

His Best Known Statement

Ofttimes we repeat or have heard repeated statements but do not know where they originate. One such statement is: "*There, but for the grace of God go I.*" To the best of our knowledge these words were first quoted by John Bradford when in the Tower of London as he saw a condemned man going to be executed.



John's Early Days

It is understood that John Bradford was born in 1510 and having received a good education he began to study law. A fellow student witnessed to him of God's salvation and at the age of thirty-seven John was converted and gloriously saved. Leaving law he started to study theology at Cambridge, and in 1550 he was ordained by Bishop Ridley to be a "roving chaplain".

John's Imprisonment and Death

When Mary became Queen (1553-1558) she was exceedingly zealous to restore Roman Catholicism. Within a very short time from the commencement of her reign, John, like many others, was arrested and confined to the Tower of London. During her reign Mary had 260 individuals put to death for their Protestant faith. Consequently, she was known as "Bloody Mary". Like Paul, even though he was in prison, John preached the gospel to those around him and spent his time writing letters to encourage other believers. During his imprisonment he was "blessed" for a time to be a fellow-prisoner with three of the great reformers. What times of deep fellowship it must have been for these four men as they sought to encourage each other in the study of the scriptures. In time all four would be put to death as martyrs, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer. Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley were slain on 16th October 1555 and Thomas Crammer on March 21st 1556. All four men were slain for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

It was on January 31st, 1555 John was brought to Newgate Prison to be burned at the stake as a heretic. It is reported that as he and John Leaf, a nineteen year old young man, approached the stake, they fell on their faces in one brief moment of silent prayer but were hastily rushed to the stake. There they were chained and just before the fires were lit, John made one last plea to his countrymen: "O England, England, repent thee of thy sins. Beware of false antichrists; take heed they do not deceive you." He asked forgiveness of any he might have wronged and freely forgave those who so grievously offended against him. After begging the prayers of the people, he turned to address young John Leaf, his fellow-sufferer. The words are unforgettable: "Be of good comfort brother; for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night!"

John lived and died in the reality of the glory beyond this present life, being enraptured with the joys of Heaven and the blessings of eternity. Therefore, for him the worst that man could do would only shorten the journey and hasten him home. In anticipation of the blessedness of Heaven, he wrote: "Dear hearts, be not faint-hearted. Continue to walk in the fear of the Lord, as you have well begun. At the length we shall meet together in Christ's kingdom, and there never part asunder . . . O joyful place; O place of all places desired."

John lived in the reality of the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "Knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance" (Heb. 10:34). He lived outside the box of time and this world, and in the fulness of the wonder of God, Christ, and heaven. We might well take the words of Hebrews concerning such a man and those who also suffered and suffer martyrdom: "Of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:38).

It had been John's prayer that God would give him strength to glorify Him by his death. His prayer was answered.