

ELIZABETH WELCH



Elizabeth was the youngest daughter of John Knox, a fiery preacher who helped bring the Reformation to Scotland in the 1500's. She was born around 1570 and probably in Edinburgh. When Elizabeth grew up, she married a minister too, named John Welch. In 1603 Scottish King James VI also became King of England and became known as James I. King James issued decrees that everyone in Scotland and England should worship the same





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way. He wanted to keep the English style of worship and church government, which included priests and bishops. Those in Scotland, who thought the Bible told them to worship more simply without the need for great ceremony or bishops, said no to the king. John Welch, Elizabeth's husband, was one of those men.

In 1605 John Welch was arrested along with other ministers for defying the king's orders. He endured a year in prison in Blackness Castle near Edinburgh. After a year, the king decided to exile John Welch to France. Elizabeth joined her husband in his exile with their children and they lived there for sixteen years. John studied the French language so he could continue preaching, and he ministered in three different churches. In the last town they settled in, St. Jean D'Angely, they faced the French army who had besieged the town, but God protected them. So by the time Elizabeth had reached middle age, she had faced the difficulty of her husband's arrest and imprisonment, being exiled with him to France and the dangers of an invading army. Surely she had faced enough risks for God. But there was one more to come.



THE DANGEROUS DEBATE

(1622)

Elizabeth woke to the sound of birds singing and her husband coughing. The dawn light was breaking through the slats in the wooden shutters on the window by the bed. Leaning over to her husband, Elizabeth rubbed his back as he gasped for air after his coughing fit. Above her head she could hear their two youngest children, Louise and Nathaniel stirring in their loft beds. The two older boys had been sent back to Scotland for their education.

‘I’ll get you something to drink to ease your chest,’ Elizabeth said as she reached over and handed him his plaid.

John nodded, still unable to speak. He pulled his plaid around his shoulders and started to cough again.

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Elizabeth pulled her dark blue gown over her linen chemise and did up the buttons down the bodice front. Then she tied her full white apron over on top. She didn't take time to add a collar or cuffs or even her stockings. Pushing her feet into soft leather shoes, she walked around the bed toward the kitchen area at the other end of the stone cottage. She opened the spigot on the ale barrel and filled a mug. John sipped it gratefully as his coughing spell eased again.

Elizabeth was worried about her husband. He looked older than his fifty years. Ever since his imprisonment at Blackness Castle many years earlier, his health had not been strong. But now she was afraid that he was getting even worse. She sighed while she pinned her grey braid on top of her head and tied her white cap on top.

Nathaniel came down the loft ladder with a young man's clatter. He cheerfully greeted his parents before going to build up the fire in the stone hearth. Nine-year-old Louise arrived a few minutes later in a more dignified manner and began laying the table for the morning meal. She cast worried glances at her father as he shrugged his wide shoulders into his doublet and fastened it in front.

After they broke their fast, they remained at the wooden trestle table to begin their morning devotions. A knock sounded at the door and Nathaniel leapt

up to answer it. Two men from the local Huguenot congregation entered. They were dressed soberly in dark coloured doublets and breeches. They removed their soft hats and bowed to both John and Elizabeth.

‘Come in, *mes amis*,’ John welcomed them and offered them seats on the bench at the table. ‘Please join us for our Sabbath morning worship.’

‘Thank you,’ one of them replied. ‘But we came only to persuade you to remain at home today. The doctor tells us your health is worsening, Mr. Welch. Please rest. Someone else can preach today.’

‘Nonsense,’ John replied. ‘As long as God gives me breath, I must preach. I can do nothing else.’

Elizabeth said nothing. She understood her husband’s call to be a minister, even in this foreign land. He had studied the French language carefully when they first arrived so he could preach God’s Word to the French people. But she worried about his health.

The men shook their heads. ‘Very well. If you are able, we do love to hear you speak of the things of God. We will see you later at worship.’

After they left, John patted Elizabeth’s hand. ‘I must serve God,’ he said, knowing very well what she was thinking.

She smiled in return. ‘Of course you must.’

