

OUR LIFE IS A  
WARFARE.

ABOUT  
TEMPTATIONS

AND  
AFFLICTIONS

LETTERS BY

**JOHN NEWTON**

# Our life is a warfare

March, 1779.

Dear Madam,

Our experiences pretty much tally. They may be drawn out into books—but the sum total may be comprised in a short sentence; "*Our life is a warfare.*" For our encouragement, the Apostle calls it a *good* warfare. We are engaged in a good cause, fight under a good Captain, the victory is sure beforehand, and the prize is a crown—a crown of eternal life. Such considerations might make even a coward bold. But then we must be content to fight; and, considering the nature, number, situation, and subtlety of our enemies, we may expect sometimes to receive a wound. But there is a *medicinal tree*, the leaves of which are always at hand to heal us.

We cannot be too attentive to the evil which is always working in us, or to the stratagems which are employed against us; yet our attention should not be wholly confined to these things. We are to look upwards likewise to him, who is our head, our life, our strength. One glance of Jesus will convey more effectual assistance—than poring upon our own hearts for a month! The one is to be done—but the other should upon no account be omitted. It was not by counting their wounds—but by beholding the brazen serpent, the Lord's instituted means of cure—that the Israelites were healed. That was an emblem for our instruction.

One great cause of our frequent conflicts is, that we have a secret desire to be rich—and it is the Lord's design to make us poor. We want to gain an ability of doing something—and He suits his dispensations, to convince us that we can do nothing. We want a stock of power in ourselves—and He would have us absolutely dependent upon Him. So far as we are content to be weak—that His power may be magnified in us—so far we shall make our enemies know that we are strong, though we ourselves shall never be directly sensible that we are so. Only by comparing what we are, with the opposition we stand against—we may come to a comfortable conclusion, that the Lord works mightily in us. *Psa. 41:11.*

If our views are simple, and our desires towards the Lord—it may be of use to consider some of your faults and mine, not as the faults of you and me in particular—but as the fault of that depraved nature, which is common with us to all the Lord's people, and which made Paul groan as feelingly and as heartily as we can do. But this consideration, though true and Scriptural, can only be safely applied when the mind is sincerely and in good earnest devoted to the Lord. There are too many unsound and half-professors, who eagerly catch at it, as an excuse for those evils they are unwilling to part with. But I trust I may safely recommend it to you.

This evil nature, this indwelling sin, is a living principle, an active, powerful cause; and a cause that is active will necessarily produce an effect. Sin is the same thing in believers as in the unregenerate; they have, indeed, a contrary principle of grace, which counteracts and resists it, which can prevent its out breaking—but will not suppress its rising. As grace resists sin, so sin resists grace, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." *Gal. 5:17.* The proper tendency of each is mutually weakened on both sides; and between the two, the poor believer, however blameless and exemplary in the sight of men, appears in his own view the most inconsistent character under the sun! He can hardly think it is so with others, and judging of them by what he sees, and of himself by what he feels—in humility he esteems others better than himself.

This is the warfare. But it shall not always be so. Grace shall prevail. The evil nature is already enervated, and before long it shall die the death. Jesus will make us more than conquerors!

# Temptations

Dear Sir,

What can you expect from me on the subject of **temptation**, with which you have been so much more conversant than myself? On this point I am more disposed to receive information from you, than to offer my advice. You, by the Lord's appointment, have had much business and exercise on these great waters; whereas the knowledge I have of what passes there, I have gained more from observation than from actual experience. I shall not wonder if you think I write like a novice: however, your request has the force of a command with me. I shall give you my thoughts; or rather, shall take occasion to write, not so much to you as to others, who, though they may be plunged in the depths of temptation, have not yet seen so much of the wisdom and power of God in these dispensations as yourself. I shall first inquire, Why the Lord permits some of his people to suffer such violent assaults from the powers of darkness; and then suggest a few advices to tempted souls.

**I. WHY does the Lord allow his people to be tempted?** The temptations of Satan (which, though not the most painful, are in reality the most dangerous) do not directly belong to my present design. I mean those by which he is too successful in drawing many professors from the path of duty, in filling them with spiritual pride, or lulling them into carnal security. In these attempts he is often most powerful and prevalent when he is least perceived; he seldom distresses those whom he can deceive. It is chiefly when these endeavors fail, that he fights against the peace of the soul. He hates the Lord's people, grudges them all their privileges and all their comforts; and will do what he can to disquiet them, because he cannot prevail against them. And though the Lord sets such bounds to his rage as he cannot pass, and limits him both as to manner and time, he is often pleased to allow him to vent his malice to a considerable degree; not to gratify Satan, but to humble and prove them; to show them what is in their hearts, to make them truly sensible of their immediate and absolute dependence upon himself, and to quicken them to watchfulness and prayer.

Though temptations, in their own nature, are grievous and dreadful, yet when, by the grace of God, they are productive of these effects, they deserve to be numbered among the "all things which are appointed to work together for the good of those who love him." The light carriage, vain confidence, and woeful backslidings of many professors, might perhaps (speaking after the manner of men) have been in some measure prevented, had they been more acquainted with this spiritual warfare, and had they drunk of the cup of temptation, which but few of those who walk humbly and uprightly are exempted from tasting of, though not all in the same degree.

One gracious end, therefore, that the Lord has in permitting his people to be tempted, is for the prevention of greater evils, that they may not grow proud or careless, or be ensnared by the corrupt customs of the world. In this view, I doubt not, however burdensome your trials may at some seasons prove, you are enabled, by your composed judgment, to rejoice in them, and be thankful for them. You know what you suffer now; but you know not what might have been the consequence, if you had never smarted by the fiery darts of the wicked one. You might have been taken in a more fatal snare, and been numbered with those who, by their grievous declensions and falls, have caused the ways of truth to be evil spoken of.

Another gracious design is, for the manifestation of his power, and wisdom, and grace, in supporting the soul under such pressures as are evidently beyond its own strength to sustain. A bush on fire, and not consumed, engaged the attention of Moses. This emblem is generally applicable to the state of a Christian in the present life, but never more so than when he is in the fire of temptation.

And though his heaviest sufferings of this kind are usually hidden from the notice of his fellow-creatures, yet there are other eyes always upon him. "We are," says the Apostle, "a spectacle to the world;" not only to men, but "to angels" also. Many things probably pass in the invisible state, in which we have nearer concerns than we are ordinarily aware of. The beginning of the book of Job throws some light upon this point, and informs us of that which we would have been otherwise totally ignorant, of the true cause of his uncommon sufferings. Satan had challenged him, charged him as a hypocrite, and thought he was able to prove him one, if he could have permission to attack him. The Lord, for the vindication of Job's integrity, and for the manifestation of his own faithfulness and power in favor of his servant, was pleased to give Satan permission to try what he could do. The experiment answered many good purposes: Job was humbled, yet approved; his friends were instructed; Satan was confuted, and disappointed; and the wisdom and mercy of the Lord, in his darkest dispensations towards his people, were gloriously illustrated. This contest and the event were recorded for the direction and encouragement of his church to the end of time.

Satan's malice is not abated; and though he has met with millions of disappointments, he still, like Goliath of old, defies the armies of God's Israel: he challenges the stoutest, and "desires to have them, that he may sift them as wheat." Indeed, he is far an overmatch for them, considered as in themselves; but though they are weak, their Redeemer is mighty, and they are forever secured by his love and intercession. "The Lord knows those who are his, and no weapon formed against them can prosper." That this may appear with the fullest evidence, Satan is allowed to assault them.

We handle vessels of glass or china with caution, and endeavor to preserve them from falls and blows, because we know they are easily broken. But if a man had the art of making glass malleable, and, like iron, capable of bearing the stroke of a hammer without breaking, it is probable, that, instead of locking it carefully up, he would rather, for the commendation of his skill, permit many to attempt to break it, when he knew their attempts would be in vain. Believers are compared to earthen vessels, liable in themselves to be destroyed by a small blow; but they are so strengthened and tempered by the power and supply of Divine grace, that the fiercest efforts of their fiercest enemies against them may be compared to the dashing of waves against a rock. And that this may be known and noticed, they are exposed to many trials; but the united and repeated assaults of the men of the world, and the powers of darkness, afford but the more incontestable demonstration, that the Lord is with them of a truth, and that his strength is made perfect in their weakness. Surely this thought, my friend, will afford you consolation; and you will be content to suffer, if God may be glorified by you and in you.

Further: By enduring temptation, you, as a living member of the body of Christ, have the honor of being conformed to your Head. He suffered, being tempted; and because he loves you, he calls you to a participation of his sufferings, and to taste of his cup: not the cup of the wrath of God; this he drank alone, and he drank it all. But in affliction he allows his people to have fellowship with him; thus they fill up the measure of his sufferings, and can say, 'As he was, so are we in the world.' Marvel not that the world hates you, neither marvel that Satan rages against you. Should not the disciple be as his Lord? Can the servant expect or desire peace from the avowed enemies of his Master? We are to follow his steps; and **can we wish, if it were possible, to walk in a path strewd with flowers, when his was strewd with**

**thorns?** Let us not be terrified by the power of our adversaries; which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to us of salvation, and that of God. To us it is given, not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for his sake.

If we would make peace with the world—the world would let us alone; if we could be content to walk in the ways of sin—Satan would give us no disturbance; but because grace has rescued us from his dominion, and the love of Jesus constrains us to live to him alone, therefore the enemy, like a lion robbed of his prey, roars against us. He roars, but he cannot devour; he plots and rages, but he cannot prevail; he disquiets, but he cannot destroy. If we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with him: in due time he will bruise Satan under our feet, make us more than conquerors, and place us where we shall hear the voice of war no more, forever.

