

John Gordon of Rusco

by Alexander Whyte

John Gordon of Rusco must remember the seven things that Samuel Rutherford wrote to him, in order to ensure his salvation and eternal life.

Scripture: Psalm 90:12, Matthew 7:14, Luke 16:16, Hebrews 12:1, James 4:14, 1 Peter 1:18, Revelation 7:14

Topics: "Christian Living", "Salvation"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the seven important things that Samuel Rutherford urged John Gordon of Rusco to remember. These include the solemn reminder of the few who are saved, the necessity of striving for heaven with force, the challenge of reaching the top of the hill in the Christian journey, the caution against besetting sins, the awareness of the shortening sand-glass of life, and the ultimate reliance on the blood of Christ for salvation.

Transcript

'Remember these seven things.'--Rutherford.

There were plenty of cold Covenanters, as they were called, in Kirkcudbright in John Gordon's day, but the laird of Rusco was not one of them. Rusco Castle was too near Anwoth Kirk and Anwoth Manse, and its owner had had Samuel Rutherford too long for his minister and his near neighbour to make it possible for him to be 'ane cold covenanter quha did not do his dewtie in everything committed to his charge thankfullie and willinglie.' We find Gordon of Rusco giving good reasons indeed, as he thought, why he should not be sent out of the Stewartry on the service of the covenant, but the war committee 'expelled his resounes' and instantly commanded his services. And from all we can gather out of the old Minute Book, Rusco played all the noble part that Rutherford expected of him in the making of Scotland and in the salvation of her kirk.

Like the Psalmist in the hundred and second Psalm, we take pleasure in the stones of Rusco Castle, and we feel a favour to the very dust thereof. Even in Rutherford's day that rugged old pile was sacred and beautiful to the eyes of Rutherford and his people, because of what the grace of God had wrought within its walls; and, both for that, and for much more like that, both in Rutherford's own day and after it, we also look with awe and with desire at the ruined old mansion-house. A hundred years before John Gordon bade Rusco farewell for heaven, we find a friend of John Knox's on his deathbed there, and having a departure from his deathbed administered to him there as confident and as full of a desire to depart as John Knox's own. 'The Last and Heavenly Speeches of John, Viscount Kenmure' also still echo through

the deserted rooms of Rusco, and after he had gone up from it we find still another Gordon there with his wife and children and farm-tenants, all warm Covenanters, and all continuing the Rusco tradition of godliness and virtue.

At the same time Samuel Rutherford was not the man to take it for granted that John Gordon and his household were all saved and home in heaven because they lived within such sacred walls and were all church members and warm Covenanters. He was only the more anxious about the Gordon family because they had such an ancestry and were all bidding so fair to leave behind them such a posterity. And thus it is that, from his isle of Patmos, Samuel Rutherford, like the apostle John to his seven churches, sends to John Gordon seven things that are specially to be remembered and laid to heart by the laird of Rusco.

1. Remember, in the first place, my dear brother, those most solemn and too much forgotten words of our Lord, that there are but few that be saved.

Is that really so? said a liberal-minded listener to our Lord one day. Is that really so, that there are but few that be saved? Mind your own business, was our Lord's answer. For there are many lost by making their own and other men's salvation a matter of dialectic and debate in the study and in the workshop rather than of silence, and godly fear, and a holy life. Yes, there are few that be saved, said Samuel Rutherford, writing again the same year to Farmer Henderson, who occupied the home-stead of Rusco. Men go to heaven in ones and twos. And that you may go there, even if it has to be alone, love your enemies and stand to the truth I taught you. Fear no man, fear God only. Seek Christ every day. You will find Him alone in the fields of Rusco. Seek a broken heart for sin, for, otherwise, you may seek Him all your days, but you will never find Him.

And it is not in our New Testament only, and in such books as Rutherford's Letters only, that we are reminded of the loneliness of our road to heaven; in a hundred places in the wisest and deepest books of the heathen world we read the same warning; notably in the Greek Tablet of Cebes, which reads almost as if it had been cut out of the Sermon on the Mount. 'Do you not see,' says the old man, 'a little door, and beyond the door a way which is not much crowded, for very few are going along it, it is so difficult of access, so rough, and so stony?' 'Yes,' answers the stranger. 'And does there not seem,' subjoins the old man, 'to be a high hill and the road up it very narrow, with precipices on each side? Well, that is the way that leads to the true instruction.'

