

GOD RULES ALL



LETTERS BY
JOHN NEWTON

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God rules all.

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God rules all!

February, 1774

Dear sir,

"I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. Psalm 135:5-6. **God rules all!** And though He is concealed by a veil of second causes from common eyes, so that they can perceive only the means, instruments, and contingencies by which he works, and therefore think He does nothing; yet, in reality, He does all, according to His own counsel and pleasure, in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth.

Who can enumerate all the beings and events, which are incessantly before His eye, adjusted by His wisdom, dependent on His will, and regulated by His power! If we consider the heavens, the work of His fingers, the moon and the stars which He has ordained; if we call in the assistance of astronomers to help us in forming a conception of the number, distances, magnitudes, and motions of the heavenly bodies—the more we search, the more we shall be confirmed, that these are but a small portion of His ways! But He calls them all by their names, upholds them by His power, and without His continual energy upholding them—they would rush into confusion, or sink into nothing!

If we speak of intelligences, He is the life, the joy, the sun of all that are capable of happiness. Whatever may be signified by the thrones, principalities, and powers in the world of light, they are all dependent upon his power, and obedient to his command. It is equally true of angels as of men, that without him they can do nothing. The powers of darkness are likewise under his subjection and control. Though but little is said of them in Scripture, we read enough to assure us that their number must be immensely great, and that their strength, subtlety, and malice are such as we may tremble to think of them as our enemies, and probably should—but for our strange *insensibility* to whatever does not fall under the cognizance of our outward senses. But he holds them all in a chain, so that they can do or attempt nothing but by his permission; and whatever he permits them to do has its appointed subservience in accomplishing his designs.

To come nearer home, and to speak of what seems more suited to our scanty apprehensions—still we may be lost in wonder. Before this blessed and only Potentate, all the nations of the earth are but as the dust upon the balance, and the small drop of a bucket, and might be thought (if compared with the immensity of his works) scarcely worthy of his notice! Yet here he presides, pervades, provides, protects, and rules. In him his creatures live, move, and have their being. From him is their food and preservation. The eyes of all are upon him—what he gives they gather, and can gather no more! And at his word they sink into the dust! There is not a *worm* which crawls upon the ground, or a *flower* which grows in the pathless wilderness, or a shell upon the sea-shore—but bears the impress of his wisdom, power, and goodness.

With respect to men, he reigns with uncontrolled dominion over every kingdom, family, and individual. Here we may be astonished at his wisdom in employing free agents, the greater part of whom are his enemies, to accomplish his purposes! But, however reluctant, they all serve him. His patience likewise is wonderful. Multitudes, yes, nearly our whole species, spend the life and strength which he affords them, and abuse all the bounties he heaps upon them—in the ways of sin! His commands are disregarded, his name blasphemed, his mercy disdained, his power defied—yet still he spares! It is an eminent part of his government, to restrain the depravity of human nature, and in various ways to check its effects, which, if

left to itself, without his providential control, would presently make earth the very image of hell—for the vilest men are not allowed to perpetrate a thousandth part of the evil which their hearts would prompt them to. The earth, though lying in the wicked one, is filled with the goodness of the Lord. He preserves man and beast, sustains the young lion in the forest, feeds the birds of the air, which have neither storehouse or barn, and adorns the insects and the flowers of the field with a beauty and elegance beyond all that can be found in the courts of kings!

Still more wonderful, is Christ's administration in His kingdom of grace! He is present with all His creatures—but in a special manner with His own people. Each of these are monuments of a more illustrious display of power, than that which spread abroad the heavens like a curtain, and laid the foundations of the earth. For He finds them all in a state of rebellion and enmity—and makes them His willing people! From the moment that He reveals His love to them—He espouses their cause, and takes all their concerns into His own hands. He is near and attentive to every one of them—as if there was only that one!

