

Alexander Gordon

by Alexander Whyte

Alexander Gordon was a man of great spirit, but much subdued by inward exercise, with a profound impact on his family, friends, and community.

Scripture: Psalm 103:17, Psalm 112:2, Psalm 131:2, Psalm 139:23, Proverbs 16:32, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6

Topics: "Persecution", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the life of grace that has been passed down through generations in the Gordon family, focusing on the great spirit and inward exercise of Alexander Gordon of Earlston. Gordon's deep faith was evident in his refusal to conform to the Romish Calendar and his resistance to the Bishop of Glasgow, leading to his banishment. Livingstone describes Gordon as a man of great spirit, deeply humbled by inward exercise, experiencing rare downcastings and upliftings in his spiritual journey.

Transcript

'A man of great spirit, but much subdued by inward exercise.' Livingstone's Characteristics.

The Gordons of Airds and Earlston could set their family seal to the truth of the promise that the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children. For the life of grace entered the Gordon house three long generations before it came to our Alexander of to-night, and it still descended upon his son and his son's son. His great-grandfather, Alexander Gordon also, was early nicknamed 'Strong Sandy,' on account of his gigantic size and his Samson-like strength. While yet a young man, happily for himself and for all his future children, as well as for the whole of Galloway, Gordon had occasion to cross the English border on some family business, to buy cattle or cutlery or what not, when he made a purchase he had not intended to make when he set out. He brought home with him a copy of Wycliffe's contraband New Testament, and from the day he bought that interdicted book till the day of his death, Strong Sandy Gordon never let his purchase out of his own hands. He carried his Wycliffe about with him wherever he went, to kirk and to market; he would as soon have thought of leaving his purse or his dirk behind him as his Wycliffe, his bosom friend. And many were the Sabbath-days that the laird of Earlston read his New Testament in the woods of Earlston to his tenants and neighbours, the Testament in the one hand and the dirk in the other.

Tamed and softened as old Sandy Gordon became by that taming and softening book, yet there were times when the old Samson still came to the surface. As the Sabbath became more and more sanctified in Reformed Scotland, the Saints' days of the Romish Calendar fell more and more into open neglect, till the

Romish clergy got an Act passed for the enforced observance of all the fasts and festivals of the Romish Communion. One of the enacted clauses forbade a Plough to be yoked on Christmas Day, on pain of the forfeiture and public sale of the cattle that drew the plough. Old Earlston, at once to protest against the persecution, and at the same time to save his draught-oxen, yoked ten of his stalwart sons to the mid-winter Plough, and, after Ploughing the whole of Christmas Day, openly defied both priest and bishop to distraint his team. Christmas Day, whatever its claims and privileges might be, had no chance in Scotland till it came with better reasons than the threat of a Popish king and Parliament. The Patriarch of Galloway, as the south of Scotland combined to call old Alexander Gordon of Earlston, lived to the ripe age of over a hundred years, and we are told that he kept family worship himself to the day of his death, holding his Wycliffe in his own hand, and yielding it and his place at the family altar over to none.

But it is with the name-son and great-grandson of this sturdy old saint that we have chiefly to do to-night. And I may say of him, to begin with, that he was altogether worthy to inherit and to hand on the tradition of family grace and truth that had begun so early and so conspicuously with the head of the Earlston house. 'Alexander Gordon of Earlston,' says John Livingstone, in one of his priceless little etchings, 'was a man of great spirit, but much subdued by inward exercise, and who attained the most rare experiences of downcasting and uplifting.' And in Rutherford's first letter to this Earlston, written from Anwoth in 1636, he says, in that lofty oracular way of his, Jesus Christ has said that Alexander Gordon must lead the ring in Galloway in witnessing a good conscience.' This, no doubt, refers to the prosecution that Gordon was at that moment undergoing at the hands of the Bishop of Glasgow for refusing to admit a nominee of the Bishop into the pulpit of a reclaiming parish. It would have gone still worse with Earlston than it did had not Lord Lorne, the true patron of the parish, taken his place beside Earlston at the Bishop's bar, and testified his entire approval of all that Earlston had done. With all that, the case did not end till Earlston was banished beyond the Tay for his resistance to the will of the Bishop of Glasgow.

