

**A GUIDE
TO GODLY
DISPUTATION**

LETTERS

BY

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Letters by John Newton

A Guide to Godly Disputation.

Contents:

- A guide to Godly disputation
- Reading the bible.
- On hearing sermons.
- On the gradual increase of gospel illumination.
- A Christian library.
- Thoughts on the exercise of social prayer.
- Desires unrealised.
- To a friend, on his recovery from illness.
- On faith, and the communion of saints.

A Guide to Godly Disputation

Dear Sir,

As you are likely to be engaged in *controversy*, and your love of truth is joined with natural warmth of temper, my friendship makes me solicitous on your behalf. You are of the strongest side; for truth is great, and must prevail; so that a person of abilities inferior to yours might take the field with a confidence of victory. I am not therefore anxious for the outcome of the battle; but I would have you more than a conqueror, and to triumph, not only over your *adversary*, but also over *yourself*. If you cannot be *vanquished*, you may be *wounded*. To preserve you from such wounds as might give you cause of weeping over your conquests, I would present you with some considerations, which, if duly attended to, will do you the service of a great coat of armor; such armor, that you need not complain, as David did of Saul's, that it will be more cumbersome than useful; for you will easily perceive that it is taken from that great armory provided for the Christian soldier—the Word of God. I take it for granted that you will not expect any apology for my freedom, and therefore I shall not offer one. For methods sake, I may reduce my advice to three heads, respecting your **opponent**, the **public**, and **yourself**.

1. As to your **opponent**, I wish that before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by *earnest prayer* to the Lord's teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to *conciliate your heart to love and pity him*; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write.

If you account him as a BELIEVER, though greatly *mistaken* in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom, are very applicable: "Deal gently with him for my sake." The *Lord* loves him and bears with him; therefore *you* must not despise him, or treat him harshly! The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show *tenderness* to others—from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while you will meet in heaven—he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now! Anticipate that period in your thoughts, and though you may find it necessary to oppose his *errors*, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.

But if you look upon him as an UNCONVERTED person, in a state of enmity against God and his grace (a supposition which, without good evidence, you should be very unwilling to admit), he is a more proper object of your *compassion* than of your *anger*! Alas! "He knows not what he does!" But you know *who* has made you to differ from him. If God, in his sovereign pleasure, had so appointed, *you* might have been as he is now; and he, instead of you, might have been set for the defense of the gospel! You were *both* equally blind by nature. If you attend to this, you will not reproach or hate him, because the Lord has been pleased to open *your* eyes—and not *his*!

Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are called *Calvinists*, are most expressly bound by our own principles, to the exercise of *gentleness* and compassion. If, indeed, those who differ from us have a power of changing themselves, if they can open their own eyes, and soften their own hearts—then we might with less inconsistency be *offended* at their obstinacy! But if we believe the very contrary to this, our part is not to *argue*, but in meekness to "gently teach those who oppose the truth—if perhaps *God* will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."

If you write with a desire of being an instrument of correcting mistakes, you will of course be cautious of laying *stumbling blocks* in the way of the blind, or of using any expressions which may exasperate their passions, or confirm them in their false principles, (humanly speaking).

2. By *PRINTING* your article, you will appeal to the **PUBLIC**—where your readers may be ranged under three divisions:

First, such as **differ** from you in principle. Concerning these I may refer you to what I have already said. Though you have your eye upon one person chiefly—there are *many* like-minded with him; and the same reasoning will hold, whether as to one or to a million.

There will be likewise many who pay too **little regard** to true religion, who have no settled system of their own, and yet are biased in favor of those sentiments which are at least repugnant to the good opinion they naturally have of themselves. These are very incompetent judges of doctrine; but they can form a tolerable judgment of a *writer's spirit*. They know that meekness, humility and love are the characteristics of a Christian temper. And though they treat the *doctrines of grace* as mere notions and speculations, which, supposing they adopted them, would have no beneficial influence upon their conduct; yet from us, who profess these principles, they always expect such attitudes and dispositions as correspond with the precepts of the gospel. They are quick-sighted to discern when we deviate from such a spirit, and avail themselves of it to justify their contempt of our arguments.

The Scriptural maxim that "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires," is verified by daily observation. If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn—we may think we are doing *service* of the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into *discredit!* The weapons of our warfare, and which alone are powerful to break down the strongholds of error, are not carnal, but spiritual. They are arguments fairly drawn from Scripture and experience, and enforced by such a mild address, as may persuade our readers, that, whether we can convince them or not—we wish well to their souls, and contend only for the truth's sake. If we can satisfy them that we act upon these motives, our point is half gained; they will be more disposed to consider calmly what we offer; and if they should still dissent from our opinions, they will be constrained to approve *our intentions*.

You will have a third class of readers, who being of **your own sentiments**, will readily approve of what you advance, and may be further established and confirmed in their views of the Scripture doctrines, by a clear and masterly elucidation of your subject. You may be instrumental to their edification, if the law of *kindness* as well as of *truth* regulates your pen; otherwise you may do them harm.

There is a principle of *SELF*, which disposes us to *despise* those who differ from us; and we are often under its influence, when we think we are only showing a fitting zeal in the cause of God.

I readily believe that the leading points of *Arminianism* spring from and are nourished by the *pride of the human heart!* But I would be glad if the reverse were always true; and that to embrace what are called the *Calvinistic doctrines* was an infallible token of a *humble mind!* I think I have known some *Arminians*, that is, people who for lack of a clearer light, have been afraid of receiving the *doctrines of free grace*, who yet have given evidence that their *hearts* were in a degree humbled before the Lord. And I am afraid there are *Calvinists*, who, while they account it a proof of their humility, that they are willing *in words* to debase the creature and to give all the glory of salvation to the Lord—yet are of a prideful, harsh and bitter

spirit. Whatever it is that makes us trust in ourselves, that we are comparatively wise or good, so as to treat those with *contempt* who do not subscribe to our doctrines, or follow our party—is a proof and fruit of a *self-righteous* spirit!

Self-righteousness can feed upon *doctrines*—as well as upon *works*! A man may have the *heart* of a Pharisee, while his *head* is stored with orthodox notions of the unworthiness of the creature, and the riches of free grace!

Yes, I would add—the *best* of men are not wholly free from this leaven; and therefore are too apt to be pleased with such caricatures as hold up our adversaries to ridicule—and by consequence flatter our own superior judgments. Controversies, for the most part, are so managed as to *indulge*—rather than to *repress* this sinful disposition; and therefore, generally speaking, they are productive of little good. They *provoke* those whom they should convince—and *puff up* those whom they should edify!

I hope your article will savor of a spirit of *true humility*, and be a means of promoting it in others.

3. This leads me, in the last place, to consider **your own concern** in your present undertaking. It seems a laudable service to *defend the faith once delivered to the saints*; we are commanded to *contend earnestly* for it, and to convince gainsayers. If ever such defenses were seasonable and expedient, they appear to be so in our own day, when *errors* abound on all sides—and every *truth* of the gospel is either directly denied or grossly misrepresented.

And yet we find but very few *writers of controversy* who have not been manifestly hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance; or imbibe an angry, contentious spirit; or they insensibly withdraw their attention from those spiritual truths which are the food and immediate support of the life of faith—and spend their time and strength upon matters that are at most but of a secondary value! This shows, that if the service is *honorable*, it is also *dangerous*. What will it profit a man if he gains his cause and silences his adversary—if at the same time he loses that humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights, and to which the promise of his presence is made?

Your aim, I doubt not, is good, but you have need to watch and pray—for you will find Satan at your right hand to entice you. He will try to pollute your piety; and though you set out in defense of the cause of God, if you are not continually looking to the Lord to keep you—it may become *your own* cause, and awaken in you those *tempers* which are inconsistent with true peace of mind, and will surely obstruct your communion with God! Be upon your guard against admitting anything *personal* into the debate. If you think you have been ill treated—this will give you an opportunity of showing that you are a disciple of Jesus, who "when reviled—He did not revile in return; when suffering—He did not threaten, but committed Himself to the One who judges justly." This is *our pattern*, thus we are to speak and write for God, and "not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult—but, on the contrary, giving a blessing, since you were called for this."

