

Church History (42): Joseph Alleine

Of the men we've already considered, Joseph Alleine is unique for a few reasons. Not only did he die at the young age of 34, but only a few of the fifteen books published by him, have remained in print. And yet, these few books, which include his letters written while imprisoned, along with his eminent piety and relentless ministerial labors, have secured him a place in history.

I. Joseph Alleine (1634-1668)

1. *His early life, education, and marriage.* "Born at Devizes, Wiltshire, early in 1634, Joseph Alleine loved and served the Lord from childhood. A contemporary witness identified 1645 as the year of Alleine's 'setting forth in the Christian race.' From eleven years of age onward, 'the whole course of his youth was an even-spun thread of godly conversion.' He entered Oxford at age sixteen and sat at the feet of such great divines as John Owen and Thomas Goodwin" (Beeke).¹ "He immersed himself in his studies often depriving himself of both food and sleep. "Courteous he was, and very civil to all acquaintance. But if they came to visit him at studying time, though they were sure enough to find him within, yet withal so busy generally with better company, as to have no leisure to let them in. And if at this they were moved, and murmured, and went away offended with him, he cared not."² When asked by a fellow student his thoughts on marriage, he responded: "Thou wouldst know the inconveniences of a wife, and I will tell thee: first of all, whereas thou risest constantly at four in the morning, or before, she will keep thee till about six. Secondly, whereas thou used to study fourteen hours in the day, she will bring thee to eight or nine. Thirdly, whereas thou art wont to forbear one meal a-day at least for thy studies, she will bring thee to thy meat. If these be not mischiefs enough to affright thee, I know not what thou art."³ "He graduated from Oxford in 1653 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and became a tutor and chaplain of Corpus Christi. He also devoted much time to preaching to prisoners in the county jail, visiting the sick, and ministering to the poor" (Beeke).⁴ In 1655, he married Theodosia Alleine, a distant cousin. "She was an active woman who feared God deeply. Early in their marriage, she ran a home school of about fifty scholars, half of them boarders. She would later serve as her husband's biographer after his death" (Beeke).⁵ She said of her own husband: "When I have pleaded with him for more of his time with myself and family, he would answer me, 'His ministerial work would not permit him to be so constant as he would; for if he had ten bodies and souls, he could employ them all in and about Taunton.' And would say, 'Ah, my dear, I know thy soul is safe; but how many that are perishing have I to look after? O that I could do more for them!' He was a holy, heavenly, tenderly-affectionate husband, and I know nothing I could complain of, but that he as so taken up, that I could have but very little converse with him."⁶

When I have begged him to consider himself and me (with regards to financial needs), he would answer me, 'he was laying up, and God would repay him; that if he sowed sparingly, he should reap so; if bountifully, he should reap bountifully.' And I must confess I did often see so much of God in His dealings with us, according to His promises, that I have been convinced and silenced; God having often so strangely and unexpectedly provided for us: And notwithstanding all he had done, He had at least somewhat to dispose of to his relations and to his brethren, besides comfortable provision for me. Thus his whole life was a continual sermon, holding forth evidently the doctrines

¹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 20

² *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 38-39

³ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 39-40

⁴ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 20

⁵ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 21

⁶ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 105

he preached; humility, self-denial, patience, meekness, faith, and holy confidence shining in him, with most dear love to God, and His church, and people; and where he longed and panted to be he is now shining, in Heaven, singing praises to God, and to the Lamb; which work he much delighted in, while here on earth.⁷

