

A SKETCH OF THE  
CHRISTIAN'S  
TEMPER

LETTERS

BY

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## Letters by John Newton

# A sketch of the Christian's temper.

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# A sketch of the Christian's temper

September, 1776

Dear sir,

Without any preamble, I purpose now to give you a few thoughts on the meaning of that name which first obtained at Antioch—in other words, *what it is to be a Christian?* What are the effects, which (making allowance for the unavoidable infirmities attending upon the present state of mortality) may be expected from a real experimental knowledge of the Gospel? I would not insinuate that none are Christians, who do not come up to the character I would describe; for then I fear I should unchristian myself. I only will consider what the Scripture encourages us to aim at—as the prize of our high calling in this life. It is generally allowed and lamented, that we are too apt to live below our privileges, and to stop short of what the Spirit and the promises of the Gospel point out to us as attainable.

Mr. Pope's admired line, "An **honest** man—is the noblest work of God," may be admitted as a truth, when rightly explained. A Christian is the noblest work of God in this visible world, and bears a much brighter impression of his glory and goodness—than the sun in the skies; and none but a Christian can be strictly and properly honest—all others are too much under the power of *self*, to do universally to others—as they would like others would do unto them; and nothing but an uniform conduct upon this principle deserves the name of honesty.

The Christian is a **new creature**, born and taught from above. He has been convinced of his guilt and misery as a sinner, has fled for refuge to the hope set before him, has seen the Son and believed on him. His natural prejudices against the glory and grace of God's salvation, have been subdued and silenced by Almighty power. He has accepted the Beloved, and is made acceptable in him; he now knows the Lord; has renounced the confused, distant, uncomfortable notions he once formed of God; and beholds him in Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, the only door by which we can enter to any true satisfying knowledge of God, or communion with him. He now sees God in Christ, reconciled, a Father, a Savior, and a Friend, who has freely forgiven him all his sins, and given him the Spirit of adoption. He is now no longer a servant, much less a stranger—but a son; and because a son, an heir already savingly interested in all gospel promises, admitted to the throne of grace, and an assured expectant of eternal glory!

The Gospel is designed to give us not only a *perhaps*, or a probability—but a *certainty* both of our acceptance and our perseverance, until death shall be swallowed up in life. And though many are sadly fluctuating and perplexed upon this head, and perhaps all are so for a season; yet there are those who can say, we know that we are of God; and therefore they are steadfast and unmovable in his way; because they are confident that their labor shall not be in vain—but that, when they shall be absent from the body, they shall be present with their Lord. This is the state of the advanced, experienced Christian, who, being enabled to make his profession the chief business of his life, is strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Everyone who has this hope in Christ, purifies himself, even as he is pure. I would now attempt **a sketch of the Christian's temper**, formed upon these principles and hopes, under the leading branches of its exercise, respecting God, himself, and his fellow-creatures.

The Christian's temper *God-ward* is evidenced by **humility**. He has received from Gethsemane and Golgotha, such a sense of the evil of sin, and of the holiness of God, combined with his matchless love to sinners, as has deeply penetrated his heart. He has an affecting remembrance of the state of rebellion and enmity in which he once lived against this holy and good God. And he has a quick perception

of the defilements and defects which still debase his best services. His mouth is therefore stopped as to boasting—he is vile in his own eyes, and is filled with wonder that the Lord should visit such a sinner, with such a salvation! He sees so vast a disproportion between the obligations he is under to grace—and the returns he makes, that he is disposed, yes constrained, to adopt the Apostle's words without affectation, and to account himself less *than the least of all saints!* Knowing his own heart, while he sees only the outside of others—he is not easily persuaded there can be a believer upon earth—so faint, so unfruitful, so unworthy as himself.

Yet, though abased, he is not discouraged, for he enjoys peace. The dignity, offices, blood, righteousness, faithfulness, and compassion of the Redeemer—in whom he rests, trusts, and lives—for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption—are adequate to all his wants and wishes—and provide him with an answer to every objection, and give him no less confidence in God, than if he were as sinless as an angel! For he sees, that, though *sin* has abounded in *him*—grace has much more abounded in Jesus!

With respect to the *past*, all things are become new. With respect to the *present* and *future*—he leans upon an Almighty arm, and relies upon the word and power which made and upholds the heavens and the earth. Though he feels himself unworthy of the smallest mercies—he claims and expects the greatest blessings which God can bestow; and, being rooted and grounded in the knowledge and love of Christ, his peace abides, and is not greatly affected, either by the variation of his own emotional frames, or the changes of God's dispensations towards him while here. With such a sense of himself, such a heart-felt peace and heavenly hope—how can his spirit but breathe love to his God and Savior?

It is indeed the perfection of his character and happiness, that his soul is united by love to the chief good. The love of Christ is the joy of his heart, and the spring of his obedience. With his Savior's presence, He finds a heaven begun upon earth; and without it, all the other glories of the heavenly state would not content him. He realizes the excellence of Christ; his love to sinners, especially his dying love; Christ's love to himself, in seeking and saving him when lost, and saving him to the uttermost! But I must stop. You can better *conceive*—than I can describe—how and why Jesus is dear to the heart that knows him.

That part of the Christian's life which is not employed in the active service of his Lord, is chiefly spent in seeking and maintaining communion with him. For this he plies the throne, and studies the Word of grace, and frequents the ordinances, where the Lord has promised to meet with his people. These are his golden hours; and when thus employed, how poor and trivial does all that the world calls great and important appear in his eyes! Yes, he is solicitous to keep up a fellowship of heart with his Beloved in his busiest scenes; and so far as he can succeed, it alleviates all his labors, and sweetens all his troubles. And when he is neither communing with his Lord, nor acting for him—he accounts his time lost, and is ashamed and grieved.

The truth of his love for Jesus—is manifested by *submission*. This is twofold, and absolute and without reserve in each. He submits to his *revealed will*, as made known to him by precept, and by Christ's own example. He aims to tread in his Savior's footsteps, and makes conscience of all his commandments, without exception and without hesitation. Again, he submits to his *providential will*—he yields to his sovereignty, acquiesces in his wisdom; he knows that he has no right to complain of anything, because he is a hell-deserving sinner; and he has no reason to complain, because he is sure that the Lord does all things well. Therefore this submission is not forced—but is an act of trust. He knows he is not more *unworthy* than he is *unable* to choose for himself, and therefore rejoices that the Lord has undertaken to manage for him! And were he compelled to make his own choice, he

could only choose that all his concerns should remain in that hand to which he has already committed them.

And thus he judges of public as well as of his personal affairs. He cannot be an unaffected spectator of national sins, nor without apprehension of their deserved consequences; he feels, and almost trembles, for others—but he himself dwells under the shadow of the Almighty, in a sanctuary which cannot be forced into; and therefore, should he see the earth shaken, and the mountains cast into the midst of the sea—his heart would not be greatly moved, for God is his refuge; the Lord reigns! He sees his Savior's hand directing every dark appearance, and over-ruling all—to the accomplishment of his own great purposes. This satisfies him; and though the winds and waves should be high, he can venture his own little bark in the storm, for he has an infallible and almighty *Pilot* on board with him!

And, indeed, why should he fear, when he has nothing to lose? His best concerns are safe; and other things he holds as gifts from his Lord, to whose call he is ready to resign them, in whatever way he pleases; well knowing, that creatures and instruments cannot of themselves touch a hair of His head without the Lord's permission; and that if he does permit them, it must be for the best.

I might enlarge farther. But I shall proceed to consider the Christian's temper respecting **himself**. He lives godly and soberly. By sobriety we mean more than that he is not a drunkard; his tempers toward God, of course, form him to a *moderation in all temporal things*. He is not scrupulous or superstitious; he understands the liberty of the Gospel, that every creature of God is good, if it is received with thanksgiving; he does not aim at being needlessly singular, nor practice self-devised austerities. The Christian is neither a Stoic nor a Cynic—yet he finds daily cause for watchfulness and restraint.

Satan will not often tempt a believer to gross crimes—our greatest snares and sorest conflicts are usually found in things lawful in themselves—but hurtful to us by their abuse, engrossing too much of our time, or of our hearts, or somehow indisposing us for communion with the Lord. The Christian will be jealous of anything which might entangle his affections, dampen his zeal, or straiten him in his opportunities of serving his Savior.