The wisdom that is from above, is not only *pure*, but also *peaceable* and *gentle*; and the lack of these qualifications, like *the dead fly in the jar of ointment*, will spoil the fragrance and efficacy of our labors. If we act in a wrong spirit—we shall bring little glory to God; do little good to our fellow creatures; and procure neither honor nor comfort to ourselves! If you can be content with *showing your wit*, and gaining the *laugh* on your side—you have an easy task!

But I hope you have a far nobler aim; and that, sensible of the solemn importance of gospel truths, and the compassion due to the souls of men, you would rather be a

means of *removing prejudices* in a single instance, than obtain the *empty applause of thousands!* Go forth, therefore, in the name and strength of the Lord Almighty, *speaking the truth in love*; and may he give you a witness in many hearts that you are taught of God, and favored with the unction of his Holy Spirit!

Reading the Bible

"Your Words were found, and I ate them. Your Words became a delight to me and the joy of my heart!" Jeremiah 15:16

Books and letters written in a proper spirit, may, if the Lord is pleased to smile upon them, have their use. Indeed, the truths essential to the peace of our souls are so simple, and may be reduced to so few heads, that while each of them singly may furnish a volume drawn out at length, they may all be comprised in small compass.

But an awakened mind which thirsts after the Savior, and seeks wisdom by reading and praying over the Scripture, has little occasion for *a library of human writings*. The Bible is the fountain from whence every stream that deserves our notice is drawn; and, though we may occasionally pay some attention to the *streams*—we have personally an equal right with others to apply immediately to the *fountain-head*, and draw the water of life for ourselves! The *purest streams* are not wholly freed from the *tinge of the soil* through which they run; a mixture of human infirmity is inseparable from the best human composition. But in the *fountain*—the truth is unmixed!

Again, men teach us by **many** words; and if they would give us their full views of the subject, require us to read a whole volume, the life and substance of which is perhaps expressed with greater force and greater advantage in the Scripture by a single sentence—which is rather *diluted* than *explained*, by our feeble expositions. A volume may be easily written upon the *grace of humility*, and to show the evil and folly of a self-seeking spirit. But if the author should introduce this subject with our Savior's words, "The Son of Man came not into the world to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many;" whoever was duly impressed with that short introduction, would have no great occasion to read the rest of the book!

The preaching of the Word of God being an instituted means of grace, ought to be thankfully and frequently improved. And human books that have a savor and unction may likewise be helpful, provided we read them with *caution*, compare them with the Scripture, and do not give ourselves implicitly to the rules or decisions of any man or set of men—but remember that one is our *Master and infallible Teacher*, even Christ. But the chief and grand means of edification, without which all other helps will disappoint us, and prove like clouds without water—are the *Bible* and *prayer*—the *Word* of grace and the *Throne* of grace. A frequent perusal of the Bible will give us an enlarged and comprehensive view of the whole of true religion—its origin, nature, genius, and tendency—and preserve us from an over-attachment to any *system of man's compilation*.

The **fault** of the several *doctrinal systems*, under which, as under so many banners, the different denominations of Christians are ranged, is, that there is usually something *left out* which ought to have been taken in—and something *admitted*, of supposed advantage, not authorized by the Scriptural standard.

A Bible Christian, therefore, will see much to approve in a *variety* of forms and parties; the providence of God may lead or fix him in a more immediate connection with some one of them—but his spirit and affection will not be confined within these narrow enclosures. He insensibly borrows and unites with which is excellent in each, perhaps without knowing how far he agrees with them, because he finds all in the written Word of God.

I know not a better *rule of reading the Scripture*, than to read it through from beginning to end; and, when we have finished it once, to begin it again. We shall meet with many passages which we can make little improvement of, but not so many in the second reading as in the first, and fewer in the third than in the second—provided we pray to Him who has the keys to open our understandings, and to anoint our eyes with his spiritual eye-salve! The course of *reading* today, will give some light for what we shall read *tomorrow*, and throw a farther light upon what we read *yesterday*. Experience alone, can prove the advantage of this method, if steadily persevered in. To make a few efforts, and then give up—is like taking a few steps and then standing still, which would do little towards completing a long journey. But, though a person walked *slowly*, and but a *little* way in a day—if he walked every day, and with his face always in the same direction, year after year—he would in time travel over the globe! By thus traveling *patiently* and *steadily* through the Scripture, and repeating our progress—we would increase in Scriptural knowledge to the end of life!

The Old and New Testament, the doctrines, precepts, and promises, the history, the examples, admonitions, and warnings, etc. would mutually illustrate and strengthen each other—and nothing that is written for our instruction would be *overlooked*. Happy would I be, could I fully follow the advice I am now offering to you. I wish you may profit by my experience. Alas, how much time have I lost and wasted, which, had I been wise—I would have devoted to reading and studying the Bible! But my evil *heart* obstructs the dictates of my *judgment*, I often feel a reluctance to read this *book of books*, and a disposition to hew out *broken cisterns* which afford me no water, while the *fountain of living waters* are close within my reach!

On hearing sermons

Dear Sir,

I am glad to find that the Lord has at length been pleased to fix you in a favored situation, where you have frequent opportunities of hearing the Gospel. This is a great privilege; but, like all other outward privileges, it **requires grace and wisdom to make a due improvement of it**; and the great abundance of ordinances you enjoy, though in itself a blessing, is attended with snares, which, unless they are carefully guarded against, may *hinder* rather than *promote* your edification. I gladly embrace the occasion you afford me, of offering you my advice upon this subject. A remembrance of the mistakes I have myself formerly committed, and the observations I have made upon the conduct of professors, considered as hearers, will perhaps in some measure qualify me for the task you have assigned me.

All the faithful ministers of the Gospel are servants and ambassadors of Christ. They are all called and furnished by his Holy Spirit. They all speak in his name; and **their success in the discharge of their office, be it more or less, depends entirely upon his blessing**. So far they are all upon a par. But in the measure of their ministerial abilities, and in the peculiar **matter** of their preaching, there is a great variety. There are "diversities of gifts from the same Spirit; and he distributes to every man severally according to his own will." Some are better in alarming the careless, others in administering consolation to the wounded conscience. Some are set more especially for the establishment and confirmation of the Gospel doctrines; others are skillful in solving theological points. Others are more excellent in enforcing practical godliness; and others, having been led through depths of temptation and spiritual distress, are best acquainted with the various workings of the heart, and know best how to speak a word in season to weary and exercised souls. Perhaps no true minister of the Gospel (for all such are taught of God) is wholly deficient in all of these areas; but few, if any, are remarkably and equally excellent in managing them all.

Again, as to their **manner**; some are more popular and heart-stirring, but at the same time more general and diffuse; while the lack of that life and earnestness in delivery is compensated in others by the closeness, accuracy, and depth of their compositions. In this variety of gifts, the Lord has a gracious regard to the different tastes and dispositions, as well as to the needs, of his people: and by their combined effects the complete system of his truth is illustrated, and the good of his church promoted with the highest advantage; while his ministers, like officers assigned to different stations in an army, have not only the good of the whole in view, but each one his particular charge to maintain.

This would be more evidently the case, if the remaining depravity of our hearts did not afford Satan but too much advantage in his subtle attempts to hurt and ensnare us. But, alas! how often has he prevailed to infuse a spirit of **envy** or dislike in ministers towards each other; to withdraw hearers from their proper concerns, by dividing them into parties, and stirring them up to contend for a Paul, an Apollos, or a Cephas, for their own favorites, to the disparagement of others, who are equally dear to the Lord, and faithful in his service? You may think my preamble long: but I shall deduce my advices chiefly from it; taking it for granted, that to you I have no need of proving at large what I have advanced.

As the gifts and talents of ministers are different, I advise you to choose for your stated pastor and teacher, one whom you find most suitable, upon the whole, to your own taste, and whom you are likely to hear with the most pleasure and advantage. Use some deliberation and much prayer in this matter. Entreat the Lord, who knows

better than you do yourself, to guide you **where your soul may be best fed**, and when your choice is fixed, you will do well to make a point of attending his ministry constantly, I mean at least at the stated times of worship on the Lord's day. I do not say, that no circumstance will justify your going elsewhere at such times occasionally; but, I think, the seldomer you are absent the better.

