

Lady Boyd

by Alexander Whyte

Lady Boyd's life and character serve as a model for recognizing and repenting of our sins, and the promise of salvation is available to all, even those with corrupt hearts.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, Proverbs 4:23, Romans 7:24, James 4:8, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Personal Holiness", "True Repentance"

Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the remarkable life of Lady Boyd, a woman of deep personal religion and intense inwardness, as seen through her meticulous diary and her close relationships with eminent ministers like Samuel Rutherford. Lady Boyd's diary, though lost, would have revealed her daily reflections on her soul and the Lord's work in her life. Rutherford's counsel to Lady Boyd to be sorry at corruption emphasizes the ongoing battle against sin in the heart, leading to a deeper understanding of the need for true repentance and reliance on God's grace.

Transcript

'Be sorry at corruption.' --Rutherford.

Out of various published and unpublished writings of her day we are able to gather an interesting and impressive picture of Lady Boyd's life and character. But there was a carefully written volume of manuscript that I much fear she must have burned when on her death-bed, that would have been invaluable to us to-night. Lady Boyd kept a careful diary for many years of her later life, and it was not a diary of court scandal or of social gossip or even of family affairs, it was a memoir of herself that would have satisfied even John Foster, for in it she tried with all fidelity to 'discriminate the successive states of her mind, and so to trace the progress of her character, a progress that gives its chief importance to human life.' Lady Boyd's diary would, to a certainty, have pleased the austere Essayist, for she was a woman after his own heart, grave, diligent, prudent, a rare pattern of Christianity.'

Thomas Hamilton, Lady Boyd's father, was an excellent scholar and a very able man. He rose from being a simple advocate at the Scottish Bar to be Lord President of the Court of Session, after which, for his great services, he was created Earl of Haddington. Christina, his eldest daughter, inherited no small part of her father's talents and strength of character. By the time we know her she has been some ten years a widow, and all her children are promising to turn out an honour to her name and a blessing to her old age. And, under the Divine promise, we do not wonder at that, when we see what sort of mother they had. For with all sovereign and inscrutable exceptions the rule surely still holds, 'Train up a child in the way he

should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.' All her days Lady Boyd was on the most intimate terms with the most eminent ministers of the Church of Scotland. We find such men as Robert Bruce, Robert Blair, John Livingstone, and Samuel Rutherford continually referring to her in the loftiest terms. But it was not so much her high rank, or her great ability, or her fearless devotion to the Presbyterian and Evangelical cause that so drew those men around her; it was rather the inwardness and the intensity of her personal religion. You may be a determined upholder of a Church, of Presbytery against Prelacy, of Protestantism against Popery, or even of Evangelical religion against Erastianism and Moderatism, and yet know nothing of true religion in your own heart. But men like Livingstone and Rutherford would never have written of Lady Boyd as they did had she not been a rare pattern of inward and spiritual Christianity.

I have spoken of Lady Boyd's diary. 'She used every night,' says Livingstone, 'to write what had been the state of her soul all day, and what she had observed of the Lord's doing.' When all her neighbours were lying down without fear, her candle went not out till she had taken pen and ink and had called herself to a strict account for the past day. Her duties and her behaviour to her husband, to her children, to her servants, and to her many dependants; the things that had tried her temper, her humility, her patience, her power of self-denial; any strength and wisdom she had attained to in the government of her tongue and in shutting her ears from the hearing of evil; as, also, every ordinary as well as extraordinary providence that had visited her that day, and how she had been able to recognise it and accept it and take good out of it. Thus the Lady Boyd prevented the night-watches. When the women of her own rank sat down to write their promised letters of gossip and scandal and amusement she sat down to write her diary. 'We see many things, but we observe nothing,' said Rutherford in a letter to Lady Kenmure. All around her God had been dealing all that day with Lady Boyd's neighbours as well as with her, only they had not observed it. But she had not only an eye to see but a mind and a heart to observe also. She had a heart that, like the fabled Philosopher's Stone, turned all it touched and all that touched it immediately to fine gold.

Riding home late one night from a hunting supper-party, young Lord Boyd saw his mother's candle still burning, and he made bold to knock at her door to ask why she was not asleep. Without saying a word, she took her son by the hand and set him down at her table and pointed him to the wet sheet she had just written. When he had read it he rose, without speaking a word, and went to his own room, and though that night was never all their days spoken of to one another, yet all his days Lord Boyd looked back on that night of the hunt as being the night when his soul escaped from the snare of the fowler. I much fear the diary is lost, but it would be well worth the trouble of the owner of Ardrross Castle to cause a careful search to be made for it in the old charter chests of the family.

Till Lady Boyd's lost diary is recovered to us, let us gather a few things about this remarkable woman out of the letters and reminiscences of such men as Livingstone and Rutherford and her namesake, Principal Boyd of Trochrig. Rutherford, especially, was, next to her midnight page, her ladyship's confidential and bosom friend. 'Now Madam,' he writes in a letter from Aberdeen, 'for your ladyship's own case.' And then he addresses himself in his finest style to console his correspondent, regarding some of the deepest and most painful incidents of her rare and genuine Christian experience. 'Yes,' he says, 'be sorry at corruption, and be not secure about yourself as long as any of it is there.' Corruption, in this connection, is a figure of speech. It is a kind of technical term much in vogue with spiritual writers of the profounder kind. It expresses to those unhappy persons who have the thing in themselves, and who are also familiar with the Scriptural and experimental use of the word--to them it expresses with fearful truth and power the sinfulness of their own hearts, as that sinfulness abides and breaks out continually. Now, how could Lady Boyd, being the woman she was, but be sorry and inconsolably sorry to find all that in her own heart every

day? No wonder that she and her son never referred to what she had written and he had read in his mother's lockfast book that never-to-be-forgotten night.