This high and lofty One, who inhabits eternity, before whom the angels veil their faces—condescends to hold communion with those whom men despise. He passes by the kings and the princes, to manifest Himself to an humble soul in a mud-walled cottage! He comforts them when in trouble, strengthens them when weak, makes their beds in sickness, revives them when fainting, upholds them when falling, and so seasonably and effectually manages for them, that, though they are persecuted and tempted, though their enemies are many and mighty—nothing is able to separate them from His love!

And all this he does alone. All the abilities, powers, and instincts, which are found among creatures, are emanations from his fullness. All changes, successes, disappointments—all that is memorable in the annals of history, all the rising and falls of empires, all the turns in human life—take place according to his plan. In vain men contrive and combine to accomplish their own counsels, unless they are parts of his counsel likewise! The efforts of their utmost strength and wisdom are crossed and reversed, by the feeblest and most unthought-of circumstances. But when he has a work to accomplish, and his time has come, however inadequate and weak the means he employs may seem to a carnal eye—the success is infallibly secured. For all things serve him, and are in his hands as clay in the hands of the potter. Great and marvelous are your works, Lord God Almighty! just and true are your ways, O King of saints!

This is the God whom we adore! This is he who invites us to lean upon his almighty arm, and promises to guide us with his unerring eye! He says to all of his children, "Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine! When you go through deep waters and great trouble—I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty—you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression—you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior!" Isaiah 43:1-3.

Therefore, while in the path of duty, and following his call, we may cheerfully pass on, regardless of apparent difficulties; for the Lord, whose we are, and who has taught us make his glory our highest end, will go before us, and at his word crooked things become straight, light shines out of darkness, and mountains sink into plains! Faith may and must be exercised; experience must and will confirm what his word declares, that the heart is deceitful, and that man in his best estate is vanity! But his promises to those who fear him, shall be confirmed likewise, and they shall find him, in all situations, to be our sun, shield, and exceeding great reward.

I have lost another of my people; a *mother in our Israel*; a person of much experience, eminent grace, wisdom, and usefulness. She walked with God forty years. She was one of the Lord's poor; but her poverty was decent, sanctified, and honorable. She lived respected, and her death is considered as a public loss. It is a great loss to me: I shall miss her advice and example, by which I have been often edified and animated. But Jesus still lives. Almost her last words were, "The Lord is my portion, says my soul."

Divine guidance

Question: In what manner are we to expect the Lord's promised guidance to influence our judgments, and direct our steps in the path of duty?

Dear Sir,

It is well for those who are duly sensible of their own weakness and fallibility, and of the difficulties with which they are surrounded in life, that the Lord has promised to guide his people with his eye, and to cause them to hear a word behind them, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when they are in danger of turning aside either to the right hand or to the left. For this purpose, he has given us the written word to be a lamp to our feet, and encouraged us to pray for the teaching of his Holy Spirit, that we may rightly understand and apply it. It is, however, too often seen, that many widely deviate from the path of duty, and commit gross and perplexing mistakes, while they profess a sincere desire to know the will of God, and think they have His warrant and authority. This must certainly be owing to misapplication of the rule by which they judge, since the rule itself is infallible, and the promise sure. The Scripture cannot deceive us, if rightly understood; but it may, if perverted, prove the occasion of confirming us in a mistake. The Holy Spirit cannot mislead those who are under his influence; but we may suppose that we are so, when we are not. It may not be unseasonable to offer a few thoughts upon a subject of great importance to the peace of our minds, and to the honor of our holy profession.

Many have been deceived as to what they ought to do, or in forming a judgment beforehand of events in which they are nearly concerned, by expecting direction in ways which the Lord has not warranted. I shall mention some of the principal of these, for it is not easy to enumerate them all.