2. *His character and personal piety.* Alleine's co-pastor, George Newton, said of him: "He was the gravest, strictest, most serious, and composed young man that I had ever yet the happiness to be acquainted with. And yet he was not rigid in his principles, his moderation was known to all men that knew him."⁸ A contemporary of his said of him: "He was, for exemplary holiness, and heavenliness of mind and life, much elevated above the ordinary rank. He lived much in delightful communion with God; his soul was great exercised in divine contemplation; and he would sometimes speak what ineffable pleasure, sweetness, and satisfaction his soul had found in his stated meditations on the Divine Attributes, distinctly one by one."⁹ (1) His devotion. "In his dedication to God, he was carried with the highest and purest flame of divine love that ever I observed in any. And that love arising from a clear vision of the beauty of divine perfections, especially his gospel love; the sight of which beauty and excellency seemed perpetually to possess and ravish his soul" (R.F.).¹⁰ In a letter to his wife, Alleine spoke of his longing for heaven. "Oh happy, thrice happy souls! When shall these fetters of mine be knocked off? When shall I be set at liberty from this prison of my body? Oh! I groan earnestly to be clothed upon with my house which is from heaven, being willing rather to be absent from the body, and present with the Lord. Oh, when shall I come and appear before Him? When shall I receive the purchase of my Savior, the fruit of my prayers, the harvest of my labors, the end of my faith, the salvation of my soul? Alas! What do I here? This is not my resting place. My treasure is in heaven, and my heart is in heaven. Oh! When shall I be where my heart is? How long shall I live at such a distance from my God, at such a distance from my country. Alas, how can I be merry, how can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land."¹¹

(2) His diligence. Alline was a careful redeemer of his time. Of his general practices while imprisoned, his wife said: "Here (prison), as elsewhere, he was a careful redeemer of his time; his constant practice was, early to being the day with God, rising about four of the clock, and spending a considerable part of the morning in meditation and prayer, and then falling close to his study, in some corner or other of the prison, where he could be private. At times, he would spend near the whole night in these exercises, not putting off his clothing at all, only taking the repose of an hour or two in his nightgown upon the bed, and so up again."¹² (3) His humility. In a letter written to "an intimate friend," Alleine himself lamented: "Oh, wretch, what a sight is here! Methinks my heart is like the chambers of imagery. I can turn no way but the loathsome sight and filthy stench of my corruptions comes up into mine eyes and nostrils; my pollutions are so foul, that I cannot tell how to look upon them, and yet so common, so universal, that I cannot look besides them. Which way soever I look into myself, I can cast mine eye on nothing but the loathsome sight of some filthy ulcer, which makes my filthy in mine own eyes, and how much more to the pure eyes of my spotless Maker. When I turn my eye in ward, and go about from cell to cell, I pass from one to the other and fain to write, 'Lord, have mercy upon me,' on every door. Every faculty is as a cage of unclean birds, and oh, the noisome lusts that lodge and live within them!"¹³

⁷ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 109

⁸ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 55

⁹ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 46

¹⁰ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 133

¹¹ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 248-249

¹² *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 76

¹³ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 276-277

3. *His ministry and pastoral labors.* "In 1655, Alleine accepted the invitation of George Newton, vicar of St. Mary Magdalene Church, Taunton, Somerset, to become Newton's assistant. Taunton, a wool-manufacturing city of some 20,000, was a Puritan stronghold. Alleine rose early, devoting the time between four and eight o'clock in the morning to the exercises of private worship. His wife recalled 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?'" (Beeke).¹⁴ Alleine typically preached in the evening service on the Lord's Day. "In the evening of the Lord's Day, his course was to repeat his sermon again, in the public place of worship, where abundance of people constantly resorted to hear him; which when he had done, several youths were called forth which did give him an account of the heads of all his sermon by memory."¹⁵ "His Lord's-days work was great, for though he preached but once in his own place, yet he was either desired by some of his brethren to supply theirs on any demand, or would go where was no minister; and so was forced often to leave his family to me, to my great grief and loss" (Theodosia).¹⁶ "He was a passionate evangelist. One contemporary wrote, 'He was infinitely and insatiably greedy of the conversion of souls, wherein he had no small success'" (Beeke).¹⁷ His co-pastor, George Newton, said of him: "It was for the salvation of souls, he poured out his very heat in prayer and preaching; *he imparted not the gospel only, but his own soul.* His supplications, and his exhortations, many times were so affectionate, so full of holy seal, life, and vigor, that they quite overcame his hearers; he melted over them, so that he thawed and mollified, and sometimes dissolved the hardest hearts. But while he melted thus, he wasted, and at last consumed himself."¹⁸