A stated and regular attendance encourages the minister, affords a good example to the congregation; and a hearer is more likely to meet with what is directly suited to his own case, from a minister who knows him, and expects to see him—than he can be from one who is a stranger. Especially, I would not wish you to be absent for the sake of gratifying your curiosity, to hear some new preacher, who you have perhaps been told is a very extraordinary man; for such occasions might possibly be available almost every week. What I have observed of many, who run about unseasonably after new preachers, has reminded me of Pro. 27:8, "As a bird that wanders from her nest, so is the man that wanders from his place."

Such *unsettled hearers* seldom thrive: they usually grow wise in their own conceits, have their heads filled with notions, acquire a dry, critical, and censorious spirit; and are more intent upon disputing who is the best preacher, than upon obtaining benefit to themselves from what they hear.

If you could find a man, indeed, who had a power in himself of dispensing a blessing to your soul, you might follow him from place to place; but as the blessing is in the Lord's hands, you will be more likely to receive it by waiting where his providence has placed you, and where he has met with you before.

But as human nature is prone to extremes, permit me to give you a caution on the other hand. If the minister under whom you stately attend, is made very acceptable to you, you will be in the less danger of slighting him. *But be careful that you do not slight any other minister of Christ.* If, therefore, when you come to hear your own preacher, you find another in the pulpit, do not let your looks tell him, that, if you had known he had been there, you would not have come. I wish indeed you may never think so in your heart: but though we cannot prevent evil thoughts from rising in our minds, we should endeavor to combat and suppress them. Some people are so curious, or rather so weak, that, if their favorite minister is occasionally absent, they hardly think it worth their while to hear another. A judicious and faithful minister, in this case, instead of being delighted with such a mark of peculiar attachment to himself, will be grieved to think that they have profited no more by his labors; for it is his desire to win souls, not to himself, but to Jesus Christ.

I hope you, my friend, will always attend the ordinances with a view to the Lord's presence; and when you are in your proper place, consider the preacher (if he preaches the truth) as one providentially and expressly sent by the Lord to you at that time; and that you could not choose better for yourself, all things considered, than he has chosen for you. Do not limit the Almighty, by confining your expectations to a single instrument. If you do, you will probably procure your own disappointment. If you fix your hopes upon the *man*, the Lord may withhold his blessing, and then the best men and the best sermons will prove to you but as clouds without water.

But, besides the more stated seasons of worship on the Lord's day, you have many opportunities of hearing sermons occasionally in the course of the week; and thus you may partake of that variety of gifts which I have already spoken of. This will be either a benefit or otherwise, according to the use you make of it. I would recommend to you to improve these occasions, but under some restrictions.

In the first place, *be cautious that you do not degenerate into the spirit of a mere hearer, so as to place the chief stress of your profession upon running hither and*

there after preachers. There are many who are always upon the wing; and, without a due regard to what is incumbent upon them in the shop, in the family, or in private devotion—they seem to think they were sent into the world only to hear sermons, and to hear as many in a day as they possibly can. Such people may be fitly compared to Pharaoh's lean cows; they devour a great deal; but, for lack of a proper digestion, they do not flourish: their souls are lean: they have little solid comfort; and their profession abounds more in *leaves* than in *fruit*.

If the twelve Apostles were again upon earth, and you could hear them all every week; yet, if you were not attentive to the private devotional duties; if you did not allow yourself time for reading, meditation, and prayer; and if you did not likewise conscientiously attend to the concerns of your particular calling, and the discharge of your duties in family life; I would be more ready to blame your indiscretion, than to admire your zeal. Everything is beautiful in its season; and if one duty frequently jostles out another, it is a sign either of a weak judgment, or of a wrong turn of mind. *No public ordinances can make amends for the neglect of secret prayer;* nor will the most diligent attendance upon them justify us in the neglect of those duties, which, by the command and appointment of God, we owe to our families and society.

Again, as it is our trial to live in a day wherein so many contentions and winds of strange doctrines abound, I hope you will watch and pray that you may not have itching ears, inclining you to hearken after novel and singular opinions, and the erroneous sentiments of men of unstable minds, who are not sound in the faith. I have known people who, from a blamable curiosity, have gone to hear such, not for the sake of edification, which they could not expect, but to know what they had to say, supposing that they themselves were too well established in the truth to be hurt by them. But the experiment (without a just and lawful call) is presumptuous and dangerous. In this way many have been hurt, yes, many have been overthrown. **Error is like poison;** the subtlety, quickness, and force of its operation is often amazing. As we pray not to be led into temptation, we should take care not to run into it willfully. If the Lord has shown you what is right, it is not worth your while to know (if you could know it) how many ways there are of being wrong.

Farther: I advise you, when you hear a Gospel sermon, and it is not in all respects to your satisfaction, be not too hasty to lay the whole blame upon the preacher. The Lord's ministers have not much to say in their own behalf. They feel (it is to be hoped) their own weakness and defects, and the greatness and difficulty of their work. They are conscious that their warmest endeavors to proclaim the Savior's glory are too cold; and their most importunate addresses to the consciences of men are too faint: and sometimes they are burdened with such discouragements, that even their enemies would pity them if they knew their case. Indeed, they have much to be ashamed of; but it will be more useful for you, who are a hearer, to consider whether the fault may not possibly be in yourself. Perhaps you thought too highly of the man, and expected too much from him; or perhaps you thought too lowly of him, and expected too little. In the former case, the Lord justly disappointed you; in the latter, you received according to your faith. Perhaps you neglected to pray for him; and then, though he might be useful to others, it is not at all strange that he was not so to you. Or possibly you have indulged a trifling spirit, and brought a dearth and deadness upon your own soul; for which you had not been duly humbled, and the Lord chose that time to rebuke you.

Lastly: as a hearer, *you have a right to try all doctrines by the word of God; and it is your duty so to do.* Faithful ministers will remind you of this: they will not wish to hold you in an implicit and blind obedience to what they say, upon their own authority, nor desire that you should follow them further than they have the Scripture for their warrant. They would not be lords over your conscience, but helpers of your joy. Prize this Gospel liberty, which sets you free from the doctrines

and commandments of men; but do not abuse it to the purposes of pride and self. *There are hearers who make themselves, and not the Scripture, the standard of their judgment.* They attend not so much to be instructed, as to pass their sentence. To them, the pulpit is the bar at which the minister stands to take his trial before them; a bar at which few escape censure, from judges at once so severe and inconsistent. For, as these censors are not all of a mind, and perhaps agree in nothing so much as in the opinion they have of their own wisdom, it has often happened, that, in the course of one and the same sermon, the minister has been condemned both as a Legalist and an Antinomian; both as too high in his notions, and too low; both as having too little action, and too much. Oh! this hateful spirit, which prompts hearers to pronounce *ex cathedra* as if they were infallible, breaks in upon the rights of private judgment, even in matters not essential, and makes a man an offender for a word. This spirit is one frequent troublesome evil, which springs from the corruption of the heart, when the Lord affords the means of grace in great abundance. How highly would some of the Lord's hidden ones, who are destitute of the ordinances, prize the blessing of a preached Gospel, with which too many professors seem to be surfeited! I pray God to preserve you from such a spirit (which I fear is spreading, and infects us like the pestilence), and to guide you in all things.

On the gradual increase of gospel illumination

Dear Sir,

The day is now breaking: how beautiful its appearance! how welcome the expectation of the approaching sun! It is this thought makes the dawn agreeable, that it is the presage of a brighter light; otherwise, if we expect no more day than it is this minute, we should rather complain of darkness, than rejoice in the early beauties of the morning. Thus the life of grace is the dawn of immortality: beautiful beyond expression, if compared with the night and thick darkness which formerly covered us; yet faint, indistinct, and unsatisfying, in comparison of the glory which shall be revealed.

It is, however, a sure pledge: so surely as we now see the light of the Sun of Righteousness, so surely shall we see the Sun himself, Jesus the Lord, in all his glory and luster. In the mean time, we have reason to be thankful for a measure of light to walk and work by, and sufficient to show us the pits and snares by which we might be endangered: and we have a promise, that our present light shall grow stronger and stronger, if we are diligent in the use of the appointed means, until the messenger of Jesus shall lead us within the veil, and then farewell shades and obscurity for ever.