Again: As by temptations we are conformed to the life of Christ, so likewise, by the sanctifying power of grace, temptations are made subservient to advance our conformity to his image; particularly as we thereby acquire a sympathy and fellow-feeling with our suffering brethren. This is eminently a branch of the mind which was in Christ. He knows how to pity and help those who are tempted, because he has been tempted himself. He knows what temptations mean, not only with that knowledge whereby he knows all things, but by experience. He well remembers what he endured in the wilderness, and in the garden; and though it is for his glory and our comfort that he suffered temptation without sin, yet for that very reason, and because he was perfectly holy, the temptations of Satan were unspeakably more bitter to him than they can be to us. The great duty and refuge of the tempted now is, to apply to him; and they have the highest encouragement to do so, in that they are assured he is touched with a feeling of our infirmities. And for the like reason they find some consolation in applying to those of their brethren who have suffered the same things. None but these can either understand or pity their complaints. If the Lord has any children who are not exercised with spiritual temptations, I am sure they are but poorly qualified to "speak a word in season to those who are weary." In this school you have acquired the tongue of the learned; and let it not seem a small thing to you, if the Lord has given you wisdom and ability to comfort the afflicted ones: if your prayers, your life, and the knowledge they have of your trials, affords them some relief in a dark hour, this is an honor and a privilege which, I am persuaded, you will think you have not purchased too dear, by all that you have endured.

Once more: Temptations, by giving us a painful sensibility of the weakness of our graces, and the strength of our inward corruptions, tend to mortify the evil principles of *self-dependence* and *self-righteousness*, which are so deeply rooted in our fallen nature; to make Christ, in all his relations, offices, and characters, more precious to us; and to convince us, that without him we can do nothing.

It would be easy to enlarge upon these and other advantages which the Lord enables his people to derive from the things which they suffer; so that they may say, with Samson, "Out of the eater comes forth meat;" and that, what their adversary designs for their overthrow, contributes to their establishment. But I have already exceeded my limits. Enough, I hope, has been said to prove, that **God has wise and gracious ends in permitting** them for a season to be tossed with tempest, and not comforted. Before long these designs will be more fully unfolded to us; and we shall be satisfied that he has done all things well. In the meanwhile it is our duty, and will be much for our comfort, to believe it upon the authority of his word.

**2. I shall now proceed to offer some ADVICES to those who are tempted.** But I am ready to say—To what purpose? When the enemy comes in like a flood; when the very foundations of hope are attacked; when suspicions are raised in the mind, not only concerning an interest in the promises, but concerning the truth of the Scripture itself; when a dark cloud blots out, not only the sense, but almost the

remembrance of past comforts; when the mind is overwhelmed with torrents of blasphemous, unclean, or monstrous imaginations, things horrible and unutterable; when *the fiery darts of Satan have set the corruptions of the heart in a flame*: at such a season a person is little disposed or able to listen to advice. I shall, however, mention some things by which, ordinarily, Satan maintains his advantage against them in these circumstances, that they may be upon their guard as much as possible. **Satan's principal devices are—**

1. To hide from a believer, *the Lord's designs* in permitting him thus to rage. Some of these I have noticed; and they should endeavor to keep them upon their minds. It is hard for them, during the violence of the storm, to conceive that any good can possibly arise from the experience of so much evil. But when the storm is over, they find that the Lord is still mindful of them. Now, though a young soldier may well be startled at the first onset in the field of battle, it seems possible that those who have been often engaged should at length gain confidence, from the recollection of the many instances in which they have formerly found, by the event, that the Lord was surely with them in the like difficulties, and that their fears were only groundless and imaginary. When the warfare is hottest, they have still reason to say, "Hope in God; for I shall yet praise him."

2. To make them utter impatient speeches, which do but aggravate their distress. It is said of Job, under his first trials, "In all this he sinned not with his lips, nor charged God foolishly." So long, Satan was unable to prevail. Afterwards he opened his mouth, as Jeremiah did likewise, and cursed the day of his birth. When he once began to complain, his causes of complaint increased. **We cannot prevent dreadful thoughts from arising in our hearts; but we should be cautious of giving them vent, by speaking unadvisedly.** This is like letting in wind upon a smothering fire, which will make it burn more fiercely.

3. To persuade them that all they feel and tremble at arises immediately from their own hearts. Indeed it is a most awful proof of our depravity, that we feel something within ready to comply with the suggestions of the enemy, in defiance of our better judgment and desires. But it is not so in all cases. It is not always easy, nor is it needful, exactly to draw the line between the temptations of Satan and our own corruptions: but sometimes it is not impossible to distinguish them. When a child of God is prompted to blaspheme the name that he adores, or to commit such evils as even unsanctified nature would recoil at; the enemy has done it, and shall be answerable for the whole guilt. The soul in this case is passive, and suffers with extreme reluctance what it more dreads than the greatest evils which can affect the body. Nor do the deepest wounds of this kind leave a scar upon the conscience, when the storm is over; which is a proof that they are not our own act.

4. To drive them from the Throne of Grace. Prayer, which is at all times necessary, is especially so in a time of temptation. But how hard is it to come boldly, that we may obtain help in this time of need! but, however hard, it must be attempted. By discontinuing prayer, we give the enemy the greatest encouragement possible; for then he sees that his temptations have the effect which he intends by them, to intercept us from our stronghold. When our Lord was in an agony, he prayed the most earnestly: the ardor of his prayer increased with the distress of his soul. It would be happy if we could always imitate him in this; but too often temptations and difficulties, instead of rousing our application, dishearten and enfeeble us; so that our cries are the faintest when we stand most in need of assistance. But so long as prayer is restrained, our burden is increased: Psalm 32:3, Psalm 32:5.

If Satan cannot make them omit praying, he will repeatedly endeavor to weary them by working upon the *legality* which cleaves so close to the heart. Satan is a hard task-master, when he interferes in the performance of our spiritual duties. This he does perhaps more frequently than we think of; for he can, if it serves his purpose,

appear as an *angel of light*. When the soul is in a tempest, and attempts to pray, he will suggest, that prayer on these occasions should be protracted to such a length, and performed with such steadiness, as is found to be at that season quite impracticable. Such constrained efforts are wearisome; and from the manner of the performance, he takes occasion to fix fresh guilt upon the conscience. Short, frequent, and fervent petitions, which will almost necessarily arise from what is felt when temptation is violent, are best suited to the case; and we need not add to the burden, by tasking ourselves beyond our power, as if we expected to be heard for our much speaking. Blessed be God that we fight with an enemy already vanquished by our Lord, and that we have a sure promise of victory. The Lord is our banner.

## Lead us not into temptation

July, 1776

Dear sir

That I may not weary you by a preamble, I oblige myself to take the turn of my letter from some passage of Scripture; and I fix upon that which just now occurred to my thoughts—a clause in that pattern of prayer which He who best knows our state, has been pleased to leave for the instruction of his people in their great concern of waiting at his throne of grace; Mat. 6:13, "*lead us not into temptation.*" This petition is seasonable at all times, and to all people who have any right knowledge of themselves, or their spiritual calling.

The word *temptation*, taken at large, includes every kind of trial. To tempt, is to try or prove. In this sense, it is said, the Lord tempted Abraham—that is, he tried him; for God cannot tempt to *evil*. He proposed such an act of obedience to him, as was a test of his faith, love, dependence, and integrity. Thus, all our afflictions, under his gracious management, are appointed to prove, manifest, exercise, and purify the graces of his children. And not *afflictions* only, *prosperity* likewise is a state of temptation; and many who have endured sharp sufferings, and came off honorably, have been afterwards greatly hurt and ensnared by *prosperity*! To this purpose the histories of David and Hezekiah are in point.

But by temptation we more frequently understand *the wiles and force which Satan employs in assaulting our peace, or spreading snares for our feet*. He is always practicing against us, either directly and from himself, by the access he has to our hearts, or mediately, by the influence he has over the men and the things of this world. The words which follow confirm this sense: "Lead us not into temptation—but deliver us from evil," or from the *evil one*, as it might be properly rendered here, and in 1 Jo. 5:19. The subtlety and power of this adversary are very great—he is an over-match for us; and we have no hope of safety—but in the Lord's protection.

Satan's action upon the heart may be illustrated by the action of the wind upon the sea. The sea sometimes appears smooth; but it is always disposed to swell and rage, and to obey the impulse of every storm. Thus, the heart may be sometimes quiet; but the wind of temptation will awaken and rouse it in a moment; for it is essential to our depraved nature to be unstable and yielding as the water. And when it is under the impression of the enemy, its violence can only be controlled by Him who says to the raging sea, "Be still, and here shall your proud waves be stayed." The branches of temptation are almost innumerable; but the principal may be reduced to the several faculties of the soul (as we commonly speak), to which they are more directly suited.

He has temptations for the **understanding**. He can blind the mind with prejudices and false reasoning, and ply it with arguments for infidelity, until the most obvious truths become questionable. Even where the Gospel has been received, he can insinuate *error*, which, for the suddenness and malignity of its effects, may be properly compared to *poison*. A healthy man may be poisoned in a moment; and if he is—the baneful drug is usually mixed with his food. Many, who for a while seemed to be sound in the faith, have had their judgments strongly and strangely perverted, and prevailed upon to renounce and oppose those truths they once prized and defended. Such instances are striking proofs of human weakness, and loud calls to watchfulness and dependence, and to beware of leaning to our own understandings. For these purposes he employs both preachers and authors, who, by fine words and fair speeches, beguile the hearts of the unwary. And, by his

immediate influence upon the mind, he is able (if the Lord permits him) to entangle those who are providentially placed out of the reach of corrupt and designing men.

He tempts the **conscience**. By working upon the unbelief of our hearts, and darkening the glory of the Gospel, he can hold down the soul by the number, weight, and aggravation of its sins—so that it shall not be able to look up to Jesus, nor draw any comfort from his blood, promises, and grace. How many go burdened in this manner, seeking relief by performing duties, and perhaps spending their strength in things not commanded, though they hear, and perhaps acknowledge, the Gospel? Nor are the wisest and most established able to withstand his assaults—if the Lord withdraw, and give him permission to employ his power and subtlety unrestrained. The Gospel affords sufficient ground for an abiding assurance of hope; nor should we rest satisfied without it: however, the possession and preservation of this privilege depends upon the Lord's presence with the soul, and his shielding us from Satan's attacks; for I am persuaded that he is able to sift and shake the strongest believer upon earth.

He has likewise temptations suited to the **will**. Jesus makes his people willing in the day of his power; yet there is a contrary principle remaining within them, of which Satan knows how to avail himself. There are occasions in which he almost prevails to set *self* again upon the throne, as Dagon was raised after he had fallen before the ark. How else should any, who have tasted that the Lord is gracious—give way to a repining spirit, account his dispensations hard, or his precepts too strict—so as to shrink from their observance, through the fear of men, or a regard to their worldly interest?