Some people, when two or more things have been in view, and they could not immediately determine which to prefer, have committed their case to the Lord by prayer, and have then proceeded to **cast lots**: taking it for granted, that, after such a solemn appeal, the turning up of the lot might be safely rested in as an answer from God. It is true, the Scripture, and indeed right reason, assures us, that the Lord disposes the lot; and there are several cases recorded in the Old Testament, in which lots were used by Divine appointment; but I think neither these, nor the choosing Matthias by lot to the apostleship, are proper precedents for our conduct. In the division of the lands of Canaan, in the affair of Achan, and in the nomination of Saul to the kingdom, recourse was had to lots by God's express command. The instance of Matthias likewise was singular, such as can never happen again; namely, the choice of an apostle; who would not have been upon a par with the rest, who were chosen immediately by the Lord, unless He had been pleased to interpose in some extraordinary way; and all these were before the canon of Scripture was completed, and before the full descent and communication of the Holy Spirit, who was promised to dwell with the church to the end of time.

Under the New Testament dispensation, we are invited to come boldly to the Throne of Grace, to make our requests known to the Lord, and to cast our cares upon him: but we have neither precept nor promise respecting the use of lots; and to have recourse to them without his appointment, seems to be tempting him rather than honoring him, and to savor more of presumption than dependence. The effects likewise of this expedient have often been unhappy and hurtful: a sufficient proof how little it is to be trusted to as a guide of our conduct.

Others, when in doubt, have **opened the Bible at a venture**, and expected to find something to direct them in the first verse they should cast their eye upon. It is no small discredit to this practice, that the Heathens, who knew not the Bible, used

some of their favorite books in the same way; and grounded their persuasions of what they ought to do, or of what should befall them, according to the passage they happened to open upon. Among the Romans, the writings of Virgil were frequently consulted upon these occasions. And indeed Virgil is as well adapted to satisfy inquirers in this way as the Bible itself; for if people will be governed by the occurrence of a single text of Scripture, without regarding the context, or duly comparing it with the general tenor of the word of God, and with their own circumstances, they may commit the greatest extravagances, expect the greatest impossibilities, and contradict the plainest dictates of common sense, while they think they have the word of God on their side.

Can the opening upon 2Sa. 7:3, when Nathan said unto David, "Do all that is in your heart, for the Lord is with you," be sufficient to determine the lawfulness or expediency of actions? Or can a glance of the eye upon our Lord's words to the woman of Canaan, Mat. 15:28, "Be it unto you even as you will," amount to a proof, that the present earnest desire of the mind (whatever it may be) shall be surely accomplished? Yet it is certain that matters big with important consequences have been engaged in, and the most optimistic expectations formed, upon no better warrant than dipping (as it is called) upon a text of Scripture.

A sudden strong impression of a text, that seems to have some resemblance to the concern upon the mind, has been accepted by many as an infallible token that they were right, and that things would go just as they would have them: or, on the other hand, if the passage bore a threatening aspect, it has filled them with fears and disquietudes, which they have afterwards found were groundless and unnecessary. These impressions, being more out of their power than the former method, have been more generally regarded and trusted to, but have frequently proved no less delusive.

It is allowed, that such impressions of a precept or a promise as humble, animate, or comfort the soul, by giving it a lively sense of the truth contained in the words, are both profitable and pleasant; and many of the Lord's people have been instructed and supported (especially in a time of trouble) by some seasonable word of grace applied and sealed by his Spirit with power to their hearts. But if impressions or impulses are received as a voice from heaven, directing to such particular actions as could not be proved to be duties without them, a person may be unwarily misled into great evils and gross delusions; and many have been so. There is no doubt but the enemy of our souls, if permitted, can furnish us with Scriptures in abundance in this way, and for these purposes.

Some people judge of the nature and event of their designs, by **the freedom which they find in prayer**. They say they commit their ways to God, seek his direction, and are favored with much enlargement of spirit; and therefore they cannot doubt but what they have in view is acceptable in the Lord's sight. I would not absolutely reject every plea of this kind, yet, without other corroborating evidence, I could not admit it in proof of what it is brought for. It is not always easy to determine when we have spiritual freedom in prayer. Self is deceitful; and when our hearts are much fixed and bent upon a thing, this may put words and earnestness into our mouths. Too often we first secretly determine for ourselves, and then come to ask counsel of God; in such a disposition we are ready to catch at everything that may seem to favor our darling scheme; and the Lord, for the detection and chastisement of our hypocrisy (for hypocrisy it is, though perhaps hardly perceptible to ourselves), may answer us according to our idols; see Eze. 14:3-4.

