

REV. JAMES FRASER of ALNESS

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JAMES FRASER was the son of Rev. John Fraser, Glencorse, in the Presbytery of Dalkeith, and latterly of Alness. His mother was Miss Jean Moffat. His father suffered for his adherence to the Covenanter cause, having been deported to America. On the coming of William, Prince of Orange, to England, Mr Fraser and his wife returned to Scotland. He was called to Glencorse soon after his arrival in this country. In 1695 the people of Alness addressed a call to him, which was set aside by the General Assembly. The congregation however, renewed their call the following year. The people of Glencorse set about building a new church, in the hope that Mr Fraser would remain with them, but just as the church was nearing completion it went on fire, and was burnt to the ground.

The minister felt that God was speaking to him in this incident, and that it was his duty to exercise his Gaelic where it was needed; so, he accepted the call to Alness, where he was inducted in 1696. He laboured at Alness for fifteen years, dying in 1711. His son James, was born there in 1700. He passed through the ordinary curriculum of arts and divinity at Aberdeen.

On the death of Mr Mackilligan, son of the better-known Covenanter minister of Fodderty, James Fraser was called in 1726 to the charge once ministered to by his father. A certain section of the congregation opposed the settlement, and on the day of his ordination the Presbytery found the doors of the Church shut against them. The ordination services were conducted in the open air in the church-yard, and for some Sabbaths the young minister had to preach in the open air. The opposition, as time went on, died away, and soon his influence as a preacher began to be felt. The solemn and searching truths he declared made careless sinners ill at ease. The claims of God's law and its threatenings were set before them. Christ was held up before them as God's provision for the lost after they had been driven out of all refuges of lies.

His near neighbour was the godly Mr Porteous, Kilmuir, a, cousin of his own. Some of the people who had been awakened under Mr. Fraser's preaching began to find their way to Kilmuir. Mr Porteous's people were afraid that this might awaken a spirit of jealousy in the mind of Mr Fraser, whom they highly respected and loved. They, therefore, asked Mr Porteous to speak to Mr Fraser

and assure him that he had done nothing to induce the people from Alness to become occasional worshipers in his church. Mr Porteous readily complied with the request. Mr Fraser's reply showed a fine Christian spirit and sanctified common sense. "My dear brother," was his answer, "this will never produce any alienation of feeling between us. It is entirely of the Lord. He has given me a quiver-full of arrows, and it is not yet exhausted, and these arrows are piercing their consciences; hence their pain and cry for relief. But the Lord has given you a cruise of oil, and they run to you for relief. The whole is from the Lord, and no coolness shall arise between us."

It has been well said in connection with this incident that "it not only reflects most creditably the unselfishness of Mr Fraser, and his absolute surrender of himself to the interests of his Master's kingdom, and the wise considerateness and modesty of Mr Porteous, but also the sterling Christian good sense of the people, who loved them both" (Macpherson's Edition of Fraser's *Treatise on Sanctification*," p. xix).

Once a month Monday was observed as a "question day," and the exercises were similar to the Friday "question meeting" of sacramental occasions, when topics of doctrine and experience were discussed. Mr Fraser inherited from his father the estate of Pitcalzean, in the Parish of Nigg. His wife was one of the Macleods of Geanies, in the Parish of Tarbat. These Macleods were connected with the Assynt family.

Dr Kennedy describes Mrs Fraser as "a cold, unfeeling, bold, unheeding, worldly woman," but even such a wife may be made a blessing, as the well-known story sets forth. "Never did her godly husband," to quote Dr Kennedy again, "sit down to a comfortable meal in his own house, and often would he have fainted for sheer want of needful sustenance but for the considerate kindness of some of his parishioners. She was too insensate to try to hide her treatment of him, and well was it for him, on one account, that she was." - (*Days of the Fathers in Ross-Shire*," p, 37, 5th Edit.). Light and fire were denied him in his study in the long, cold winter evenings, and as his study was his only place of refuge from the cruel scourge of his wife's tongue and temper, there shivering and, in the dark, he used to spend his winter evenings at home. In this way he actually wore a hole through the plaster of each end of his accustomed beat, on which some eyes have looked that glistened with light from other fire than that of love at the remembrance of his cruel wife, "- (Ibid., p, 38).