Farther: he has snares for the **affections**. In managing these, he gains a great advantage from our situation in a world which does not know God. The Scripture gives Satan the title of *god of this world*; and believers learn, by painful experience, how great his power is in and over the people and things of it—so that to be steadfast in wisdom's ways requires unremitted efforts, like pressing through a crowd, or swimming against a stream. How hard is it to live in the midst of *pitch* and not be defiled? *The air of the world is infectious*. Our business and unavoidable connections are so interwoven with occasions of sin, and there is so much in our hearts suited to them, that unless we are incessantly upheld by Almighty strength, we cannot stand a day—or an hour. Past victories afford us no greater security than they did Samson, who was shamefully surprised by enemies whom he had formerly conquered.

Nor are we only tempted by compliance's which are **evil** in themselves. With respect to these, perhaps, conscience may be awake, and we stand upon our guard; but we are still upon Satan's ground; and while he may seem to allow himself defeated, he can dexterously change his method, and come upon us where we do not suspect him.

Perhaps our greatest danger arises from things in themselves **lawful**. He can tempt us by our nearest and dearest friend, and pervert every blessing of a *kind Providence* into an occasion of drawing our hearts from the Giver! Yes, spiritual blessings, gifts, comforts, and even graces—are sometimes the engines by which he practices against us, to fill with vain confidence and self-sufficiency, or to lull us into formality and indolence.

That wonderful power which we call the **imagination**, partakes largely of that depravity which sin has brought upon our whole frame, and affords Satan an avenue for assaulting us with the most terrifying, if not the most dangerous, of his temptations. At the best, we have but a poor command over it. We cannot, by an act of our own will, exclude a thousand painful, wild, inconsistent, and hurtful ideas, which are ever ready to obtrude themselves upon our minds: and a slight alteration

in the body, in the motion of the blood or nervous spirits, is sufficient to withdraw it wholly from our dominion, and to leave us, like a city without walls or gates—exposed to the incursion of our enemy!

We are fearfully and wonderfully made; and, with all our boasted knowledge of other things, can form no conception of what is so vastly interesting to us—the mysterious connection between *soul* and *body*, and the manner in which they are mutually affected by each other. The effects we too sensibly feel. The wisest of men would be accounted fools or mad, were they to express in words, a small part of what passes within them! And it would appear that much of the soberest life—is little better than a waking dream! But how dreadful are the consequences, when the Lord permits some *hidden pin* in the human machine to be altered! Immediately a door flies open, which no hand but his can shut—and the enemy pours in, like a flood, falsehood and horror, and the blackness of darkness; the judgment is borne down and disabled, and the most distressing illusions seize us with all the apparent force of evidence and demonstration.

When this is the case in a certain high degree—we call it a mental derangement. But there are various degrees of it, which leave a person in the possession of his senses as to the things of common life, and yet are sufficient, with respect to his spiritual concerns, to shake the very foundations of his hope, and deprive him of all peace and comfort, and make him a terror to himself. All the Lord's people are not called to navigate in these *deep waters of soul distress*; but all are liable. Ah! if we knew what some suffer—whom Satan is permitted to tyrannize in this way, surely we should be more earnest and frequent in praying, "Lead us not into temptation."

From some little sense I have of the malice and subtlety of our spiritual enemies, and the weakness of those barriers which we have to prevent their assaults—I am fully persuaded that nothing less than the continual exertion of that Almighty Power which preserves the stars in their orbits—can maintain our peace of mind for an hour or a minute.

In this view, all comparative difference in *external situations* seems to be annihilated. For as the Lord's presence can make his people happy in a dungeon, so there are temptations, which, if we felt them, would instantly render us incapable of receiving a moment's satisfaction from an assemblage of all earthly blessings, and make the company of our dearest friends tasteless, if not insupportable.

Ah! how little do the mirthful and the frivolous think of these things! How little indeed do they think of them—who profess to believe them! How faint is the sense of our obligations to Him, who freely submitted to the fiercest onsets of the powers of darkness, to free us from the punishment due to our sins; otherwise we must have been forever shut up with those miserable and merciless spirits, who delight in our torment, and who, even in the present state, if they get access to our minds, can make our existence a burden!

But our Lord, who knows and considers our weakness, of which we are so little aware, allows and directs us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation!" We are not to expect an absolute freedom from temptation; we are called to be soldiers, and must sometimes meet with enemies, and perhaps with wounds. Yet, considering this prayer as provided by Him who knows what we are, and where we are, it may afford us both instruction and consolation.

It calls to a constant reflection upon our own weakness. Believers, especially young ones, are prone to rest too much in *grace received*. They feel their hearts warm; and, like Peter, are ready to please themselves with thinking how they would act in such or such a state of trial. It is as if the Lord had said, *Poor worms, be not high-minded—but fear and pray, that, you may be kept from learning by bitter experience—how*

*weak your supposed strength is.* It sweetly intimates, that all our ways, and all our enemies, are in the hands of our great Shepherd. He knows our path. We are short-sighted, and cannot tell what an hour may bring forth. But we are under his protection; and if we depend upon him, we need not be anxiously afraid. He will be faithful to the trust we repose in him, and will allow no temptation to overtake us—but what he will support us under and bring us through. But it becomes us to beware of carnal security and presumption, to keep our eyes upon him, and not to think ourselves safe a moment longer than our spirits feel and breathe the meaning of this petition.

It implies, likewise, the duty of *watchfulness* on our part; as our Lord joins them elsewhere, "*Watch and pray.*" If we desire not to be *led* into temptation, surely we are not to *run* into it. If we wish to be preserved from error—we are to guard against a curious and reasoning spirit. If we would preserve peace of conscience, we must beware of trifling with the light and motions of the Holy Spirit—for without his assistance we cannot maintain faith in exercise. If we would not be ensnared by the men of the world—we are to keep at a proper distance from them. The less we have to do with them—the better; excepting so far as the providence of God makes it our duty in the discharge of our callings and relations, and taking opportunities of doing them good. And though we cannot wholly shut Satan out of our imaginations, we should be cautious that we do not willfully provide fuel for his flame; but entreat the Lord to set a watch upon our eyes and our ears, and to teach us to reject the first motions and the smallest appearance of evil.

I have been so intent upon my subject, that I have once and again forgot I was writing to you, otherwise I would not have let my paper run to so great a length, which I certainly did not intend when I began. I shall not add to this fault, by making an apology. I have touched upon a topic of great importance to myself. I am one among many who have suffered greatly for lack of paying more attention to my need of this prayer. O that I could be wiser hereafter, and always act and speak as knowing that I am always upon a field of battle, and beset by legions!

## Three letters to a tempted believer

### LETTER 1

June 20, 1776.

Madam,

It would be both unkind and ungrateful in me, to avail myself of any *plea of business* for delaying the acknowledgment I owe you for your favor. Could I have known in time that you were in town, I would have endeavored to have called upon you while here; and very glad would I have been to have seen you. But those who fear the Lord may be sure, that whatever is not achievable is not necessary. God could have over-ruled every difficulty in your way, had he seen it expedient. But he is pleased to show you, that you depend not upon men—but upon himself; and that, notwithstanding your situation, may exclude you from some advantages in point of outward means. He who has begun a good work in you, is able to carry it on, in defiance of all *seeming hindrances*, and make all things (even those which have the most unfavorable appearances) work together for your good.

A sure effect of his grace, is a desire and longing for Gospel ordinances; and when they are afforded, they cannot be neglected without loss. But the Lord sees many souls who are dear to him, and whom he is training up in a growing fitness for his kingdom, who are by his providence so situated, that it is not in their power to attend upon Gospel preaching; and perhaps they have seldom either Christian minister or Christian friend to assist or comfort them. Such a situation is a state of trial; but Jesus is all-sufficient, and he is always near. They cannot be debarred from his Word of grace, nor from his throne of grace, for those who feel their need of him, and whose hearts are drawn towards him, are always at the foot of it. Every room in the house, yes, every spot they stand on—fields, lanes, and hedge-rows, all is holy ground to them; for the Lord is there.

The chief difference between us and the disciples, when our Savior was upon earth, is in this: they then walked by *sight*, and we are called to walk by *faith*. They could see him with their bodily eyes; we cannot; but he said before he left them, "It is expedient for you that I go away." How could this be, unless that spiritual communion which he promised to maintain with his people after his ascension, were preferable to that fellowship he allowed them while he was visibly with them? But we are sure it is preferable, and those who had tried both—were well satisfied that he had made good his promise; so that, though they had known him after the flesh, they were content not to know him so any more.

Yes, madam, though we cannot see him—he sees us; he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. In a natural state, we have very dark, and indeed dishonorable, thoughts of God—we conceive of him as at a distance. But when the heart is awakened, we begin to make Jacob's reflection, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I knew it not!" And when we receive saving faith, we begin to know that this ever-present God is in Christ; that the government of heaven and earth, the dispensations of the kingdom of nature, providence, and grace—are in the hands of Jesus; that it is He with whom we have to do, who once suffered agony and death for our redemption, and whose compassion and tenderness are the same, now that he reigns over all blessed forever, as when he conversed among men in the days of his humiliation.

Thus God is made known to us by the Gospel, in the endearing views of a Savior, a Shepherd, a Husband, a Friend; and a way of access is opened for us through the veil, that is, the human nature of our Redeemer, to enter, with humble confidence, into the holiest of all, and to repose all our cares and concerns upon the strength of that everlasting arm which upholds heaven and earth, and upon that infinite love

which submitted to the shame, pain, and death of the cross—to redeem sinners from wrath and misery!

Though there is a height, a breadth, a length, and a depth, in this mystery of redeeming love, exceeding the comprehension of all finite minds; yet the great and leading principles which are necessary for the support and comfort of our souls, may be summed up in a very few words. Such a summary we are favored with in Titus 2:11-14, "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good." Here the whole of salvation, all that is needful to be known, experienced, practiced, and hoped for, is comprised within the compass of four verses.

If many books, much study, and great discernment, were necessary in order to be saved, what must the poor and simple do? Yet for them especially, is the Gospel designed; and few but such as these, attain the knowledge and comfort of it.