Besides, the grace of prayer may be in exercise, when the subject-matter of the prayer may be founded upon a mistake, from the intervention of circumstances which we are unacquainted with. Thus, I may have a friend in a distant country; I hope he is alive; I pray for him, and it is my duty so to do. The Lord, by his Spirit,

assists his people in what is their present duty. If I am enabled to pray with much liberty for my distant friend, it may be a proof that the Spirit of the Lord is pleased to assist my infirmities, but it is no proof that my friend is certainly alive at the time I am praying for him: and if the next time I pray for him I should find my spirit straitened, I am not to conclude that my friend is dead, and therefore the Lord will not assist me in praying for him any longer.

Once more: A **remarkable dream** has sometimes been thought as decisive as any of the foregoing methods of knowing the will of God. That many wholesome and seasonable admonitions have been received in dreams, I willingly allow; but, though they may be occasionally noticed, to pay a great attention to dreams, especially to be guided by them, to form our sentiments, conduct, or expectations upon them—is superstitious and dangerous. The promises are not made to those who dream, but to those who watch.

Upon the whole, though the Lord may give to some people, upon some occasions, a hint or encouragement out of the common way; yet expressly to look for and seek his direction in such things as I have mentioned, is unscriptural and ensnaring. I could fill many sheets with a detail of the inconveniences and evils which have followed such a dependence, within the course of my own observation. I have seen some presuming they were doing God service, while acting in contradiction to his express commands. I have known others infatuated to believe a lie, declaring themselves assured, beyond the shadow of a doubt, of things which, after all, never came to pass; and when at length disappointed, Satan has improved the occasion to make them doubt of the plainest and most important truths, and to account their whole former experience a delusion. By these things weak believers have been stumbled, cavils and offenses against the Gospel multiplied, and the ways of truth evil spoken of.

But how then may the Lord's guidance be expected? After what has been premised negatively, the question may be answered in a few words. In general, God guides and directs His people, by affording them, in answer to prayer, the light of his Holy Spirit, who enables them to understand and to love the Scriptures. The word of God furnishes us with just principles, and right apprehensions, to regulate our judgments and affections, and thereby to influence and direct our conduct. Those who study the Scriptures, in a humble dependence upon Divine teaching, are taught to make a true estimate of everything around them, and are gradually formed into a spirit of submission to the will of God. They thereby discover the nature and duties of their several situations and relations in life, and the snares and temptations to which they are exposed.

The word of God dwelling richly in them, is a preservative from error, a light to their feet, and a spring of strength and consolation. By treasuring up the doctrines, precepts, promises, examples, and exhortations of Scripture, in their minds, and daily comparing themselves with the rule by which they walk, they grow into a habitual frame of spiritual wisdom, and acquire a gracious taste, which enables them to judge of right and wrong with a degree of readiness and certainty, as a musical ear judges of sounds. And they are seldom mistaken, because they are influenced by the love of Christ, which rules in their hearts, and a regard to the glory of God, which is the great object they have in view.

In particular cases, the Lord opens and shuts for them, breaks down walls of difficulty which obstruct their path, or hedges up their way with thorns, when they are in danger of going wrong, by the dispensations of his providence. They know that their concerns are in his hands; they are willing to follow where and when he leads; but are afraid of going before him. Therefore they are not impatient: because they believe, they will not make haste, but wait daily upon him in prayer; especially when they find their hearts most engaged in any purpose or pursuit, they are most

watchful of being deceived by appearances, and dare not move farther or faster than they can perceive his light shining upon their paths. I express at least their desire, if not their attainment: thus they would be. And though there are seasons when faith languishes, and self too much prevails, this is their general disposition; and the Lord, whom they serve, does not disappoint their expectations. He leads them by a right way, preserves them from a thousand snares, and satisfies them that he is and will be their guide even unto death.

