

# William Guthrie

by Alexander Whyte

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*William Guthrie was a great humorist, sportsman, preacher, and writer who found joy and balance in the midst of difficulties, and whose practical and scientific approach to the things of the soul made him a beloved and respected figure in his time.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 51:17, Psalm 126:5, Proverbs 3:5, Proverbs 17:22, Matthew 5:4, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Philippians 4:7, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, James 4:8

**Topics:** "Christian Humor", "Practical Preaching"

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## Description

Alexander Whyte preaches about the life of William Guthrie, a great humorist, sportsman, preacher, and writer, who found solace in humor and sports to alleviate his melancholy. Despite his struggles, Guthrie's humor and sportsmanship were always noble and pious, leading to a humbler walk with God. Guthrie's practical preaching style attracted broken hearts and anxious inquirers from far and wide, making him the greatest practical preacher in Scotland. Additionally, Guthrie's small book, 'The Great Interest,' highly praised by John Owen and Thomas Chalmers, is scientifically exact in addressing matters of the soul, demonstrating the author's deep understanding and practical approach to spiritual exercises.

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## Transcript

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine.'--Solomon.

William Guthrie was a great humorist, a great sportsman, a great preacher, and a great writer. The true Guthrie blood has always had a drop of humour in it, and the first minister of Fenwick was a genuine Guthrie in this respect. The finest humour springs up out of a wide and a deep heart, and it always has its roots watered at a well-head of tears. 'William Guthrie was a great melancholian,' says Wodrow, and as we read that we are reminded of some other great melancholians, such as Blaise Pascal and John Foster and William Cowper.

William Guthrie knew, by his temperament, and by his knowledge of himself and of other men, that he was a great melancholian, and he studied how to divert himself sometimes in order that he might not be altogether drowned with his melancholy. And thus, maugre his melancholy, and indeed by reason of it, William Guthrie was a great humorist. He was the life of the party on the moors, in the manse, and in the General Assembly. But the life of the party when he was present was always pure and noble and pious, even if it was sometimes somewhat hilarious and boisterous.

If a man's melancholy temperament is sanctified,' says Rutherford in his Covenant of Grace, 'it becomes to him a seat of sound mortification and of humble walking.' And that was the happy result of all William Guthrie's melancholy; it was always alleviated and relieved by great outbursts of good humour; but both his melancholy and his hilarity always ended in a humbler walk. Samuel Rutherford confides in a letter to his old friend, Alexander Gordon, that he knows a man who sometimes wonders to see any one laugh or sport in this so sinful and sad life.

But that was because he had embittered the springs of laughter in himself by the wormwood sins of his youth. William Guthrie had no such remorseful memories continually taking him by the throat as his divinity professor had, and thus it was that with all his melancholy he was known as the greatest humorist and the greatest sportsman in the Scottish Kirk of his day. No doubt he sometimes felt and confessed that his love of fun and frolic was a temptation that he had to watch well against.

In his Saving Interest he speaks of some sins that are wrought up into a man's natural humour and constitution, and are thus as a right hand and a right eye to him. 'My merriment!' he confessed to one who had rebuked him for it, 'I know all you would say, and my merriment costs me many a salt tear in secret.' At the same time this was often remarked with wonder in Guthrie, that however boisterous his fun was, in one moment he could turn from it to the most serious things. 'It was often observed,' says Wodrow, 'that, let Mr.

Guthrie be never so merry, he was presently in a frame for the most spiritual duty, and the only account I can give of it,' says wise Wodrow, 'is, that he acted from spiritual principles in all he did, and even in his relaxations.' Poor Guthrie had a terrible malady that preyed on his most vital part continually--a malady that at last carried him off in the mid-time of his days, and, like Solomon in the proverb, he took to a merry heart as an alleviating medicine.

Like our own Thomas Guthrie, too, William Guthrie was a great angler. He could gaff out a salmon in a few minutes as the deftest-handed gamekeeper in all the country, and he could stalk down a deer in a few hours as my lord himself who did nothing else. When he was composing his Saving Interest, he somehow heard of a poor countryman near Haddington who had come through some extraordinary experiences in his spiritual life, and he set out from Fenwick all the way to Haddington to see and converse with the much-experienced man. All that night and all the next day Guthrie could not tear himself away from the conversation of the man and his wife. But at last, looking up and down the country, his angling eye caught sight of a trout-stream, and, as if he had in a moment forgotten all about his book at home and all that this saintly man had contributed to it, Guthrie asked him if he had a fishing-rod, and if he would give him a loan of it. The old man felt that his poor rough tackle was to be absolutely glorified by such a minister as Guthrie condescending to touch it, but his good wife did not like this come-down at the end of such a visit as his has been, and she said so. She was a clever old woman, and I am not sure but she had the best of it in the debate that followed about ministers fishing, and about their facetious conversation.