His evangelistic fervor is evidenced throughout his writings, especially in his most famous treatise, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*. "This evangelical classic was first printed in 1671, when 20,000 copies were sold, and subsequently reprinted in 1675 as *A Sure Guide to Heaven*. It is a powerful manual on conversion and the call of the gospel" (Beeke).¹⁹ His last chapter is entitled, *The Motives to Conversion*. "1. The God that made you most graciously invites you. 2. The doors of heaven are thrown open to you. 3. God will give you unspeakable privileges in this life. 4. The terms of mercy are brought as low as possible to you. 5. God offers all needed grace to enable you." "Though you are plunged into the ditch of that misery from which you can never get out, Christ offers to help you out: He reaches out His hand to you; and if you perish, it is for refusing His help."²⁰ Alleine ended his short treatise *God speaking from Mount Gerizim; or the Gospel in a Map*, with *An Exhortation to Sinners*: "O ye sons of death, ye children of the night and of darkness, hear, and your souls shall live; to you also is the word of this salvation sent; even the strangers, and those who are afar off, that will lay hold on the covenant, and choose the thing that pleases God, these also shall have a name in His house, even the glorious name of sons and daughters. Hearken, O people, you that are polluted in your blood, written in the earth, free among the dead; come in, let your covenant with death be made void, and your agreement with hell be disannulled, strike a league with the Almighty, and your names also shall be written amongst the living in Jerusalem."²¹

Hear, O sinners, hear. See you not how the merciful Savior of the world stretches forth
His hands all the day long, and spreads forth His wings, and calls you as a hen does her

¹⁴ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 20-21

¹⁵ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 55-56

¹⁶ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 105

¹⁷ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 21

¹⁸ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 54

¹⁹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 22

²⁰ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted*, 130-140

²¹ Joseph Alleine, *Heaven Opened: The Riches of God's Covenant Grace*, 306-307

chickens! Hear you not the soundings of His bowels? He has no need of you; yet how do His companions melt over perishing sinners? His heart is turned within Him; and shall not this turn your hearts? His repenting are kindled together; and shall not this lead you to repentance? Behold He stands at the door and knocks. O man, wilt thou keep Jesus at the door, and lodge Barabbas in thy bosom, and prefer thy cruel lusts before thy compassionate Lord? O His melting love to sinners? He calls after them. He weeps over them. He cries to them. Oh how dreadful will this case be, to perish under the pitiful eyes of His mercy, and to die by the hand of a Savior! Oh! double hell, to have thy Redeemer become thine executioner! And the hand that was so long stretched forth to save thee, to be now stretched forth to slay thee!²²

Another evident theme in his writings, especially his letters, is the love of God in Christ. He wrote in a letter to his church, after affirming his love for them: "But why do I speak of my love? It is the sense of the infinite love of God your Father that I would have to dwell upon you. Forget me, so you remember Him. Let me be very little, so He be very lovely in your eyes. Let Him be as the bucket that goes up, though I be as the bucket that goes down. Bury me, so that you do but set the Lord always before you. Let my name be written in the dust, so His name be written deep upon all your souls."²³ Later in the same letter he said: "If the pens of all the world were employed to write volumes of love; if the tongues of all the living were exercised in nothing else but talking of this love; if all the hearts that be were made up of love: and all the powers and affections of the mind were turned into one, to wit, the power of love; yet this were no less than infinitely too little, either to conceive, or to express the greatness of Christ's love."²⁴