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Later that day John entered the pulpit in the small stone church and began to preach. The benches were filled with people eager to hear their fiery minister. No one slept when John Welch preached. But he didn't finish his sermon. He already spoke more slowly than he once did and he leaned on the pulpit for support. Then a coughing fit began and weakened him so much that he had to stop and be helped home. The congregation remained behind, praying for their ailing pastor.

The doctor came and shook his head at John as he lay in his bed. 'I told you that you must rest. But even that won't cure you, Mr. Welch. I believe that only if you breathe your native air in Scotland will you begin to feel better. Surely after all this time the English king will let you return.'

Elizabeth stood by the bed. 'The king is a stubborn man. It's not likely he will change his mind,' she said. And then she paused. 'Although I suppose we could always ask him.'

John smiled weakly, his face as pale as the sheet that covered him. 'I'm sure *you* could, my dear.'

And so it was decided. First they must write and ask permission to return to England to speak to the king. Surprisingly the king gave his permission, but only for them to come to London, and John was not allowed to preach. So then the preparation for the long journey from the south of France to London began.

Elizabeth packed up their belongings, giving away their household furniture and other items to needy people. They would travel lightly with only their clothes and John's books in a small box. They had a long journey ahead.

They arrived in London feeling just as much like foreigners there as they had felt in France. How both John and Elizabeth longed for Scotland, wishing that their journey was ending in Ayr and not in this noisy, dirty city. Making the best of it, they gratefully settled in the home of some fellow believers who had heard of their coming.

Letters from France had arrived more quickly than the Welch family. The letters told of John's poor health and of his hopes that King James would relent and allow him to return home to Scotland. Meanwhile, the Christians in London were anxious to meet this famous preacher for themselves. Many came to visit him in the Welch family lodgings, gathering around the wooden table, with Bibles open, discussing doctrines. Elizabeth understood, but was aware that even this exertion left her husband weak.

Meanwhile they waited. Elizabeth knew she couldn't just walk up to the front door of the palace and ask to see the king. She had to ask friends, who would ask their friends, who knew

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someone at the court, who could get permission for Elizabeth to come to the king's court. It all took time and as John seemed weaker each day, Elizabeth worried that she might not get to speak with the king at all.

At last the summons came. Elizabeth put on her best dress, a dark red gown with a wide lace collar and lace cuffs. She wore a matching lace trimmed white apron and cape. As she entered the corridors of the palace, she realised she was very plainly dressed. Both the men and women of the court wore clothing trimmed with furs, gold and silver braid, along with much jewellery. Ignoring their unfriendly stares she followed the steward to the door of the King's Presence Chamber. Taking a deep breath she entered the room full of people and saw the king himself standing at the far end.

Elizabeth marched up to the tall thin man richly dressed in gold trimmed doublet and breeches with a long fur lined open coat. She curtsied deeply to him and lightly kissed the hand he held out to her. Then she rose to her feet and heard people around her gasp. The king had not given her permission to rise. But Elizabeth didn't want to waste any more time. It had already taken too long to get here. She looked the middle-aged king in the eye.

He stared back at her, his bearded face grim.



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‘Who is your father?’ the king suddenly demanded.

‘John Knox,’ Elizabeth replied proudly.

The king’s eyes widened. ‘You’re Knox’s daughter and Welch’s wife? The devil couldn’t have thought up a better match than that!’

‘We certainly never asked his advice!’ Elizabeth shot back.

The king had more questions and Elizabeth felt as if she were on trial. She was aware that the room was now silent, everyone listening to their conversation.

‘How many children did your father have?’

‘Three,’ Elizabeth replied. ‘All lasses.’

‘God be thanked,’ the king replied with a smirk. ‘If it had been three lads I’d have had no peace in my three kingdoms!¹ They’d have all been just like their father and your husband.’

Elizabeth felt exasperated with these questions. They had nothing to do with her husband’s exile. So she changed the subject, asking as politely as she could. ‘Sir, I would like to request that you allow my husband to return to Scotland. He is very ill and his doctor says breathing his native air will help him.’

¹ The three kingdoms are England, Scotland and Ireland.