The Haddington stream, and the dispute that rose out of it, recall to my mind a not unlike incident that took place in the street of Ephesus, in the far East, just about 1800 years ago. John, the venerable Apostle, had just finished the fourteenth chapter of his great Gospel, and felt himself unable to recollect and write out any more that night. And coming out into the setting sun he began to amuse himself with a tame partridge that the Bactrian convert had caught and made a present of to his old master. The partridge had been waiting till the pen and the parchment were put by, and now it was on John's hand, and now on his

shoulder, and now circling round his sportful head, till you would have thought that its owner was the idlest and foolishest old man in all Ephesus. A huntsman, who greatly respected his old pastor, was passing home from the hills and was sore distressed to see such a saint as John was trifling away his short time with a stupid bird. And he could not keep from stopping his horse and saying so to the old Evangelist. 'What is that you carry in your hand?' asked John at the huntsman with great meekness. 'It is my bow with which I shoot wild game up in the mountains,' replied the huntsman. 'And why do you let it hang so loose? You cannot surely shoot anything with your bow in that condition!' 'No,' answered the amused huntsman, 'but if I always kept my bow strung it would not rebound and send home my arrow when I needed it. I unstring my bow on the street that I may the better shoot with it when I am up among my quarry.' 'Good,' said the Evangelist, and I have learned a lesson from you huntsmen. For I am playing with my partridge to-night that I may the better finish my Gospel to-morrow. I am putting everything out of my mind to-night that I may to-morrow the better recollect and set down a prayer I heard offered up by my Master, now more than fifty years ago.' We readers of the Fourth Gospel do not know how much we owe to the Bactrian boy's tame partridge, and neither John Owen nor Thomas Chalmers knew how much they owed to the fishing-rods and curling-stones, the fowling-pieces and the violins that crowded the corners of the manse of Fenwick. I do not know that William Guthrie made a clean breast to the Presbytery of all the reasons that moved him to refuse so many calls to a city charge, though I think I see that David Dickson, the Moderator, divined some of them by the joke he made about the moors of Fenwick to one of the defeated and departing deputations.

William Guthrie, the eldest son and sole heir of the laird of Pitforth, might have had fishing and shooting to his heart's content on his own lands of Pitforth and Easter Ogle had he not determined, when under Rutherford at St. Andrews, to give himself up wholly to his preaching. But, to put himself out of the temptation that hills and streams and lochs and houses and lands would have been to a man of his tastes and temperament, soon after his conversion William made over to a younger brother all his possessions and all his responsibilities connected therewith, in order that he might give himself up wholly to his preaching.

And his reward was that he soon became, by universal consent, the greatest practical preacher in broad Scotland. He could not touch Rutherford, his old professor, at pure theology; he had neither Rutherford's learning, nor his ecstatic eloquence, nor his surpassing love of Jesus Christ, but for handling broken bones and guiding an anxious inquirer no one could hold the candle to William Guthrie. Descriptions of his preaching abound in the old books, such as this: A Glasgow merchant was compelled to spend a Sabbath in Arran, and though he did not understand Gaelic, he felt he must go to the Place of public worship.

Great was his delight when he saw William Guthrie come into the pulpit. And he tells us that though he had heard in his day many famous preachers, he had never seen under any preacher so much concern of soul as he saw that day in Arran, under the minister of Fenwick. There was scarcely a dry eye in the whole church. A gentleman who was well known as a most dissolute liver was in the church that day, and could not command himself, so deeply was he moved under Guthrie's sermon.

That day was remembered long afterwards when that prodigal son had become an eminent Christian man. We see at one time a servant girl coming home from Guthrie's church saying that she cannot contain all that she has heard to-day, and that she feels as if she would need to hear no more on this side heaven. Another day Wodrow's old mother has been at Fenwick, and comes home saying that the first prayer was more than enough for all her trouble without any sermon at all. He had a taking and a soaring gift of preaching, but it was its intensely practical character that made Guthrie's pulpit so powerful and so

popular.