He is likewise **content with his situation**, because the Lord chooses it for him. He is not eager for additions and alterations in his circumstances. If Divine Providence points out and leads to a change—he is ready to follow, though it should be what the world would call from a better to a worse; for he is a pilgrim and a stranger here, and a citizen of heaven. As wealthy people sometimes, in traveling, submit cheerfully to inconvenient accommodations, very different from their homes, and comfort themselves with thinking they are not always to live so—so the Christian is not greatly solicitous about *external circumstances*. If he has them, he will use them moderately. If he has but little of them, he can make a good shift without them. He is but upon a journey—and will soon be at home! If he is rich, experience confirms our Lord's words, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Luke 12:15. This satisfies him. He know that a large room, a crowd of servants, and twenty dishes upon his table, add nothing to the real happiness of life—therefore he will not have his heart set upon such things.

If he is in a poorer state, he is more disposed to *pity* than to *envy* these above him; for he knows that they must have many encumbrances from which he is freed. However, the will of God, and the light of his countenance, are the chief things the Christian, whether rich or poor, regards; and therefore his *moderation* is made known unto all men.

A third branch of the Christian's temper respects his **fellow-creatures**. And here, methinks, if I had not filled a sheet already, I could enlarge with pleasure. We have, in this degenerate day, among those who claim and are allowed the name of Christian, too many of a narrow, selfish, mercenary spirit—but in the beginning it was not so. The Gospel is designed to cure such a spirit—but gives no indulgence to it. A Christian has the mind of Christ, who went about doing good, who makes his sun to shine upon the good and the evil, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. His Lord's example forms him to the habit of *diffusive benevolence*. He breathes a spirit of goodwill to mankind, and rejoices in every opportunity of being useful to the souls and bodies of others, without respect to parties or interests. He commiserates, and would if possible alleviate, the miseries of all around him. And if his actual services are restrained by lack of ability—yet all share in his *sympathy* and *prayers*.

Acting in the spirit of his Master, he frequently meets with a measure of the like treatment; but if his good is requited with evil—he labors to overcome evil with good. He feels himself to be a sinner—who needs much forgiveness; this makes him ready to forgive. He is not haughty, faultfinding, easily offended, or hard to be reconciled; for at the feet of Jesus he has learned *meekness*. When he meets with unkindness or injustice, he considers, that, though he has not deserved such things from men—that they are *instruments* employed by his Heavenly Father (from whom he has deserved to suffer much more), for his humiliation and chastisement; and is therefore more concerned for their welfare, than for his own sufferings, and prays, after the pattern of his Savior, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" He knows he is fallible; therefore cannot be dogmatic. He knows he is frail; and therefore dares not be censorious.

As a member of society, he is just, and punctual in the discharge of every relative duty, faithful to his engagements and promises, rendering to all their dues, obedient to lawful authority, and acting to all men according to the golden rule, of doing to others—as he would like to be treated by them. His conduct is simple, devoid of artifice, and consistent, attending to every branch of duty. In the closet, the family, the church, and in the transactions of common life, he is the same man; for in every circumstance he serves the Lord, and aims to maintain a conscience void of offense in his sight.

A great part of the beauty of his profession in the sight of men, consists in the due government of his **tongue**. The law of truth, and kindness, and purity, is upon his lips. He abhors lying; and is so far from inventing a slander, that he will not repeat a report to the disadvantage of his neighbor, however true, without a necessary reason. His converse is cheerful—but inoffensive; and he will no more wound another with his *wit* (if he has a talent that way), than with a *knife*. His speech is with grace, seasoned with salt, and suited to promote the peace and edification of all around him.

Such is the Christian in *civil* life. But though he loves all mankind, he stands in a nearer relation, and bears an especial brotherly love, to all who are partakers of the faith and hope of the Gospel. This regard is not confined within the pale of a denomination—but extended to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. He calls no man master himself; nor does he wish to impose a Shibboleth of His own upon others. He rejoices in the image of God, wherever he sees it, and in the work of God, wherever it is carried on. Though tenacious of the truths which the Lord has taught him, his heart is open to those who differ from him in less essential points, and allows to others that *right of private judgment* which he claims for himself, and is disposed to hold communion in love, with all who hold the Head.

He cannot indeed countenance those who set aside the one foundation which God has laid in Zion, and maintain errors derogatory to the honor of his Savior, or

subversive of the faith and experience of his people; yet he wishes well to them, pities and prays for them, and is ready in meekness to instruct those who oppose. But there is no bitterness in his zeal, being sensible that raillery and invective are dishonorable to the cause of truth, and quite unsuitable in the mouth of a sinner, *who owes all that distinguishes him from the vilest of men to the free grace of God!* In a word, he is influenced by the wisdom from above, which, as it is pure, is likewise peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good works, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

I must just recur to my first head, and observe, that, with this spirit and deportment, the Christian, while he is enabled to maintain a conscience void of offense towards God and man, is still sensible and mindful of indwelling sin. He has his eye more upon his *rule* than upon his *attainments*; and therefore finds and confesses that in everything he comes exceedingly short, and that his best services are not only defective—but defiled. He accounts himself an unprofitable servant; and is abased in his own eyes. He derives all his hope and comfort, as well as his strength—from Jesus, whom he has known, received and loved, and to whom he has committed his soul. He renounces all confidence in the flesh, and esteems all things as loss—compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ his Lord, for whose sake he has lost all things—considering them rubbish, that he may gain Christ!

I beg a remembrance in your prayers, that He who has given me to will and desire, may work in me to be and to do according to his own good pleasure.

# Thoughts on the Government of the Tongue

There is, perhaps, no one test or proof of the reality of a work of grace upon the heart, more simple, clear, and infallible—than the general tenor of our *language* and *conversation*; for our Lord's aphorism is of certain and universal application, that, "out of the abundance of the *heart*—the mouth speaks." To the same purpose, the apostle James proposes to all who make profession of the gospel, a searching criterion of their sincerity, when he says, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight bridle on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." This passage should not be thought a hard saying, for it stands in the Bible; but, because it stands in the Bible, and forms a part of the *rule* by which the characters and states of all men will be finally determined, there is reason to fear that it will be found a hard saying at last, by too many who name the name of Christ. A few thoughts upon this important subject, "the government of the tongue" can never be unseasonable.

It is not the restraint of the heart, which the apostle requires. He knew that, though it is our duty to watch against the first rising motions of evil within, and to be humbled for them—that it is not in our power wholly to prevent them. But he supposes that the grace of God in a true believer will check the evils of the heart, and prevent them from breaking out by the tongue.

Nor is the restraint of the tongue to be taken so strictly, as if a true believer was never liable to speak unadvisedly. *Job* and *Jeremiah* cursed the day of their birth; and *Peter* not only denied his Lord—but denied him with oaths and execrations. I allow that it is possible for the best of men, in an unguarded hour, and through the pressure of some sudden and violent temptation or provocation, may occasionally act or speak unsuitably to their habitual gracious character. But I think the apostle must mean thus much at least, that, when saving grace is in the heart—it will so regulate and control the tongue, that it shall not customarily sin; and that, without some evidence of such a regulation, we are not bound to acknowledge any man to be a Christian, however splendid his profession may be in other respects. Nay, I think we may further say of this test, what the magicians of Egypt acknowledged upon another occasion, "This is the finger of God!" This is, perhaps, the only *outward* mark of a believer, which the hypocrite cannot imitate. In many things he may seem to be religious; in some, perhaps, he may appear to go beyond the real Christian; but, because his heart is unchanged—he cannot bridle his tongue.

The man who seems, and who desires to be thought religious, may have many qualifications to support his claim, which may be valuable and commendable in themselves, and yet are of no avail to the possessor, if he bridles not his tongue. He may have much *religious knowledge*; I mean, of such knowledge as may be



acquired in the use of ordinary means. He may have a *warm zeal*, and may contend earnestly (in his way) for the faith once delivered to the saints. He may be able to *talk* well on spiritual subjects, to *pray* with freedom and fervency. Yes, he may even be a preacher, and conduct himself to the satisfaction of sincere Christians. Or he may be a fair trader, a good neighbor, a kind master, an affectionate husband or parent, be free from gross vices, and attend constantly upon the ordinances. Will not such a man seem to himself, and probably be esteemed by others—to be religious? Yet if, with all these good properties, he does not bridle his tongue—he may be said to lack the one thing needful. He deceives his own heart! His religion is vain!

But what are we to understand by **bridling the tongue**? The expression, I think, will be sufficiently explained by considering how the grace of God will necessarily influence and govern the tongues of those who partake of it, in what they say when they are led to speak of *God*, of *themselves*, and of or to their *fellow-creatures*.

