

A Noted Minister - Rev. James Durham

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MR JAMES DURHAM, minister at Glasgow, was a prudent, pious, and humble divine. He was Laird of Powrie in Angus; but after he had been married and had children, being urged in spirit, and pressed by godly and able ministers, and private Christians, he came to the University of Glasgow, and studied divinity, where in a short time he profited so as he might have been a professor of divinity in any university in Europe. He was soon appointed minister at Glasgow, and in the year 1650, when King Charles II came to Scotland, he, as most fit, for his gravity, learning, wisdom and piety, was unanimously chosen by the General Assembly, to be minister to the king's family. Here he continued for some time, not without great approbation, and some success, as might have been expected at such a time in such a place. Also, he offered to go with the king when he went towards Worcester, but not finding acceptance he returned to Glasgow. He continued in his ministry till the year 1658, when he died, being about 36 years old. His Book of "Scandal", his "Exposition of the Revelation", and of the "Song", with many other pieces, show what rare gifts the Lord had bestowed on him.

His conversion took place as follows: - Going with his wife to visit her mother in the parish of Abercom, some miles west from Edinburgh, it happened to be the time when the Lord's Supper was being administered in that parish. On Saturday, his mother-in-law earnestly pressed him to go with them to church, and hear the sermon. He showed at first a great unwillingness, but was at last prevailed on to go along with them. The minister who preached that day was extremely warm and serious in his delivery, and though the sermon was but a plain and familiar discourse, yet his seriousness fixed Mr Durham's attention very closely. He was much affected by it, but the change was to be reserved for the next day. When he came home, he said to his mother-in-law, "The minister has preached very seriously today, and I shall not need to be urged to go to church tomorrow." Accordingly, on Sabbath morning, rising early, he returned to the church, and Mr Ephraim Melvil preached from 1 Peter 2: 7 "To you that believe, He is precious". In that sermon the minister so sweetly and seriously opened up the preciousness of Christ and the Spirit of God wrought so effectually upon his spirit, that in the hearing of that sermon he first closed with Christ, and then went to the Lord's table and took the seal of God's covenant. He ordinarily called Mr Melvil 'father' when he spake to him.

He was of great integrity, authority, and respect in the country where he lived, and among all his neighbouring gentlemen; so that in all debates and differences that happened, Mr Durham was chosen by both parties as their arbitrator and judge, to whose sentence they submitted.

In the time of the civil wars, many gentlemen were in arms for the cause of religion, amongst whom Mr Durham was chosen, and called to be a captain, in which station he behaved himself like another Cornelius, and prayed to God always with his company; yea, he sometimes acted more like a minister than a captain, standing at the head of his company, and giving them many serious exhortations, advices, and counsels for their souls, and prayed before them so powerfully and effectually, that not only all his company, but strangers who passed by and heard, were greatly affected and surprised, looking to him as a man in whom there was much of the Spirit of God.

His call and coming forth to the holy ministry was remarkable. The Scots army being about to engage with the English, he judged it proper to call his company and soldiers to prayer before the engagement. And as he was beginning to pray, it happened that Mr Dickson, professor of divinity then at Glasgow, came riding by the army, who seeing the soldiers addressing themselves in prayer, and hearing the voice of one praying, drew near, and lighted from his horse and joined with them. He was so much taken with Mr Durham's prayer, that, after prayer, he called for the captain, and having conversed with him a little, he did solemnly charge him, that as soon as this piece of service he was engaged in was over, he should devote himself to serve God in the holy ministry, for to that he judged the Lord called him. But though, as yet, Mr Durham had not light to yield to Mr Dickson's desire, yet two remarkable providences, happening shortly after Mr Dickson's solemn charge, served very much to make his way clear. The first was, - In the heat of battle, an English soldier was ready to strike him down with his sword, but apprehending him to be a minister by his grave deportment, black clothes, and band, as was then in fashion with gentlemen, asked Mr Durham, if he was a priest? To this Mr Durham answered, Yes, and so his life was spared by the soldier. Upon after reflection, Mr Durham considering with himself how wonderfully the Lord had spared him, and preserved his life, and that his saying he was a priest had been the means of his preservation, resolved, therefore, as a testimony of his grateful sense of the Lord's mercy to him henceforth to devote himself to the service of God in the holy ministry, if the Lord should see meet to call and qualify him for the same.