The very fact that he could go all the way in those days from Fenwick to Haddington, just to have a case of real soul-exercise described to him by the exercised man himself, speaks volumes as to the secret of Guthrie's power in the pulpit. His people felt that their minister knew them; he knew himself, and therefore he knew them. He did not pronounce windy orations about things that did not concern or edify them. He was not learned in the pulpit, nor eloquent, or, if he was--and he was both--all his talents, and all his scholarship, and all his eloquence were forgotten in the intensely practical turn that his preaching immediately took.

All the broken hearts in the west country, all those whose sins had found them out, all those who had learned to know the plague of their own heart, and who were passing under a searching sanctification--all such found their way from time to time from great distances to the Kirk of Fenwick. From Glasgow they came, and from Paisley, and from Hamilton, and from Lanark, and from Kilbride, and from many other still more distant places. The lobbies of Fenwick Kirk were like the porches of Bethesda with all the blind, halt, and withered from the whole country round about.

After Hutcheson of the Minor Prophets had assisted at the communion of Fenwick on one occasion, he said that, if there was a church full of God's saints on the face of the earth, it was at Fenwick communion-table.

Pitforthly and Glen Ogle, and all the estates in Angus, were but dust in the balance compared with one Sabbath-day's exercise of such a preaching gift as that of William Guthrie. 'There is no man that hath forsaken houses and lands for My sake and the Gospel's, but shall receive an hundredfold now in this life, and in the world to come life everlasting.'

But further, besides being a great humorist and a great sportsman and a great preacher, William Guthrie was a great writer. A great writer is not a man who fills our dusty shelves with his forgotten volumes. It is not given to any man to fill a whole library with first-rate work. Our greatest authors have all written little books. Job is a small book, so is the Psalms, so is Isaiah, so is the Gospel of John, so is the Epistle to the Romans, so is the Confessions, so is the Comedy, so is the Imitation, so are the Pilgrim and the Grace Abounding, and though William Guthrie's small book is not for a moment to be ranked with such master-pieces as these, yet it is a small book on a great subject, and a book to which I cannot find a second among the big religious books of our day. You will all find out your own favourite books according to your own talents and tastes. My calling a book great is nothing to you. But it may at least interest you for the passing moment to be told what two men like John Owen, in the, seventeenth century, and Thomas Chalmers, in the nineteenth, said about William Guthrie's one little book. Said John Owen, drawing a little gilt copy of *The Great Interest* out of his pocket, 'That author I take to be one of the greatest divines that ever wrote. His book is my vade mecum. I carry it always with me. I have written several folios, but there is more divinity in this little book than in them all.' Believe John Owen. Believe all that he says about Guthrie's *Saving Interest*; but do not believe what he says about his own maligned folios till you have read twenty times over his *Person and Glory of Christ*, his *Holy Spirit*, his *Spiritual-mindedness*, and his *Mortification, Dominion, and Indwelling of Sin*. Then hear Dr. Chalmers: 'I am on the eve of finishing Guthrie which I think is the best book I ever read.' After you have read it, if you ever do, the likelihood is that you will feel as if somehow you had not read the right book when you remember what Owen and Chalmers have said about it. Yes, you have read the right enough book; but the right book has not yet got in you the right reader. There are not many readers abroad like Dr. John Owen and Dr. Thomas Chalmers.

In its style William Guthrie's one little book is clear, spare, crisp, and curt. Indeed, in some places it is almost too spare and too curt in its bald simplicity. True students will not be deterred from it when I say that it is scientifically and experimentally exact in its treatment of the things of the soul. They will best understand and appreciate this statement of Guthrie's biographer that 'when he was working at his Saving Interest he endeavoured to inform himself of all the Christians in the country who had been under great depths of exercise, or were still under such depths, and endeavoured to converse with them.' Guthrie is almost as dry as Euclid himself, and almost as severe, but, then, he demonstrates almost with mathematical demonstration the all-important things he sets out to prove. There is no room for rhetoric on a finger-post; in a word, and, sometimes without a word, a finger-post tells you the right way to take to get to your journey's end. And many who have wandered into a far country have found their way home again under William Guthrie's exact marks, clear evidences, and curt directions. You open the little book, and there is a sentence of the plainest, directest, and least entertaining or attractive prose, followed up with a text of Scripture to prove the plain and indisputable prose. Then there is another sentence of the same prose, supported by two texts, and thus the little treatise goes on till, if you are happy enough to be interested in the author's subject-matter, the eternal interests of your own soul, a strong, strange fascination begins to come off the little book and into your understanding, imagination, and heart, till you look up again what Dr. Owen and Dr. Chalmers said about your favourite author, and feel fortified in your valuation of, and in your affection for, William Guthrie and his golden little book.

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