I can now almost see to write, and shall soon put the extinguisher over my candle: I do this without the least reluctance, when I enjoy a better light; but I should have been unwilling half an hour ago. Just thus, methinks, when the light of the glorious Gospel shines into the heart, all our former feeble lights, our apprehensions, and our contrivances, become at once unnecessary and unnoticed. How cheerfully did the Apostle put out the candle of his own righteousness, attainments, and diligence, when the true Sun arose upon him! Phi. 3:7-8. Your last letter is as a comment upon his determination. Adored be the grace that has given us to be like-minded, even to "account all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord."

While I am writing, a new luster, which gilds the house on the hill opposite to my study window, informs me that the sun is now rising; he is rising to others, but not yet to me; my situation is lower, so that they enjoy a few gleams of sunshine before me: yet this momentary difference is inconsiderable, when compared to the duration of a whole day. Thus some are called by grace earlier in life, and some later; but the seeming difference will be lost and vanish when the great day of eternity comes on. There is a time, the Lord's best appointed time, when he will arise and shine upon many a soul that now sits "in darkness, and in the region of the shadow of death."

I have been thinking on the Lord's conference with Nicodemus; it is a copious subject, and affords room, in one part or other, for the whole round of doctrinal and experimental topics. Nicodemus is an encouraging example to those who are seeking the Lord's salvation: he had received some favorable impressions of Jesus; but he was very ignorant, and much under the fear of man. He dared only come by night; and at first, though he heard, he understood not: but He, who opens the eyes of the blind, brought him surely, though gently, forward. The next time we hear of him, he dared put in a word in behalf of Christ, even in the midst of his enemies, John 7:50-53; and at last, he had the courage openly and publicly to assist in preparing the body of his Master for its funeral, at a time when our Lord's more avowed followers had all forsook him, and fled. So true is that, "Then you shall know, if you follow on to know the Lord;" and again, "He gives power to the faint; and to them that have no might, he increases strength."

Hope then, my soul, against hope; though your graces are faint and languid, he who planted them will water his own work, and not allow them wholly to die. He can make a little one as a thousand; at his presence mountains sink into plains, streams gush out of the flinty rock, and the wilderness blossoms as the rose. He can pull down what sin builds up, and build up what sin pulls down; that which was impossible to us, is easy to him; and he has bid us expect seasons of refreshment from His presence. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

A Christian library

"Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body."
Ecclesiastes 12:12

Dear Sir,

An eager desire of reading many books, though it is often supposed to be the effect of a taste for knowledge, is perhaps a principal cause of detaining multitudes in ignorance and perplexity. When an inexperienced person thus ventures into the uncertain tide of opinions, he is liable to be hurried hither and thither with the changing stream; to fall in with every new proposal, and to be continually perplexed with the difficulty of distinguishing between probability and truth. Or if, at last, he happily finds a clue to lead him through the labyrinth wherein so many have been lost, he will acknowledge, upon a review, that from what he remembers to have read (for perhaps the greater part he has wholly forgotten), he has gained little more than a discovery of what mistakes, uncertainty, insignificance, acrimony, and presumption, are often obtruded on the world under the disguise of a plausible title-page.

It is far from my intention to depreciate the value or deny the usefulness of books, without exception. A few well-chosen treatises, carefully perused and thoroughly digested, will deserve and reward our pains; but a multiplicity of reading is seldom attended with a good effect. Besides the confusion it often brings upon the judgment and memory, it occasions a vast expense of time, indisposes for close thinking, and keeps us poor, in the midst of seeming plenty, by reducing us to live upon the thoughts of others, instead of laboring to improve and increase the stock of our own reflections.

Every branch of knowledge is attended with this inconvenience; but it is in no one more sensibly felt than when the inquiry is directed to the subject of religion. Perhaps no country has abounded so much with religious books as our own: many of them are truly excellent; but a very great number of those which are usually met with, as they stand recommended by great names, and the general taste of the public, are more likely to mislead an inquirer, than to direct him into the paths of true peace and wisdom.

And even in those books which are in the main agreeable to the word of God, there is often so great a mixture of human infirmity, so much of the spirit of controversy and party, such manifest defects in some, and so many unwarrantable additions to the simple truth of the Gospel in others, that, unless a person's judgment is already formed, or he has a prudent friend to direct his choice, he will be probably led into error or prejudice before he is aware, by his attachment to a favorite author.

Allowing, therefore, the advantage of a discreet and seasonable use of human writings, I would point out a still more excellent way for the acquisition of true knowledge: a method which, if wholly neglected, the utmost diligence in the use of every other means will prove ineffectual; but which, if faithfully pursued, in an humble dependence upon the Divine blessing, will not only of itself lead us by the straightest path to wisdom, but will also give a double efficacy to every subordinate assistance.

If I may be allowed to use the term "book" in a metaphorical sense, I may say, that the Most High God, in condescension to the weakness of our faculties, the brevity of our lives, and our many avocations, has comprised all the knowledge conducive to our real happiness in **four comprehensive volumes**. The first, which may be considered as the text, is cheap, portable, and compendious, so that hardly any

person in our favored land, who is apprised of its worth, need be without it; and the other three, which are the best and fullest commentaries upon this, are always at hand for our perusal, and pressing upon our attention in every place and circumstance of our lives.

It will be easily apprehended, that by the first book or volume, I mean that perfect and infallible system of truth, **the BIBLE**. The internal character of this book, arising from its comprehensiveness, simplicity, majesty, and authority, sufficiently prove, to every enlightened mind, that it is given by inspiration of God. They who are competent judges of this evidence, are no more disturbed by the suggestions of some men reputed wise, that it is of human composition, than if they were told that men had invented the sun and placed it in the sky. Its fullness speaks its Author. No case has yet occurred, or ever will, for which there is not a sufficient provision made in this invaluable treasury. Here we may seek (and we shall not seek in vain) wherewith to combat and vanquish every error, to illustrate and confirm every spiritual truth. Here are promises suited to every need, directions adapted to every doubt, which can possibly arise. Here is milk for babes, meat for strong men, medicines for the wounded, refreshment for the weary. The general history of all nations and ages, and the particular experience of each private believer, from the beginning to the end of time—are wonderfully comprised in this single volume; so that whoever reads and improves it aright, may discover his state, his progress, his temptations, his danger, and his duty—as distinctly and minutely marked out, as if the whole had been written for him alone. In this respect, as well as in many others, great is the mystery of godliness.

The **simplicity**, as well as the subject-matter, of the Bible, evinces its Divine original. Though it has depths sufficient to perplex and confound the proudest efforts of unsanctified reason, it does not, as to its general import, require an elevated genius to understand it, but is equally addressed to the level of every capacity. As its contents are of universal concern, they are proposed in such a manner as to engage and satisfy the inquiries of all; and the learned, with respect to their own personal interest, have no advantage above the ignorant. That it is in fact read by many who receive no instruction or benefit from it, is wholly owing to their inattention or vanity. This event may rather excite grief, than wonder. The Bible teaches us to expect it. It forewarns us, that the natural man cannot receive the things of God; they can neither understand nor approve them. It points out to us the necessity of a heavenly teacher, the Holy Spirit, who has promised to guide those who seek him by prayer, into all necessary truth. Those who implore his assistance, find the seals opened, the veil taken away, and the way of salvation made plain before them.

The **language** of the Bible is likewise clothed with inimitable majesty and authority. God speaks in it, and reveals the glory of his perfections—his sovereignty, holiness, justice, goodness, and grace—in a manner worthy of himself, though at the same time admirably adapted to our weakness. The most labored efforts of human genius are flat and languid, in comparison with those parts of the Bible which are designed to give us due apprehensions of that God with whom we have to do. Where shall we find such instances of the true, the sublime, the great, the marvelous, the beautiful, the heart-stirring, as in the Holy Scriptures?

Again: the **effects** which it performs demonstrate it to be the word of God. With a powerful and penetrating energy, it alarms and pierces the conscience, discovers the thoughts and intents of the heart, convinces the most obstinate, and makes the most careless tremble. With equal authority and efficacy, it speaks peace to the troubled mind, heals the wounded spirit, and can impart a joy unspeakable and full of glory, in the midst of the deepest distress. It teaches, persuades, comforts, and reproves, with an authority that can neither be disputed nor evaded; and often communicates

more light, motives, and influence, by a single sentence, to a plain unlettered believer, than he could derive from the voluminous commentaries of the learned.

