

James Guthrie

by Alexander Whyte

James Guthrie was a Scottish minister who was martyred for his commitment to the Covenant and his deep sense of conviction about sin.

Scripture: Psalm 116:15, Romans 8:18, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 1:21, Revelation 2:10

Topics: "Martyrdom", "Reformation"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the life and martyrdom of James Guthrie, a passionate Covenanter who stood firm in his faith and convictions despite facing persecution and death. Guthrie's deep sense of sin, humility, and unwavering commitment to the cause of reformation are highlighted, along with his tender and compassionate approach in handling controversies. Despite his fear of death, Guthrie longed to die with all his senses and graces intact, showing his strong faith and trust in God's mercy and salvation. His execution and final words reflect his readiness to depart in peace and his firm belief in the eternal life awaiting him.

Transcript

'The short man who could not bow.'--Cromwell.

James Guthrie was the son of the laird of that ilk in the county of Angus. St. Andrews was his alma mater, and under her excellent nurture young Guthrie soon became a student of no common name. His father had destined him for the Episcopal Church, and, what with his descent from an ancient and influential family, his remarkable talents, and his excellent scholarship, it is not to be wondered at that a bishop's mitre sometimes dangled before his ambitious eyes. 'He was then prelatiC,' says Wodrow in his Analecta, 'and strong for the ceremonies.' But as time went on, young Guthrie's whole views of duty and of promotion became totally changed, till, instead of a bishop's throne, he ended his days on the hangman's ladder. After having served his college some time as regent or assistant professor in the Moral Philosophy Chair, Guthrie took licence, and was immediately thereafter settled as parish minister of Lauder, in the momentous year 1638. And when every parish in Scotland sent up its representatives to Edinburgh to subscribe the covenant in Greyfriars Churchyard, the parish of Lauder had the pride of seeing its young minister take his life in his hand, like all the best ministers and truest patriots in the land. But just as Guthrie was turning in at the gate of the Greyfriars, who should cross the street before him, so as almost to run against him, but the city executioner! The omen --for it was a day of omens--made the young minister stagger for a moment, but only for a moment. At the same time the ominous incident made such

an impression on the young Covenanter's heart and imagination, that he said to some of his fellow-subscribers as he laid down the pen, 'I know that I shall die for what I have done this day, but I cannot die in a better cause.'

In the lack of better authorities we are compelled to trace the footsteps of James Guthrie through the Laodicean pages of Robert Baillie for several years to come. Baillie did not like Guthrie and there was no love lost between the two men. The one man was all fire together in every true and noble cause, and the other we spew out of our mouth at every page of his indispensable book. As Carlyle says, Baillie contrived to 'carry his dish level' through all that terrible jostle of a time. And accordingly while we owe Baillie our very grateful thanks that he kept such a diary, and carried on such an extensive and regular correspondence during all that distracted time, we owe him no other thanks. He carried his dish level, and he had his reward.

As we trace James Guthrie's passionate footsteps for the years to come through Principal Baillie's sufficiently gossiping, but not unshrewd, pages, we soon see that he is travelling fast and sure toward the Nether Bow. We hear continually from our time-serving correspondent of Guthrie's 'public invective,' of his 'passionate debates,' of his 'venting of his mind,' of his 'peremptory letters,' of his 'sharp writing,' and of his being 'rigid as ever,' and so on. All that about his too zealous co-presbyter, and then his fulsome eulogy of the returning king --his royal wisdom, his moderation, his piety, and his grave carriage--as also what he says of 'the conspicuous justice of God in hanging up the bones of Oliver Cromwell, the disgracing of the two Goodwins, blind Milton, John Owen, and others of that maleficent crew,' all crowned with the naive remark that 'the wisest and best are quiet till they see whither these things will go'--it is plain that while our wise and good author is carrying his dish as level as the uneven roads will allow, Guthrie is as plainly carrying his head straight to the Cross of Edinburgh, and to the iron spikes of the Canongate.