Without Me you can do nothing

February 23, 1775

Dear sir,

I assent to our Lord's declaration, "Without Me you can do nothing;" not only upon the authority of the Speaker--but from the same irresistible and experimental evidence, as if he had told me, that I cannot make the sun to shine, or change the course of the seasons. Though my pen and my tongue sometimes move freely--yet the total incapacity and stagnation of thought I labor under at other times, convinces me, that *in myself I have not sufficiency to think a good thought!* And I believe the case would be the same, if that little measure of knowledge and abilities, which I am too prone to look upon as my own, were a thousand times greater than it is.

For every new service, I stand in need of a new supply, and can bring forth nothing of my supposed store into actual exercise--but by his immediate assistance. His gracious influence is that, to those who are best furnished with gifts, which the water is to the mill, or the wind to the ship, without which the whole apparatus is motionless and useless.

I apprehend that we lose much of the comfort which might arise from a sense of our continual dependence upon him, and, of course, fall short of acknowledging as we ought what we receive from him--by mistaking the manner of his operation. Perhaps we take it too much for granted, that communications from himself must bear some kind of sensible impression that they are his, and therefore are ready to give our own *industry* or *ingenuity*, the credit for those performances in which we can perceive no such divine impression. Yet it is very possible that we may be under his influence, when we are least aware! And though what we say, or write, or do, may seem no way extraordinary; yet that we should be led to such a particular turn of thought at one time rather than at another, has, in my own concerns, often appeared to me remarkable, from the *circumstances* which have attended, or the *consequences* which have followed.

How often, in the choice of a text, or in the course of a sermon, or in a letter to a friend, have I been led to speak a word in season--and what I have expressed at large, and in general--has been so exactly suited to some case which I was utterly unacquainted with--that I could hardly have hit it so well, had I been previously informed of it. Some instances of this kind have been so striking, as hardly to admit a doubt of *divine agency*. And, indeed, if believers in Jesus, however unworthy in themselves, are the temples of the Holy Spirit; if the Lord lives, dwells, and walks in them; if he is their life and their light; if he has promised to guide them with his eye, and to work in them to will and to do of his own good pleasure; methinks what I have mentioned, and more, may be reasonably expected.

That line in the hymn, "*Help I every moment need,*" is not a hyperbolic expression--but strictly and literally true, not only in great emergencies--but in our smoother hours, and most familiar paths. This gracious assistance is afforded in a way *imperceptible* to ourselves, to hide pride from us, and to prevent us from being indolent and careless with respect to the use of appointed means. And it would be likewise more abundantly, and perhaps more sensibly afforded, were our spirits more simple in waiting upon the Lord. But, alas! a divided heart, an undue attachment to some temporal object, sadly deadens our spirits (I speak for myself), and grieves the Lord's Spirit; so that we walk in darkness and at a distance, and, though called to great privileges, live far below them!

But methinks the thought of him who is always near, and upon whom we do and must incessantly *depend*, should suggest a powerful motive for the closest attention

to his revealed will, and the most punctual compliance with it. For so far as the Lord withdraws from us--we become as blind men; and with the clearest light, and upon the plainest ground, we are liable, or rather sure, to stumble at every step.