The Bible is a sealed book—until the heart be awakened by the Holy Spirit; and, then, he who runs may read. The propositions of the Gospel are few:

I am a sinner, therefore I need a Savior, one who is both *able* and *willing* to save to the uttermost. Such a one is Jesus: he is all that I need—wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. But will he receive me? Can I answer a previous question? Am I willing to receive him? If so, and if his word may be taken, if he meant what he said, and promised no more than he can perform—I may be sure of a welcome! He knew, long before, the doubts, fears, and suspicions which would arise in my mind when I would come to know what I *am*, what I have *done*, and what I have *deserved*; and therefore he declared, before he left the earth, "Him who comes to me—I will never cast out." I have no money or price in my hand, no worthiness to recommend me. And I need none, for he saves freely—for his own name's sake. I have only to be thankful for what he has already shown me, and to wait upon him for more. It is my part to *commit* myself to him—as the Physician of sin-sick souls, not to *prescribe* to him how he shall treat me. To begin, carry on, and perfect the cure—is his part.

The *doubts* and *fears* you speak of are, in a greater or less degree, the common experience of all the Lord's people, at least for a time. While any unbelief remains in the heart, and Satan is permitted to tempt—we shall feel these things. In themselves they are groundless and evil; yet the Lord permits and over-rules them for good. They tend to make us know more of the plague of our own hearts, and feel more sensibly the need of a Savior, and make his rest (when we attain it) doubly sweet and sure—and they likewise qualify us for pitying and comforting others.

Fear not—only believe, wait, and pray. Expect not all at once. A Christian is not of hasty growth, like a mushroom—but rather like the oak, the progress of which is hardly perceptible—but in time becomes a great deep-rooted tree. If my writings have been useful to you, may the Lord have the praise. To administer any comfort to his children is the greatest honor and pleasure I can receive in this life. I cannot promise to be a very punctual correspondent, having many engagements; but I hope to do all in my power to reply to your correspondence.

LETTER 2

August 20, 1776.

Madam,

Though in general I think myself tolerably punctual when I can answer a letter in six or seven weeks after the receipt—yet I feel some pain for not having acknowledged yours sooner. A case like that which you have favored me with an account of, deserved an immediate attention; and when I read it, I proposed writing within a day or two, and I can hardly allow any *plea of business* to be sufficient excuse for delaying it so long; but our times are in the Lord's hands—may he now enable me to send you what may prove a word in season.

Your exercises have been by no means singular, though they may appear so to yourself; because, in your retired situation, you have not (as you observe) had much opportunity of knowing the experience of other Christians; nor has the *guilt* with which your mind has been so greatly burdened, been properly your own. It was a *temptation* forced upon you by the enemy—and he shall answer for it.

Undoubtedly it is a mournful proof of the depravity of our nature, that there is that within us, which renders us so easily susceptible of Satan's suggestions; a proof of our extreme weakness, that, after the clearest and most satisfying evidences of the truth, we are not able to hold fast our confidence, if the Lord permits Satan to *sift* and *shake* us. But I can assure you, that these changes are not uncommon. I have known people, who, after walking with God comfortably for forty years, have been at their wit's end from such assaults as you mention, and been brought to doubt, not only of the reality of their own hopes—but of the very ground and foundation upon which their hopes were built!

Had you remained, as it seems you once were, attached to the vanities of a mirthful and debauched life, or could you have been content with a *form of godliness*, destitute of the power—it is probable you would have remained a stranger to these troubles. Satan would have employed his arts in a different and less perceptible way, to have soothed you into a *false peace*, and prevented any thought or suspicion of danger from arising in your mind. But when he could no longer detain you in his bondage, or seduce you back again into the world—then of course he would change his method, and declare open war against you.

You have experienced a specimen of his *power* and *malice*; and the Lord, whom you loved, because he first loved you, permitted it, not to gratify Satan—but for your benefit to humble and prove you, to show you what is in your heart, and to do you good in the outcome. These things, for the present, are not joyous but grievous; yet in the end they yield the peaceable fruits of righteousness. In the mean time, his eye is upon you; he has appointed bounds both to the *degree* and the *duration* of the trial. And he does and will afford you such supports, that you shall not be tried beyond what you are enabled to bear. I doubt not, but your conflicts and sorrows will in due time terminate in praise and victory, and be sanctified to your fuller establishment in the truth.

I greatly rejoice in the Lord's goodness to your dying parent. How wisely timed, and how exactly suited, was that affecting dispensation, to break the force of those suggestions with which the enemy was aiming to overwhelm your spirit. He could not stand against such an illustrious demonstrative attestation, that the doctrines you had embraced were not cunningly devised fables. He could proceed no farther in that way; but he is prolific in resources. His next attempt, of course, was to fix guilt upon your conscience, as if you had yourself formed and willingly entertained those thoughts, which, indeed, you suffered with extreme reluctance and pain. Here likewise I find he succeeded for a time; but he who broke the former snare, will deliver you from this likewise!

The dark and dishonorable thoughts of God, which I hinted at as belonging to a natural state, are very different from the thoughts of your heart concerning him. You do not conceive of him as a hard master, or think you could be more happy in the

breach—than in the observance of his precepts. You do not prefer the world to his favor, or think you can please him, and make amends for your sins by an obedience of your own. These, and such as these, are the thoughts of the natural heart—the very reverse of yours.

One thought, however, I confess you have indulged, which is no less dishonorable to the Lord than uncomfortable to yourself. You say, "I dare not believe that God will not impute to me as sin, the admission of thoughts which my soul ever abhorred, and to which my will never consented." Nay, you fear lest they should not only be imputed—but unpardonable. But how can this be possible? Indeed I will not call it *your* thought; it is your *temptation*. You tell me you have children. Then you will easily understand a plain illustration, which just now occurs to me.

Let me suppose a case which has sometimes happened: a child, three or four years of age we will say, while playing incautiously at a little distance from home, should be suddenly seized and carried away by a gypsy. Poor thing! how terrified, how distressed must it be! Methinks I hear its cries. The sight and violence of the stranger, the recollection of its dear parents, the loss of its pleasing home, the dread and uncertainty of what is yet to befall it—is it not a wonder that it does not die in agony? But see, help is at hand—the gypsy is pursued, and the child recovered. Now, my dear madam, permit me to ask you, if this were your child, how would you receive it? Perhaps, when the first transports of your joy for its safety would permit you, you might gently chide it for leaving your door; but would you disinherit it? Would you disown it? Would you deliver it up again to the gypsy with your own hands, because it had suffered a violence which it could not withstand, which it abhorred, and to which its will never consented? And yet what is the tenderness of a mother, of ten thousand mothers, compared to that which our compassionate Savior bears to every poor soul that has been enabled to flee to him for salvation! Let us be far from charging that to him, of which we think we are utterly incapable ourselves!

Take courage, madam! Resist the devil—and he will flee from you. If he were to tempt you to anything criminal, you would start at the thought, and renounce it with abhorrence. Do the same when he tempts you to question the Lord's compassion and goodness. But there he imposes upon us with a *show of humility*, and persuades us that we do well to oppose *our unworthiness* as a sufficient exception to the many express promises of the Word. It is said, the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin; that all manner of sin shall be forgiven for his sake; that whoever comes he will in no wise cast out; and that he is able to save to the uttermost. Believe his Word—and Satan shall be found a liar!

If the child had deliberately gone away with the gypsy, had preferred that wretched way of life, had refused to return, though frequently and tenderly invited home; perhaps a parent's love might, in time, be too weak to plead for the pardon of such continued obstinacy. But, indeed, in this manner we *have* all dealt with the Lord—and yet, whenever we are willing to return—he is willing to receive us with open arms, and without an upbraiding word! Luke 15:20-22. Though our sins have been deep-dyed, like scarlet and crimson, enormous as mountains, and countless as the sands, the sum total is, *Sin has abounded; but where sin has abounded, grace has much more abounded!*

After all, I know the Lord keeps the *key of comfort* in his own hands—yet he has commanded us to attempt comforting one another. I should rejoice to be his instrument of administering comfort to you. I shall hope to hear from you soon; and that you will then be able to inform me he has restored to you the joys of his salvation. But if not yet, wait for him, and you shall not wait in vain.

### LETTER 3

June, 1777.

My dear Madam,

*Temptations* may be compared to the wind, which when it has ceased raging from one point, after a short calm, it frequently renews its violence from another quarter. The Lord silenced Satan's former assaults against you—but he is permitted to try you again in another way. Be of good courage, madam, wait upon the Lord, and the present *storm* shall likewise subside in good time. You have an infallible Pilot, and are embarked in a voyage against which the winds and waves cannot prevail. You may be *tossed* about, and think yourself in apparent jeopardy—but *sink* you shall not, except the promises and faithfulness of God can fail.

Upon an attentive consideration of your trouble, it seems to me to amount only to this, that though the Lord has done great things for you, he has not yet brought you to a state of dependence on himself, nor released you from that impossibility which all his people feel, of doing anything without him. And is this, indeed, a matter of complaint? Is it not every way better—more for his glory, and more suited to keep us mindful of our obligations to him, and, in the outcome, more for our safety, that we should be reduced to a happy necessity of receiving daily out of his fullness (as the Israelites received the manna), than to be set up with something of a stock of wisdom, power, and goodness of our own?

*Adam* was thus furnished at the beginning with strength to stand; yet, *mutability* being essential to a *creature*—he quickly fell and lost all. We who are by nature sinners, are not left to so hazardous an experiment. God has himself engaged to keep us, and treasured up all fullness of grace for our support, in a head who cannot fail. Our gracious Savior will communicate all needful supplies to his members—yet in such a manner that they shall feel their need and weakness, and have nothing to boast of from first to last—but his wisdom, compassion, and care. We are in no worse circumstances than the Apostle Paul, who, though eminent and exemplary in the Christian life, found and freely confessed that he had no sufficiency in himself to think a good thought! Nor did he wish it otherwise; he even gloried in his infirmities, that the power of Christ might rest upon him.

Unbelief, and a thousand other evils, are still in our hearts! Though their *reign* and *dominion* is at an end—they are not slain nor eradicated; their effects will be felt more or less sensibly, as the Lord is pleased more or less to afford or abate his gracious influence. When they are kept under control—we are no better in ourselves, for they are not kept down by us. But we are very prone to think better of ourselves at such a time; and therefore God is pleased to permit us at seasons—to feel a difference, that we may never forget how *weak* and how *vile* we are. We cannot absolutely *conquer* these evils—but it befits us to be *humbled* for them; and we are to fight, and strive, and pray against them. Our great duty is to be at his footstool, and to cry to him who has promised to perform all things for us.