In a word, the Bible answers the character the Apostle gives it: "It is able to make us wise unto salvation; it is completely and alone sufficient to make the man of God perfect, thoroughly furnished for every good work." The doctrines, histories, prophecies, promises, precepts, exhortations, examples, and warnings, contained in the Bible, form a perfect WHOLE, a complete summary of the will of God concerning us, in which nothing is lacking, nothing is superfluous.

The second volume which deserves our study, is the book of **CREATION**. "The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship." Nor can we cast our eyes anywhere, without meeting innumerable proofs of his wisdom, power, goodness, and presence. God is revealed in the *least*, as well as in the *greatest* of his works. The sun and the glow-worm, the stars and each single blade of grass—are equally the effects of Divine power. The lines of this book, though very beautiful and expressive in themselves, are not immediately legible by fallen man. The works of creation may be compared to a beautiful, but unknown language—of which the Bible is the key; and without this key they cannot be understood. This book was always open to the heathens; but they could not read it, nor discern the proofs of his eternal power and Godhead which it affords. "They became vain in their own imaginations, and worshiped the creature more than the Creator."

The case is much the same at this day with many reputed wise, whose hearts are not subjected to the authority of the Bible. The study of the works of God, independent of his word, though dignified with the names of science and philosophy, is no better than an elaborate trifling and waste of time. It is to be feared none are more remote from the true knowledge of God, than many of those who value themselves most upon their supposed knowledge of his creatures. They may speak in general terms of his wisdom; but they live without him in the world; and their philosophy cannot teach them either to love or serve, to fear or trust him.

Those who know God in his word, may find both pleasure and profit in tracing his wisdom in his works, if their inquiries are kept within due bounds, and in a proper subservience to things of greater importance; but comparatively few have leisure, capacity, or opportunity for these inquiries.

But the book of creation is designed for the instruction of all believers. If they are not qualified to be astronomers or anatomists, yet from a view of the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars, which he has created, they learn to conceive of his condescension, power, and faithfulness. Though they are unacquainted with the theory of light and colors, they can see in the rainbow a token of God's covenant love. Perhaps they have no idea of the magnitude or distance of the sun; but it reminds them of Jesus the Sun of Righteousness, the source of light and life to their souls.

The Lord has established a wonderful analogy between the natural and the spiritual world. This is a secret only known to those who fear him; but they contemplate it with pleasure; and almost every object they see, when they are in a right frame of mind, either leads their thoughts to Jesus, or tends to illustrate some scriptural truth or promise. This is the best method of studying the book of Nature; and for this purpose it is always open and plain to those who love the Bible, so that he who runs may read.

The book of **PROVIDENCE** is the third volume, by which those who fear the Lord are instructed. This likewise is inextricable and unintelligible to the wisest of men who are not governed by the word of God. But when the principles of Scripture are

admitted and understood, they throw a pleasing light upon the study of Divine Providence, and at the same time are confirmed and illustrated by it. What we read in the Bible, of the sovereignty, wisdom, power, omniscience, and omnipresence of God, of his over-ruling all events to the accomplishment of his counsels and the manifestation of his glory, of the care he maintains of his church and people, and of his attention to their prayers—is exemplified by the history of nations and families, and the daily occurrences of private life.

The believer receives hourly and indubitable proofs that the Lord reigns; that truly there is a God who judges the earth. Hence arises a solid confidence: he sees that his concerns are in safe hands; and he needs not be afraid of evil tidings: his heart is fixed, trusting in the Lord; while others live at an uncertainty, exposed to the impression of every new appearance, and, like a ship in a storm, without rudder or pilot, abandoned to the power of the winds and waves.

In the history of Joseph, and in the book of Esther, and indeed throughout the Bible, we have specimens of the wise unerring providence of God: what important consequences depend, under his management, upon the smallest events; and with what certainty seeming contingencies are directed to the outcome which he has appointed! By these authentic specimens we learn to judge of the whole; and with still greater advantage by the light of the New Testament, which shows us, that the administration of all power in heaven and earth is in the hands of Jesus. The government is upon his shoulders: the King of saints is King of nations, King of kings, and Lord of lords: not a sparrow falls to the ground, nor a hair from our heads, without his cognizance. And though his ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts; though his agency is veiled from the *eye of sense* by the intervention of second causes; yet faith perceives, acknowledges, admires, and trusts his management. This study, like the former, does not require superior natural abilities, but is obvious to the weakest and lowest of his people, so far as their own duty and peace are concerned.

The fourth volume is the book of the **HEART**, or of **Human Nature**, comprehending the experience of what passes within our own breasts, and the observations we make upon the principles and conduct of others, compared with what we read in the word of God. The heart of man is deep; but all its principles and workings, in every possible situation, and the various ways in which it is affected by sin, by Satan, by worldly objects, and by grace—in solitude and in company, in prosperity and in affliction—are disclosed and unfolded in the Scripture. Many, who are proud of their knowledge of what they might be safely ignorant of, are utter strangers to themselves. Having no acquaintance with the Scripture, they have neither skill nor inclination to look into their own hearts, nor any certain criterion whereby to judge of the conduct of human life. But the Bible which teaches us to read this mysterious book, also shows us the source, nature, and tendency of our hopes, fears, desires, pursuits, and perplexities; the reasons why we cannot be happy in ourselves, and the vanity and insufficiency of everything around us to help us.

The rest and happiness proposed in the Gospel, is likewise found to be exactly suitable to the desires and necessities of the awakened heart. And the conduct of those who reject this salvation, as well as the gracious effects produced in those who receive it, prove to a demonstration, that the word of God is indeed a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

My limits will admit but of a few hints upon these extensive subjects. I shall only observe, that whoever is well read in these four books, is a wise person, how little whatever he may know of what the men of the world call *science*. On the other hand, though a man should be master of the whole circle of classical, scientific, and philosophical knowledge, if he has no taste for the Bible, and has no ability to apply it to the works of creation and providence, and his own experience—he knows

nothing yet as he ought to know. I have pointed out a treasure of more worth than all the volumes in the Vatican.

Thoughts on the exercise of social prayer

Sir,

I account it a great mercy, that at this time, when iniquity so generally abounds, there is a number, I hope a growing number, whose eyes affect their hearts, and who are stirred up to unite in prayer for the spread of Gospel knowledge, and a blessing upon our sinful land. Meetings for social prayer are frequent in different parts of the kingdom, and among various denominations of Christians. As the Lord has promised, that, when he prepares the heart to pray, he will graciously incline his ear to hear, who can tell but he may yet be entreated for us, and avert the heavy and justly-deserved judgments which seem to hang over us?

It is much to be desired, that our hearts might be so affected with a sense of Divine things, and so closely engaged when we are worshiping God, that it might not be in the power of little circumstances to interrupt and perplex us, and to make us think the service wearisome, and the time which we employ in it tedious. But as our infirmities are many and great, and the enemy of our souls is watchful to discompose us, if care is not taken by those who lead in social prayer, the exercise which is approved by the judgment may become a burden, and an occasion of sin. Complaints of this kind are frequent, and might, perhaps, be easily rectified, if the people chiefly concerned were spoken to in love. But as they are usually the last who hear of it, it may perhaps be of service to communicate a few remarks on a subject of such general concern.

The chief fault of some good prayers is, that they are **too long**. Not that I think we should pray by the clock, and limit ourselves precisely to a certain number of minutes; but it is better of the two, that the hearers should wish the prayer had been longer, than spend half or a considerable part of the time in wishing it was over. This is frequently owing to an unnecessary enlargement upon every circumstance which comes to mind, as well as to the repetition of the same things. If we have been copious in pleading for spiritual blessings, it may be best to be brief and summary in the article of intercession for others; or if the frame of our spirits, or the circumstances of affairs, lead us to be more large and particular in laying the cases of others before the Lord, respect should be had to this intention in the former part of the prayer.

