

Alexander Brodie

by Alexander Whyte

The sermon explores the life of Alexander Brodie, emphasizing his intellectual prowess, personal struggles, and the lessons drawn from his diary for future generations.

Scripture: Joshua 1:9, Proverbs 11:28, 1 Corinthians 16:13, 1 Timothy 6:10, Hebrews 13:5

Topics: "Covetousness", "Righteousness"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the life of Alexander Brodie, a man of great intellect and ability, who faced struggles with covetousness and fear of man. Despite his virtues in intellectual pursuits, religious upbringing, and acknowledgment of God in daily life, Brodie's downfall was his love of money and lack of courage in difficult times. Whyte emphasizes the importance of seeking righteousness, standing firm on truth and duty, and maintaining a good conscience even in confusing times, drawing lessons from Brodie's life as a cautionary tale.

Transcript

'Mr. Rutherford's letter desiring me to deny myself.'--Brodie's Diary.

Alexander Brodie was born at Brodie in the north country in the year 1617. That was the same year that saw Samuel Rutherford matriculate in the College of Edinburgh. Of young Brodie's early days we know nothing; for, though he has left behind him a full and faithful diary both of his personal and family life, yet, unfortunately, Brodie did not begin to keep that diary till he was well advanced in middle age. Young Brodie's father died when his son and heir was but fourteen years old, and after taking part of the curriculum of study in King's College, Aberdeen, the young laird married a year before he had come to his majority. His excellent wife was only spared to be with him for two years when she was taken away from him, leaving him the widowed father of one son and one daughter.

As time goes on we find the laird of Brodie a member of Parliament, a member of General Assembly, and a Lord of Session. He was one of the commissioners also, who were sent out to the

Hague to carry on negotiations with Charles, and during the many troubled years that followed that mission, we find Brodie corresponding from time to time with Cromwell and his officers, and with Charles and his courtiers, both about public and private affairs. Brodie was one of the ablest men of his day in Scotland, and he should have stood in the very front rank of her statesmen and her saints; but, as it is, he falls very far short of that. We search the signatures of the National Covenant in vain for the name of

Alexander Brodie and the absence of his name from that noble roll is already an ill-omen for his future life. David Laing, in his excellent preface to Brodie's Diary, is good enough to set down the absence of Brodie's name from the Covenant to his youth and retired habits. I wish I could take his editor's lenient view of Brodie's absence from Greyfriars church on the testing day of the Covenant. It would be an immense relief to me if I could persuade myself to look at Brodie in that matter with Mr. Laing's eyes. I have tried hard to do so, but I cannot. Far younger men than the laird of Brodie were in the Greyfriars churchyard that day, and far more modest men than he was. And I cannot shut my eyes to what appears to me, after carefully studying his life and his character, a far likelier if a far less creditable reason. After the Restoration Brodie's life, if life it could be called, was spent in a constant terror lest he should lose his estates, his liberty, and his life in the prelatist persecution; but, with his sleepless management of men, if not with the blessing of God and the peace of a good conscience, Alexander Brodie died in his own bed, in Brodie Castle, on the 17th of April, 1680.

There were some things in which Alexander Brodie ran well, to employ the apostle's expression; in some things, indeed, no man of his day ran better. To begin with, Brodie had an excellent intellect. If he did not always run well it was not for want of a sound head or a sharp eye. In reading Brodie's diary you all along feel that you are under the hand of a very able man, and a man who all his days does excellent justice to his excellent mind, at least on its intellectual side.

The books he enters as having read on such and such a date, the catalogues of books he buys on his visits to Edinburgh and London, and the high planes of thought on which his mind dwells when he is at his best, all bespeak a very able man doing full justice to his great ability. The very examinations he puts himself under as to his motives and mainsprings in this and that action of his life; the defences and exculpations he puts forward for this and that part of his indefensible conduct; the debate he holds now with the presbyterian party and now with the prelatist; the very way he puts his finger down on the weak and unsound places in both of the opposing parties; and, not least, his power of aphoristic thought and expression in the running diary of his spiritual life, all combine to leave the conviction on his reader's mind that Lord Brodie was one of the very ablest men of a very able day in Scotland.