'Be sorry at corruption, and be not secure.' How could she be secure when she saw and felt every day that deadly disease eating at her own heart? She could not be secure for an hour; she would have been anything but the grave and prudent woman she was--she would have been mad--had she for a single moment felt secure with such a corrupt heart. You must all have read a dreadful story that went the round of the newspapers the other day. A prairie hunter came upon a shanty near Winnipeg, and found--of all things in the world!--a human foot lying on the ground outside the door. Inside was a young English settler bleeding to death, and almost insane. He had lost himself in the prairie blizzard till his feet were frozen to mortification, and in his desperation he had taken a carving-knife and had hacked off his most corrupt foot and had thrown it out of doors. And then, while the terrified hunter was getting help, the despairing man cut off the other corrupt foot also. I hope that brave young Englishman will live till some Winnipeg minister tells him of a yet more terrible corruption than ever took hold of a frozen foot, and of a knife that cuts far deeper than the shanty carver, and consoles him in death with the assurance that it was of him that Jesus Christ spoke in the Gospel long ago, when He said that it is better to enter into life halt and maimed, rather than having two feet to be cast into everlasting fire.

There was no knife in Ardross Castle that would reach down to Lady Boyd's corrupt heart; had there been, she would have first cleansed her own heart with it, and would then have shown her son how to cleanse his. But, as Rutherford says, she also had come now to that 'nick' in religion to cut off a right hand and a right foot so as to keep Christ and the life everlasting, and so had her eldest son, Lord Boyd. As Bishop Martensen also says, 'Many a time we cannot avoid feeling a deep sorrow for ourselves because of the bottomless depth of corruption which lies hidden in our heart--which sorrow, rightly felt and rightly exercised, is a weighty basis of sanctification.'

To an able woman building on such a weighty basis as that on which Lady Boyd had for long been building, Rutherford was quite safe to lay weighty and unusual comforts on her mind and on her heart. 'Christ has a use for all your corruptions,' he says to her, to her surprise and to her comfort. 'Beata culpa,' cried Augustine; and 'Felix culpa,' cried Gregory. 'My sins have in a manner done me more good than my graces,' said holy Mr. Fox. 'I find advantages of my sins,' said that most spiritually minded of men, James Fraser of Brea. Those who are willing and able to read a splendid passage for themselves on this paradoxical-sounding subject will find it on page xii. of the Address to the Godly and Judicious Reader in Samuel Rutherford's Christ Dying and Drawing to Himself.

What Rutherford was bold to say to Lady Boyd about her corruptions she was able herself to say to Trochrig about her crosses. 'Right Honourable Sir, --It is common to God's children and to the wicked to be under crosses, but their crosses chase God's children to God. O that anything would chase me to my God!' There speaks a woman of mind and of heart who knows what she is speaking about. And, like her and her correspondents, when all our other crosses have chased us to God, then our master cross, the corruption of our heart, will chase us closer up to God than all our other crosses taken together. We have no cross to be compared with our corruptions, and when they have chased us close enough and deep enough into the secret place of God, then we will begin to understand and adorn the dangerous doxologies of Augustine and Gregory, Fraser and Fox.

Yes; anything and everything is good that chases us up to God: crosses and corruptions, sin and death and hell. 'O that anything would chase me to my God!' cried saintly Lady Boyd. And that leads her ladyship

in another letter to Trochrig to tell him the kind of preaching she needs and that she must have at any cost. 'It will not neither be philosophy nor eloquence that will draw me from the broad road of perdition: I must have a trumpet to tell me of my sins.'

That was a well-said word to the then Principal of Glasgow University who had so many of the future ministers of Scotland under his hands, all vying with one another as to who should be the best philosopher and the most eloquent preacher. Trochrig was both an eloquent preacher and a philosophic principal and a spiritually-minded man, but he was no worse to read Lady Boyd's demand for a true minister, and I hope he read her letter and gave his students her name in his pastoral theology class. Lady Boyd on the broad road of perdition!' some of his students would exclaim. 'Why, Lady Boyd is the most saintly woman in all the country.' And that would only give the learned Principal an opportunity to open up to his class, as he was so well fitted to do, that saying of Rutherford to Lady Kenmure: that 'sense of sin is a sib friend to a spiritual man,' till some, no doubt, went out of that class and preached, as Thomas Boston did, to 'terrify the godly.' Such results, no doubt, came to many from Lady Boyd's letter to the Principal as to the preaching she needed and must at any cost have: not philosophy, nor eloquence, but a voice like a trumpet to tell her of her sin.

Rutherford was in London attending the sittings of the Westminster Assembly when his dear friend Lady Boyd died in her daughter's house at Ardross. The whole Scottish Parliament, then sitting at St. Andrews, rose out of respect and attended her funeral. Rutherford could not be present, but he wrote a characteristically comforting letter to Lady Ardross, which has been preserved to us. He reminded her that all her mother's sorrows were comforted now, and all her corruptions healed, and all her much service of Christ and His Church in Scotland far more than recompensed.

Children of God, take comfort, for so it will soon be with you also. Your salvation, far off as it looks to you, is far nearer than when you believed. You will carry your corruptions with you to your grave; 'they lay with you,' as Rutherford said to Lady Boyd, 'in your mother's womb,' and the nearer you come to your grave the stronger and the more loathsome will you feel your corruptions to be; but what about that, if only they chase you the closer up to God, and make what is beyond the grave the more sure and the more sweet to your heart. Lady Boyd is not sorry for her corruptions now. She is now in that blessed land where the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick. Take comfort, O sure child of God, with the most corrupt heart in all the world; for it is for you and for the like of you that that inheritance is prepared and kept, that inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away. Take comfort, for they that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.

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