Having seen a glimpse of the holiness and majesty, the glory and the grace, of the great **God** with whom they have to do—their hearts are impressed with reverence, and therefore there is a sobriety and decorum in their language. They cannot speak lightly of God, or of his ways. One would suppose that no person, who even but seems to be religious, can directly and expressly profane his glorious name. But there is a careless and flippant manner of speaking of the great God, which is very disgusting and very suspicious. Likewise, the hearts of believers teach their mouths to speak honorably of God under all their afflictions and crosses, acknowledging the wisdom and the mercy of his dispensations; and, if an impatient word escapes them, it grieves and humbles them, as quite unfitting their situation as His creatures, and especially as sinful creatures, who have always reason to acknowledge, that it is of the Lord's mercy, that they are not wholly consumed.

When they speak of **themselves**, their tongues are bridled, and restrained from *boasting*. They speak as befits poor, unworthy creatures—because they feel themselves to be such. In what they say, either of their comforts or of their sorrows, sincerity dictates a simplicity which cannot be easily counterfeited. While they, whose tongues are not thus bridled, often betray themselves by a lack of sincerity, even when they are lamenting their sinfulness, and the vileness of their hearts.

In what they say of or to **others**, the tongues of believers are bridled by a heart felt regard to truth, love and purity.

Where grace is in the heart, the tongue will be bridled by the law of TRUTH. It is grievous to see how nearly and readily some professors of religion will venture upon the *borders of a lie*; either to defend their own conduct, to avoid some inconvenience, to procure a supposed advantage, or sometimes merely to embellish a story. Admitting the possibility of a sincere person being

surprised into the declaration of a lie—yet, where instances of this kind are frequent, I hardly know a *fouler blot* in profession, or which can give a more just warrant to fear that such professors know nothing aright either of God or themselves. The Lord is a God of truth; and he teaches his servants to hate and abhor lying, and to speak the truth from their hearts. I may add likewise, with regard to *promises*—that, though the law of the land requires, on many occasions, oaths and bonds to secure their performance, that person, whose word may *not* be safely depended upon without either bond or oath, scarcely deserves the name of a Christian!

Where grace is in the heart, the tongue will be likewise bridled by the law of LOVE. If we love our neighbor, can we lightly speak evil of him, magnify his failings, or use provoking or insulting language? Love thinks no evil—but bears, hopes and endures. Love acts by the golden rule, to "Do unto others—what you would like them to do unto you." Those who are under the influence of Christian love, will be gentle and compassionate, disposed to make the most favorable allowances, and of course their tongues will be restrained from the language of malevolence, harsh censure, and slander—which are as familiar to us as our mother tongue, until we are made partakers of the grace of God.

The tongue is also bridled by a regard to PURITY, agreeable to the precepts, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." "Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving." Ephesians 4:29, 5:4. Grace has taught believers to *hate* these things; how then can their tongues *speak* of them? There are false professors, indeed, who can suit their language to their company. When with the people of God—they call talk very seriously. But at other times, they are well pleased to join in vain, frothy, and evil conversation. But this double-mindedness is of itself sufficient to discredit all their pretenses to a pious character.

Upon the whole, though perfection is not to be expected, though true believers may, on some occasions, speak rashly, and have great cause for humiliation, watchfulness, and prayer, with respect to the government of their tongues; yet I think the Scripture, and particularly the apostle James, in the passage I have mentioned, authorizes this conclusion. That, if the tongue is frequently without a bridle; if it may be observed, that a person often speaks *lightly* of God and of divine things, *proudly* of himself, *harshly* of his fellow-creatures; if it can be truly affirmed, that he is a liar, a talebearer, a railer, a flatterer, or a jester—then, whatever other good qualities he may seem to possess—his speech betrays him! He deceives himself, his religion is vain. Let us think of these things, and entreat the Lord to cast the salt of his grace into the fountain of our hearts, that the streams of our conversation may be wholesome.

# The heart of man

October 21, 1775.

My Dear Friend,

The calls and engagements which I told you engrossed and anticipated my time when I wrote last, have continued without any intermission hitherto, and I am still far behind-hand with my business. I am willing to hope, that the case has been much the same with you, and that lack of leisure has been the only cause of my not having been pleased with so much as a note from you since my return from London.

I am reluctant, for my own sake, to charge your silence to any unwillingness of continuing that fellowship which I have been, and still find myself, desirous to improve on my part. For though we are not agreed in our views—yet, while our preliminary agreement, to allow mutual freedom, and to exercise mutual candor, in expressing our sentiments, exists, we may, and I hope shall, be glad to hear from each other. It may seem to intimate I have a better opinion of myself than of you, that, while I seem confident your freedom will not offend me, I feel now and then a fear lest mine should prove displeasing to you. But friendship is a little suspicious when exercised with long silence; and a plain declaration of my sentiments has, more than once, put amiable and respectable people to the full trial of their patience.

I now return your sermons: I thank you for the perusal. I see much in them that I approve, and nothing in them but what I formerly espoused. But in a course of years a considerable alteration has taken place in my judgment and experience, I hope, yes I may boldly say I am sure, not for the worse. Then I was seeking, and now, through mercy, I have found, the Pearl of great price. It is both the prayer and the hope of my heart, that a day is coming when you shall make the same acknowledgment. From your Letters and Sermons, I am encouraged to address you in our Lord's words, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." I am persuaded the views you have received will not allow you to remain where you are. But *fidelity* obliges me to add, "*Yet one thing you lack.*" That "one thing" I trust the Lord will both show you, and bestow upon you, in his due time.

You speak somewhere of "atoning for disobedience by repentance." Ah! my dear sir, when we are brought to estimate our disobedience, by comparing it with such a sense of the majesty, holiness, and authority of God; and the spirituality, extent, and sanction of his holy law, as he, and he only, can impress upon the heart of a sinner—we shall be convinced that *nothing but the blood of the Son of God can atone for the smallest instance of disobedience!*

I intimated, in my letter from London, one defect of your scheme, which will probably be the first to engage your notice. I am sure you have a desire to be useful to the souls of men; to be an instrument of reclaiming them from that course of open wickedness, or lifeless formality, in which you see them enslaved; and, in a word, to prevail with them to live soberly, righteously, and godly, according to the just and comprehensive sense you have given of those words in your sermon on Titus 2:11-12.

Now inward experience, and a pretty extensive observation of what passes abroad, have so perfectly convinced me there is but one mode of preaching which the Holy Spirit owns to the producing these effects, that I am not afraid to pronounce confidently—you will not have the desires of your heart gratified upon your present plan! The people will give you a hearing—but remain just as they are, until the Lord leads you to speak to them as criminals condemned already, and whose first essential step it is, to seek forgiveness by the blood of Jesus, and a change of heart and state by his grace, before they can bring forth any fruit acceptable to God.

As I have little time for writing, and little hope of succeeding in a way of argumentation, I have substituted, instead of a longer letter, the heads of some sermons I preached nine or ten years ago, on our Lord's discourse with Nicodemus. However, when I have heard that you are well, and that you still are disposed to correspond with me, I shall be ready to give a more particular answer to the subjects you pointed out to me in the letter you favored me with the day before I left London. I pray God to bless you in all your ways, and beg you to believe that I am, with sincerity, etc.

You complain that I have hitherto disappointed your expectations. If you have preserved my first papers, I believe you will find that I apprised you this might probably be the event, and certainly must, unless it should please God to make what I should write a means of giving you the same views with myself. I only proposed, as a witness, to bear a simple testimony to what I had seen and known. So far as you believed me sincere, and unwilling to impose upon you, I thought you might admit there was perhaps some weight in what I advanced, though for the present you could not see things in the same light. And if you allowed a possibility, that my changing the sentiments which I once held in common with yourself might be upon sufficient grounds, you would, as I trust you do, wait upon the great Teacher for his instruction; otherwise I did not expect to convince you; nor do I yet, only I am glad to put myself in his hands as an *instrument*.

You quite misunderstood what I spoke of the light and influence of the Spirit of God. He reveals to me no new truths—but has only shown me the meaning of his own written Word. Nor is this light a special revelation to myself—it is common to all who are born again. And thus, though you and I cannot fully agree about it—yet I almost daily meet with people, from the east, west, north, and south, whom, though I never saw them before, I find we understand each other at once. This (as you bid me be explicit) is the *one thing* which you at present lack. And I limited my expression to one thing, because it is our Lord's expression, and because that *one thing* includes many.