But all this was one of the things that Mr Fraser found working for his good. While in company with a number of his brethren, who had no reason to be tongue-tied as to the virtues of their wives, one of them hinted that Mr Fraser could not join with them in the chorus of praises. "How say?" was the instant question, "She has sent me seven times a day to my knees when I would not otherwise have gone; that is more than any of you can say of yours," On the day of his death, some of his elders, grief-stricken, came to the manse, and found Mrs Fraser busy feeding her poultry. One of them, approaching, said respectfully and sorrowfully - "So Mr Fraser has gone to his rest?" "Oh, yes; the poor man died this morning," was the icy reply from the tearless widow.

In 1752, a Mr Grant had been intruded on the parish of Nigg, against the wishes of the people. The people refused to attend Mr Grant's ministry, and Mr Fraser went occasionally to preach and baptise for the dissentients. The intruded minister threatened if he persisted in visiting his parish that he would take steps to have him deposed from the ministry. Mr Fraser replied that should matters be brought to such a pass he would reside on his own property at Pitcalzean, and preach to the people there. Eventually a minister from the Secession Church was called to Nigg.

Mr Fraser was very helpful to Mr Macphail, Resolis, as already recorded in one of these sketches. The saintly minister of Resolis had become very depressed in mind, and came to the conclusion that he had been so useless that he must resign his charge. He sent for Mr Fraser so that he might preach for him, and intimate thereafter the decision Mr Macphail had come to. Mr Fraser preached in such a way that Mr Macphail asked him not to intimate his resignation, as he had been encouraged by the precious truth he had listened to.

Mr Fraser is known to many as the author of a "*Treatise on Sanctification*." This work is an exposition of Romans, chapters vi. to viii. 4. It has also a number of important essays appended. The manuscript, beautifully written out, was dated July 1769, which was only two or three months before his death. The first edition of the work was issued at Edinburgh in 1774, with a short note by the well-known Rev. Dr John Erskine. A reprint appeared in 1813, and later an abridged edition was issued by the *Religious Tract Society*.

In an introductory note to the sermons appended to the 1834 edition, Mr John Russel, one of the ministers of Kilmarnock, says of Mr Fraser: - "I had the honour to be personally acquainted with the author, and consider that acquaintance as one of the happiest circumstances of my life. In him centred

all the amiable qualities of the divine, the scholar, and the Christian. Indeed, one may say, without exceeding the bounds of truth, that the illustrious title marked out for Gospel ministers by Paul, when he says that they are the glory of Christ, eminently belonged to him.”

The first of the above sermons is an elaborate treatise on Hebrews ix. 14, and occupies no less than fifty-two closely printed pages. It was usually called by the Gaelic speaking people “an t-searmon mhor” (the great sermon). The late Principal Cunningham, New College, Edinburgh, said the sermon was uncommonly good, but what astonished him was where a congregation could be found to follow it and appreciate it.

But there were giants in spiritual and doctrinal matters in those days. Mr Sage tells us in his “Memorabilia Domestica” that one Sabbath evening he read a passage from Mr Fraser’s work on Sanctification to Hugh Ross, a native of Alness, who had heard Mr Fraser preach in his youth, and received everlasting lasting benefit from it. As he read, he noticed his listener became very excited. “What book is that you are reading from?” he asked Mr Sage. “Why do you ask?” “Well,” replied Hugh, “I do not know what book it is; but this I know, that seventy years ago I heard these sentiments on that passage delivered by Mr Fraser, when lecturing on Romans, and they are as fresh in my memory as when I heard them from his lips.”

Mr Fraser died at Alness on the 5th October 1769. His cousin, Mr Porteous, Kilmuir, preached the funeral sermon on Sabbath from the text - “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” (Gen, v. 24).