Another consistent theme of Alleine was personal holiness. In a letter written from prison on December 3, 1663, Alleine urged his people to holiness with three motives: "First, holiness is the choicest ornament: It is an adoring in the sight of God of great price. It is the glory of God, and will you count it your shame? God is glorious in holiness, and grace is called glory." "Secondly, holiness is the safest monument. Grace is not only for ornament, but for use. Righteousness is a breast-plate that keeps the vitals, and is a sure defense from any moral wounds." "Thirdly, holiness will be found to be your real happiness. Eat of this tree, and you shall indeed be as God. Godliness is like God's likeness. The beauty of holiness is this very image; sin is the disease of which holiness is the cure."²⁵ He closed the letter with an urgent appeal: "Let holiness sit in your lips, and season all your speech with grace. Profess it, own it, plead stoutly and resolve for it; be your advocates for holiness, in an adulterous and wicked generation. Wear it as a robe of honor, when the spiteful world cast the dung of their reproaches at you for it. Let it dwell in your hearts. Let it adorn your houses. Let it be your companion in your closets. Let it travel with you in your journeys. Let it lie down and rise up with you. Let it close your eyes in the evening, and call you out of your beds in the morning. Be you the follower of holiness. Keep her, and she shall keep you."²⁶ In another letter to his people, Alleine exhorted them to personal and domestic godliness. "Let piety be your first and great business. It is the highest point of justice, to give God His due." But he then gave them a warning: "But piety without charity, is but the half of Christianity, or rather impious hypocrisy. We may not divide the tables. See therefore that you do justly, and love mercy, and let equity and charity run, like an even thread, throughout all your dealings. Be you temperate in all things, and let charity and sobriety be your undivided companions. Let truth and purity, seriousness and modesty, heavenliness and gravity, be the constant ornaments of your speech. See that

²² *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 230-231

²³ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 220

²⁴ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 222

²⁵ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 190-191

²⁶ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 191-192

you forget and forgive wrongs, and requite them with kindness, as you would be found children of the Most High."²⁷

4. *His imprisonment and letters.* "Ejected for nonconformity in 1662, Alleine took the opportunity to increase his public labors, believing that his remaining time was short. He preached on average one or two sermons every day for nine months until he was arrested and cast into the Ilchester prison. The night before, Alleine had preached and prayed with his people for three hours and had declared, 'Glory be to God that hath accounted me worthy to suffer for His gospel' (Beeke).²⁸ His wife said: "Being thoroughly persuaded of this, that the ejection of the ministers out of their places, did not disoblige them from preaching the gospel, he took up a firm resolution to go on with his work in private, both of preaching and visiting from house to house, till he should be carried to prison or banishment, which he counted upon the Lord assisting him. And this resolution, without delay, he prosecuted (pursed)."²⁹ This resulted in Alleine's arrest on May 26, 1663. "When he was taken up for prison, he was not only contented, but joyful to suffer for the name of Jesus and His gospel, which was so dear to him; intimating, that God had given him much more time than he expected or asked of Him, and that he accounted it cause of rejoicing, and his honor, that he was one of the first called forth to suffer for His name (Theodosia).³⁰ "Alleine's prison cell became his pulpit as he continued to preach to his people through the prison bars. He also wrote numerous pastoral letters and theological articles" (Beeke).³¹ All total, Alleine was imprisoned about 18 months (1663-1664), with a short interval. From prison he would write several letters (49 of which have survived), mostly to his church at Taunton. "With their emphasis on Christ and true godliness, these letters breathe the atmosphere of heaven itself" (Beeke).³²

As other ministers were imprisoned together, they took turns preaching in prison. "They had preaching and praying twice a-day, almost every day they were in prison" (Theodosia).³³ On the day of his release, Alleine gave some departing counsels to those left behind. Of these exhortations his wife said: "How greatly concerned he was for those that were with him (that they might be the better for their bonds, walking worthy of the many and great mercies they had enjoyed during their imprisonment), you may clearly see by those parting counsels that he gave them that morning, that they were delivered, as they were taken from his mouth in short hand, by an intimate friend and fellow-prisoner."³⁴ He gave his fellow prisoners nine exhortations (what to do) and four dehortations (what not to do). His fifth exhortation was: "Let the bonds of your affliction strengthen the bonds of your affection. Brethren, God has sent us here to teach us, among other things, the better to love one another. Love is lovely, both in the sight of God and men, and if by your imprisonment you have profited in love, then you have made an acceptable proficiency." His first dehortation was: "Revile not your persecutors; but bless them, and pray for them, as the instruments of conveying great mercies to you. Do not forget the rule of Christ, as when you come home, to be setting your mouths to talk against those that have injured you."³⁵