There are, doubtless, seasons when the Lord is pleased to favor those who pray with a peculiar liberty; they speak because they feel; they have a wrestling spirit, and hardly know how to leave off. When this is the case, those who join with them are seldom wearied, though the prayer should be protracted something beyond the usual limits. But I believe it sometimes happens, both in praying and in preaching, that we are apt to spin out our time to the greatest length, when we have in reality the least to say. Long prayers should in general be avoided, especially where several people are to pray successively; or else even spiritual hearers will be unable to keep up their attention. And here I would just notice an impropriety we sometimes meet with, that, when a person gives expectation that he is just going to conclude his prayer, something not thought of in its proper place occurring that instant to his mind, leads him as it were to begin again. But, unless it is a matter of singular importance, it would be better omitted for that time.

The prayers of some men are more like preaching than praying. They rather express the Lord's mind to the people, than the desires of the people to the Lord. Indeed this can hardly be called prayer. It might in another place stand for part of a good sermon; but will afford little help to those who desire to pray with their hearts. Prayer should be sententious, and made up of breathings to the Lord, either of

confession, petition, or praise. It should be, not only scriptural and evangelical, but experimental—a simple and unstudied expression of the needs and feelings of the soul. It will be so if the heart is lively and affected in the duty; it must be so if the edification of others is the point in view.

Several books have been written to assist in the gift and exercise of prayer, as by Dr. Watts and others; and many useful hints may be borrowed from them; but a too close attention to the method and transitions therein recommended, gives an air of study and formality, and offends against that simplicity which is so essentially necessary to a good prayer, that no degree of acquired abilities can compensate for the lack of it. It is possible to learn to pray mechanically, and by rule; but it is hardly possible to do so with acceptance, and benefit to others. When the several parts of invocation, adoration, confession, petition, etc. follow each other in a stated order, the hearer's mind generally goes before the speaker's voice, and we can form a tolerable conjecture what is to come next. On this account we often find, that unlettered people, who have had little or no help from books, or rather have not been fettered by them, can pray with an unction and savor in an unpremeditated way; while the prayers of people of much superior abilities, perhaps even of ministers themselves, are, though accurate and regular, so dry and starched, that they afford little either of pleasure or profit to a spiritual mind.

The spirit of prayer is the fruit and token of the Spirit of adoption. The studied addresses with which some approach the Throne of Grace, remind us of a stranger's coming to a great man's door; he knocks and waits, sends in his name, and goes through a course of ceremony, before he gains admittance; while a child of the family uses no ceremony at all, but enters freely when he pleases, because he knows he is at home. It is true, we ought always to draw near the Lord with great humiliation of spirit, and a sense of our unworthiness. But this spirit is not always best expressed or promoted by a pompous enumeration of the names and titles of the God with whom we have to do, or by fixing in our minds beforehand the exact order in which we propose to arrange the several parts of our prayer. Some attention to method may be proper, for the prevention of repetitions; and plain people may be a little defective in it sometimes; but this defect will not be half so tiresome and disagreeable as a studied and artificial exactness.

Many, perhaps most people who pray in public, have some favorite word or expression, which recurs too often in their prayers, and is frequently used as a mere expletive, having no necessary connection with the sense of what they are speaking. The most disagreeable of these is, when the name of the blessed God, with the addition of perhaps one or more epithets, as, Great, Glorious, Holy, Almighty, etc. is introduced so often, and without necessity, as seems neither to indicate a due reverence in the person who uses it, nor suited to excite reverence in those who hear. I will not say, that this is taking the name of God in vain, in the usual sense of the phrase: it is, however, a great impropriety, and should be guarded against. It would be well if those who use redundant expressions had a friend to give them a caution, as they might with a little care be mended; and hardly any person can be sensible of the little peculiarities he may inadvertently adopt, unless he is told of it.

There are several things likewise respecting the voice and manner of prayer, which a person may with due care correct in himself, and which, if generally corrected, would make meetings for prayer more pleasant than they sometimes are. These I shall mention by pairs, as the happy and agreeable way is a medium between two inconvenient extremes.

Very loud speaking is a fault, when the size of the place, and the number of hearers, do not render it necessary. The end of speaking is to be heard; and, when that end is attained, a greater elevation of the voice is frequently hurtful to the speaker, and is more likely to confuse a hearer than to fix his attention. I do not

deny but allowance must be made for constitution, and the warmth of the passions, which dispose some people to speak louder than others: yet such will do well to restrain themselves as much as they can. It may seem indeed to indicate great earnestness, and that the heart is much affected; yet it is often but false fire. It may be thought speaking with power; but a person who is favored with the Lord's presence may pray with power in a moderate voice; and there may be very little power of the Spirit, though the voice should be heard in the street and neighborhood.

The other extreme, of **speaking too low**, is not so frequent; but, if we are not heard, we might as well altogether hold our peace. It exhausts the spirits, and wearies the attention, to be listening for a length of time to a very low voice. Some words or sentences will be lost, which will render what is heard less intelligible and agreeable. If the speaker can be heard by the person furthest distant from him, the rest will hear of course.

The **tone of the voice** is likewise to be regarded. Some have a tone in prayer, so very different from their usual way of speaking, that their nearest friends could hardly know them by their voice. Sometimes the tone is changed, perhaps more than once; so that, if our eyes did not give us more certain information than our ears, we might think two or three people had been speaking by turns. It is pity, that, when we approve what is spoken, we should be so easily disconcerted by an awkwardness of delivery; yet so it often is, and probably so it will be, in the present weak and imperfect state of human nature. It is more to be lamented than wondered at, that sincere Christians are sometimes forced to confess, "He is a good man, and his prayers, as to their substance, are spiritual and judicious; but there is something so displeasing in his manner, that I am always uneasy when I hear him."

Contrary to this, and still more offensive, is a custom that some have of talking to the Lord in prayer. It is their natural voice, indeed; but it is that expression of it which they use upon the most familiar and trivial occasions. The human voice is capable of so many inflections and variations, that it can adapt itself to the different sensations of our mind, as joy, sorrow, fear, desire, etc. If a man was pleading for his life, or expressing his thanks to the king for a pardon, common sense and decency would teach him a suitableness of manner; and anyone who could not understand his language, might know by the sound of his words that he was not making a bargain, or telling a story. How much more, when we speak to the King of kings, should the consideration of his glory, and our own vileness, and of the important concerns we are engaged in before him, impress us with an air of seriousness and reverence, and prevent us from speaking to him as if he was altogether such a one as ourselves? The liberty to which we are called by the Gospel, does not at all encourage such a pertness and familiarity as would be unbecoming to use towards a fellow-worm who was a little advanced above us in worldly dignity.

I shall be glad if these hints may be of any service to those who desire to worship God in spirit and in truth, and who wish that whatever has a tendency to dampen the spirit of devotion, either in themselves or in others, might be avoided. It is a point of delicacy and difficulty to tell anyone what we wish could be altered in his manner of prayer: but it can give no just offense to ask a friend, if he has read a letter on this subject, in "A Collection of Twenty-six Letters," published in 1775.

Desires Unrealized

"You cannot do the things that you would." (Gal. 5:17)

This is an humbling, but a just account of a Christian's attainments in the present life, and is equally applicable to the strongest and to the weakest. The weakest need not say less, the strongest will hardly venture to say more. The Lord has given His people a desire and will aiming at great things: without this they would be unworthy the name of Christians; but they cannot do as they would. Their best desires are weak and ineffectual, not absolutely so (for He who works in them to will, enables them *in a measure to do* likewise), but in comparison with the mark at which they aim. So that while they have great cause to be thankful for the desire He has given them, and for the degree in which it is answered, they have equal reason to be ashamed and abased under a sense of their continual defects, and the evil mixtures which taint and debase their best endeavors.

It would be easy to make out a long list of particulars which a believer would do if he could, but in which, from first to last, he finds a mortifying inability. Permit me to mention a few, which I need not transcribe from books, for they are always present to my mind.

1. He would willingly enjoy God in **prayer**. He knows that prayer is his duty; but, in his judgment, he considers it likewise as his greatest honor and privilege. In this light he can recommend it to others, and can tell them of the wonderful condescension of the great God, who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in Heaven, that He should stoop so much lower, to afford His gracious ear to the supplications of sinful worms upon earth. He can bid them expect a pleasure in waiting upon the Lord, different in kind, and greater in degree, than all that the world can afford. By prayer, he can say, 'You have liberty to cast all your cares upon Him that cares for you. By one hour's intimate access to the Throne of Grace, where the Lord causes His glory to pass before the soul that seeks Him, you may acquire more true spiritual knowledge and comfort than by a day or week's converse with the best of men, or the most studious perusal of many folios'--and in this light he would consider it and improve it for himself.

