

# Robert Gordon

by Alexander Whyte

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*Robert Gordon was a single-hearted and painful Christian who was much employed in parliaments and public meetings, and his legacy was that of a mark of a member of Parliament or a speaker at public meetings.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 51:10, Proverbs 20:7, Romans 12:3, 1 Corinthians 10:12, Galatians 6:9, Philippians 2:12, 1 Timothy 4:15, Hebrews 12:1, James 4:8, 1 Peter 5:5

**Topics:** "Christian Character", "Holiness"

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## Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the exemplary Christian character of Robert Gordon of Knockbrev, comparing him to Old Honest and Mr. Fearing in Pilgrim's Progress. Gordon was described as 'single-hearted and painful,' deeply devoted to his faith and salvation. His sincerity, straightforwardness, and earnestness in pursuing holiness made a lasting impact on those around him. Despite his struggles and pains, Gordon's commitment to his Christian journey and involvement in public affairs exemplified a life dedicated to truth, righteousness, and service to others.

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## Transcript

'A single-hearted and painful Christian, much employed in parliaments and public meetings after the year 1638.'--Livingstone.

'Hall-binks are slippery.'--Gordon to Rutherford.

Robert Gordon of Knockbrev, in his religious character, was a combination of Old Honest and Mr. Fearing in the Pilgrim's Progress. He was as single-hearted and straightforward as that worthy old gentleman was who early trusted one Good-Conscience to meet him and give him his hand over the river which has no bridge; and he was at the same time as troublesome to Samuel Rutherford, his minister and correspondent, as Greatheart's most troublesome pilgrim was to him. In two well-chosen words John Livingstone tells us the deep impression that the laird of Knockbrev made on the men of his day. With a quite Scriptural insight and terseness of expression, Livingstone simply says that Robert Gordon was the most 'single-hearted and painful' of all the Christian men known to his widely-acquainted and clear-sighted biographer.

Now there may possibly be some need that the epithet 'painful' should be explained, as it is here applied to this good man, but everybody knows without any explanation what it is for any man to be 'single-hearted.' This was the fine character our Lord gave to Nathanael when He saluted him as an

Israelite indeed in whom was no guile. It is singleness of heart that so clears up the understanding and the judgment that, as our Lord said at another time, it fills a man's whole soul with light. And Paul gives it as the best character that a servant can bring to or carry away from his master's house, that he is single-hearted and not an eye-servant in all that he says and does. I keep near me on my desk a book called Roget's Thesaurus, which is a rich treasure-house of the English language. And though I thought I knew what Livingstone meant when he called Robert Gordon a single-hearted man, at the same time I felt sure that Roget would help me to see Gordon better. And so he did. For when I had opened his book at the word 'single-hearted,' he at once told me that Knockbrev was an open, frank, natural, straightforward, altogether trustworthy man. He was above-board, outspoken, downright, blunt even, and bald, always calling a spade a spade. And with each new synonym Robert Gordon's honest portrait stood out clearer and clearer before me, till I thought I saw him, and wished much that we had more single-hearted men like him in the public and the private life of our day.

And then, as to his 'painfulness,' we have that so well expounded and illustrated in John Bunyan's Mr. Fearing, that all I need to do is to recall that inimitable character to your happy memory. 'He was a man that had the root of the matter in him, but at the same time he was the most troublesome pilgrim that ever I met with in all my days. He lay roaring at the Slough of Despond for above a month together. He would not go back neither. The Celestial City, he said he should die if he came not to it, and yet was dejected at every difficulty and stumbled at every straw. He had, I think, a Slough of Despond in his mind, a slough that he carried everywhere with him, or else he could never have been as he was.' Yes, both Mr. Fearing and the laird of Knockbrev were painful Christians. That is to say, they took pains, special and exceptional pains, with the salvation of their own souls. They took their religion with tremendous earnestness. They would have pleased Paul had they lived in his day, for they both worked out their own salvation with fear and trembling. They looked on sin and death and hell with absorbing and overwhelming solemnity, and they set themselves with all their might to escape from these direst of evils. Pardon of sin, peace with God, a clean heart and a Christian character, all these things were their daily prayer; for these things they wrestled many a night like Jacob at the Jabbok.