‘Give him his native air? I’ll give him the devil,’ King James replied angrily.

Elizabeth was shocked. She had heard that the king was a profane man, but she thought he would not speak so in front of a Christian woman. And before she could stop her tongue, she replied, ‘Is that how you speak to your courtiers?’

More gasps were heard around the room, and Elizabeth wondered if she had gone too far. Would the king put her in prison for her boldness, or maybe even worse?

The king studied Elizabeth in silence, and then smiled in an unsettling way.

‘Very well, I will let your husband return to Scotland. On one condition. He must submit to bishops in the English church.’

Elizabeth was horrified. This was one of the reasons they had endured sixteen years of exile in France. The Bible said nothing about this kind of bishop in the church. And besides, the bishops just did as the king told them, so if John agreed to this, he would be choosing to follow the king instead of God.

‘Never!’ she replied, holding out her white apron. ‘I’d rather see his head in my apron here than have him do that.’



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‘Then begone,’ the king dismissed her. ‘He can stay in London if he wants, but he may not return to Scotland.’ And the king turned his back on Elizabeth and began to speak to a handsome young man.

Elizabeth almost said something more and then thought better of it. She had already said quite a bit to the king, more than most would ever dare. At least she and her family had won the right to stay in England and she was still free. The king could easily have put her in prison for her impudence.

When Elizabeth left the king’s court, she went directly back to their lodgings. As she told her husband all that had been said and done at the court, a messenger arrived. The king’s secretary sent a document giving John permission to preach in London. Elizabeth handed the stiff paper to her husband. ‘Imagine him allowing you to preach and yet not to return to Scotland.’

John took the paper and read it for himself. ‘I will take whatever opportunities God gives me. If this is where he wants me to preach, then I will. I must do God’s work while he gives me strength.’ He rose stiffly from his chair and reached for his Bible.

Elizabeth accompanied John to the church and she watched with a mixture of pride and worry as he climbed the steps to the pulpit. She offered a silent prayer, asking God to give him strength to preach.



And God did. John preached with more energy than she had seen in some time. The congregation was silent, listening carefully to every word. After a long time, John closed his sermon with prayer. And then he collapsed. It was as if he had used up all his strength on this one last sermon. Elizabeth was the first one out of her seat to be at his side. Gently several men lifted him up and carried John back to their lodgings. Elizabeth followed behind carrying his hat and cloak.

They laid him down in his bed and allowed Elizabeth to fuss over him, pulling up the covers and speaking softly to him. Louise and Nathaniel stood uncertainly near the door. Elizabeth knew John was dying, exhausted in his efforts to serve God even in poor health. She sat with him, listening to his muttered prayers as he drifted in and out of consciousness. She thought about what they had both risked to serve God over the years.

‘Lord, your servant is a clay vessel and can hold no more,’ John whispered.

Elizabeth caressed his forehead and prayed too, that God would grant her husband peace. An hour later he died quietly. Elizabeth knew he was now safe in God’s hands, no longer suffering. The king may have kept John from returning to his home in Scotland, but God took him to the best home of all – to be in heaven with him.

Devotional Thought

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

Philippians 3:8-9a

Elizabeth would have read these verses that the apostle Paul wrote and understood what Paul meant. Paul was telling the Philippian Christians that he was willing to give up everything he owned to serve Jesus. Paul was saying that everything else was like rubbish and not worth keeping if it interfered with serving God. Elizabeth knew what it was to give up everything she and John owned to serve God. She accepted being exiled from her home and country and having to move from place to place so her husband could preach the gospel in France. Nothing else mattered: not her house, her clothes, her belongings, or her friends. That took a great deal of courage. And Elizabeth needed courage to speak to the king, asking permission for her husband to return home to preach there. Like Paul, Elizabeth chose to serve God even though it meant leaving everything else behind.

Elizabeth was allowed to return home to Scotland after John died. She returned to Ayr, where John had been the minister for five years. She lived there for three years and then she died too. She lived long enough to know that her second son, Josiah, would carry on his father's work. He was ordained a minister and accepted a call to a church in Ireland just before Elizabeth died.