This all took place in the early half of the seventeenth century, so that Dr. Robert Buchanan might with more correctness have entitled his able book 'The Two Hundred Years' Conflict' than 'The Ten,' so early was the battle for Non-Intrusion begun in Galloway. Alexander Gordon was a Free Churchman 200 years before the Disruption, and Lord Lorne was the forerunner of those evangelical and constitutional noblemen and gentlemen in Scotland who helped so much to carry through the Disruption of 1843. We find both Lord Lorne and Earlston his factor, sitting as elders beside one another in the Glasgow Assembly of 1638, and then we find Earlston the member for Galloway in the Parliament of 1611.

We do not know exactly on what occasion it was that Earlston refused to accept the knighthood that was offered him by the Crown; but we seem to hear the old Wycliffite come back again in his great-grandson as he said, 'No, your Majesty, excuse and pardon me; but no.' Alexander Gordon felt that it would be an everlasting dishonour to him and to his house to let his shoulder be touched in knighthood by a sword that was wet, and that would soon be still more wet, with the best blood in Scotland. 'No, your Majesty, no.'

Almost all that we are told about Earlston in the histories of his time bears out the greatness of his spirit; that, and the stories that gives rise to, take the eye of the ordinary historian; but good John Livingstone, though not a great historian in other respects, is by far the best historian of that day for our purpose. John Livingstone's Characteristics is a perfect gallery of spiritual portraits, and the two or three strokes he gives to Alexander Gordon make him stand out impressively and memorably to all who understand and care for the things of the Spirit.

'A man of great spirit, but much subdued by inward exercise.' I do not need to tell you what exercise is--at least bodily exercise. All that a man does to draw out, develop, and healthfully occupy his bodily powers in walking, riding, running, wrestling, carrying burdens, and leaping over obstacles--all that is called bodily exercise, and some part of that is absolutely necessary every day for the health of the body and for the continuance and the increase of its strength. But we are not all body; we are soul as well, and much more soul than body. Bodily exercise profiteth little, says the Apostle, compared, that is, with the exercise of the soul, of the mind, and of the heart. Now, Alexander Gordon was such an athlete of the heart that all who knew him saw well what exercise he must have gone through before he was subdued in his high mind and proud spirit to be so humble, so meek, so silent, so unselfish, and so full of godliness and brotherly kindness--what a world of inward exercise all that bespoke! Alexander Gordon's patience under wrong, his low esteem of himself and of all he did, his miraculous power over himself in the forgiveness of enemies and in the forgetfulness of injuries, his contentment amid losses and disappointments his silence when other men were bursting to speak, and his openness to be told that when he did speak he had spoken rashly, unadvisedly, and offensively--in all that Earlston was a conspicuous example of what inward exercise carried on with sufficient depth and through a sufficiently long life will do even for a man of a hot temper and a proud heart.

Alexander Gordon had, to begin with, a large heart. A large heart was a family possession of the Gordons; the fathers had it and the mothers had it; and whatever came and went in the family estate, the Gordon heart was always entailed unimpaired--increased indeed--upon the children. And after some generations of true religion, inwardly and deeply exercising the Gordon heart, it almost came as a second nature to our Gordon to take to heart all that happened to him, and to exercise his large and deep heart yet more thoroughly with it. The affairs of the family, the affairs of the estate, the affairs of the Church, his duties as a landlord, a farmer, a heritor, and a factor, and the persecutions and sufferings that all these things brought upon him, some of which we know--all that found its way into Earlston's wide and deep and still unsanctified heart. And then, there is a law and a provision in the life of grace that all those men come to discover who live before God as Earlston lived, a provision that secures to such men's souls a depth, and an inwardness, and an increasing exercise that carries them on to reaches of inward sanctification that the ruck and run of so-called Christians know nothing about, and are incapable of knowing.