The day of death, the day of judgment, heaven and hell--these things were more present with them than the things they saw and handled every day. And this was why they were such troublesome pilgrims. This was why they sometimes stumbled at what their neighbours called a straw; and this was why they feared neither king nor bishop, man nor devil, they feared God and sin and death and hell so much. This was why, while all other men were so full of torpid assurance, they still carried, to the annoyance and anger of all their serene-minded neighbours, such a Slough of Despond in their anxious minds. This was why sin so poisoned all their possessions and enjoyments that Greatheart could not get Fearing, any more than Rutherford could get Gordon, out of the Valley of Humiliation. And this was why Gordon so often turned upon Rutherford when he was exalted above measure, and reminded his minister, in the old Scottish proverb, that 'Hall-binks are slippery.'

Seats of honour, Mr. Samuel, are unsafe seats for unsanctified sinners. Ecstasies do not last, and they leave the soul weaker and darker than they found it. It is a comely thing even for a saint to be well-clothed about with humility, and the deepest valley is safer and seemlier walking for a lame man than the mountain-top; and so on, till Rutherford admitted that Robert Gordon's warnings were neither impertinent nor untimeous. The sin-stricken laird of Knockbrev was like Mr. Fearing at the House Beautiful. When all the other pilgrims sat down without fear at the table, that so timid and so troublesome pilgrim, remembering the proverb, stole away behind the screen and found his meat and his drink in overhearing

the good conversation that went on in the banquet-hall. Gordon could not understand all Rutherford's joy. He did not altogether like it. He did not answer the ecstatic letters so promptly as he answered those which were composed on a soberer key. He was a blunt, plainspoken, matter-of-fact man; he immensely loved and honoured his minister, but he could not help reminding him after one of his specially enraptured letters that 'Hall-binks are slippery seats.'

The golden mean lay somewhere between the hall-bink and the ash-pit; somewhere between Rutherford's ecstasy and Gordon's depression. But as the Guide said in the exquisite conversation, the wise God will have it so, some must pipe and some must weep: and, for my part, I care not for that profession that begins not with heaviness of mind.

Only, here was the imperfection of Mr. Fearing and Robert Gordon, that they would play upon no other music but this to their latter end. So much so, that the thick woods of Knockbrev are said to give out to this day the sound of the sackbut to those who have their cars set to such music; there are men in that country who say that they still hear it when they pass the plantations of Knockbrev alone at night. Knockbrev is now a fine modern mansion that is sometimes let for the summer to city people seeking solitude and rest. Among these thick woods and along these silent sands Samuel Rutherford and Robert Gordon were wont to walk and talk together. And here still a man who wishes it may be free from the noise and the hurrying of this life. Here a man shall not be let and hindered in his contemplations as in other places he is apt to be. There are woods here that he who loves a pilgrim's life may safely walk in. The soil also all hereabouts is rich and fruitful, and, under good management, it brings forth by handfuls. The very shepherd boys here live a merry life, and wear more of the herb called heart's-ease in their bosoms than he that is clad in silk and velvet. What a rich inheritance to the right heir is the old estate of Knockbrev! What an opportunity, and what an education, it must be to tenant Knockbrev with recollection, with understanding, and with sympathy even for a season.

Robert Gordon would very willingly have remained behind the screen all his days. He would very willingly have given himself up to the care of his estate, to the up-bringing of his children, and to the working out of his own salvation, but such a man as he now was could not be hid. The stone that is fit for the wall is not let lie in the ditch. We have a valuable letter of Rutherford's addressed to Marion M'Naught about the impending election of a commissioner for Parliament for the town of Kirkcudbright. In that letter he urges her to try to get her husband, William Fullarton, to stand for the vacant seat. 'It is an honourable and necessary service,' he says. And speaking of one of the candidates, he further says: 'I fear he has neither the skill nor the authority for the post.' Now, it was either at this election, or it was at the next election, that an influential deputation of the gentry and burgesses and ministers and elders of the district waited on Robert Gordon to get him to stand for one of the vacant seats in Galloway; and once he was chosen and had shown himself to the world he was never let return again to his home occupations. 'He was much employed in those years,' says Livingstone, 'in parliaments and public meetings.'