As I said before, I cannot give it to you—but the Lord can. And from the desire he has raised in your heart, I have a warm hope that he will. You place the whole stress of your inquiries upon *human reason*. I am far from discarding reason, when it is enlightened and sanctified; but spiritual things must be spiritually discerned, and can be received and discerned no other way; for to our natural reason they are foolishness; 1Co. 2:14-15; Mat. 11:25. This *certain something* I can no more describe to those who have not experienced it, than I could describe the taste of a pineapple to a person who had never seen one. But Scriptural proofs might be adduced in abundance—yet not so as to give a solid conviction of it—*until* we actually experience it.

Thus it was with my friend, whose case I sent you. When God gave him *the key* (as he expressed it), then the Scriptures were unlocked. His wishing himself a Deist some time before, was not from any libertine exceptions he made to the precepts of the Gospel—but from the perplexing enigmas he had found, by endeavoring to understand the doctrines by *dint of reason*, though reason in him was as strong and penetrating as in most men I ever met with. Upon your present plan, how can I hope to satisfy you, though even Paul asserts it, that *the carnal mind is enmity against God*? You will readily agree with me to the proposition as it stands in Paul's words—but I think will not so readily assent to what I have no more doubt than of my own existence, is the sense of it—That the heart of man—of any man, every man, however apparently amiable in his outward conduct, however benevolent to his fellow-creatures, however abundant and zealous in his devotions—is, by nature, enmity against God. Not indeed against the idea he himself forms of God—but against the character which God has revealed of himself in the Scripture. Man is an enemy to the justice, sovereignty, and law of God; and to the one method of

salvation, which he has appointed in the Gospel, by faith alone; by such a faith as it is no more in his power to contribute to the production of in himself, than he can contribute to raising the dead, or making a world. Whatever is of the flesh is flesh, and can rise no higher than its principle—But the Lord could convince you of this by a glance of thought.

But I must break off, for lack both of room and time. Let me remind you of our agreement, to use and allow the greatest freedom, and not to be offended with what is well-meant on either side. Something in your last letter made me apprehensive you were a little displeased with me. He who knows my heart, knows that I wish you as well as my own soul.

The expression, of *atoning for disobedience by repentance*, was in one of your sermons. I considered it as unguarded; but, on my view of things, it were in a manner impossible I could use that expression, though perhaps too often unguarded myself.

I pray God to bless you in all your ways, and beg you to believe that I am, with sincerity, etc.

# A believer's frames

Dear Sir,

You ask me, in your letter, what should one do when one finds one's self always still, quiet, and stupid—except in the pulpit; is made useful there, but cannot get either comfort or sorrow out of it, or but very rarely? You describe a case which my own experience has made very familiar to me. I shall take the occasion to offer you a few miscellaneous thoughts upon the subject of a believer's frames; and I send them to you, not by the post, but from the press; because I apprehend the exercise you speak of is not peculiar to you or to me, but is in a greater or less degree the burden of all who are spiritually minded, and duly attentive to what passes in their own hearts, whether they are in the ministry or not.

As you intimate that you are in the main favored with liberty and usefulness in the pulpit, give me leave to ask you, What you would do if you did not find yourself occasionally poor, insufficient, and, as you express it, stupid, at other times? Are you aware of what might be the possible, the probable, the almost certain consequences, if you always found your spirit enlarged, and your frames lively and comfortable? Would you not be in great danger of being puffed up with spiritual pride? Would you not be less sensible of your absolute dependence upon the power of Christ, and of your continual need of his blood, pardon, and intercession? Would you not be quite at a loss to speak suitably and feelingly to the case of many gracious souls, who are groaning under those effects of a depraved nature, from which, upon that supposition, you would be exempted? How could you speak properly upon the deceitfulness of the heart, if you did not feel the deceitfulness of your own; or adapt yourself to the changing experiences through which your hearers pass, if you yourself were always alike, or nearly so? Or how could you speak pertinently of the inward warfare, the contrary principles of flesh and spirit fighting one against another—if your own spiritual desires were always vigorous and successful, and met with little opposition or control?

The Apostle Paul, though favored with a singular eminency in grace, felt at times that he had no sufficiency in himself so much as to think a good thought; and he saw there was a danger of his being exalted above measure, if the Lord had not wisely and graciously tempered his dispensations to prevent it. By "being exalted above measure," perhaps there may be a reference not only to his spirit, lest he should think more highly of himself than he ought, but likewise to his preaching, lest, not having the same causes of complaint and humiliation in common with others, he should shoot over the heads of his hearers, confine himself chiefly to speak of such comforts and privileges as he himself enjoyed, and have little to say for the refreshment of those who were discouraged and cast down by a continual conflict with indwelling in.

The angel who appeared to Cornelius did not preach the Gospel to him, but directed him to send for Peter: for though the glory and grace of the Savior seems a fitter subject for an angel's powers than for the poor stammering tongues of sinful men, yet an angel could not preach experimentally, nor describe the warfare between grace and sin from his own feelings. And if we could suppose a minister as full of comforts and as free from failings as an angel, though he would be a good and happy man, I cannot conceive that he would be a good or useful preacher; for he would not know how to sympathize with the weak and afflicted of the flock, or to comfort them under their difficulties with the consolations wherewith he himself, in similar circumstances, had been comforted of God.

It belongs to your calling of God as a minister, that you should have a taste of the various spiritual trials which are incident to the Lord's people, that thereby you may possess the tongue of the learned, and know how to speak a word in season to those who are weary; and it is likewise needful to keep you perpetually attentive to that important admonition, "Without me you can do nothing."

Thus much considering you as a minister. But we may extend the subject so as to make it applicable to believers in general. I would observe, therefore, that it is a sign of a sad declension, if one, who has tasted that the Lord is gracious, should be capable of being fully satisfied with anything short of the light of his countenance, which is better than life. A resting in notions of Gospel truth, or in the recollection of past comforts, without a continual thirst for fresh communications from the Fountain of life, is, I am afraid, the canker which eats away the beauty and fruitfulness of many professors in the present day; and which, if it does not prove them to be absolutely dead, is at least a sufficient evidence that they are lamentably sick. But if we are conscious of the desire, if we seek it carefully in the use of all appointed means, if we willingly allow ourselves in nothing which has a known tendency to grieve the Spirit of God, and to dampen our sense of divine things; then, if the Lord is pleased to keep us short of those comforts which he has taught us to prize, and, instead of lively sensations of joy and praise, we feel a languor and deadness of spirit, provided we do indeed feel it, and are humbled for it—we have no need to give way to despondency or excessive sorrow.

Still the foundation of our hope, and the ground of our abiding joys, is the same; and the heart may be as really alive to God, and grace as truly in exercise, when we walk in comparative darkness and see little light, as when the frame of our spirits is more comfortable. **Neither the reality, nor the measure of grace, can be properly estimated by the degree of our sensible comforts.** The great question is—How we are practically influenced by the word of God, as the ground of our hope, and as the governing rule of our tempers and conversation? The Apostle exhorts believers to rejoice in the Lord always. He well knew that they were exposed to trials and temptations, and to much trouble from an evil heart of unbelief; and he prevents the objections we might be ready to make, by adding, "And again I say, Rejoice," as if he had said, I speak upon mature consideration; I call upon you to rejoice, not at some times only, but at all times; not only when upon the mount, but when in the valley; not only when you conquer, but while you are fighting; not only when the Lord shines upon you, but when he seems to hide his face. When he enables you to do all things, you are no *better* in yourselves than you were before; and when you feel you can do nothing, you are no *worse*. *Your experiences will vary: but his love and promises are always unchangeable.*

Though our desires of comfort, and what we call lively frames, cannot be too importunate while they are regulated by a due submission to his will, yet they may be inordinate for lack of such submission. Sinful principles may, and too often do, mix with and defile our best desires. I have often detected the two vile abominations Self-will and Self-righteousness insinuating themselves into this concern: like Satan, who works by them, they can occasionally assume the appearance of an angel of light. I have felt an impatience in my spirit, utterly unsuitable to my state as a sinner and a beggar, and to my profession of yielding myself and all my concerns to the Lord's disposal. He has mercifully convinced me that I labor under a multiplication of disorders, summed up in the word—sin. He has graciously revealed himself to me as the infallible physician; and has enabled me, as such, to commit myself to him, and to expect my cure from his hand alone. Yet how often, instead of thankfully accepting his prescriptions, have I foolishly and presumptuously ventured to prescribe to him, and to point out how I would have him deal with me! How often have I thought something was necessary which he saw best to deny, and that I could have done better without those dispensations which his wisdom appointed to work for my good! He is God, and not man, or else

he would have been weary of me, and left me to my own management long ago. How inconsistent! to acknowledge that I am blind, to entreat him to lead me, and yet to want to choose my own way, in the same breath! I have limited the Holy One of Israel, and not considered that he magnifies his wisdom and grace in working by contraries, and bringing good out of apparent evil. It has cost me something to bring me to confess that he is wiser than I; but I trust, through his blessing, I have not suffered wholly in vain. My sensible comforts have not been great: the proofs I have had of the evils of my sinful nature, my incapacity and aversion to good, have neither been few nor small; but by these unpromising means I hope he has made his grace and salvation precious to my soul, and in some measure weaned me from leaning to my own understanding.