I open his voluminous diary at random, and I at once come on such passages as these: 'If substantial duties are neglected or slighted it is a shrewd suspicion, be the repentance what it will, that all is not right. Lord, discover Thyself in the duties of the time, and in every substantial duty. At the same time, hang not the weight of our well-being on our duties, but on Christ by faith. I am a reeling, unstable, staggering, unsettled, lukewarm creature. For Thy compassion's sake forgive and heal, warm, establish, enlighten, draw me and I will follow.

I am full of self-love, darkness in my judgment, fear to confess Thee, or hazard myself, or my estate, or my peace.... We poor creatures are commanded by our affections and our passions; they are not at our command; but the Holy One doth exercise all His attributes at His own will; they are all at His command; they are not passions or perturbations in His mind, though they transport us. When I would hate, I cannot. When I would love, I cannot. When I would grieve, I cannot. When I would desire, I cannot.

But it is the better for us that all is as He wills.... Another of the deep deceits of my heart is this, that I have more affection in prayer than I have corresponding holiness in my walk or conversation. I wondered not to see the men of the world so taken up with covetous, ambitious, vain projects, for no man's head and heart can be so full of them as my head and heart are. Oh keep me from these unsober, distempered, mad, unruly thoughts! When I am away from Thee then I am quite out of my wit.

But God can make use of poison to expel poison. Oh, if I were examined and brought to the light, what a monstrous creature I would be seen to be! For as I see myself I am no better than a devil, void of sincerity and of uprightness in what I do myself, and yet judge others, condemning in another man what I excuse and even approve in myself: plunged in deep snares of self-love, not loving others nor judging nor acting for others as I do for myself and for my relations.' And then a passage which might have been taken from The Confessions itself: 'Ere I come to glory and to my journey's end, I shall have spent so much of Thy free grace--what in pardoning, what in preventing, what in convincing, what in enlightening, what in strengthening, and confirming, and upholding; what in watering and making me to grow; what in growth of sanctification, knowledge, faith, experience, patience, mortification, uprightness, steadfastness, watchfulness, humiliation, resolution, and self-denial; what for public, what for private, and what for the family; what against snares on the right hand and on the left;--O Lord, the all-sufficiency of Thy grace!'

Surely the man must run well and must make a good goal at last who can write about sin and grace in himself in that fashion! And that is not all he wrote on that subject and in that style. You have no idea of the wealth of personal and experimental matter there lies buried in Alexander Brodie's diary. When I first read Brodie's big diary, I said to myself, What a treasure is this I have stumbled upon! Here is yet another of Scotland's statesmen, scholars, and eminent saints. Here, I thought, is an author on the inward life to be set beside Brae and Halyburton, if not beside Shepard and Edwards themselves.

In the religious upbringing also, and lifelong care of his orphaned son and daughter, Brodie was all we could wish to see. In the sanctification and wise occupation of the Sabbath-day; in the family preparation for communion seasons; in the personal and private covenants he encouraged his children to make with God in their own religious life; in the company he brought to his house and to his table; in his own devotional habits at home--in all these all-important matters Brodie was all that a father of children too early bereft of their mother ought to be. Till we do not wonder to find his son commencing his diary on the day of his father's death in this way: 'My precious, worthy, and dear father! I can hardly apprehend the consequence of it to the land, and the Church, and his family. The Lord give instruction. I have seen the godly conversation, holy and Christian walk of a father, his watchfulness and fruitfulness, his secret communion with God, and yet I cannot say that my heart has been won to God by his example.' A complete directory, indeed, for a Highland gentleman's household religion might easily be collected out of Alexander Brodie's domestic diary.