Why are we called *soldiers*—but because we are called to a *warfare*! And how could we *fight*, if there were no *enemies* to resist? The Lord's soldiers are not merely for show, to make an empty parade in a uniform, and to brandish their arms when none but friends and spectators are around them. No, we must stand upon the field of battle—we must face the fiery darts—we must *wrestle* (which is the closest and most arduous kind of fighting) with our foes! Nor can we well expect wholly to escape wounds; but the leaves of the tree of life are provided for their healing. The Captain of our salvation is at hand, and leads us on with an assurance which might make even a coward bold—that, in the end, we shall be more than conquerors through him who has loved us!

I am ready to think that some of the sentiments in your letters are not properly *yours*, such as you yourself have derived from the Scriptures—but rather borrowed

from authors or preachers, whose judgment your humility has led you to prefer to your own. At least, I am sure the Scripture does not authorize the conclusion which distresses you—that if you were a child of God—you would not feel such changes and oppositions. Were I to define a Christian, or rather to describe him at large, I know no text I would choose sooner, as a ground for the subject, than Gal. 5:17, "The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." A Christian has *noble aims*—which distinguish him from the bulk of mankind. His leading principles, motives, and desires—are all supernatural and divine. Could he do as he desires—there is not an angel before the Eternal Throne, that would excel him in holiness, love, and obedience! He would tread in the very footsteps of his Savior, fill up every moment in his service, and employ every breath in his praise.

This he would do—but, alas! he cannot! Against these spiritual desires, there is a contrary desire and working of a corrupt nature, which meets him at every turn! He has a beautiful copy set before him in the Scriptures—he is enamored with it, and though he does not expect to equal it, he writes carefully after it, and longs to attain to the nearest possible imitation. But indwelling sin and Satan continually jog his hand, and spoil his strokes!

You cannot, madam, form a right judgment of yourself, except you make due allowance for those things which are not special to yourself—but common to all who have spiritual perception, and are indeed the inseparable appendages of this mortal state. If it were not so, why should the most spiritual and gracious people be so ready to confess themselves vile and worthless? One eminent branch of our holiness, is a sense of shame and humiliation for those evils which are only known to ourselves, and to him who searches our hearts, joined with an acquiescence in Jesus, who is appointed of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

I will venture to assure you, that though you will possess a more stable peace, in proportion as the Lord enables you to live more simply upon the blood, righteousness, and grace of the Mediator, you will never grow into a better opinion of yourself than you have at present. The nearer you are brought to him, the more lively sense you will have of your continual need of him, and thereby your admiration of his power, love, and compassion, will increase likewise from year to year.

I would observe farther, that our *spiritual exercises* are not a little influenced by our *constitutional temperament*. As you are only a correspondent, I can but conjecture about you upon this head. If your frame is delicate, and your nervous system very sensible and tender, I should probably ascribe some of your apprehensions to this cause. It is an abstruse subject, and I will not enter into it; but according to the observations I have made—people of this habit seem to live more upon the confines of the invisible world, if I may so speak, and to be more susceptible of impressions from it, than others. That complaint which, for want of a better name, we call *depression of heart*, may probably afford the enemy some special advantages and occasions of distressing you. The mind then perceives objects as through a *tinctured medium*, which gives them a dark and discouraging appearance! And I believe Satan has more influence and address than we are aware of—in managing the glass. And when this is not the case at all times, it may be so occasionally, from sickness or other circumstances.

You tell me that you have lately been in circumstances, which may probably have such an effect as I have hinted. You may be charging yourself with *guilt* for what springs from *physical indisposition*, in which you are merely passive, and which

may be no more properly sinful, than the headache, or any of the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to!

The enemy can take no advantage but what the Lord permits him; and he will permit him none but what he designs to over-rule for your greater advantage in the end. He delights in your prosperity; and you should not be in heaviness for an hour, were there not a need be for it. Notwithstanding your fears, I have a good hope, that he who you say has helped you in six troubles—will appear for you in the seventh; that you will not die—but live, and declare the works of the Lord, and come forth to testify to his praise—that he has turned your mourning into joy!

## The benefits of affliction.

December, 1776

My dear Madam,

I have often preached to others of **the benefits of affliction**; but my own path for many years has been so smooth, and my trials, though I have not been without trials, comparatively so light and few—that I have seemed to myself to speak by *rote* upon a subject of which I had not a proper feeling. Yet the many exercises of my poor afflicted people, and the sympathy the Lord has given me with them in their troubles—has made "*the benefits of affliction*" a frequent and favorite topic of my ministry among them. The *advantages* of afflictions, when the Lord is pleased to employ them for the good of his people, are many and great. Permit me to mention a few of them; and may the Lord grant that we may all find those blessed ends answered to ourselves, by the trials he is pleased to appoint us.

Afflictions *quicken us to prayer*. It is a pity it should be so; but experience testifies, that a long course of ease and prosperity, without painful changes—has an unhappy tendency to make us cold and formal in our secret worship. But *troubles* rouse our spirits, and constrain us to call upon the Lord in good earnest—when we feel a need of that help which we only can have from his almighty arm.

Afflictions are useful, and in a degree necessary, to keep alive in us—a *conviction of the vanity and unsatisfying nature of the present world*, and all its enjoyments; to remind us that this world is not our rest, and to call our thoughts upwards, where our true treasure is, and where our heart ought to be. When things go on much to our wish, our hearts are too prone to say, "It is good to be here!" It is probable, that had Moses, when he came to invite Israel to Canaan, found them in prosperity—that they would have been very unwilling to move out of Egypt; but the afflictions they were in—made his message welcome. Thus the Lord, by pain, sickness, and disappointments, by breaking our cisterns and withering our gourds—weakens our attachment to this world, and makes the thought of leaving it, more easy and more desirable.

A child of God cannot but greatly desire a more enlarged and *experimental acquaintance with his holy Word*; and this attainment is greatly promoted by our trials. The far greater part of the promises in Scripture, are made and suited to a state of affliction; and, though we may *believe* they are true, we cannot so well *know* their sweetness, power, and suitableness, unless we ourselves are in a state to which they refer! The Lord says, "Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you." Now, until the day of trouble comes, such a promise is like a city of refuge to an Israelite, who, not having slain a man, was in no danger of the avenger of blood. He had a privilege near him, of which he knew not the use and value—because he was not in the case for which it was provided. But some can say, I not only believe this promise upon the authority of the speaker—but I can set my seal to it! I *have* been in trouble; I took this course for relief, and I was not disappointed. The Lord truly heard and delivered me. Thus afflictions likewise give occasion of our knowing and noticing more of the Lord's wisdom, power, and goodness, in supporting and relieving us—than we would otherwise have known.

I have not time to take another sheet, must therefore contract my homily.

Afflictions evidence to ourselves, and manifest to others, the *reality of grace*. When we suffer as Christians, exercise some measure of that patience and submission, and receive some measure of these supports and supplies, which the Gospel requires and promises to believers—we are more confirmed that we have not taken up with mere

notions; and others may be convinced that we do not follow cunningly devised fables.

Afflictions likewise strengthen us—by the *exercise our graces*. As our limbs and natural powers would be feeble if not called to daily exertion—so the graces of the Spirit would languish, without something which was provided to draw them out to use.

Lastly, afflictions are honorable, as they *advance our conformity to Jesus our Lord*, who was a man of sorrows for our sake. Methinks, if we might go to heaven without suffering, we would be unwilling to desire it. Why should we ever wish to go by any other path to heaven—than that which Jesus has consecrated and endeared, by his own example? Especially as his people's sufferings are not *penal*—there is no wrath in them. The cup he puts in their hands is very different from that which he drank for their sakes, and is only *medicinal* to promote their chief good. Here I must stop; but the subject is fruitful, and might be pursued through a quire of paper.

"And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons-- My son, do not make light of **the Lord's discipline**, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." Hebrews 12:5-11

## The furnace of affliction

September 27, 1777.

My dear Friend,

I could not, at such a time as this, refrain from writing; and glad would I be, if the Lord may help me to drop a suitable word, and accompany it with a blessing to you in the reading.

I am glad to be assured (though I expected no less) that your sick wife happily feels herself safe in the Lord's hand, and under the care of the good Shepherd and Savior, to whom she has often committed herself; and finds him faithful to his promise, giving her strength in her soul according to her day, and enabling her quietly to submit to his holy, wise, and gracious will. And it is my prayer, that he may strengthen you likewise, and reveal his own all-sufficiency so clearly and powerfully to your heart, that you may not be afraid of any event--but cheerfully rely upon him, to be all that to you, in every circumstance and change, which his promise warrants you to expect.

I am willing to hope, that this is but a short season of concern, appointed for the exercise of your faith and patience, and to give you, in his good time, a signal proof of his power and goodness in answering prayer. He sometimes brings us into such a situation, when *creature help* is utterly unavailing, that we may afterwards be more clearly sensible of his interposition. Then we experimentally learn the vanity of all things here below, and are brought to a more immediate and absolute dependence upon himself. We have need of having these lessons frequently inculcated upon us; but when his end is answered, how often, after he has caused grief, does he show his great compassion, and save us from our fears by an outstretched arm, and with such a seasonable and almost unexpected relief, as constrains us to cry out, "What has God wrought!" and "Who is a God like unto you!" Such, I hope, will be the issue of your present trial, and that He who gave her to you at first, will restore her to you again.

You are in **the furnace of affliction**; but the Lord is sitting by it as a refiner of silver, to moderate the fire, and manage the process, so that you shall lose nothing but dross, and be brought forth as refined gold, to praise his name. Apparent difficulties, however great, are nothing to him. If He speaks--it is done; for to God the Lord belong the issues of life and death. Should his pleasure be otherwise, and should he call your dear partner to a state of glory before you--still I know he is able to support you. What he does, however painful to the flesh, must be right, because He does it. Having bought us with his blood, and saved our souls from hell, he has every kind of right to dispose of us and ours--as he pleases. And this we are sure of, he will not lay so much upon us--as he freely endured for us; and he can make us amends for all we suffer, and for all we lose--by the light of his countenance. A few years will set all to rights; and those who love him and are beloved by him, though they may *suffer* as others, shall not *sorrow* as others; for the Lord will be with them here--and he will soon have them with him! There, all tears shall be wiped from their eyes!