Accordingly, having studied divinity under Mr Dickson at Glasgow, he was licensed, in the year 1646, and ordained a minister in Glasgow, November, 1647. When Cromwell and his army were in Glasgow, on the Sabbath Day, Cromwell heard Mr Durham, who preached against the invasion to his face. Next day Cromwell sent for Mr Durham and told him, "That he always thought Mr Durham had been a more wise and prudent man, than to meddle with matters of public concern in his sermons". To which Mr Durham answered - "That it was not his practice to bring public matters into the pulpit but that he judged it both wisdom and prudence in him to speak his mind upon that head, seeing he had the opportunity of doing it in his own hearing". Cromwell dismissed him very civilly, but desired him to forbear insisting upon that subject in public. And at the same time sundry ministers both in town and country met with Cromwell and his officers, and represented in the strongest manner the injustice of his invasion.

On a certain day when Mr Durham, and Mr Andrew Gray were to preach, as they were walking together, Mr Durham observed multitudes thronging into that church where Mr Andrew Gray was to preach, and but here and there one dropping into that church where he himself was to preach, said to Mr Gray, "Brother, I perceive you are likely to have a thronged church this day", to which Mr Gray answered, "Truly brother, they are fools so leave you and come to me." To which Mr Durham replied, "Not so, dear brother, for a minister can receive no such honour and success in his ministry, except it be given from heaven. I rejoice that Christ is preached, and that His Kingdom and interest is getting ground, and that his honour and esteem doth increase, though my esteem in people's hearts should decrease, and be diminished, for I am content to be anything, so that Christ may be all in all". He was a person of the utmost composure and gravity, and scarce smiled at anything. When Mr William Guthrie and he were together at dinner in some gentleman's house, Mr Guthrie was exceeding merry, and made Mr Durham smile, and even laugh, with his pleasant facetious conversation. It was the ordinary custom of the family to pray after dinner, and Mr Guthrie was desired to pray, which he did with the greatest measure of seriousness and fervency, to the astonishment of all present. When they rose from prayer, Mr Durham came to him and embraced him, and said, "O William, you are a happy man, if I had been so merry as you have been, I could not have been so serious, nor in any frame for prayer, for 48 hours."

As Mr Durham was devout in all the parts of his ministerial work, he

was more eminently so at communion services. Then he endeavoured through grace to rouse up himself to such a divineness of frame, as very much suited the spiritual state and majesty of that ordinance, greatly fearing lest himself or any of the people to whom he dispensed it, should fall under the grievous guilt of the body and blood of the Lord. Then, in a manner, his face shone, as being in the mount of communion and fellowship with God, and at some of those solemn and sweet occasions, he spake as a man that had seen heaven, commending Jesus Christ, making a glorious display of the banner of the free grace, holding forth the riches of it very clearly and convincingly, and bringing the offer of it very low, wonderfully low: so that in the hearing of some of his sermons at those occasions, particularly that of Matt. 22: 4, some of his hearers were made to think, that the cord of the offer of salvation was let down and hung so low to sinners, that those of the lowest stature among them all, might have caught hold of it, whom, through grace, had any mind to do so; and, so vehemently and urgently pressed, on so sweet and easy terms to be embraced, that it was a wonder to some, how they could refuse or avoid them. Mr Durham gave himself much to meditation, and usually said very little to persons that came to make known their case to him, but heard them patiently, and was sure to handle them in his sermon. His healing disposition and great moderation of spirit remarkably appeared, when this church was greatly divided betwixt the resolutioners and protesters. As he would never give his judgement on either side, so he used to say that the division was by far worse than either of the sides. He was equally respected by both parties, so that at a meeting of the Synod of Glasgow, when those of the two different sides met separately, each of them made choice of Mr Durham for their moderator; but he refused to join with either of them, until they would both unite together, which they accordingly did. At this meeting Mr Durham gave in overtures for peace. His lectures on the book of the Revelation were revised and put to press by himself, but he died before it was finished. All the while he was lecturing upon this scripture, it is said, he kept two days a week for fasting and prayer, in order to find out the Lord's mind in it.

When on his death-bed, he was under considerable darkness about his state, and said to Mr John Carstairs, "Brother, for all that I have preached and written, there is but one scripture I can remember or dare hold on to. Tell me, if I dare lay the weight of my salvation upon it?" -

"Whosoever cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out." Mr Carstairs answered him, "You may depend on it, though you had a thousand salvations at hazard". It is said he cried out a little after, "He is come, He is come."