'A cause is not good,' says Rutherford in another of his pungent books, 'because it is followed by many. Men come to Zion in ones and twos out of a whole tribe, but they go to hell in their thousands. The way to heaven is overgrown with grass; there are the traces of but few feet on that way, only you may see here and there on it the footprints of Christ's bloody feet to let you know that you are not gone wrong but are still on the right way.'

2. Remember also that other word of our Lord, that heaven is like a fortress in this, that it must be taken by force. Only our Lord means that the force must not be done to the gates or the walls of heaven, but to our own hard hearts and evil lives. 'I find it hard to be a Christian,' writes Rutherford to Rusco. 'There is no little thrusting and thringing to get in at heaven's gates. Heaven is a strong castle that has to be taken by force.' 'Oh to have one day more in my pulpit in Aberdeen!' cried a great preacher of that day when he was dying. 'What would you do?' asked another minister who sat at his bedside. 'I would preach to the people the difficulty of salvation,' said the dying man. 'Remember,' wrote Rutherford to Rusco from the same city, 'Remember that it is violent sweating and striving that alone taketh heaven.'

3. Remember also that there are many who start well at the bottom of the hill who never get to the top. We ministers and elders know that only too well; we do not need to be reminded of that. There are the names of scores and scores of young communicants on our session books of whom we well remember how we boasted about them when they took the foot of the hill, but we never mention their names now, or only with a blush and in a whisper. Some take to the hill-foot at one age, and some at another; some for one reason and some for another. A bereavement awakens one, a sickness--their own or that of some one dear to them--another; a disappointment in love or in business will sometimes do it; a fall into sin will also do it; a good book, a good sermon, a conversation with a friend who has been some way up the hill; many things may be made use of to make men and women, and young men and women, take a start toward a better life and a better world. But for ten, for twenty, who so start not two ever come to the top. 'Heaven is not next door,' writes Rutherford to Rusco; if it were we would all be saved.' There was a well-known kind of Christians in Rutherford's day that the English Puritans called by the nick-name of the Temporaries; and it is to pluck Rusco from among them that Rutherford writes to him this admonitory letter. And there is an equally well-known type of Christian in our day, though I do not know that any one has so happily nick-named him as yet.

'The Scriptures beguiled the Pharisees,' writes Rutherford; and the Christian I refer to is self-beguiled with the very best things in the Scriptures. The cross is always in his mouth, but you will never find it on his back. He has got, at least in language, as far as the cross, but he remains there. He says the burden is off his back, and he takes care that he shall keep out of that kind of life that would put it on again. He has been once pardoned, and he takes his stand upon that. He strove hard till he was converted, and he sometimes strives hard to get other men brought to the same conversion. But his conversion has been all exhausted in the mere etymology of the act, for he has only turned round in his religious life, he has not made one single step of progress.

But let one of the greatest masters of true religion that ever taught the Church of Christ speak to us on the subject of this gin-horse Christian. 'The Scriptures,' says Jonathan Edwards, 'everywhere represent the seeking, the striving, and the labour of a Christian as being chiefly to be gone through after his conversion, and his conversion as being but the beginning of the work. And almost all that is said in the New Testament of men's watching, giving earnest heed to themselves, running the race that is set before them, striving and agonising, pressing forward, reaching forth, crying to God night and day; I say, almost all that is said in the New Testament of these things is spoken of and is directed to God's saints. Where these things are applied once to sinners seeking salvation, they are spoken of the saint's prosecution of their high calling ten times. But many have got in these days into a strange anti-scriptural way of having all their striving and wrestling over before they are converted, and so having an easy time of it afterwards.'

4. Remember, also, wrote Rutherford, to look up the Scriptures and read and lay to heart the lessons of Esau's life and Judas's, of the life of Balaam, and Saul, and Pharaoh, and Simon Magus, and Caiaphas, and Ahab, and Jehu, and Herod, and the man in Matthew 8:19, and the apostates in Hebrews 6. For all these were at best but watered brass and reprobate silver.

'One day,' writes Mrs. William Veitch of Dumfries in her autobiography, 'having been at prayer, and coming into the room where one was reading a letter of Mr. Rutherford's directed to one John Gordon of Rusco--giving an account of how far one might go and yet prove a hypocrite and miss heaven--it occasioned great exercise in me.' Dr. Andrew Bonar is no doubt entirely right when he says that this letter, now open before us, must have been the heart-searching letter that caused that God-fearing woman, fresh from her knees, so great exercise. Let us share her great exercise, and in due time we shall share

her great salvation. Not otherwise.