There are some good men among us who think that the world is so bad that it is fit for nothing but to be abandoned to the devil and his angels altogether, and that a genuine man of God is too good to be made a member of Parliament or to be much seen on the platforms of public meetings. Such was not Samuel Rutherford's judgment, as will be seen in his 36th Letter. And such was not Robert Gordon's judgment, when he left the woods and fields of Knockbrev and gave himself wholly up to the politics of his entangled and distressful day.

What he would have said to the summons had the marches been already redd between Lex and Rex, and had the affairs of the Church of Christ not been still too much mixed up with the affairs of the State, I do not know. Only, as long as the Crown and the Parliament had their hands so deeply in the things of the Church, Knockbrex was not hard to persuade to go to Parliament to watch over interests that were dearer to him than life, or family, or estate. Robert Gordon carried the old family brow with him into all the debates and dangers of that day; and he added to all that a singleness of heart and a painstaking mind all his own. And it was no wonder that such a man was much in demand at such a time. In our own far happier time what a mark does a member of Parliament still make, or a speaker at public meetings, who is seen to be single in his heart, and is at constant pains with himself and with all his duties. It is at bottom our doubleness of heart and our lack of sufficient pains with ourselves and with the things of truth and righteousness that so divide us up into bitter factions, hateful and hating one another. And when all our public men are like Robert Gordon in the singleness of their aims and their motives, and when they are at their utmost pains to get at the truth about all the subjects they are called to deal with, party, if not parliamentary government, with all its vices and mischiefs, will have passed away, and the absolute Monarchy of the Kingdom of Heaven will have come.

So much, then, is told us of Robert Gordon in few words: 'A single-hearted and painful Christian, much employed in parliaments and public meetings.' To which may be added this extract taken out of the Minute Book of the Covenanters' War Committee: 'The same day there was delyverit to the said commissioners by Robert Gordoun of Knockbrax sex silver spoones Scots worke, weightan vi. unce xii. dropes.' Had Knockbrex also, like the Earlstons, been fined by the bishops and harried by the dragoons till he had nothing left to deliver to the Commissioners but six silver spoons and a single heart? It would seem so. Like the woman in the Gospel, Gordon gave to the Covenant all that he had. Had Robert Gordon been a Highlander instead of a Lowlander; had he been a Ross-shire crofter instead of a small laird in Wigtown, he would have been one of the foremost of the well-known 'men.' His temperament and his experiences would have made him a prince among the minsters and the men of the far north. Were it nothing else, the pains he spent on the growth of the life of grace in his own soul,—that would have canonised him among the saintliest of those saintly men.

He would have set the Question on many a Communion Friday, and the Question in his hands would not have concerned itself with surface matters. Was it because Rutherford had now gone nearer that great region of experimental casuistry that he started that excellent Friday problem in a letter from Aberdeen to Knockbrex in 1637? With Rutherford everything, --the most doctrinal, experimental, ecclesiastical, political, all--ran always up into Christ, His love and His loveableness. 'Is Christ more to be loved for gaining for us justification or sanctification?' Such was one of the questions Rutherford set to his correspondent in the south. Did any of you north country folk ever hear that question debated out before one of your Highland communions? If you care to see how Rutherford the minister and Knockbrex the man debated out their debt to Jesus Christ, read the priceless correspondence that passed between them, and especially, read the 170th Letter.

But first, and before that, do you either know, or care to know, what either justification or sanctification is? When you do know and do care for these supreme things, then you too will in time become a single-hearted and painstaking Christian like Robert Gordon, or else an ecstatic and enraptured Christian like Samuel Rutherford. And that again will be very much according to your natural temperament, your attainments, and your experiences. And nothing in this world will thereafter interest and occupy you half so much as just those questions that are connected first with all that Christ is in Himself and all that He has

done for you, and then with the signs and the fruits of the life of grace in your own souls.

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