Though there is a principle of consciousness, and a determination of the will, sufficient to denominate our thoughts and performances *our own*; yet I believe mankind in general are more under an *invisible agency* than they apprehend. The Lord, immediately from himself, and perhaps by the ministry of his holy angels--guides, prompts, restrains, or warns his people. So there undoubtedly is what I may call a *black inspiration*--the influence of the evil spirits, who work in the hearts of the disobedient, and not only excite their wills--but assist their faculties, and qualify as well as incline them to be more assiduously wicked, and more extensively mischievous, than they could be of themselves. I consider Voltaire, for instance, and many writers of the same stamp, to be little more than secretaries and amanuenses of *the evil one*--who has unspeakably more wit and adroitness in promoting infidelity and immorality, than they of themselves can justly pretend to. They have, for a while, the credit (if I may so call it) of the fund from whence they draw; but the world little imagines who is the real and original author of that philosophy and poetry, of those fine turns and sprightly inventions, which are so generally admired. Perhaps many, now applauded for their genius, would have been comparatively dolts, had they not been engaged in a cause which *Satan* has so much interest in supporting.

But, to return to the more pleasing subject. How great and honorable is the privilege of a true believer! That he has neither wisdom nor strength in himself--is no disadvantage; for he is connected with Infinite Wisdom and Almighty Power! Though weak as a worm, his arms are strengthened by the almighty God--and all things become possible, yes easy to him--which occur within the compass of his proper duty and calling. The Lord, whom he serves, engages to proportion his strength to his day, whether it be a day of *service* or of *suffering*. And though he is fallible and short-sighted, exceeding liable to mistake and error; yet, while he retains a sense that he is so, and with the simplicity of a child asks counsel and direction of the Lord--he seldom takes a wrong step, at least not in matters of consequence. And even his sins are overruled for good. If he forgets his true state, and thinks himself to be something, he presently finds he is indeed nothing. But if he is content to be nothing, and to have nothing--he is sure to find a seasonable and abundant communication of all that he needs. Thus he lives, like Israel in the wilderness, upon mere divine bounty; but, then, it is a bounty unchangeable, unwearied, inexhaustible, and all-sufficient.

Moses, when speaking of the methods the Lord took to humble Israel, mentions his feeding them with manna, as one method. The manna would not keep; they could not hoard it up, and were therefore in a state of absolute dependence from day to day. This appointment was well suited to humble them.

Thus it is with us in spiritual matters. We would perhaps prefer to hoard up a stock of grace and sufficiency at once--such an inherent portion of wisdom and power, as we might depend upon, at least for common occasions, without being constrained, by a sense of indigence--to have continual recourse to the Lord for everything we need. But His way is best. His own glory is most displayed--and our safety best secured, by keeping us quite poor and empty in ourselves, and supplying us from one minute to another, according to our need--out of His inexhaustible storehouse of grace.

This, if anything, will prevent boasting, and keep a sense of gratitude awake in our hearts. This is well adapted to quicken us to prayer, and furnishes us with a thousand occasions for praise, which would otherwise escape our notice.

But who or what are we, that the Most High God should thus notice us; should visit us every morning, and water us every moment! It is an astonishing thought, that God should thus dwell with men! that he, before whom the mightiest earthly potentates are less than nothing and vanity--should thus stoop and accommodate himself to the situation, needs, and capacities of the weakest, lowest, and poorest of his children! But so it has pleased him. He sees not as man sees!

Trust in the providence of God, and benevolence to his poor

My dear Friend,

The more I think of the point you proposed to me, the more I am confirmed to renew the advice I then gave. There is doubtless such a thing as Christian prudence; but, my friend, beware of counterfeits. Self-love, and the evil heart of unbelief, will endeavor to obtrude upon us a *prudence so called*, which is as opposite to the former as darkness to light. I do not say, that, now that you have a wife, and the prospect of a family, you are strictly bound to give to the poor in the same proportion as formerly. I say, you are not bound; for everything of this sort should proceed from a willing heart.

But if you should tell me the Lord has given you such a zeal for his glory, such a concern for the honor of the Gospel, such a love to his members, such a grateful sense of his mercies (especially by granting you, in this late instance of your marriage, the desire of your heart), and such an affiance in his providence and promises, that you find yourself very unwilling to be one sixpence in the year less useful than you were before, I could not blame you or dissuade you from it. But I do not absolutely advise it; because I know not the state of your mind, or what measure of faith the Lord has given you. Only this I believe, that when the Lord gives such a confidence, he will not disappoint it.