Another thing that greatly drew me to Brodie when I first read his diary was his noble and truly Christian acknowledgment of God in all the manifold experiences and events of his daily life. '23rd July, 1661.--Came through the fells in England to Alsburi and dined there, saw a country full of grass, plentiful in comparison of us, and acknowledged God in it.... Thus I saw a large beautiful country, not straitened with the poverty that my native soil labours under. I desired to consider and understand this.... I saw a mighty city, London, numerous, many souls in it, great plenty of things, and thought him a great king that had so many things at his command; yet how much greater is He who hath at His command all things created in heaven and on earth. Who shall not fear Him?... August 17.--Went this afternoon with Cassilis to the Bridge for natural refreshment, and I saw this populous city, and plenty in it. I therein saw something of the Lord's providence, who hath divided the kingdoms of the earth and given them their habitations, not all alike, but as His wisdom hath seen fit. I saw the copper-works also, and acknowledged the Lord in the gifts and the faculties He hath given to the children of men. 27.--I did see the Lord Mayor, his solemnities, and desired to be instructed by what I saw. The variety of the Lord's creatures on other parts of the earth was represented. In this I did acknowledge Him. But all the glory of the city neither abides nor can make its

owner any the happier. It cannot be laid hold upon. It is not solid; it is but in conceit. Oh learn me to be crucified to all this and the like, and make me wise unto salvation! Nov. 9.--Dined at Billingsgate; saw the prison of King's Bench at Southwark, and the workers of glass, in all which I saw the manifold wisdom of God in all the gifts and faculties He hath given to the sons of men. But alas! I am so barren of any thoughts of God, and so have I found myself this day and at all times.'

'Yet, all these fences, and their whole array,

One cunning bosom sin blows quite away.'

Now, there is no more cunning bosom sin in some men than the sin of covetousness, and that sin in Alexander Brodie's heart and life blew almost, if not altogether, away all these and many more fences of his salvation. Well as David Laing edits Alexander Brodie's Diary, unfortunately for some of his readers he leaves his index an index of names only, neglecting things. And thus I have had to extemporise an index for myself under such sad heads as those of Brodie's 'passionateness,' his 'covetousness,' his 'time-serving' and 'tuft-hunting,' and suchlike. And I am compelled in truth to say that the entries in my index under 'covetousness' and under 'time-serving' and 'tergiversation' is a long and yet far from exhaustive list. And now, acting, I hope, on the Scriptural principle that

'The saints are lowered that the world may rise,'

I shall say a single word on each of Brodie's two so besetting sins. And, doing in the matter of Brodie's vices as I have just done in the matter of his virtues, I shall let the singularly honest Diarist speak for himself. I certainly would not dare, on any evidence, to characterise or condemn a man like Brodie as he will now characterise and condemn himself. 'July 30, 1653.--I find covetousness getting deeper and deeper into my heart, insatiable desires of lands and riches, the desire of acquiring my neighbour's property, and many vain projects and want of contentment, albeit I have already what might satisfy and well content me. I find that it is not ten hundred times what I possess that would content and stay my mind from greedy lusts and insatiable desires. What avails prayer as long as these lusts remain? I scarcely allow meat and fish and beer and victual to my family and to the poor. Lord, pity! 21 Aug. --Sin and snare are inseparable from this haste to be rich. Lord, in this Thou punishest one sin with another, with unrighteousness, oppression, unevenness, uncharitableness, deceit, falsehood, rigour to tenants, straitenedness to the poor. 21 Sept.--Read 1 Cor. viii. 14, 15, which did reprove 'my straitenedness, my coldness, and my parsimony. 19 July.--Was taken up inordinately with trash and hagg. Let not the Lord impute it! 9 Oct. --My heart challenged me that I could so freely lay out money on books, plinishing, clothes to myself, and was so loth to lay out for the Lord. Oh, what does this presage and witness but that I am of the earth and that my portion is not blessed, but that my goods are rather accursed! 4 Nov.--Neil Campbell staid with me. I found my niggardly nature still encroaching upon me, and made my sup plication for escape. July 1.--Because I have not employed my wealth in charitable uses, therefore does the Lord take other ways more grievous to me to scatter what I have so sinfully kept back.' And so on, alternately scrimping and confessing; filling his pockets with money, and praying that he may be enabled to open them, he goes on till we read such miserably self-deceiving entries as this almost at the end of his doleful diary: 'I purpose, if the Lord would give strength and grace and constancy, and an honest and sound heart, to lay by some money for such uses from time to time, whereof this much shall be a sign and memorial.'