5. 'And remember,' he proceeds, 'what your besetting sin may cost you in the end. I beseech you therefore and obtest you in the Lord, to make conscience of all rash and passionate oaths, of raging and avenging anger, of night-drinking, of bad company, of Sabbath-breaking, of hurting any under you by word or deed, of hurting your very enemies. Except you receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, you cannot enter it. That is a word that should make your great spirit fall.' If men allow themselves in malice and envy,' writes Thomas Shepard, a contemporary of Rutherford's, 'or in wanton thoughts, that will condemn them, even though their corruptions do not break out in any scandalous way. Such thoughts are quite sufficient evidence of a rotten heart. If a man allows himself in malice or in envy, though he thinks he does it not, yet he is a hypocrite; if in his heart he allows it he cannot be a saint of God. If there be one evil way, though there have been many reformation, the man is an ungodly man. One way of sin is exception enough against any man's salvation. A small shot will kill a man as well as a large bullet; a small leak let alone will sink a ship, and a small, and especially a secret and spiritual sin, will cost a man his soul.'

6. 'Remember, also, your shortening sand-glass.' On the day when John Gordon was born a sandglass with his name written upon it was filled, and from that moment it began to run down before God in heaven. For how long it was filled God who filled it alone knew. Whether it was filled to run out in an hour, or to run till Gordon was cut down in mid-time of his days, or till he had attained to his three-score years and ten, or whether it was to run on to the labour and sorrow of four-score years, not even his guardian angel knew, but God only. And then beside that sand-glass a leaf, taken out of the seven-sealed book, was laid open, on the top of which was found written the as yet unbaptized name of this new-born child. And under his name was found written all that John Gordon was appointed and expected to do while his sand-glass was still running. His opening life as child and boy and man in Galloway; his entrance on Rusco; his friendship with Samuel Rutherford; his duties to his family, to his tenants, to his Church, and to the Scottish Covenant; the inward life he was commanded and expected to live alone with God; the seven things he was every day to remember; the evangelical graces of heart and life and character he was to be told and to be enabled to put on; the death he was to die, and the 'freehold' he was after all these things to enter on in heaven.

And it is of that sand-glass that was at that moment running so fast and so low within the veil that Rutherford writes so often and so earnestly to the so-forgetful laird of Rusco. And how solemnising it is, if anything would solemnise our hard hearts, that we all have a sand-glass standing before God with our names written upon it, and that it is running out before God day and night unceasingly. We shall all be too suddenly solemnised when the last grain of our measured-out sand has dropped down, and the blind Fury will come, and without pity and without remorse will slit our thin-span life with her abhorred shears. And that whether our life-work is finished or no, half-finished or no, or not even begun. The night cometh, and the shears with it, when no man can work. Our family must then be left behind us, however they have been brought up; our farm also, however it has been worked; our estate also, however it has been managed; our pulpit, our pew, our church, our character, and even our salvation, and we must, all alone with God, face and account for the empty sand-glass and the accusing book.

Is it any wonder that John Gordon's minister, when he was in the spirit in Patmos, should write him as we here read? What kind of a minister would he have been, and what a sand-glass, and what a book of angry account he would have had soon to face himself, if he had let all his people in Anwoth live on and suddenly die in total forgetfulness of the sand and the shears, the book of duty and the book of judgment.

'Remember,' Rutherford wrote, 'remember and misspend not your short sand-glass, for your forenoon is already spent, your afternoon has come, and your night will be on you when you will not see to work. Let your heart, therefore, be set upon finishing your journey and summing up and laying out the accounts of your life and the grounds of your death alone before God.'

7. And, above all, remember that after you have done all, it is the blood of Christ alone that will set you down safely as a freeholder in Heaven. But His blood, and your everyday remembrance of His blood, and your everyday obligation to it, will surely set you, John Gordon of Rusco on earth, so down a freeholder in heaven.

'Soon shall the cup of glory

Wash down earth's bitterest woes.

Soon shall the desert briar

Break into Eden's Rose:

I stand upon His merit,

I know no other stand,

Not e'en where glory dwelleth

In Immanuel's land.'

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