



Joseph Alleine (1634-1668)

A fiery preacher that pressed people to repent and follow Christ.

Joseph Alleine was born in Devizes, Wiltshire, in 1633. He loved and served the Lord from childhood. From eleven years of age onward, “the whole course of his youth was an even-spun thread of godly conversation,” wrote one observer. The times, however, are perilous. Charles I was beheaded and his son, Charles II, at the head of a Scottish army, is defeated by Cromwell’s Parliamentarians at Worcester as young Joseph Alleine sets off for Corpus Christi College. At Oxford, Alleine would sit at the feet of such divines as John Owen and Thomas Goodwin.

Alleine first worked as a college tutor, then later as a chaplain, devoting considerable time to preaching in the county jail, visiting the sick, and relieving the poor.

In 1655, Alleine became assistant to George Newton, pastor of St. Mary Magdalen Taunton, Somerset, a wool-manufacturing city of some 20,000.

While in Taunton, Alleine married his cousin, Theodosia Alleine, whose father was a minister. She feared God deeply and was a supportive wife.

Alleine would often rise early in the morning, lamenting that others were already at work before he prayed to his Master. His wife commented that he “would be much troubled if he heard smiths or other craftsmen at work at their trades, before he was at communion with God: saying to me often, ‘How this noise shames me! Doth not my Master deserve more than theirs?’” Alleine would customarily have private devotions and meditation upon God from 4 to 8 A.M.

In Taunton, Alleine’s pulpit and pastoral ministry was richly blessed. Richard Baxter was impressed with Alleine’s “great ministerial skillfulness in the public explication and application of the Scriptures—so melting, so convincing, so powerful.” He was an excellent teacher who devoted a good part of most weekdays to teaching his people from the Shorter Catechism. He had a passionate pastor’s heart.

After he was ejected for nonconformity in 1662 along with most of his Puritan associates, Alleine actually increased his preaching. Believing his time was short, he averaged one or two sermons each day for the next nine months, until he was arrested and cast into prison. The evening prior to his arrest, he had preached and prayed with his people for three hours, declaring, “Glory be to God that hath accounted me worthy to suffer for His gospel!” His prison became a pulpit as he preached to crowds through the bars. Released a year later, he continued preaching. He was arrested a second time while preaching on July 10, 1666, and imprisoned again.

Alleine was released after this second imprisonment and spent his last years in danger of further arrest. His health eventually gave way under the hardship. He died at age thirty-four (1668) in full assurance of faith and with much thanksgiving and praise to God. His last words were: “Christ is mine, and I am His—His by covenant.”

AN ALARM TO THE UNCONVERTED

Alleine’s *Alarm to the Unconverted*, the best known of his nineteen treatises, was first printed in 1671 (subtitle: *A Serious Treatise on Conversion*) and subsequently printed as *A Sure Guide to Heaven* in 1675—the title given to

the latest Banner of Truth Trust editions. It is a powerful manual on conversion and the call of the gospel, as the chapter titles reveal: Mistakes about Conversion; The Nature of Conversion; The Necessity of Conversion; The Marks of the Unconverted; The Miseries of the Unconverted; Directions to the Unconverted; The Motives to Conversion.

Alleine's model of Puritan evangelism is well suited to correct contemporary distortions of the Gospel. For example, he shows us that dividing the offices and benefits of Christ is not a new idea. The true convert is willing to receive Christ, both as a Savior from sin and as Lord of one's life. He writes, "All of Christ is accepted by the sincere convert. He loves not only the wages but the work of Christ, not only the benefits but the burden of Christ. He takes up the commands of Christ, yea, the cross of Christ. The unsound convert takes Christ by halves. He is all for the salvation of Christ, but he is not for sanctification. He is for the privileges, but does not appropriate the person of Christ. He divides the offices and benefits of Christ. This is an error in the foundation. Whoever loves life, let him beware here. It is an undoing mistake, of which you have often been warned, and yet none is more common" (p. 45).

This book, reprinted some 500 times, is a classic on evangelism and a tool used for the conversion of many souls. It greatly influenced the evangelistic approach of famous preachers such as George Whitefield and Charles Spurgeon.

LIFE AND LETTERS

A definitive biography of Alleine has yet to be written. The longest sustained seventeenth-century narrative was written by his wife, Theodosia, following his ejection and imprisonment after the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662. In 1672, Alleine's *Christian Letters, Full of Spiritual Instructions* was printed in London. The following year, fragments of biographical information and personal reminiscences were brought together by his widow and Richard Baxter, and printed with his letters. That volume was reprinted with corrections in 1677 as *The Life and Death of that Excellent Minister of Christ Mr. Joseph Alleine* (London: Nevil Simmons).

Additional printings followed, culminating in an 1840 edition by Robert Carter in which, for the first time, all forty-six of Alleine's extant letters are printed in one volume. An appendix contains George Newton's Sermon

Preached at the Funeral of Mr. Joseph Alleine (London: Nevil Simmons, 1677), edited for updated punctuation, spelling, and grammar.

Charles Stafford's biography, *Joseph Alleine: His Companions and Times*, appeared in 1864. Though Charles Spurgeon called it an "admirable biography," it too is woefully incomplete, no doubt partly due to the paucity of details of Alleine's life. Although the presently reprinted Carter edition suffers somewhat from not being a sustained narrative, it has the advantage of having been written by Alleine's contemporaries, including Richard Baxter, George Newton, Richard Fairclough, Alleine's widow and several close friends who preferred to remain anonymous. These pages display the portrait of a minister who had a large heart for God and for the precious souls of those who sat under his ministry.

Valuable as the account of Alleine's life by his contemporaries is, his letters, which form the second half of this book, are even more precious. While the narrative of his life gives us an account of his outward circumstances, the secret springs of his heart are revealed by his letters, which combine the fervor of an evangelist, the heart of a pastor, and the patience of a sufferer for the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of these letters were written from prison to his parishioners in Taunton when he was no longer able to speak the Word of God to them personally. With their emphasis on Christ and true godliness, they breathe the atmosphere of heaven itself.

Iain Murray writes, "Never did the evangel of Jesus Christ burn more fervently in any English heart!" In this reprint of the life and letters of Alleine, we are convicted, challenged, and exhorted by his triumphant faith and close walk with Christ. When Alexander Duff (who devoted his life to mission work in India) read Alleine's book, he wrote, "What inextinguishable zeal! What unquenchable thirstings after the conversion of lost sinners! What unslumbering watchfulness in warning and edifying saints! What profound humility and self-abasement in the sight of God! What patience and forbearance, what meekness and generosity, what affability and moderation! What triumphant faith-what tranquil, yet rapturous joy!" No wonder John Wesley called Alleine "the English Rutherford."

Joseph Alleine (1633-1668) had unsurpassed zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of sinners. As one of his contemporaries said, "He was infinitely and insatiably greedy of the conversion of souls, wherein he had

no small success.” May the challenges of his life and ministry encourage us to emulate his zeal for the Lord.

SOURCE: Adapted from a new printing of “The Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine,” published by Reformation Heritage Books, 2919 Leonard NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525 USA heritagebooks.org