5. *His later years and death.* Alleine left prison a weak and frail man. He continued his private preaching/teaching immediately. "At his return from the prison, he was far more earnest in his work than before. And the people flocked so greatly after him, that he judged it best to divide the company into four, and resolved to preach four times each Sabbath to them; but finding sensibly that would be

²⁷ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 232

²⁸ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 21

²⁹ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 66

³⁰ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 67

³¹ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 21

³² Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 25

³³ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 81

³⁴ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 81

³⁵ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 81-89

too hard for him, his strength much decaying, he did forebear that course, and preached only twice a Sabbath as formerly, and often on week days at home and in the country; and spent what time he had else from his studying, in private converse with God, as formerly he had done" (Theodosia).³⁶ Yet, Alleine's illness intensified, consuming his frame and rendering his arms useless, "that he could not put off nor on his clothing, nor write either his notes or any letters, but I wrote for him, as he directed" (Theodosia).³⁷ He continued his labors as his strength permitted, being closely watched by his persecutors and briefly imprisoned, for a few months, on at least one occasion. In July of 1667 he went to Dorchester to advise further with a doctor where he fell greatly ill. "We had not been there above five days, before the use of all his limbs were taken away on a sudden; so that he could not go, nor stand, nor move a finger, nor turn in his bed. He was given over by physicians and friends, that saw him lie some weeks in cold sweats night and day, and many times for some hours together, half his body cold, in our apprehension dying" (Theodosia).³⁸ By February he was able to walk, occasionally losing the use of his limbs. "When he was deprived of the use of his limbs, looking down on his arms, as I held him up by all the strength I had, he again lifted up his eyes from his useless arms to heaven, and with a cheerful countenance said: 'The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken, and blessed be the name of the Lord.' When asked by a friend, how he could be so well contented to lie so long under such weakness, he answered, What! Is God my Father, Jesus Christ my Savior, and the Spirit my sweet friend, my Comforter, and Sanctifier, and Heaven my inheritance. Shall I not be contented without limbs and health? Through grace I am fully satisfied with my Father's pleasure" (Theodosia).³⁹

Alleine returned to Taunton later in February where in April he fell terrible ill. One evening, being in his chamber he desired me to leave him a while alone; which I was very unwilling to do, but his importunity made me go down from him. But in less than half a quarter of an hour, he was fallen to the ground in one of his former fits, and had hurt his face; and from his nose came much blood, which was very clotted and corrupt, which physicians seeing, did conclude that the fall saved his life. For, had not that blood come from his head, he had, so far as they could rationally judge, died in that fit, which took away his senses for the present; but he went to bed, and slept so well that night, as he had not in many weeks before" (Theodosia).⁴⁰ "After this, he lied always expecting death, saying often to me and his friends, 'It is but a puff, and I am gone.' And therefore would, every night, after he had been at prayer, bid all the family farewell, telling them, he might be dead before the morning; and dropping some holy counsels to them, would depart to his chamber. And when we lay down to rest, his last words were usually, 'We shall shortly be in another bed, therefore it is good to mind it, and provide for it apace; farewell, my dear heart, the Lord bless thee!' and so he would go to his rest" (Theodosia).⁴¹ Alleine's health continued to decline and he and his wife set off for Bath (a place known for its medicinal waters). "At his first appearing in the bath, being wasted to skin and bone, some of the ladies were affrighted, as if death had been come in among them, and could not endure to look towards him." Yet he continued his normal patterns of devotion (rising before 4am and giving the first 2 hours to prayer, meditation and singing). Following his afternoon prayers, his chairmen (who carried him) carried him to visit the schools, alms-houses, godly poor, and widows, to whom he would give money, and pray with them. "He also engaged several to send their children once a week to him to be catechized: and we had about sixty or seventy children every Lord's-Day to our lodging, and they profited much by his instructions" (Theodosia).⁴² Alleine died in 1668 at age 34, and George Newton preached his funeral sermon.

³⁶ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 77

³⁷ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 78

³⁸ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 90

³⁹ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 91

⁴⁰ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 95

⁴¹ *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 96

⁴² *Life and Letters of Joseph Alleine*, 99