All the untold woes of that so woful time came of the sword of the civil power being still grafted on the crook of the Church; as also of the insane attempt of so many of our forefathers to solder the crown of Charles Stuart to the crown of Jesus Christ. How those two so fatal, and not even yet wholly remedied, mistakes, brought Argyll to the block and Guthrie to the ladder in one day in Edinburgh, we read in the instructive and inspiriting histories of that terrible time; and we have no better book on that time for the mass of readers than just honest John Howie's Scots Worthies. There is a passage in our Scottish martyr's last defence of himself that has always reminded me of Socrates' similar defence before the judges of Athens. 'My lords,' said Guthrie, 'my conscience I cannot submit. But this old and crazy body I do submit, to do with it whatsoever you will; only, I beseech you to ponder well what profit there is likely to be in my blood. It is not the extinguishing of me, or of many more like me, that will extinguish the work of reformation in Scotland. My blood will contribute more for the propagation of the Covenant and the full reformation of the kirk than my life and liberty could do, though I should live on for many years.' One can hardly help thinking that Guthrie must have been reading The Apology in his manse in Stirling at the moment he was apprehended. But in the case of Guthrie, as in the case of Socrates, no truth, no integrity, and no eloquence could save him; for, as Bishop Burnet frankly says, 'It was resolved to make a public example of a Scottish minister, and so Guthrie was singled out. I saw him suffer,' the Bishop adds, 'and he was so far from showing any fear that he rather expressed a contempt of death.' James Cowie, his precentor, and beadle, and body-servant, also saw his master suffer, and, like Bishop Burnet, he used to tell the impression that his old master's last days made upon him. 'When he had received sentence of death,' Cowie told Wodrow's informant, 'he came forth with a kind of majesty, and his face seemed truly to shine.' It needed something more than this world could supply to make a man's face to shine under the

sentence that he be hanged at the Cross of Edinburgh, his body dismembered, and his head fixed on an iron spike in the West Port of the same city. The disgraceful and ghastly story of his execution, and the hacking up of his body, may all be read in Howie, beside a picture of the Nether Bow as it still stands in our Free Church and Free State Day. 'Art not Thou from everlasting, O Lord my God?' were James Guthrie's last words as he stood on the ladder. 'O mine Holy One: I shall not die, but live. Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.'

There is one fine outstanding feature that has always characterised and distinguished the whole of the Rutherford circle in our eyes, and that is their deep, keen Pauline sense of sin. Without this, all their patriotism, all their true statesmanship, and even all their martyrdom for the sake of the truth, would have had, comparatively speaking, little or no interest for us. What think ye of sin? is the crucial question we put to any character, scriptural or ecclesiastical, who claims our time and our attention. If they are right about sin, they are all the more likely to be right about everything else; and if they are either wrong or only shallow about sin, their teaching and their experience on other matters are not likely to be of much value or much interest to us. We have had written over our portals against all comers: Know thyself if thou wouldst either interest us or benefit us, or with the understanding and the spirit worship with us. And all the true Rutherford circle, without one exception, have known the true secret and have given the true password. Their keen sense and scriptural estimate of the supreme evil of sin first made them correspondents of Rutherford's; and as that sense and estimate grew in them they passed on into an inner and a still more inner circle of those Scottish saints and martyrs who corresponded with Rutherford, and closed, with so much honour and love, around him. And the two Guthries, James and William, as we shall see, were famous even in that day for their praying and for their preaching about sin.

There is an excellent story told of James Guthrie's family worship in the manse of Stirling, that bears not unremotely on the matter we have now on hand. Guthrie was wont to pray too much, both at the family altar and in the pulpit, as if he had been alone with his own heart and God. And he carried that bad habit at last to such a length in his family, that he almost drove poor James Cowie, his man-servant, out of his senses, till when Cowie, could endure no longer to be singled out and exposed and denounced before the whole family, he at last stood up with some boldness before his master and demanded to be told out, as man to man, and not in that cruel and injurious way, what it was he had done that made his master actually every day thus denounce and expose him. 'O James, man, pardon me, pardon me. I was, I see now, too much taken up with my own heart and its pollutions to think enough of you and the rest.' 'It was that, and the like of that,' witnessed Cowie, 'that did me and my wife more good than all my master's well-studied sermons.' The intimacy and tenderness of the minister and his man went on deeper and grew closer, till at the end we find Cowie, reading to him at his own request the Epistle to the Romans, and when the reader came to the passage, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy,' the listener burst into tears, and exclaimed, 'James, James, halt there, for I have nothing but that to lippen to.' And then, on the ladder, and before a great crowd of Edinburgh citizens: 'I own that I am a sinner--yea, and one of the vilest that ever made a profession of religion. My corruptions have been strong and many, and they have made me a sinner in all things--yea, even in following my duty. But blessed be God, who hath showed His mercy to such a wretch, and hath revealed His Son unto me, and made me a minister of the everlasting Gospel, and hath sealed my ministry on the hearts of not a few of His people.' James Guthrie's ruling passion, as Cowie, remarked, was still strong in his death.