Perhaps I know as well how to calculate the pain of such a separation, as anyone who has not actually experienced it. Many a time the desire of my eyes has been threatened, many a time my heart has been brought low; but from what I have known at such seasons, I have reason to hope, that, had it been his pleasure to bring upon me the thing that I feared, his everlasting arm would have upheld me from sinking under the stroke. As ministers, we are called to comfort the Lord's afflicted people, and to tell them the *knowledge of his love* is a cordial able to keep the soul alive under the sharpest trials. We must not wonder that he sometimes puts us in a

way of *showing* that we do not deal in unfelt truths--but that we find ourselves that solid consolation in the Gospel, which we encourage others to expect from it. You have now such an occasion of glorifying the Lord; I pray he may enable you to improve it, and that all around you may see that he is with you, and that his good Word is the support and anchor of your soul. Then I am sure, if it upon the whole it is best for you--that he will give you the desire of your heart, and you shall yet live to praise him together.

# Six Letters on Afflictions

## My Dear Madam,

I have seen of late, more of the importance of a *thankful spirit*, not only for its own sake, but as a useful and almost necessary means of serving the Lord acceptably. An unbelieving poring over our *sinful selves*, not only robs us of our comfort, but of our strength likewise, and makes us forget the innumerable mercies with which the Lord has enriched us.

To be humbled and ashamed before him, under a sense of our vileness, is quite correct. But still, while Jesus is our Head, our Righteousness, our Shepherd, our Lord, and our God; and while we feel a growing desire of grace and communion maintained in the soul — we shall not sorrow, without rejoicing at the same time. This was the experience of the great apostle of the Gentiles; he felt this in an eminent degree when he said, "he was sorrowful — yet always rejoicing," so that if he was with us now, he would join with us in saying:

"I the chief of sinners am,  
But Jesus died for me!"

You see then, my dear Madam, we have daily reason to sorrow because we are sinners — and greater reason to rejoice, because Jesus has put away sin by the sacrifice of himself!

I hope your nephew enjoys good bodily health, and his soul is nourished and refreshed. Though he lives in a barren land, I trust he finds that the Lord can open springs and fountains in the wilderness. The *word* of grace and the *throne* of grace afford wells of salvation, from which he cannot be debarred. From thence, I hope, he will daily draw the water of life with joy; and, like a tree of the Lord's planting — strike root downwards, and bear fruit upwards, and experience that the Lord is able to keep, establish, and comfort him — though for a season he is deprived of the public ordinances of the Gospel.

It is observable, that none of David's Psalms express more lively emotions of faith and love, than some of those which he penned when he was driven from the opportunities of public worship, and constrained to dwell alone like a desert owl in the wilderness; such was his situation when he wrote the 42nd, 57th, 63rd, 142nd, and 143rd Psalms.

Blessed are we, when we can clearly see that every event and circumstance of our lives, is under the immediate direction and appointment of Him who cares for us, and who has engaged that all things shall, notwithstanding all our doubts and misgivings, work together for good.

May you, my dear Madam, go on in the ways of the Lord, with fresh animation and delight, and may your prospects be bright and unclouded, so that you may with joy be able to sing with the seraphic poet:

"I now can read my title clear,  
To mansions in the skies;  
I bid farewell to every fear,  
And wipe my weeping eyes!

"There shall I bathe my weary soul  
In seas of heavenly rest;  
And not a wave of trouble roll  
Across my peaceful breast."

And now, my dear Madam, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

And with this I will conclude, assuring you that I am,  
Your much obliged and affectionate servant,  
John Newton

**My Dear Madam,**

I perceive that your heavenly Father has again put you into the furnace — and I trust he will divinely impress upon your heart, that there is a *needs be* for it, and that the outcome of your present trial shall surely end in some good or another to your soul.

His word tells us that trials are absolutely necessary, and why they are so — as he would not afflict those he loves, but for their real profit. So he chooses those afflictions for us, and appoints them for us at such seasons, and attended with such circumstances, as he sees will be (all things considered) most for our spiritual advantage. The afflictions and trials of his people are always sent, either to *prevent* or to *cure* something still worse. We know how we feel under a present trouble — but we know not how we might have been without it.

Satan is compared to a fowler, and we sometimes are as little upon our guard as a thoughtless bird — the danger is close to us, but we are not aware of it. But, as a sudden noise affrights the bird, and makes it take wing and escape the snare — so the Lord often disappoints the devices of the enemy, by sending a seasonable trial to his dear children, which rouses them, and makes them flee to him for safety.

I have often thought if *David* had fallen and broke his leg when he was going up to the housetop — he would have missed the sight of Bathsheba, and that long train of evils, which made him cry out of broken bones in a still more painful sense.

We know how things are with us now, but we know not how they might have been by this time, if such or such a painful dispensation had not happened. A course of continual prosperity might have lulled us to sleep. We cannot but allow this when we find ourselves still apt to be drowsy — though the Lord is pleased to put *thorns* into our pillow. Notwithstanding the feeling proofs we have of the vanity of the present state, our spirits are still too apt to cleave to the dust. What then might have been the case, had our path been always smooth?

Another way in which afflictions work for good is, that they put us in a situation for the more observable exercise and manifestation of our graces — and thereby afford us fairer opportunity for glorifying God. You know as well as I do, that the glory of God should be our highest aim — and in our better moments, it is so. The Holy Spirit teaches us to pray, that we may live to his glory — and he often answers this prayer by sending us trials. His wisdom, faithfulness and power, in supporting and delivering — are more clearly seen in a time of suffering. And the graces of faith, patience, and submission, are more evident then, than they would be if we were always at ease.

The case of *Job* is recorded for our instruction in this view. He received personal benefit by his heavy troubles, and came out of the furnace *purified* like gold. But his great honor was, that by his sufferings he was made of eminent use to the church of God; and believers in all ages, have been and will be edified and comforted by what they read of the Lord's dealings with him.

And though we are not called upon to appear (as he was) as public examples — yet, within the circle of our own connections, if the Lord enables us to suffer as Christians — others will be encouraged and excited to trust and praise the Lord, when they see what he is pleased to do for us.

In this sense, Christians in private life suffer for his sake. He will have it known . . . that his grace is all-sufficient,  
that he is a present help in time of trouble,  
that his promises are sure, and  
that he can carry his children safely through fire and water.

And for this purpose he calls out (*when*, and *as* he pleases) — some of those whom he most loves, to endure hardships — so that both friends and enemies may see that his grace bestowed upon them was not in vain.

How else should the power of precious faith be known — if it was not tried? It is an honor to serve God by doing his will; but in outward services there is something pleasing to *self*. But it is a much greater honor to serve him by suffering his will — here self has less concern, and our obedience is more simple and unselfish. May we be of the Apostle's mind, and glory in tribulation, if, by anything we can suffer and endure — that the power of Christ may be manifested and honored.

He is a good master to serve — I have found him so for thirty years. He can, and he will make us rich amends. He well deserves our patient submission to trials, when we consider what he has endured for us.

Cheer up, dear Madam, the Lord does all things well! Do not be afraid of storms, for you have an *infallible Pilot* who will . . .  
guide you with his eye,  
uphold you with his arm, and  
every minute is bringing you nearer to the harbor of eternal rest and peace!

We have just began *harvest* in these parts. The corn has passed through a variety of weather; but frosts and winds, rains and heat, each of which, singly, would have destroyed it — have each in their places (through the blessing of the Lord's overruling providence) concurred to bring it to its present maturity. The farmers here, as well as elsewhere — have had different fears and complaints at different times. They have thought sometimes the weather to be too cold or too hot, too wet or too dry, by turns. But their fears were groundless and vain — the crop is ripe, the stalks are loaded, and bend under the weight of the grain.

Is not this an emblem of the spiritual life? What *changes* of weather have we passed through, since the *seeds of grace* were first sown in our hearts? How often have we been ready to murmur at the appointments of the Heavenly Gardener! How hardly could we be persuaded that the afflictions, temptations, trials, and desertions we have been exercised with — have, in their places, been no less subservient to our growth, than the more pleasing sunshine we have been sometimes favored with? Yet, I trust, we are still growing and getting forward — neither frost or floods have been able to destroy us!

Oh, Madam, (may our hearts rejoice at the thought!) the *harvest* is approaching! And when he sees that we are fully ripe, when all that he has designed to do *for* us, *in* us, and *by* us, is completed — he will separate us from these clods of earth, and remove us into his garner, where we shall be done with fears and changes forever.

We shall not then live this poor dying life — neither shall we have to complain of an evil heart of unbelief! We shall not mourn an absent God; or complain of a cold and careless heart; or feel a law in our members warring against the law of our minds. For then we shall be at the fountain-head of all our best wishes and desires

— and enjoying, through eternal ages, that ineffable bliss which is prepared for all who *love* God, and who have been *called* by divine grace — out of the service of sin, Satan, and the world, to love and serve Him who is the Rock of eternal ages. Yes, my dear Madam, we shall, with unspeakable delight — see Jesus as he is, and be completely like him! Let us, then, not be weary in well doing — for, in due season, we shall reap, if we fail not.

I am, my dear Madam,  
Your obliged and affectionate Servant,  
John Newton

**My Dearest Madam,**

*Inclination* would lead me to write to you very often, but *opportunity* is often lacking. Every day brings business of its own which must be attended to — and something often remains to add to the business of tomorrow. This is remarkably the case with me at present; I have a drawer full (indeed, it is not a large one) of unanswered letters — yours must be despatched among the first.

You desire my thoughts concerning the difference which the Lord is pleased to appoint in the situation of his people, with respect to trials and circumstances. In *externals*, there is a great difference. Some *few* have sat upon a throne — while the *many* have lived in poverty. *For the most part, the Lord's children are a poor and afflicted people. The Lord chooses poverty as the safest state for them in this ensnaring world.*

And if any of them are rich, it is not, I apprehend, for their own sakes — but that they may be some way instrumental in promoting his cause and interest in the world — that they may assist their poor brethren — that they may be witnesses for the truth to those in their own rank of life, and that the power of his grace may triumph in every situation.