Again: self-righteousness has had a considerable hand in dictating many of my desires for an increase of comfort and spiritual strength. I have wanted some stock of my own. I have been wearied of being so perpetually beholden to him, necessitated to come to him always in the same strain, as a poor miserable sinner. I would have liked to have done something for myself upon common occasions, and to have depended upon him chiefly upon extraordinary occasions. I have found indeed, that I could do nothing without his assistance, nor anything even with it, but what I have reason to be ashamed of. If this had only humbled me, and led me to rejoice in his all-sufficiency, it would have been well. But it has often had a different effect, to make me sullen, angry, and discontented, as if it was not best and most desirable that he should have all the glory of his own work, and I should have nothing to boast of, but that in the Lord I have righteousness and strength. I am now learning to glory only in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me; to be content to be nothing, that he may be All in All. But I find this a hard lesson; and when I seem to have made some proficiency, a slight turn in my spirit throws me back, and I have to begin all over again.

There is an inseparable connection between causes and effects. There can be no effect without a cause, no active cause without a proportionable effect. Now indwelling sin is an active cause; and therefore, while it remains in our nature, it will produce effects according to its strength. Why then should I be surprised, that, if the Lord suspends his influence for a moment, in that moment sin will discover itself? Why should I wonder that I can feel no lively exercise of grace, no power to raise my heart to God, any farther than he is pleased to work in me mightily; any more than wonder that I do not find fire in the bottom of a well, or that it should not be day when the sun is withdrawn from the earth? Humbled I ought to be, to find I am so totally depraved; but not discouraged, since Jesus is appointed to me as my wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; and since I find that, in the midst of all this darkness and deadness, he keeps alive the principle of grace which he has implanted in my heart.

As to Mr. Rutherford's expression which you mention, that "there is no temptation like being without temptation;" I allow it in a qualified sense; that is, it is better of the two to suffer from Satan's fiery darts, than to be lulled asleep, and drawn into a careless security, by his more subtle, though less perceptible devices; so as to grow indifferent to the means of grace, and sink into a worldly spirit, or, like the church of Laodicea, to imagine ourselves rich, and increased in goods, and that we have need of nothing. But I am persuaded this is not your case; the deadness you complain of, and which is a burden you groan under, is a very different thing. And I advise you to be cautious how you indulge a desire to be exercised with Satan's temptations, as supposing they would be conducive to make you more spiritual, or would of course open you a way to greater consolations. If you have such a desire, I may say to you, in our Lord's words, "you know not what you ask."

He who knows our weakness, and the power of our adversary, has graciously directed us to pray, that we enter *not* into temptation. Have you considered what the



enemy can do, if he is permitted to come in like a flood? In one hour he could raise such a storm as would put you to your wit's end. He could bring such a dark cloud over your mind, as would blot out all remembrance of your past comforts, or at least prevent you from deriving the least support from them. He could not only fight against your peace, but shake the very foundations of your hope, and bring you to question, not only our interest in the promises, but even to doubt of the most important and fundamental truths upon which your hopes have been built. Be thankful, therefore, if the Lord restrains his malice. A young sailor is often impatient of a short calm; but the experienced mariner, who has been often tossed with tempests, and upon the point of perishing, will seldom wish for a storm. in a word, let us patiently wait upon the Lord, and be content to follow as he leads, and he will surely do us good.

# Christian Liberty

by John Newton to the Earl of Dartmouth

November, 1776.

My London journey, which prevented my writing in October, made me amends by an opportunity of waiting upon your lordship in person. Such seasons are not only pleasant at the time — but afford me pleasure in the review. I could have wished the half hour we were together by ourselves, prolonged to half a day. The subject your lordship was pleased to suggest has been often upon my mind; and glad should I be, were I able to offer you anything satisfactory upon it.

There is no doubt but *first religious impressions* are usually mingled with much of a *legal spirit*, and that conscience at such a time is not only *tender* — but *misinformed* and *scrupulous*. And I believe, as your lordship intimated, that when the mind is more enlightened, and we feel a liberty from many *fetters* we had imposed upon ourselves — we are in danger of verging too far towards the other extreme.

It seems to me that no one person can adjust the medium, and draw the line exactly for *another*. There are so many *particulars* in every situation, of which a stranger cannot be a competent judge, and the best human advices and models are mixed with such defects — that it is not right to expect others to be absolutely guided by *our* rules. Nor is it safe for us implicitly to adopt the decisions or practices of others.

But the Scripture undoubtedly furnishes sufficient and infallible rules for every person, however circumstanced; and the throne of grace is appointed for us to wait upon the Lord for the best exposition of his precepts. Thus David often prays to be *led* in the right way — in the path of judgment. By frequent *prayer*, and close acquaintance with the Scripture, and a habitual attention to the frame of our *hearts* — there is a certain *delicacy of spiritual taste and discernment* to be acquired, which renders a nice disquisition concerning the nature and limits of the *Adiaphora*, as they are called — or how near we may go the utmost bounds of what is right, without being wrong, quite unnecessary. Love is the clearest and most persuasive indicator: and when our love to the Lord is in lively exercise, and the rule of his Word is in our eye — we seldom make great mistakes.

From the time we know the Lord, and are bound to him by the cords of love and gratitude — the two chief points we should have in our view, I apprehend, are, to maintain communion with him in our own souls, and to glorify him in the sight of men. Agreeably to these views, though the Scripture does not enumerate or decide in so many words, for or against many things which some plead for, and others condemn — yet it furnishes us with some general guidelines, which, if rightly applied, will perhaps go a good way

towards settling the debate, at least to the satisfaction of those who would rather please God than man.

Some of these canons I will just remark to your lordship; Rom. 12:1, 2; 1 Corinthians 8:13, and 10:31; 2 Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 4:30, and 5:11, 15, 16; 1 Thessalonians 5:22; Ephesians 6:18; to which I may add, as suitable to the present times, Isaiah 22:12; Luke 21:34. I apprehend the spirit of these and similar passages of Scripture (for it would be easy to adduce a larger number,) will bring a Christian under such restrictions as follow.

1. To avoid and forbear, for his own sake, from whatever has a tendency to damp and indispose his spirit in attendance upon the means of grace; for such things, if they are not condemned as *sinful per se*, if they are not absolutely unlawful, yes though they are, when duly regulated, lawful and right, (for often our *chief snares* are entwined with our *blessings*,) yet if they have a repeated and evident tendency to *deaden our hearts to divine things*, of which each person's experience must determine — then there must be something in them, either in season, measure, or circumstance — wrong to US. And let them promise what they will, they do but rob us of our *gold* — to pay us with *trinkets*. For the light of God's countenance, and an open cheerfulness of spirit in walking with him in private, is our chief joy; and we must be already greatly hurt, if anything can be pursued, allowed, or rested in — as a tolerable substitute for it.

2. For the sake of the *church*, and the influence which *example* may have upon his fellow Christians — the law of charity and prudence will often require a believer to abstain from some things, not because they are *unlawful* — but *inexpedient*. Thus the apostle, though strenuous for the right of his Christian liberty, would have abridged himself of the *use*, so as to eat no meat — rather than offend a weak brother, rather than mislead him to act against the present light of his conscience.

Upon this principle, if I could, without hurt to myself, attend some *popular amusements* — and return thence with a warm heart to my prayer closet, (the possibility of which in my own case I greatly question,) yet I should think it my duty to forbear, lest some weaker than myself should be encouraged by me to make the like experiment, though in their own minds they might fear it was wrong, and have no other reason to think it lawful, but because I did it; in which case I would suspect, that though *I* received no harm — *they* would.