On one occasion Guthrie and some of his fellow-ministers were comparing experiences and confessing to one another their 'predominant sins,' and when it came to Guthrie's turn he told them that he was much

too eager to die a violent death. For, said he, I would like to die with all my wits about me. I would not like eyesight and memory and reason and faith all to die out on my deathbed and leave me to tumble into eternity bereft of them all. Guthrie was greatly afraid at the thought of death, but it was the premature death of his reason, and even of his faith, that so much alarmed and horrified him to think of. He envied the men who kneeled down on the scaffold, or leaped off the ladder, in full possession at the last moment of all their senses and all their graces. 'Give me a direct answer, sir,' demanded Dr. Johnson of his physician when on his deathbed. 'Then I will take no more opiates, for I have prayed that I may be able to render up my soul to God unclouded.' And when pressed by his attendants to take some generous nourishment, he replied almost with his last breath. 'I will take anything but inebriating sustenance.'

But in nothing was good James Guthrie's tenderness to sin better seen than in the endless debates and dissensions of which that day was so full. So sensitive was he to the pride and the anger and the ill-will that all controversy kindles in our hearts that, as soon as he felt any unholy heat in his own heart, or saw it in the hearts of the men he debated with, he at once cut short the controversy with some such words as these: 'We have said too much on this matter already; let us leave it till we love one another more.' If hot-blooded Samuel Rutherford had sat more at James Guthrie's feet in the matter of managing a controversy, his name would have been almost too high and too spotless for this present life. Samuel Rutherford's one vice, temper, was one of James Guthrie's chief virtues.

We have only two, or at most three, of the many letters that must have passed between Rutherford and Guthrie preserved to us. And, as is usual with Rutherford when he writes to any member of his innermost circle, he writes to Guthrie so as still more completely to win his heart. And in nothing does dear Rutherford win all our hearts more than in his deep humility, and quick, keen sense of his own inability and utter unworthiness. 'I am at a low ebb,' he writes to Guthrie from the Jerusalem Chamber, 'yea, as low as any gracious soul can possibly be. Shall I ever see even the borders of the good land above?' I read that fine letter again last Sabbath afternoon in my room at hospitable Helenslee, overlooking the lower reaches of the Clyde, and as I read this passage, I recollected the opportune sea-view commanded by my window. I had only to rise and look out to see an excellent illustration of my much-exercised author; for the forenoon tide had just retreated to the sea, and the broad bed of the river was left by the retreated tide less a river than a shallow, clammy channel. Shoals of black mud ran out from our shore, meeting and mingling with shoals of black mud from the opposite shore. There was scarce clean water enough to float the multitude of buoys that dipped and dragged in their bed of mire. That any ship, to call a ship, could ever work its way up that sweltering sewer seemed an utter impossibility. There was Rutherford's low ebb, then, under my very eyes. There was low water indeed. And the low water seemed to laugh the waiting seamen's hopes to scorn. But next morning my heart rose high as I looked out at my window and saw all the richly-laden vessels lighting their fires and spreading their sails, and setting their faces to the replenished river. And I thought of Samuel Rutherford's ship, far past all her ebbing tides now, and for ever anchored in her haven above.

On the wall of my room in the same beautiful house there was a powerful cartoon of Peter's crucifixion, head downwards, for his Master's sake. The masterpiece of Filippino Lippi I felt to be an excellent illustration also of Rutherford's letter to James Guthrie and the rest of the ministers and elders who were imprisoned in the Castle of Edinburgh for daring to remind Charles Stuart of the contents of the Covenant to which both he and the whole nation had solemnly sworn. 'If Christ doth own me,' Rutherford wrote to the martyrs in the Castle, 'let me be laid in my grave in a bloody winding-sheet; let me go from the scaffold to the spikes in four quarters-grave or no grave, as He pleases, if only He but owns me.' And I seemed to

see the crucified disciple's glorified Master appearing over his reversed cross and saying, 'Thou art Peter, and with this thy blood I will sow widespread my Church.' Yes, my brethren, if Christ but owns us, that will far more than make up to us in a moment for all our imprisonments, and all our martyrdoms, and all our ebbing tides down here. 'Angels, men, and Zion's elders eye us in all our suffering for Christ's sake, but what of all these? Christ is by us, and looketh on, and writeth it all up Himself.'

James Guthrie was hanged and dismembered at the Cross of Edinburgh on the first day of June, 1661. His snow-white head was cut off, and was fixed on a spike in the Nether Bow. James Guthrie got that day that which he had so often prayed--for a sudden plunge into everlasting life with all his senses about him and all his graces at their brightest and their keenest exercise.

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