadius.

77. John Udall, *A Commentarie vpon the Lamentations of Ieremy* (London, 1593). John Hull, *Exposition upon part of Lamentations* (London, 1618).

78. See notes of these sermons in manuscript in, Collection, Maxwells of Pollok, Glasgow and Renfrew, 16 items/notebooks; T-PM 114/1, Glasgow City Archives, Mitchell Library, Glasgow; Sir George Maxwell, Summaries of sermons at Cathcart, Glasgow and elsewhere, 10 Aug. 1647(?)–31 Dec. 1648; in reverse, notes on Genesis, c.i.–xxxii [chapters 1–31]. The year is supplied by the Mitchell Library from the contents, and the question mark is theirs.

79. See page 246.

live the life of grace but by drawing breath and grace from Christ, for He both gives and holds in life.

Dickson is tender in commending Christ. “Think not to eschew God’s judgments, but under Christ’s shadow, with the coney in the rock seeing judgments are already begun, let us hide ourselves under His covert.” He warns his congregation that,

Christ, who is a lamb for meekness, when His mercy is abused, becomes a fiery lion. For He being that angel that led the children of Israel through the wilderness by a cloud and pillar of fire, spared them not when they provoked Him, but slew them all so that none entered into Canaan but two persons, for they would not be led by Him. Albeit Christ be tender, meek and gentle to the poor and miserable that turn unto Him, yet is He a terrible and fearful Lord to the proud and obstinate. Therefore, in time submit to Him.⁷⁵

Lamentations has been under-represented both in sermons and commentaries over the centuries. This was the case during Dickson’s time also. There were the standard commentaries in Latin that he could have consulted.⁷⁶ If he had wished to draw on any English expositions, however, there was only the volume published by John Udall in 1593 or John Hull’s exposition from 1618.⁷⁷ Only a couple more would follow as the century progressed. Dickson himself would return to preach several sermons from the book in 1648 when a professor of divinity in Glasgow.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION

David Dickson helps us to recover the true glory of the church. The church has a spiritual glory that is defaced when we try to conform it and its ordinances to the world. Jeremiah “compares the kirk to gold being compared with other nations, it lets us see that the glory of God’s people is like gold in comparison with other people, for all other glory is but worldly and perishing, but the glory of the kirk is heavenly and permanent because she is partaker of her Lord’s glory . . . the kirk’s glory is nothing else but a declaration of that which God has bestowed upon her.”⁷⁹

The spiritual beauty of the church consists in the ordinary means of grace that have been appointed for the spiritual nourishment and refreshment of believers and the conversion of sinners. Dickson speaks to our generation and its pursuit of novelties that are devised by man to appeal to man. In the sermon on Lamentations 4:1, he says,

USE. Then look about you and be enamoured with the beauty of the house of God, delight in the fellowship of saints, as David [said,] "How amiable is thy tabernacle" [cf. Ps. 84:1], when he was shut out in the tents of Kedar. Likewise, he calls the kirk the land of the living, for in other places, he saw nothing but mouths [that] smelled like the graves of dead men [cf. Ps. 5:9], full of nothing but sensuality, beastliness, and idolatry, but they thought Judea the land of the living, for there they found the sweet breath of the saints smelling of the incense of praise and of all these ointments where with the vessels of the sanctuary were anointed. He found among the saints the smell of the graces of the Lord's Spirit; yea, everything which might have allured a spiritual eye.

APPLICATION. The same is your glory and prerogative, for your beauty exceeds all the nations of the earth that know not Christ, for you have God for your husband, your Lord and your love; you may kiss the Son of God and not be despised; you may knock at the King of heaven's door and be sure to be let in; you may get the Spirit to inform you and lead you in all truth, the heavenly manna of His Word to your food, the rivers of waters of the Spirit to divide it and digest it when you have fed upon it, that you may grow up as plants of righteousness to Him. Take then a view of this glory and despise all other in comparison of it. Here be made wise by it, put on this beauty and glory, seek the face of your Lord, deck yourself with this glory, lest your gold be turned into a potsherd and vanish and decay.⁸⁰

If this is true concerning the church's glory, how it should make us grieve concerning the church that is so dear to God. "Are there none to be sorry for their afflictions that are so dear to God? If so be, let such beware that they be not dear to God" (p. 50). Dickson indicates why the losses sustained by the church of God should deeply affect us more than anything else. "We should be more sorry to wit [*know; see*] the kirk in a hard state than if our children were slain, our goods spoiled, and our public estate undone, for the greatest evils should move us most ... because the loss of the church is conjoined with the dishonor of God, and loss of spiritual things" (p. 49).

When we grasp the true import of the church's diminished glory in our own generation, we must also say, "How is the gold become dim! how is the most fine gold changed!" (Lamentations 4:1). Thus, the book of Lamentations continues to be profoundly relevant to a professing church under God's chastisement and in dire

need of repentance and restoration. Here are prayers to weep out before the Lord.

her enemies prosper; for the Lord hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions... . And from the daughter of Zion all her beauty is departed ... Jerusalem remembered in the days of her affliction and of her miseries all her pleasant things that she had in the days of old (Lamentation 1:5-7).

Dickson also helps us to be watchful. When the church experiences chastisement it arises from a pattern of disobedience. God has been chastising unconfessed secret sins by allowing us to commit further secret sins. Whether it is a church or an individual, "where there are hid and secret sins, if they are not repented of, will break out in open sins ... secret sins not being heeded, beget more sins of that kind and leaven the whole lump and at last break out into a running issue to defile others." For instance, decline and departure in God's worship begin in the heart. One thing leads to another, and secret idolatry leads to open idolatry. (pp. 76-77). Leaving our first love may seem like an insignificant secret sin in our eyes, but Christ regards it as a leaven that influences everything. It is so dangerous that a church's candlestick will be removed if we do not repent (Revelation 2:5; see p. 220). We must blow at the little spark that remains to fan it into a flame (p. 53).

Despite a backsliding condition where holiness and godliness are rare, and the worship of God debased, there is hope in turning to the Lord. It would be good for us to learn the humble submission of Jeremiah to God's chastening hand, and then we might also share in his hope.

It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord... . For the Lord will not cast off for ever: But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies... . Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens (Lamentation 3:26, 31, 40).

In Lamentations, Jeremiah pours out his sorrow before the Lord. When he rises to find hope, it is in the character and covenant mercies of God (Lamentations 3:22-24). In the midst of not only change and decay but also ruin and desolation, He remains the same. The "Lord remains still unchangeable, kind, and loving to those

80. See page 247.