Such men as Earlston, while the daily rush of outward things is let in deeply into their hearts, are not restricted to these things for the fulness of their inward exercise; their own hearts, though there were no outward world at all, would sufficiently exercise them to all the gifts and graces and attainments of the profoundest spiritual life. For one thing, when once Earlston had begun to keep watch over his own heart in the matter of its motives--it was David Dickson, one fast-day at Irvine, on I Sam. ii., who first taught Gordon to watch his motives--from that day Rutherford and Livingstone, and all his family, and all his fellow-elders saw a change in their friend that frightened them. There was after that such a far-off tone in his letters, and such a far-off look in his eyes, and such a far-off sound in his voice as they all felt must have come from some great, and, to them, mysterious advance in his spiritual life; but he never told even his son William what it was that had of late so softened and quieted his proud and stormy heart. But, all the time, it was his motives.

The baseness of his motives even when he did what it was but his duty and his praise to do, that quite killed Earlston every day. The loathsomeness of a heart that hid such motives in its unguessed depths made him often weep in the woods which his grandfather had sanctified by his Bible readings a century before. Rutherford saw with the glance of genius what was going on in his friend's heart, when, in one

letter, not referring to himself at all, Earlston suddenly said, 'If Lucifer himself would but look deep enough and long enough into his own heart, the sight of it would make him a little child.' 'Did not I say,' burst out Rutherford, as he read. 'that Alexander Gordon would lead the ring in Galloway ?'

Earlston frightened into silence the Presbytery of Kirkcudbright on one occasion also, when at their first meeting after he had spoken out so bravely before the king and the Parliament, and they were to move him a vote of thanks, he cried out: 'Fathers and brethren, the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, and you do not know it. For I had a deep, malicious, revengeful motive in my heart behind all my fine and patriotic speeches in Parliament. I hated Montrose more than I loved the freedom of the Kirk. Spare me, therefore, the sentence of putting that act of shame on your books!'

It was discoveries like this that accumulated in John Livingstone's note-book till he blotted out all his instances and left only the blessed result, 'Alexander Gordon, a man of great spirit, but much subdued by inward exercise, and who was visited with most rare experiences of downcasting and uplifting.' No doubt, dear John Livingstone; we can well believe it. Too rare with us, alas! but every day with your noble friend; every day and every night, when he lay down and when he rose up. His very dreams often cast him down all day after them; for he said, If my heart were not one of the chambers of hell itself, such hateful things would not stalk about in it when the watchman is asleep. Downcastings! Downcastings! Yes, down to such depths of self-discovery and self-detestation and self-despair as compelled his Heavenly Master to give commandment that His prostrate servant should be lifted up as few men on the earth have ever been lifted up, or could bear to be. Yes; they were rare experiences both of downcastings and of upliftings; when such downcastings and upliftings become common the end of this world will have come. and with it the very Kingdom of Heaven.

The last sight we see of Alexander Gordon in this world is after his Master has given commandment that the last touch be put to His servant's subdued and childlike humility. The old saint is sitting in his grandfather's chair and his wife is feeding him like a weaned child. John Livingstone tells that Mr. John Smith, a minister in Teviotdale, had all the Psalms of David by heart, and that instead of a curtailed, monotonous, and mechanical grace before meat he always repeated a whole Psalm. Earlston must have remembered once dining in the Manse of Maxton at a Communion time; for, as his tender-handed wife took her place beside his chair to feed her helpless husband, he always lifted up his palsied hand and always said to himself, to her, and above all, to God, the 131st Psalm--

'As child of mother weaned; my soul

Is like a weaned child;'

till all the godly households in Galloway knew the 131st Psalm as Alexander Gordon of Earlston's grace before meat.

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