I have known and conversed with some who, I fear, have made shipwreck of their profession, who have dated their first decline from *imitating others*, whom they thought wiser and better than themselves, in such kind of compliances. And it seems that an obligation to this sort of *self-denial* rises and is strengthened and proportioned to the weight and *influence* of our characters. Were I in private life, I do not know that I should think it sinful to *hunt* partridge or a rabbits; but, as a minister, I no more dare do it than

I dare join in a drunken frolic, because I know it would give offence to some, and be pleaded for as a license by others.

3. There is a duty and a charity likewise, which we owe to the world at large, as well as a faithfulness to God and his grace — in our necessary converse among them. This seems to require, that though we should not be needlessly *singular* — yet, for their instruction, and for the honor of our Lord and Master, we should keep up a certain kind of *singularity*, and show ourselves called to be a *separated* people; that, though the providence of God has given us callings and relations to fill up, (in which we cannot be too exact,) yet we are not *of* the world — but belong to another community, and act from other principles, by other rules, and to other ends — than the generality of those about us.

I have observed, that the world will often leave professors in quiet possession of their notions and sentiments, and places of worship — provided they will not be too stiff in the matter of conformity with their more general customs and amusements. But I fear many of them have had their prejudices strengthened against our holy religion by such *compliances*, and have thought, that if there were such joy and comfort to be found in the ways of God as they hear from our pulpits — then professors would not, in such numbers, and so often run among them, to beg a relief, from the burden of *time* hanging upon their hands.

Providential and necessary *calls of duty*, that lead us into the world, will not hurt us — if we find the spirit of the world unpleasant, and are glad to retire from it, and keep out of it as much as our relative duties will permit. That which is our *cross* — is not so likely to be our *snare*. But if that spirit, which we should always watch and pray against, infects and assimilates our minds to itself, then we are sure to suffer loss, and act below the dignity of our profession.

Upon the whole, it appears to me, that it is more honorable, comfortable, and safe, (if we cannot exactly hit the golden mean,) to be thought by some *too scrupulous and precise* — than actually to be found too compliant with those things which, if not absolutely contrary to a divine commandment, are hardly compatible with the tenor of the gospel, or conformable to the mind that was in Christ Jesus, which ought also to be in his people.

The places and amusements which the world frequent and admire, where occasions and temptations to sin are cultivated, where sinful passions are provoked and indulged, where the fear of God is so little known or regarded, that those who do fear him must hold their tongues, though they should hear his name blasphemed, can hardly be a Christian's *voluntary* chosen ground. Yet I fear these characters will apply to every kind of amusement in the nation.

As to *family* connections, I cannot think we are bound to break or slight them. But as believers and their relatives often live as it were in *two elements* — there is a *mutual awkwardness*, which

makes their interactions rather dry and tedious. But upon that account they are less frequent than they would otherwise be, which seems an advantage. Both sides keep up returns of *civility* and *affection*; but as they cannot unite in sentiment and leading inclination, they will not contrive to be very often together, except there is something considerable given up by one or the other. I think Christians ought to be very cautious what *concessions* they make upon this account. But, as I said at the beginning, no general positive rules can be laid down.

I have simply given your lordship such thoughts as have occurred to me while writing, without study, and without coherence. I dare not be dogmatic; but I think what I have written is agreeable both to particular texts and to the *general tenor of Scripture*. I submit it to your judgment.

# What are the most obvious Causes, Symptoms, and Effects of a Decline in the Spiritual Life?

Believers are, by nature, dead in trespasses and sins, even as others—but, by faith in the Son of God, they are made partakers of a new and endless life. They derive it from him; and he has said, "Because I live, you shall live also." But the *life of this life*, if I may so speak, its manifestation and exercise, is subject to great changes. A *sick* man is still alive—but he has lost the cheerfulness, activity, and vigor which he possessed while he was in health. There are many people, who if they are, as we would hope, really *alive* to God—are at least *sick, languid*, and in a *declining* state. May the great Physician restore them! It is sometimes said, that "the knowledge of a disease amounts to half a remedy"; which will hold thus far in the present case, that unless we are sensible of our *disorder* and our *danger*—we shall not be heartily solicitous for a *recovery*.

The *causes* and *symptoms* or *effects* of such a decline are very numerous, nor is it always easy to distinguish them, for they have reciprocal influence to strengthen each other. What may be assigned as the cause, in many cases, is likewise a proof that the plague is already begun; and the effects may be considered as so many causes, which render the malady more confirmed, and more dangerous.

Among the many general **CAUSES**, we may assign a principal place to **doctrinal error**. I do not include every mistake or erroneous sentiment, which may be adopted or retained; but there are some errors, which, for the suddenness and violence of their operation, may be compared to 'poison'! Thus the Galatians, by listening to false teachers, were seduced from the simplicity of the gospel; the consequence was, that they quickly lost the blessedness they had once spoken of. Poison is seldom taken in the gross; but, if *mingled* with food, the mischief is not suspected until it is discovered by the *effect*.

Thus those who are employed in *poisoning souls*, generally make use of some important and beneficial truth, as a vehicle by which they convey their *malignant drug* into the minds of the unwary! Perhaps they speak well of the person and atonement of Christ, or they exalt the riches and freedom of divine grace—while under the veil of these fair pretenses, they insinuate prejudices against the nature or necessity of that holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. Others speak strongly in general terms in favor of personal holiness—but their aim is to withdraw the heart from a dependence upon the Savior's blood, and the influences of his Holy Spirit, without which the most studied exactness of conduct, differs no less from the holiness of the gospel—than a picture or a statue, or a dead carcass, differs from a living man.

Whoever is thus prevailed upon, in the great and essential points of Scriptural doctrine—to separate, in his judgment and experience, those things which God has joined together, is already infected with a disease in its own nature mortal, and his religion, unless the Lord mercifully interposes, will degenerate into either *licentiousness* or *formality*!

We live in a day when too many are tossed to and fro, like ships without helm or pilot, by various winds of doctrine; and therefore those who wish well to their own souls, cannot be too much upon their guard against that spirit of *curiosity* and desire for 'new things', which the apostle describes by the metaphor of having *itching ears*, a desire of hearing every novel and singular teacher, lest they imbibe errors before they are aware, and become a prey to the *sleight* and *craftiness* of those who lie in wait to deceive!

**Spiritual pride** and **self-admiration** will likewise infallibly cause a declension in the divine life, though the mind may be preserved from the infection of doctrinal errors, and though the power of gospel truth may for a time have been really experienced. If our attainments in knowledge and giftedness, and even in grace—seduce us into a good opinion of ourselves, as if we were wise and good—we are already ensnared, in danger of falling every step we take, of mistaking the right path, and proceeding from bad to worse, without a power of correcting or even of discovering our deviations—unless and until the Lord mercifully interposes, by restoring us to a spirit of humility and dependence upon Himself. For God, who gives more grace to the humble—resists the proud! He beholds them with abhorrence—in proportion to the degree in which they admire themselves. It is the invariable law of his kingdom, that everyone who exalts himself—shall be abased.

True Christians, through the remaining evil of their hearts, and the subtle temptations of their enemy, are liable, not only to the workings of that pride which is common to our fallen nature—but to a certain kind of pride, which, though the most absurd and intolerable in any person, can only be found among those who make profession of the gospel. We have nothing but what we have received, and therefore to be proud of titles, wealth, knowledge, success, or any temporal advantages, by which the providence of God has distinguished us—is downright sinful! And for those who confess themselves to be 'sinners', and therefore deserving of nothing but misery and wrath—to be proud of those peculiar blessings which are derived from the gospel of his grace, is a wickedness of which even the demons are not capable of!

The apostle Paul was so aware of his danger of being *exalted above measure*, through the abundant revelations and peculiar favors which the Lord had afforded him, that he says, "There was given me a messenger of Satan to buffet me." He speaks of this sharp dispensation as an *additional mercy*, because he saw it was necessary, and designed to keep him humble and attentive to his own weakness.

*Ministers* who are honored with singular abilities and success, have great need of watchfulness and prayer on this account. The *Lord* sees not as *man* sees. Simple-hearted hearers are apt to admire their favorite preacher, and almost to consider him as something more than man in the pulpit, taking it for granted that he is deeply affected himself with the truths, which, with so much apparent liberty and power, he proposes to them; while, perhaps, the *poor worm* is secretly indulging self-applause, and pleasing himself with the numbers and attention of those who hang upon his words!