And then, as to his fear of man, his time-serving, and vacillation in the day of difficult duty, hear his own humiliating confessions: 'Jan. 20, 1662.--My perplexity continues as to whether I shall move now or not,

stay or return, hold by Lauderdale, or make use of the Bishop. I desired to reflect on giving titles, speaking fair, and complying. I found Lauderdale changed to me, and I desired to spread this out before God. I went to Sir George Musher's funeral, where I was looked at, as I thought, like a speckled bird.

I apprehend much trouble to my-self, my family, and my affairs, from the ill-will of those who govern. May God keep me under the shadow of His wings. Oct. 16.--Did see the Bishop, and all my discourse with him did go far in fair words and the like. The 31.--James Urquhart was with me. Oh that I could attain to his steadfastness and firmness! But, alas! I am soon overcome; I soon yield to the least difficulty. The 26.--Duncan Cuming was here, and I desired him to tell the honest men in the South that though I did not come up their length, I hoped they would not stumble at me.'

In other words, 'Tell the prisoners in the Bass and in Blackness, and the martyrs of the Grassmarket and the Tolbooth, that Lord Brodie is a Presbyterian at heart, and ought to be a Covenanter and a sufferer with his fellows; but that he loves Brodie Castle and a whole skin better than he loves the Covenant and the Covenanters, or even the Surety of the better covenant.' And having despatched his sympathetic message to the honest men in the South, he takes up his pen again to carry on his diary, which he carries on in these actual terms.

Believe me, I copy literally and scrupulously from the humiliating book. 'Die Dom.--I find great averseness in myself to suffering. I am afraid to lose life or estate. I hold it a duty not to abandon those honest ministers that have stuck to the Reformation. And if the Lord would strengthen me, I would desire to confess the truth like them.... I questioned whether I might not safely use means to decline the cross and to ward off the wrath of the Lords and the Magistrates. Shall I begin to hear Mr.

William Falconer? Shall I write to Seaforth and Argyll to ask them to clear and vindicate me? Shall I forbear to hear that honest minister, James Urquhart, for a time, seeing the storm is like to fall on me if I do so? What counsel shall I give my son? Shall I expose myself and my family to danger at this time? What is Thy will? What is my duty?' And then this able and honest hypocrite has the grace to add: 'A grain of sound faith would easily answer all these questions.' I have a sheaf of such passages.

It is sickening work to speak and hear such things. But they must sometimes be spoken and heard, if only to afford a reply to Paul's question in the text: 'Ye did run well: what did hinder you?' How well Alexander Brodie ran for a time, and how well he might have run to the end but for those two sins that did so easily beset him--the love of money and the fear of man! But under the arrest and overthrow that those two so mean and so contemptible vices brought on Brodie, we see his spiritual life, or what might have ripened into spiritual life, gradually but surely decaying, even in his diary, till we read this last entry on the day of his death: 'My darkness has not taken an end, nor my confusions.'

Alexander Brodie being long dead yet speaketh with terrible power in every page of his solemnising diary. Young men of Scotland, he says, young statesmen, young senators of the College of Justice, young churchmen, young magistrates, young landlords, and all young men of talent and of influence, sons of the Cavaliers and the Covenanters alike-- seek the right and the true, the just and the honourable, in your day; choose it for your part, and take your stand firmly and boldly upon it. Make hazards in order to stand upon it. Read my humbling life, and take warning from me. And when your times are confused and perplexed; when truth and duty are not wholly and commandingly clear; give a good conscience the benefit of the doubt, and suspect the side on which safety and promotion and public praise lie. Pray without ceasing, and then live as you pray. And then my diary shall not have been written and left open among you in vain.

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