But, alas! how seldom can he do as he would. How often does he find this privilege a mere task, which he would be glad of a just excuse to omit! And the chief pleasure he derives from the performance is to think that his task is finished: he has been drawing near to God with his lips, while his heart was far from Him. Surely this is not doing as he would, when (to borrow the expression of an old woman here) he is dragged before God like a slave, and comes away like a thief.

2. The like may be said of reading the **Scriptures**. He believes them to be the Word of God; he admires the wisdom and grace of the doctrines, the beauty of the precepts, the richness and suitableness of the promises; and therefore, with David, he accounts it preferable to thousands of gold and silver, and sweeter than honey or the honeycomb. Yet while he thus thinks of it, and desires that it may dwell in him richly, and be his meditation night and day, he cannot do as he would. It will require some resolution to persist in reading a portion of it every day; and even then his heart is often less engaged than when reading a pamphlet. Here again his privilege frequently dwindles into a task. His appetite is vitiated, so that he has but little relish for the food of his soul.

3. He would willingly have abiding, admiring thoughts of the Person and love of the Lord **Jesus Christ**. Glad is he, indeed, of those occasions which recall the Savior to his mind; and with this view notwithstanding all discouragements, he perseveres in

attempting to pray and read, and waits upon ordinances. Yet he cannot do as he would. Whatever claims he may have to the exercise of gratitude and sensibility towards his fellow creatures, he must confess himself mournfully ungrateful and insensible towards his best Friend and Benefactor. Ah! what trifles are capable of shutting out of our thoughts, of whom we say, He is the Beloved of our souls, who loved us, and gave Himself for us, and whom we have deliberately chosen as our chief good and portion. What can make us amends for the loss we suffer here? Yet surely if we could we would set Him always before us; His love should be the delightful theme of our hearts. "From morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve." But though we aim at this good, evil is present with us; we find we are renewed but in part, and have still cause to plead the Lord's promise, to take away the heart of stone, and give us a heart of flesh.

4. He would willingly acquiesce in all the dispensations of Divine **providence**. He believes that all events are under the direction of infinite wisdom and goodness, and shall surely issue in the glory of God and the good of those who fear Him. He doubts not but the hairs of his head are all numbered—that the blessings of every kind which he possesses were bestowed upon him, and are preserved to him by the bounty and special favor of the Lord whom he serves; that afflictions spring not out of the ground, but are fruits and tokens of Divine love, no less than his comforts—that there is a needs-be, whenever for a season he is in heaviness. Of these principles he can no more doubt of what he sees with his eyes, and there are seasons when he thinks they will prove sufficient to reconcile him to the sharpest trials. But often when he aims to apply them in an hour of present distress, he cannot do what he would. He feels a law in his members warring against the law in his mind; so that, in defiance of the clearest convictions, seeing as though he perceived not, he is ready to complain, mumber, and despond.

Alas! How vain is man in his best estate! How much weakness and inconsistency, even in those whose hearts are right with the Lord! And what reason have we to confess that we are unworthy, unprofitable servants! It were easy to enlarge in this way, would paper and time permit. But, blessed be God--we are not under the law, but under grace: and even these distressing effects of the remnants of indwelling sin are overruled for good. By these experiences the believer is weaned from self, and taught more highly to prize and more absolutely to rely on Him, who is appointed unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. **The more vile we are in our own eyes--the more precious will Jesus be to us.** A deep repeated sense of the evil of our hearts is necessary to preclude all boasting, and to make us willing to give the whole glory of our salvation where it is due. Again, a sense of these evils will, when hardly anything else can do it, reconcile us to the thoughts of death, yes make us desirous to depart that we may sin no more, since we find depravity so deep rooted in our nature, that, like the leprous house, the whole fabric must be taken down before we can be freed from its defilement. Then, and not until then, we shall be able to do the thing that we would: when we see Jesus we shall be transformed into His image, and have done with sin and sorrow forever!

To a friend, on his recovery from illness

Dear Sir,

I suppose you will receive many congratulations on your recovery from your late dangerous illness; most of them perhaps more sprightly and better turned, but none, I persuade myself, more sincere and affectionate than mine. I beg you would prepare yourself by this good opinion of me, before you read further; and let the reality of my regard excuse what you may dislike in my manner of expressing it.

When a person is returned from a doubtful distant voyage, we are naturally led to inquire into the incidents he has met with, and the discoveries he has made. Indulge me in a curiosity of this kind, especially as my affection gives me an interest and concern in the event. You have been, my friend, upon the brink, the very edge, of an eternal state; but God has restored you back to the world again. Did you meet with, or have you brought back, nothing new? Did nothing occur to stop or turn your usual train of thought? Were your apprehensions of invisible things exactly the same in the height of your sickness, when you were cut off from the world and all its engagements—as when you were in perfect health, and in the highest enjoyment of your own inclinations?

If you answer me, "Yes, all things are just the same as formerly, the difference between sickness and health only excepted;" I am at a loss how to reply. I can only sigh and wonder; sigh, that it should be thus with any, that it should be thus with you whom I dearly love; and wonder, since this unhappy case, strange as it seems in one view, is yet so frequent, why it not was always thus with myself; for long and often it was just so. Many a time, when sickness had brought me, as we say, to death's door, I was as easy and insensible as the sailor, who, in the height of a storm, would presume to sleep upon the top of the mast, quite regardless that the next tossing wave might plunge him into the raging ocean, beyond all possibility of relief. But at length a day came, which, though the most terrible day I ever saw, I can now look back upon with thankfulness and pleasure: I say, the time came, when, in such a helpless extremity, and under the expectation of immediate death, it pleased God to remove the veil from my eyes, and I saw things in some measure as they really were.

Imagine with yourself, a person trembling upon the brink of a dreadful precipice; with a powerful and inexorable enemy eager to push him down, and an assemblage of all that is horrible waiting at the bottom for his fall. Even this will give you but a faint representation of the state of my mind at that time. Believe me, it was not a whim or a dream, which changed my sentiments and conduct—but a powerful conviction, which will not admit the least doubt; an evidence which, like that I have of my own existence, I cannot call in question without contradicting all my senses. And though my case was in some respects uncommon, yet something like it is known by one and another every day: and I have myself conversed with many, who, after a course of years spent in defending Deistical principles, or indulging libertine practices, when they have thought themselves confirmed in their schemes by the cool assent of what they then deemed *impartial reason*, have been like me brought to glory in the cross of Christ, and to live by that faith which they had before slighted and opposed.

By these instances, I know that nothing is too hard for the Almighty. The same power which humbled me, can undoubtedly bring down the most haughty infidel upon earth. And as I likewise knew, that, to show his power, he is often pleased to make use of weak instruments, I am encouraged, notwithstanding the apparent difficulty of succeeding, to warn those over whom friendship or affection gives me

any influence, of the evil and the danger of a course of life formed upon the prevailing maxims of the world. So far as I neglect this, I am unfaithful in my professions both to God and man.

I shall not at present trouble you in an argumentative way. If by dint of reasoning I could effect some change in your notions, my arguments, unless applied by a Superior Power, would still leave your heart unchanged and untouched. *A man may give his assent to the Gospel, and be able to defend it against others, and yet not have his own spirit truly influenced by it.* This thought I shall leave with you, that if your philosophy be not true to a demonstration, it must necessarily be false; for the outcome is too important to make a doubt on the dangerous side tolerable. If the Christian could possibly be mistaken, he is still upon equal terms with those who pronounce him to be so; but if the Deist be wrong (that is, if we Christians are in the right), the consequence to him must be unavoidable and intolerable. This, you will say, is a trite argument: I own it; but, beaten as it is, it will never be worn out or answered.

Permit me to remind you, that the points in debate between us are already settled in themselves, and that our talking cannot alter or affect the nature of things; for they will be as they are, whatever apprehensions we may form of them: and remember likewise, that we must all, each one for himself, experience on which side the truth lies. I used a wrong word when I spoke of your *recovery*; my dear friend, look upon it only as a *reprieve*; for you carry the sentence of death about with you still; and unless you should be cut off (which God of his mercy forbid!) by a sudden stroke, you will as surely lie upon a death-bed; as you have been now raised from a bed of sickness. And remember likewise (how can I bear to write it!) that, should you neglect my admonitions, they will, notwithstanding, have an effect upon you, though not such an effect as I could wish: they will render you more inexcusable.