Perhaps such thoughts will occasionally rise in the minds of the best ministers; but, if they are allowed, if they become habitual, and enter strongly into the idea he forms of his own character; and if, while he professes to preach Christ Jesus the Lord—he is preaching himself, and seeking his own glory—he is guilty of high treason against the Majesty of him in whose name he speaks. And sooner or later, the effects of his pride will be visible and noticed. Errors in judgment, gross misconduct, and abatement of zeal, of gifts, of influence, are evils, always to be dreaded, when spiritual pride has gained an ascendancy, whether in public or in private life. "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?" 1 Corinthians 4:7 "The Lord Almighty has planned it, to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth." Isaiah 23:9

**An inordinate desire and attachment to the things of this present world**, may be assigned as a third prevailing cause of a spiritual declension. Unless this evil principle is mortified in its root—by the doctrine of the cross—it will in time prevail over the most splendid profession. That love of the world, which is inconsistent with the true love of God—manifests itself in two different ways, as men by temper and habit are differently inclined:

The first is covetousness or greediness for gain. This was the ruin of Judas, and probably the cause of the defection of Demas. By the honorable mention made of him in some of Paul's epistles, Demas seems to have had much of Paul's confidence and esteem for a season. Yet at length his covetous passion prevailed, and the last account we have of him from the apostle, is, "Demas has deserted me—because he loved this present world." 2 Timothy 4:10

Again, there are people not chargeable with the love of money for its own sake—for they rather squander it—than hoard it. Yet they are equally under the influence of a worldly spirit! They manifest their worldly hearts—by an expensive taste in the articles of dress, furniture and feasting—which are always unsuitable to a Christian profession.

It is not easy to exactly mark out the precise line of Christian conduct in these respects, which befits the different situations in which the providence of God has placed us. Nor is it necessary, to those who are poor in spirit—and upright in heart. A simple desire



of pleasing God, and adorning the gospel, will solve most cases of how a believer should spend his money—which occupy little and trifling minds. The inclination of our heart—will always direct and regulate our voluntary expenses. Those who love the Lord, and whose spirits are lively in His service, will avoid both stinginess and selfish extravagance. They will rather lean to the frugal side in how they spend their money on themselves—that they may be better able to promote God's cause, and to relieve the necessities of His people.

Misers, who can be content with the mere form of religion, will hoard all they can save—in order to gratify their avarice! Others will spend all they can spare—to gratify their vanity, or their worldly appetites!

It is not easy to determine which of these evils is the greatest. Perhaps of the two, the miser is least accessible to conviction, and consequently the most difficult to be reclaimed. But a desire for extravagance and indulgence, if persisted in, will gradually lead to such compliances with the spirit and maxims of the world, as will certainly weaken, if not wholly suppress—the exercise of vital godliness. In whatever degree the "love of the world" prevails—the "health of the soul" will proportionably decline.

"People who long to be rich, fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows!" 1 Timothy 6:9-10.

Many other causes might be enumerated—but most of them may be reduced to the heads I have already mentioned. The practice of a single sin, or the omission of a single duty—if allowed against the light of conscience, and, if habitual, will be sufficient to keep the soul weak, unfruitful, and uncomfortable, and lay it open to the impression of every surrounding temptation. Sometimes *unfaithfulness* to light already received, perverts the judgment, and then errors which seem to afford some countenance or plea for a sin which the heart will not give up, are readily embraced, to evade the remonstrances of conscience. At other times, *errors*, incautiously admitted, imperceptibly weaken the sense of duty, and by degrees, spread their influences over the whole conduct. Faith and a good conscience are frequently mentioned together by the apostle, for they are inseparable; to part with one is to part with both. Those who hold the mystery of faith in a pure conscience, shall be preserved in a thriving frame of spirit, they shall grow in grace, go on from strength to strength, shall walk honorably and comfortably. But so far as the doctrines or the rules of the gospel are neglected, a wasting sickness will prey upon the vitals of religion, a sickness, in its nature mortal, and from which none recover—but those on whom God mercifully bestows the grace of repentance unto life.

The **SYMPTOMS** of such a soul sickness are very numerous and diversified, as tempers and situations vary. A few of those which are more generally apparent, and sure indications of a decline in religion are the following.

*Bodily* sickness is usually attended with loss of appetite, inactivity, and restlessness. Likewise, the sickness of the *soul* deprives it of rest and peace, causes a dullness and indolence in the service of God, and an indisposition to the means of grace, to secret waiting upon God, and to the public ordinances. These appointments, so necessary to preserve spiritual health, are either gradually neglected and given up, or the attendance upon them dwindles into a mere formal round, without relish and without benefit.

To the healthy man, plain food is savory—but the palate, when vitiated by sickness, becomes picky and fastidious, and hankers after varieties and delicacies. Likewise, when the sincere milk of the gospel, plain truth delivered in plain words, is no longer pleasing—but a person requires curious speculations, or the frothy eloquence of man's wisdom, to engage his attention, it is a bad sign. For these are suited to nourish, not the constitution—but the disease.

From slighting or trifling with those means which God has provided to satisfy the soul—the next step usually is—to seek relief from a compliance with the spirit, customs, and amusements of the *world*. And these compliances, when once allowed, will soon be defended; and those who cannot approve or imitate such conformity, will be represented as under the influence of a narrow, legal, or pharisaic spirit.

The sick professor is in a delirium, which prevents him from *feeling* his disease—and he rather supposes the alteration in his conduct is owing to an increase of wisdom, light, and liberty. He considers the time when he was more strict and circumspect as a time of ignorance, will smile at the recollection of what he now deems his *childish scruples*, and congratulates himself that he has happily outgrown them, and now finds that the services of *God* and the *world* are not so incompatible as he once thought them to be.

Yet while he thus relaxes the rule of his own conduct, he is a critically severe observer of the behavior of others. He sharply censures the miscarriages and even the mistakes of ministers and professors, if an occasion offers, and speaks of these things, not weeping as the apostle did—but with pleasure, and labors to persuade himself, that the strictness so much talked of, is either a cloak of hypocrisy, or the fruit of superstition. True Christians seldom meet with more uncandid misconstruction, or undeserved reproach, than from those who, having once been their companions, afterwards desert them.

When the disorder is at this height, it is truly *dangerous*, and indeed, as to any human help, *desperate*. But power belongs to God. May it please him to remember in mercy those who are near unto death, to restore them to their right minds, and to recover

them to himself. Otherwise, "it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them!"

# Causes, nature, and marks of a decline in grace

March, 1765

My friend,

I remember, when I once had the pleasure of waiting on you, you were pleased to begin an interesting conversation, which, to my concern, was interrupted. The subject was concerning the **causes, nature, and marks of a decline in grace**; how it happens that we lose that warm impression of Divine things, which in some favored moments we think it almost impossible to forget; how far this change of frame is consistent with a *spiritual growth* in other respects; how to form a comparative judgment of our proficiency upon the whole; and by what steps the losses we sustain from our necessary connection with a sinful nature and a sinful world, may be retrieved from time to time. I beg your permission to fill up the paper with a view to these inquiries. I do not mean to offer a labored essay on them—but such thoughts as shall occur while the pen is in my hand.

The awakened soul (especially when, after a season of distress and terror, it begins to taste that the Lord is gracious) finds itself as in a new world. No change in outward life can be so sensible so affecting. No wonder, then, that at such a time little else can be thought of—the transition from darkness—to light; from a sense of wrath—to a hope of glory, is the greatest change which can be imagined, and is oftentimes as *sudden* as *wonderful*. Hence the general characteristics of young converts are *zeal* and *love*. Like Israel at the Red Sea, they have just seen the wonderful works of the Lord, and they cannot but sing his praise; they are deeply affected with the *danger* they have lately escaped, and with the case of multitudes around them, who are secure and careless in the same alarming situation; and a sense of their own mercies, and a compassion for the souls of others, is so transporting, that they can hardly forbear preaching to everyone they meet.

This emotion is highly just and reasonable, with respect to the causes from whence it springs; and it is doubtless a proof, not only of the imperfection—but the depravity of our nature, that we are not always thus affected; yet it is not entirely genuine. If we examine this character closely, which seems at first sight, a pattern and a reproof to Christians of longer standing, we shall for the most part find it attended with considerable **defects**.

**1. Such people are very weak in faith.** Their confidence arises rather from the lively impressions of joy within—than from a distinct and clear apprehension of the work of God in Christ. The comforts which are intended as cordials to animate them against the opposition of an unbelieving world—they mistake and rest in as the proper evidences of their hope. And hence it comes to pass, that when the Lord varies his dispensations, and hides his face—they are soon troubled and at their wit's end.