Perhaps you may have seen my published letter on *the advantages of poverty*, and therefore I shall not enlarge much upon this subject. I would only observe, that those who live in affluence are exempted from one trial at least, which is exceeding hard to bear — I see much of it here, though it is not exclusively confined to Olney. Many — I may say most of our serious people, are exercised with *pinching poverty*. Some have little more than dry bread, some (who are slow workers, or sew coarse laces) can hardly get so much as bread, without contracting debts, which distress their minds lest they should be unable to pay, and thereby cause their profession to be spoken against.

The Lord notwithstanding carries them through, and at times gives them food which the world knows nothing of. But their trial is grievous, and is not, like many others, occasional — but returns from day to day, as constant as the sun. By being placed among such a people, I hope the Lord shows me that I have great reason to be thankful for the *necessities* and the *comforts* of life.

In other respects there is not perhaps so great a difference in point of trials, as there may seem to be, if such considerations as the following are taken into the account:

First, we know our own trials, but can form no right judgment, at least no certain judgment — as to how it is with others. A person whom we look upon as happy — may have some trouble corroding at heart, though concealed, which if we knew, we would be unwilling to take in exchange for our own.

Secondly, there are *seasons* of trials. Some who are now in comfortable circumstances — have perhaps had great afflictions in time past. Or they may live to see and feel too — very heavy and unexpected troubles, which may make them the objects rather of pity than of envy. We know not what a day may bring forth. And others, who are now in difficulty and perplexity — may live to see better days. The Lord can command light to arise out of darkness, and make crooked things straight, and the present crosses may be preparing the way for great comforts. Everything is so uncertain here, that we cannot form a tolerable estimate of any particular person's case while living.

Thirdly, trials are to be computed rather by their *effect*, than by their *cause*. That is a great trial which makes a great impression upon the mind — though perhaps to a bye-stander, the immediate occasion may seem trivial. And the heaviest trial is lighter — if the Lord affords a proportionable measure of strength, grace, and comfort, to sustain it. If he puts forth his grace — then his people are strengthened, hard things are made easy, and bitter things sweet. They can go through the water, or through the fire unhurt, and almost unmoved — if he is with them. But if he withdraws, they are ready to sink under the weight of a *feather* — for they have no strength of their own.

So far as we think we see a difference, we may observe that those whom the Lord most favors, who are simply devoted to him, and dependent upon him — usually are exercised with the sharpest afflictions. This seems strange to an eye of *sense*; but *faith*, instructed by the Word and Spirit of God — sees a wisdom and beauty in this appointment. He afflicts them — because he loves them! Their trials are sanctified, and their eminence in grace is owing (as a means) to the Lord's blessing on the afflictions through which they pass — which, under the influence of his Spirit, are suited . . .

to quicken them to prayer;

to wean them from the world;

to manifest to them the sweetness and certainty of the promises;

to make the name and grace of Jesus more precious to them,

and to animate their desires towards their heavenly rest.

Thus, all things work together for their good, and those who have fewer trials, though they escape some smart, are for the most part — very light, unsavory, and unsteady in their walk and conduct. They neither have so much true comfort from Him who is the great Comforter of the children of God; nor does their light so advantageously shine before men to the praise of his glory.

We have had a comfortable season during the holidays. I preach more frequently than usual at that time of the year — I hope many have tasted that the Lord is gracious. My time now is much taken up, and I am interrupted more than once, before I can finish a letter.

We beg our best respects to Mr. L. May the Lord give you both all the blessings of grace and peace you need. Pray remember us also to Miss L.

We hope to have the pleasure of hearing from you soon. Do not forget us when upon your knees before God, and believe me to be,

I am, my dear Madam,

Your obliged and affectionate Servant,

John Newton

**My Dear Madam,**

Though I would have been happy to have spent the day with you when I called —

yet I discovered that you were not well, and appeared restless; however, it gave me great pleasure to see you at any rate, and I have rejoiced since, to find prayer answered in your happy delivery, and that the Lord had been gracious, and faithful to his promise, in dispelling your fears, and affording you support and comfort in the hour of trial. I hope this will encourage you to put your trust in him in future, and that you will readily know where to go for help, with a firm expectation of obtaining it. "Because he has heard my prayer," says David, "therefore will I call upon him as long as I live." I will make every new deliverance an argument and plea for more; for, as I know *I shall continually need his assistance* — so I am persuaded he will never be weary of affording it.

Thus, *troubles* quicken prayer, *prayer* hastens relief, *relief* awakens *praise*, and *praise* strengthens our *faith* and *hope*. We shall go through this course of changes so long as we remain in this world; but we are every moment drawing nearer to an unchangeable state, where our hearts shall be filled with his praise, through the whole length of an eternal day.

My body was weary, and my spirit dissipated all the while I was in town. I seem not cut out for a London situation, and have therefore reason to be thankful that my lot is cast in a retired corner. And though I am glad occasionally to see my friends — yet I am glad to get back out of the noise, smoke and hurry. However, *the path of duty*, lead where it will, is always safe — provided we are aware of danger, and are dependent upon the Lord to keep us. He is all-sufficient to his people in every place and circumstance. His presence can make a dungeon pleasant, and without it a palace would prove a dungeon to the soul that has tasted he is gracious — at least it ought to be so.

We are not in our right minds, if we can be for an hour satisfied with outward things, unless we are either rejoicing in him, or sighing and hungering after him: either of these is a good frame, and the latter not less so than the former, though it is less comfortable.

But it would not do for us to be always upon the *mount*. We must have fightings — or we could not have victories. *Without a feeling sense of our own weakness and insufficiency* — *we could not duly prize the all-sufficient and compassionate Physician*. Unless we have some seasons of darkness — we shall not be sensible of the value of light; indeed, we know not how to properly appreciate any one blessing — until we are deprived of it.

Take for another instance, the case of health — if we were never ill, we would never know how to estimate the value of health. The great thing is, to be enabled to resign ourselves into the hands of the Lord, and to rejoice and glory in Christ Jesus, as made of God unto us, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; and to be content and glad to be nothing in our own estimation — that he may be, and appear to be, all in all.

When the heart is sincere, the chief remaining difficulty arises from the tendency we have to a self-righteous and legal spirit. This often makes our peace as variable as our frames, and we reason and complain, as if the Lord was as changeable as ourselves. But he is the same from first to last; he alone could begin the good work in our hearts, and he alone is able to carry it on. Blessed be his name, he has promised that he will carry it on until the end; he will be a shield to protect, and a sun to nourish.

And though some, who I doubt not, mean well, are afraid lest the doctrine of his *free unalterable grace* should make people careless — yet, I dare appeal to the experience of all who know their own hearts, and have tasted of his mercy, whether they do not find that the more firmly they can trust him, and venture their *all* upon

his word and his power — so much the more they are disposed to serve him, and cleave to him in love alone.

A well-grounded confidence, that our labor shall not be in vain in the Lord, is what the Apostle proposes as a prevailing motive to be always abounding in his work. *The whole of our profession may be comprised in looking unto Jesus; to take our eyes off from other objects, especially from ourselves, and to fix them upon him.* The more we abound in believing, admiring views of his person, offices, love, obedience unto death, victories, intercession, and his fullness of grace to supply all our needs — so much the more shall we abound unto every good work. For he is our life, and our root, and it is only by receiving from his fullness, that we can . . .  
make good our calling,  
overcome the world, and  
bring forth fruit unto God.

I had a safe and pleasant journey home on Saturday, and am now gotten into my *old track* again. I have many causes of complaint in *myself* — but more causes of rejoicing in Jesus. For though I hate sin, and long to be rid of it — yet, where sin has abounded, grace has much more abounded.

Mr. Hall, who, I think, you visited with me when here, was *released from his long affliction* yesterday morning. A few days before he died, the Lord enabled him to express the return of a comfortable hope in the Lord Jesus after a long season of desertion and temptation. His situation, at times, was truly painful, as he had been in this dark state for more than three years. Thus, though God causes grief for wise reasons, which we cannot fathom — he will have compassion, and will show us that his covenant stands sure.

When the Lord shall have renewed your bodily strength, and raised you up again — I hope we shall have the pleasure of hearing from you, that we may join our praises to yours. My dear wife joins in very best respects to Mr. L. and yourself, with thanks to you both for your kind present, which came quite safe.

Your obliged and affectionate servant,  
John Newton

### **My Dear Madam,**

Your obliging visit at Wimbleton gave me very great pleasure, and has made me your debtor more than before. I should be chargeable with ingratitude, if I did not write, since you are pleased to desire it. That I wish to have a letter from you now and then to answer, is not merely a point of punctilio; for if I had opportunity, and could give you any satisfaction — I would willingly send you ten for one; but if you could overcome your reluctance to writing, and favor me with some brief hints of the state of your mind, besides the pleasure I would have in hearing from you, it would enable me to offer you a word in season, which might be more agreeable, both to me and to you, than when I write without any determinate point in view.

You may be sure I could not be long at Wimbleton without inquiring concerning your welfare, and I suppose the accounts I received enabled me to form some judgment of your situation. The Lord, who loves you — appoints you trials for the exercise of your faith and patience. His power could, and his love would remove them; if therefore they continue, it is because his wisdom has designed you a greater good by their continuance, and his gracious promises warrant you to hope and plead, that when his proposed ends by them are duly answered, he will make crooked things straight, and satisfy you that he has done all things well.

What do you think, dear Madam, if you could see him with your bodily eyes, and hear him say with an audible voice, "Fear not, I am with you! Be not dismayed, I am your God! I will strengthen you, yes I will help you, yes I will uphold you!" Would not this comfort you, and dispose you to say, "Here am I — do with me as seems good in your sight?" If so, you have equal reason to make the same conclusion now; he is as near to you as if you saw him, and his promise in his blessed word is no less certain, no less worthy of our dependence, than if he was to repeat it by a voice from Heaven.

Therefore fear not — only believe. His grace shall be sufficient for you, and your strength be made equal to your day. Though you see not him — his eye is upon you for good continually. He is about your path, and about your bed. His ear is ever open to your prayers, and all the desires of your mind are written in his book of remembrance. *Afflictions* are his chosen methods of instructing his people; by these

...  
he teaches them the vanity of creatures,  
subdues their spirits into a patient and submissive frame,  
quicken them to prayer, and  
takes occasion to show them more of his wisdom, power and love, manifested in their deliverance, than they could have otherwise known.