I have delivered my own soul by faithfully warning you: but if you will not examine the matter with that seriousness it calls for; if you will not look up to God, the Creator of your body, and the Preserver of your spirit, for direction and assistance how to please him; if you will have your reading and conversation only on one side of the question; if you determine to let afflictions and dangers, mercies and deliverances, all pass without reflection and improvement; if you will spend your life as though you thought you were sent into the world only to eat, sleep, and play, and, after a course of years, be extinguished like the snuff of a candle; why, then, you must abide the consequences. But assuredly, sooner or later, God will meet you. My hearty daily prayer is, that it may be in a way of mercy, and that you may be added to the number of the trophies of his invincible grace.

On faith, and the communion of saints

Dear Sir,

In compliance with your request, I freely give you my sentiments on the particulars you desired: your candor will pass over all inadvertencies, when I give you such thoughts as offer themselves spontaneously, and without study. If the Lord is pleased to bring anything valuable to my mind, I shall be glad to send it to you; and I am willing to believe that when Christians, in his name and fear, are writing to one another, he does often imperceptibly guide us to drop "a word in season;" which I hope will be the case at present.

The first object of solicitude to an awakened soul, is safety. The law speaks, the sinner hears and fears: a holy God is revealed, the sinner sees and trembles; every false hope is swept away; and all earnest inquiry takes place, "What shall I do to be saved?" In proportion as faith is given, Jesus is discovered as the only Savior, and the question is answered; and as faith increases, fear subsides, and a comfortable hope of life and immortality follows.

When we have thus "a good hope through grace," that heaven shall be our home, I think the next inquiry is, or should be, How we may possess as much of heaven, along the way, as is possible? in other words, How a life of communion with our Lord and Savior may be maintained in the greatest power, and with the least interruption that is consistent with the present imperfect state of things? I am persuaded, dear Sir, this is the point that lies nearest your heart; and therefore I shall speak freely my mind upon it.

In the first place, it is plain, from Scripture and experience, that all our abatements, declensions, and languors, arise from a defect of faith; from the imperfect manner in which we take up the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Scripture. If our apprehensions of him were nearly suitable to the characters he bears in the word of God; if we had a strong and abiding sense of his power and grace always upon our hearts; doubts and complaints would cease. This would make hard things easy, and bitter things sweet, and dispose our hearts with cheerfulness to do and suffer the whole will of God; living upon and to him, as our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, joy, and supreme end, we should live a heaven upon earth. The face of the question is therefore a little changed, and amounts to this, **What are the means to increase and strengthen our faith?**

I apprehend, that the growth of faith, no less than of all other graces, of which faith is the root, is gradual, and ordinarily effected in the use of appointed means; yet not altogether arbitrary, but appointed by him who knows our frame; and therefore works in us, in a way suited to those capacities he has endued us with.

I. If faith arises from the knowledge of Christ, and this knowledge is only contained in the word of God—it follows, that a careful, frequent perusal of the Scriptures, which testify of him, is a fit and a necessary means of improving our faith.

II. If, besides the outward revelation of the word, there must be a revelation of the Spirit of God likewise, whose office it is "to take of the things of Jesus, and show them to the soul," by and according to the written word (John 16:14; 2Co. 3:18); and if this Spirit is promised and limited to those who ask; then it follows likewise, that secret prayer is another necessary means of strengthening faith. Indeed, these two I account the prime ordinances. If we were providentially, and not willfully, restrained from all the rest, the word of grace and the throne of grace would supply their lack: with these we might be happy in a dungeon, or in a desert; but nothing will compensate the neglect of these. Though we should be engaged in a course of

the best conversation, and sermons, from one end of the week to the other, we would languish and starve in the midst of plenty, our souls would grow dry and lean, unless these secret exercises were kept up with some degree of exactness.

III. Another means to this purpose, is faithfulness to light already received; John 14:15-24, especially John 14:21. It is worth observation, that faith and fidelity, the act of dependence and the purpose of obedience, are expressed in the Greek by the same word. Though the power is all of God, and the blessing of mere free grace; yet if there is any secret reserve, any allowed evil connived at in the heart and life, this will shut up the avenues to comfort, and check the growth of faith. I lay very little stress upon that faith or comfort which is not affected by unsteady walking.

The experience of past years has taught me to distinguish between ignorance and disobedience. The Lord is gracious to the weakness of his people; many involuntary mistakes will not interrupt their communion with him; he pities their infirmity, and teaches them to do better. But if they dispute his known will, and act against the dictates of conscience, they will surely suffer for it. This will weaken their hands, and bring distress into their hearts. Willful sin sadly perplexes and retards our progress. May the Lord keep us from it! It raises a dark cloud, and hides the Sun of Righteousness from our view; and until he is pleased freely to shine forth again, we can do nothing; and for this perhaps he will make us wait, and cry out often, "How long, O Lord! how long?"

Thus, by reading the word of God, by frequent prayer, by a simple attention to the Lord's will, together with the use of public ordinances, and the observations we are able to make upon what passes within us and without us, which is what we call experience, the Lord watering and blessing with the influence of His Holy Spirit, may we grow in grace, and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior; be more humble in our own eyes, more weaned from self, more fixed on him as our all in all, until at last we shall meet before His throne.

The communion of saints—another point you desired my thoughts upon—is the great privilege of all the children of God; they may be separate from each other in body, and yet may daily meet at the Throne of Grace. This is one branch of the communion of saints, to be present in spirit to each other. Sharing in common of the influences of the same Spirit, they feel the same desires, aim at the same objects, and, so far as they are personally acquainted, are led to bear each other upon their hearts in prayer.

It has often been an encouragement to me in a dark and dull hour, when rather the constraint of duty than the consideration of privilege has brought me upon my knees, to reflect how many hearts, and eyes, and hands, have been probably lifted up in the same moment with mine: this thought has given me new courage. O what a great family our Father has! And what David says of the natural is true of the spiritual life: (Psalm 104:1-35). "These all wait upon you, that you may give them their food in due season. What you give them, they gather: you open your hand, and they are filled with good." Then I particularly think of those who have been helpful to me in time past; the seasons of sweet communion we have enjoyed together, the subjects of our mutual complaints, etc. Where are they, or how engaged, now? Perhaps this moment praying or thinking about me. Then I am roused to make their cases my own, and, by attempting to plead for them, I get strength to pray for myself.

It is an encouragement, no doubt, in a field of battle, to know that the army we belong to is large, unanimous, all in action, pressing on from every side against the common enemy, and gaining ground in every attack. But if we derive fresh spirits from considering our friends and associates on earth, how should we take fire if we could penetrate within the veil, and take a view of the invisible world! We would

not then complain that we were serving God alone. Oh the numbers, the voices, the raptures, of that heavenly multitude! Not one complaining note, not one discordant string. How many thousand years has the harmony been strengthening, by the hourly accession of new voices!

I sometimes compare this earth to a temporary gallery or stage, erected for all the heirs of glory to pass over, that they may join in the coronation of the Great King; a solemnity in which they shall not be mere spectators, but deeply interested parties; for he is their husband, their Lord; they bear his name, and shall share in all his honors. Righteous Abel led the van—the procession has been sometimes broader; sometimes narrowed to almost a single person, as in the days of Noah. After many generations had successively entered and disappeared, the King himself passed on in person, preceded by one chosen harbinger: he received many insults on his passage; but he bore all for the sake of those he loved, and entered triumphant into his glory.

He was followed by twelve faithful servants, and after them the procession became wider than ever. There are many yet unborn who must (as we do now) tread in the steps of those gone before; and when the whole company is arrived, the stage shall be taken down and burnt.

Then all the chosen race shall meet before the throne,
Shall bless the conduct of his grace, and make his wonders known.

Let us then, dear Sir, be of good courage: all the saints on earth, all the saints in heaven, the angels of the Lord, yes, the Lord of angels himself, all are on our side. Though the company is large, yet there is room—many mansions—a place for you—a place, I trust, for worthless me.