**2. Those who are in this state of their first love, are seldom free from something of a censorious spirit.** They have not yet felt all the deceitfulness of their own hearts; they are not well acquainted with the devices or temptations of Satan; and therefore know not how to sympathize or make allowances with others, where allowances are necessary and due—and can hardly bear with any who do not reveal the same earnestness as themselves.

**3. They are likewise more or less under the influence of self-righteousness and self-will.** They mean well—but not being as yet well acquainted with the spiritual meaning and proper use of the law, nor established in the life of faith, a part (oftentimes a very considerable part) of their zeal spends itself in *externals* and *non-essentials*, prompts them to practice what is not commanded, to refrain from what is

lawful, and to observe various and needless austerities and singularities, as their tempers and circumstances differ.

However, with all their faults, methinks there is something very beautiful and engaging in the honest vehemence of a young convert. Some cold and rigid judges are ready to reject these promising appearances on account of *incidental blemishes*. But would a gardener throw away a fine nectarine, because it is green, and has not yet attained all that beauty and flavor which a few more showers and suns will impart? Perhaps it will hold for the most part in *grace* as in *nature* (some exceptions there are) —if there is not some *fire* in youth, we can hardly expect a proper *warmth* in old age.

But the great and good Gardener watches over what his own hand has planted, and carries on his work by a variety of *different*, and even *contrary* dispensations. While their mountain stands thus strong, they think they shall never be moved; but at length they find a change. Sometimes it comes on by insensible degrees. That part of their affection which was purely natural, will abate of course when the *power of novelty* ceases. They will begin, in some instances, to perceive their own indiscretions; and an endeavor to correct the excesses of an *imprudent zeal* will often draw them towards the contrary extreme of *remissness*. The *evils of their hearts*, which, though overpowered, were *not eradicated*, will revive again. The enemy will watch his occasions to meet them with suitable temptations; and as it is the Lord's design that they should *experimentally learn and feel their own weakness*, he will in some instances be permitted to succeed.

When guilt is thus brought upon the conscience, the heart grows hard, the hands feeble, and the knees weak; then confidence is shaken, the spirit of prayer interrupted, the armor gone. And thus things grow worse and worse—until the Lord is pleased to interpose. For though we can fall of ourselves, we cannot rise without his help! Indeed, every sin, in its own nature, has a tendency towards a final apostasy! But there is a provision in the covenant of grace, and the Lord, in his own time, returns to convince, humble, pardon, comfort, and renew the soul. He touches the rock—and the waters flow. By repeated experiments and exercises of this sort (for this wisdom is seldom acquired by one or a few lessons), we begin at length to learn that we *are* nothing, *have* nothing, call *do* nothing—but sin. And thus we are gradually prepared to live more outside of ourselves—and to derive all our sufficiency of every kind from Jesus, the fountain of grace. We learn to tread more warily, to trust less to our own strength; to have lower thoughts of ourselves, and higher thoughts of Jesus! In which two last particulars, I apprehend what the Scripture means by a growth of grace does properly consist. Both are increasing in the lively Christian—every day shows him more of his own heart, and more of the power, sufficiency, compassion, and grace of his adorable Redeemer; but neither will be complete until we get to heaven.

I apprehend, therefore, that though we find an abatement of that sensible warmth of affection which we felt at first setting out; yet, if our views are more evangelical, our judgment more ripened, our hearts more habitually humbled under a sense of inward depravity, our tempers more softened into sympathy and tenderness; if our prevailing desires are spiritual, and we practically esteem the precepts, ordinances, and people of God; we may warrantably conclude, that his good work of grace in us is, upon the whole, on an increase.

But still it is to be lamented, that an increase of knowledge and experience, should be so generally attended with a decline of fervor. If this was not for what has passed in my own heart, I would be ready to think it impossible. But this very circumstance gives me a still more emphatic conviction of my own vileness and depravity. The lack of humiliation humbles me, and my very indifference rouses and awakens me to earnestness.

There are, however, seasons of refreshment, ineffable glances of light and power upon the soul—which, as they are derived from clearer displays of Divine grace, if not so elevating as the first joys, are more penetrating, transforming, and animating. A glance of these, when compared with our sluggish stupidity when they are withheld—weans the heart from this wretched state of sin and temptation, and makes the thoughts of death and eternity desirable. Then this *conflict* shall cease; I shall sin and wander no more, see him as he is, and be like him forever!

If the question is—How are these bright moments to be prolonged, renewed, or retrieved? We are directed to faith and diligence. A careful use of the appointed means of grace, a watchful endeavor to avoid the occasions and appearances of evil, and especially assiduity in secret prayer, will bring us as much of them as the Lord sees good for us. He knows best—why we are not to be trusted with them continually. Here we are to walk by faith, to be exercised and tried; by and by we shall be crowned, and the desires he has given shall be abundantly satisfied!

# By the grace of God I am what I am!

June, 1773

Dear sir,

I must content myself with the idea of the pleasure it would give me, to sit with you half a day under my favorite great tree, and converse with you, not concerning the comparatively petty affairs of human governments—but of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. How many delightful subjects would suggest themselves in a free and retired conversation! The excellency of our King, the permanency and glory of his kingdom, the beauty of his administration, the privileges of his subjects, the review of what he has done for us, and the prospect of what he has prepared for us in future—and if, while we were conversing, he should be pleased to join us (as he did the disciples when walking to Emmaus), how would our hearts burn within us! Indeed, whether we are alone or in company, the most interesting topics strike us but *faintly*—unless he is pleased to afford his gracious influence; but when he is present—light, love, liberty, and joy, spring up in the hearts that know him.

But we cannot meet. All that is left for me, is to use the liberty you allow me of offering a few hints upon these subjects by letter, not because you don't know them—but because you love them. The hour is coming, when all *impediments* shall be removed—all distinctions shall cease that are founded upon sublunary things, and the earth and all its works shall be burnt up. Glorious day! May our souls be filled with the thought, and learn to estimate all things around us now—by the view in which they will appear to us then. Then it will be of small consequence who was the prince, and who was the beggar, in this life; but who in their several situations sought, and loved, and feared, and honored the Lord.

Alas! how many of the kings of the earth, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, will then say (in vain) to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb!" In this world they are for the most part too *busy* to regard the commands of God, or too *amusing* to seek his favor. They have their good things here; they please themselves for a while, and in a moment they go down to the grave. In that moment their thoughts perish, their schemes are left unfinished, they are torn from their possessions, and enter upon a new, an untried, an unchangeable, a never-ending state of existence! Alas, is this all the world can afford!

I congratulate you—not because God has appointed you to appear in an elevated rank, (this, abstracted from the opportunity it affords you of greater gospel usefulness, would perhaps be a more proper subject for condolence); but that he has admitted you to those honors and privileges which come from him alone, and which so few in the superior ranks of life think worthy of their attention. "**By the grace of God I am what I am!**" 1 Corinthians 15:10.

As believers, we are often affected with a sense of God's *distinguishing mercy* to us. We are debtors, great debtors to the sovereign grace of God, which alone makes us to differ from the perishing world around us!

Yet it does not yet appear *what we shall be*. We cannot form a just conception of *the misery from which we are redeemed*, much less of *the price paid for our redemption!* How little do we know of the Redeemer's surpassing excellency, and of the unutterable agonies He endured, when His soul was made an offering for sin, and it pleased the Father to bruise Him—that by His stripes we might be healed! These things will strike us in quite another manner—when we view them from the light of eternity!

May the cheering contemplation of the glorious hope set before us—support and animate us to improve our short interval on earth, and fill us with a holy ambition of shining as lights in this evil world, to the praise and glory of His grace—who has called us out of darkness, into His glorious light!

Encompassed as we are with snares, temptations, and infirmities, it is possible (by His promised assistance) to live in some good measure *above the world*—above the influence of its *cares*, its *smiles*, or its *frowns*. Our citizenship is in heaven—we are not at home—but only reside here on earth for a season, to fulfill our appointed service. The Lord, whom we serve, has promised that He will *guide* us by His wisdom, *strengthen* us by His power, and *comfort* us with the light of His countenance, which is better than life. Every temporal blessing we receive from Him, is a token of His favor, and a pledge of that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, which He has reserved for us in heaven. Oh! to hear Him say at last, "*Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Lord!*" will be rich amends for all that we can lose, suffer, or endure, for His sake!

"No *eye* has seen, no *ear* has heard, and no *mind* has imagined—what God has prepared for those who love Him!" 1 Corinthians 2:9