If Israel had not been oppressed in Egypt, and pursued into the wilderness — they would not have had that triumphant song to sing afterwards, at the Red Sea, when they saw what great things the right hand of the Lord had done for them. He has said, "those who sow in tears — shall reap in joy." Let this encourage you; you cannot be disappointed; you have only to wait patiently upon the Lord, to delight yourself in him — and he shall give you the desire of your heart.

I hope you will find the Lord's presence in Kent. I suppose it is a barren soil in point of ordinances; but to a believer the whole earth is the temple of the Lord. It is not the place you would choose — but if you go, his providence is concerned in it, and who knows what desirable and unexpected events may depend upon it? Who knows but he may make you a blessing and a messenger of peace to some around you!

However this may be, he will be present to keep and comfort you. When you see the sea dashing against the shore with an impetuosity that threatens to swallow up all before it, and yet restrained by the invisible force of that word, "Hitherto you shall come — and no farther;" you will then see an emblem of his power over the hearts of men.

When they seem most free to devise and to execute their own purposes, they, in reality, can perform nothing but what he intends to make subservient to his purpose — beyond that mark they cannot move an inch. Oh! 'tis a cheering thought, that he who once bore our sins in his own body on the tree — now reigns exalted high, and does according to his pleasure in the armies of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth. What can you want, and what have you to fear, when the Lord Almighty is your Shepherd, your Savior, and your Friend?

He will *try* you — but not above what he will enable you to bear. He will *chasten* you — but only for your profit, to make you a partaker of his holiness. The things which at present are not joyous, but grievous — shall yield to you the peaceful fruits of righteousness in due season.

Therefore, dear Madam, be strong — yes, I say unto you, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might — and he will do more for you than you can ask or think! And while you are *fighting* the good fight of faith — look forward to the *crown* which the Lord is preparing for you. Yet a little while, and you shall enter upon a state of joy without abatement, interruption, or end.

We are well, and join in love and respects to you. We think and talk of you, and pray for you often. Do give me the pleasure of a letter soon. We beg our respects and best wishes to Mr. L.

I am, dear Madam, sincerely,  
Your much obliged, and affectionate servant,

### **My Dear Madam,**

The assurance you give me that my letters are acceptable, ought to prompt me to write frequently, and indeed my *inclination* is not lacking — if my *time* was not so much taken up with necessities.

Yesterday I preached at Collingtree, and my subject was, the Lord's question to the prophet, (Ezekiel 37,) "*Can these dry bones live?*" A question which, as to the substance and intent of it, will often occur to us if we fix our eyes too attentively upon outward appearances. A thousand difficulties will occur to dampen our expectations of what God has promised — unless, like Abraham, we retreat to the consideration of his almighty power, and believe that what he has promised, he is fully able to perform.

What can be more unlikely than for dry bones to live? Yet, if the Lord has said it — it shall be done. He can . . .  
turn the heart of stone into a heart of flesh,  
raise the spiritually dead,  
cause light to shine out of darkness,  
and make mountains sink into plains.

And as he can — so he has engaged that he will do great things for those who fear him. We may answer all our fears, corruptions, temptations, and difficulties, with this thought — the sum of all that they can suggest to discourage, amounts to this, "*Can these dry bones live?*" And we may say, "*Yes, they can!*" As hard and impossible as it seems to us — it is perfectly easy to Him who can do all things; and who delights to show himself a God, working wonders for the relief and comfort of his people.

He allows us to meet with troubles for this very reason, that an occasion may be afforded for the manifestation of his glorious power and faithfulness in our support and deliverance. At the same time, he has an eye to our good in all; only we have need of patience to wait his time, by humble prayer. For, until his hour has come, nothing can be effectually done.

We are expecting to sustain a heavy loss soon — and yet we can hardly desire it should be otherwise. Mrs. R., whom you know is suffering greatly from her cancer, which has been gradually increasing for some time — she is now brought very low, her pains are extreme — but her peace is abiding, and her comforts, at times, unspeakable. In such a case as her's — the reality and power of religion appear to great advantage.

I am sometimes ready to wish that believers could die in public. I cannot but think that such a death-bed scene would be the most probable means of curing the prejudices with which multitudes are possessed against the Gospel; and demonstrating the comparative insignificance and poverty of all that this world can propose for our satisfaction. This is still more striking in the case of the poor simple villagers, who have lived in a happy ignorance of the polite world, and cannot be suspected of any artifice or design.

Oh, with what dignity and certainty, with what warmth and sensibility have I heard some of our poor people speak — when death has been approaching, and eternity opening to their view!

Take courage, dear Madam — we have not followed cunningly devised fables. The Lord he is God — He will be an all-sufficient good to those who fear him. And though he leads them through the fire and the water — they shall neither be drowned or burnt — he will shortly bring them out into a wealthy place!

Dear Mrs. R. is in an almost continual agony of pain. She cannot have a moment's intermission or rest, but what is procured by repeated opiates. Her disorder now grows very offensive to herself, as well as to others. Her hearing is almost totally lost — and yet she is happy. She knows in whom she has believed — she feels his supporting presence — she has a foretaste of eternal glory. She is confident, that the moment she shall be absent from the body, she shall be present with the Lord, who has loved her with an everlasting love, and whom I am satisfied she sincerely loves. How much more happy is her situation than the wise and the wealthy, the great and the mirthful, the men of business, or the men of pleasure — who live without God in the world!

The Lord has placed you in a state of affluence; but how much more cause have you to be thankful, dear Madam, that he has given you the knowledge of his grace! This is a mercy which, it is to be feared, few in your situation are acquainted with, or desirous of.

If Miss G. is with you, pray give our love to her. Our circle join in kindest respects to you and Mr. L.

Your most affectionate and obliged Servant,  
John Newton

## The Lord only afflicts for our good

December 21, 1776.

My dear Friend,

Your letter brought me tidings of joy, and then furnished me with materials for a bonfire upon the occasion. It was an act of passive obedience to burn it—but I did obey. I congratulate you upon the happy outcome to which the Lord has brought your affairs. I see that his good Spirit and good providence have been and are with you. I doubt not but your union with Miss \*\*\*\* will be a mutual blessing, and on your part heightened by being connected with such a family. I could enlarge upon this head, if my letter likewise was to be burnt as soon as you have read it. I look upon the friendship the Lord has given me there, as one of my prime privileges; and I hope I shall always be thankful that it proved a means of introducing you into it.

I congratulate you likewise upon your accession to \*\*\*\*\*, not because it is a good living, in a genteel neighborhood, and a fine country; but because I believe the Lord sends you there for fulfilling the desires he has given you of being useful to souls. Church advancement in any other view, is dreadful! I would as soon congratulate a man upon seeing a millstone tied about his neck, to sink him into the depths of the sea, as upon his obtaining what is called a good living, except I thought him determined to spend and be spent in the cause of the Gospel. A parish is an solemn millstone indeed, to those who see nothing valuable in the flock but the fleece!

But the Lord has impressed your heart with a sense of the glory and importance of his truth, and the worth of souls; and animated your zeal by the most powerful motive—the knowledge of his constraining love. Your case is extraordinary. Perhaps, when you review in your mind the circle of your former mirthful acquaintances, you may say, with Job's servant, "I alone have escaped alive!" The rest are either removed into their eternal state, or are still *hurrying down the stream of dissipation*, and living without God in the world. Yet there was a time when there seemed no more probability on your side—than on theirs; that you should obtain mercy, and be called to the honor of preaching the glorious Gospel.

You are setting out with every possible advantage in early life, with a cheerful flow of health, and affluent circumstances; and now, to crown all, the Lord gives you the very choice of your heart in a partner; one who, besides deserving and meeting your affection, will, I am persuaded, be a real help-meet to you in your spiritual walk. *How much is here to be thankful for!*

I trust the Lord has given you, and will maintain in you, a right spirit; so as not to rest in his *gifts*—but to hold them in connection with the love and favor of the *Giver*. It is a low time with us, when the greatest assemblage of earthly blessings can seem to satisfy us without a real communion with him. His grace is sufficient for you—but undoubtedly such a scene of prosperity as seems to lie before you, is full of snares—and calls for a double effort of watchfulness and prayer. Your situation will fix many eyes upon you, and Satan will doubtless watch you, and examine every corner of the hedge around you—to see if he can find a gap by which to enter. We have but few *rich* Gospel ministers; but it is too evident that Satan has found the way to damp the zeal and hurt the spirits of some of those few, who for a time acted nobly, and seemed to walk out of the reach of the allurements of the world.

I am not jealous of you; I feel a comfortable persuasion, that *the Lord has taken a fast hold of your heart—and given you a fast hold of his Almighty arm!* Yet I believe you will not be displeased with me for dropping a hint of this kind, and at this time.

You have heard of the trial with which the Lord has been pleased to visit us; it still continues, though considerably alleviated. It is tempered with many mercies, and I hope he disposes us in a measure, to submission. I trust it will be for good. My dear friend, you are coming into my school, where you will learn, as occasions offer, to feel more for the afflictions of others. But be not discouraged; **the Lord only afflicts for our good**. It is necessary that our sharpest trials should sometimes spring from our dearest comforts, else we would be in danger of setting up our rest here. In such a world, and with such hearts as we have—we shall often need something to prevent our cleaving to the dust, to quicken us to prayer, and to make us feel that our dependence for one hour's peace is upon the Lord alone.

I am ready to think I have known as much of the good and happiness which this world can afford, as most people who live in it. *I never saw the person with whom I wished to exchange places*. And for many years past I have thought my trials have been light and few, compared with what many, or most, of the Lord's people have endured. And yet, though in the main possessed of my own wishes, when I look back upon the twenty-seven years past, I am ready to style them, with Jacob, "few and evil;" and to give the sum-total of their contents in Solomon's words, "all is vanity." If I take these years to pieces, I see a great part of them was filled up with sins, sorrows, and inquietudes. The *pleasures*, too, are gone, and have no more real existence than the baseless fabric of a dream!

The shadows of the evening will soon begin to come over us; and if our lives are prolonged, a thousand pains and infirmities, from which the Lord has in a remarkable measure exempted us hitherto—will probably overtake us; and at last we must feel the parting pang. Sin has so envenomed the soil of this earth, that the amaranth will not grow upon it. But we are hastening to a better world, and bright unclouded skies, where our sun will go down no more—and all tears shall be wiped from our eyes!