When I look among the professors, yes, among the ministers of the Gospel, there are few things I see a more general lack of, than such a *trust in God as to temporals*, and such a sense of the honor of being permitted to relieve the necessities of his people, as might dispose them to a more liberal distribution of what they have at present in their power, and to a reliance on him for a sufficient supply in future. Some exceptions there are. Some people I have the happiness to know, whose chief pleasure it seems to be, to devise liberal things.

For the most part, we take care, first to be well supplied, if possible, with all the necessaries, conveniences, and not a few of the elegancies of life; then to have a snug fund laid up against a rainy day, as the phrase is, (if this is in an increasing way, so much the better), that when we look at children and near relatives, we may say to our hearts, "Now they are well provided for." And when we have got all this and more, we are perhaps content, *for the love of Christ*, to bestow a pittance of our superfluities, a tenth or twentieth part of what we spend or hoard up for ourselves, upon the poor! But, alas! what do we herein more than others? Multitudes, who know nothing of the love of Christ, will do thus much, yes, perhaps, greatly exceed us, from the mere feelings of humanity.

But it may be asked, would you show no regard to the possibility of leaving your wife or children unprovided for? Quite the reverse: I would have you attend to it very much, and behold the Scriptures show you the more excellent way. If you had a little money to spare, would you not lend it to me, if I assured you it should be repaid when needed? I call point out to you better interest and better security than I could possibly give you: Pro. 19:17, "He who has pity upon the poor, lends unto the Lord: and that which he has given, will he pay him again." What do you think of this text? Is it the word of God, or not? Is he worthy of belief, or not? Is he able to make good his word, or is he not? I dare stake all my interest in your friendship (which I should be very reluctant to forfeit), that if you act upon this maxim, in a spirit of prayer and faith, and with a single eye to his glory, you shall not be disappointed. Read over Mat. 6:26-34. Shall we confine that reasoning and those promises to the primitive times? Say not, "If the Lord would make windows in heaven, this thing might be." He has more ways to bless and prosper those who trust in him, than we are able to point out to him. But I tell you, my friend, *God will*

sooner make windows in heaven, turn stones into bread, yes, stop the sun in its course, than he will allow those who conscientiously serve him, and depend upon him, to be destitute.

Some instances we have had of ministers who have seemed to transgress the bounds of strict prudence in their attention to the poor. But they have been men of faith, prayer, and zeal: if they did it, not from impulse, or a spirit of indolence, but from such motives as the Scripture suggests and recommends, I believe their families have seldom suffered for it. Besides, you know not what you may actually save in the course of years by this method. The Apostle, speaking of some abuses that obtained in the church of Corinth, says, "For this cause many are sick among you." If *prudence* should shut up your compassion (which I trust it never will), the Lord might a severe illness upon your family, which would perhaps cost you twice the money which would have sufficed to refresh his people, and to commend your ministry and character.

But if, after all, prudence will be heard, I counsel you to do these two things. First, **Be very certain that you allow yourselves in nothing superfluous.** You cannot, I trust, in conscience think of spending one penny more than is needful on yourself; unless you have another penny to help the poor. Then, secondly, Let your friends who are in good circumstances be plainly told, that, though you love them, prudence, and the necessary charge of a family, will not permit you to entertain them, no, not for a night. What! say you, shut my door against my friends? Yes, by all means, rather than against Christ. If the Lord Jesus was again upon earth, in a state of humiliation, and he, and the best friend you have, standing at your door, and your provision so strait that you could not receive both, which would you entertain? Now, he says of the poor, "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me." Your friends have houses of their own, but the poor need relief. One would almost think that passage, Luk. 14:12-14, was not considered as a part of God's word; at least I believe there is no one passage so generally neglected by his own people. I do not think it unlawful to entertain our friends; but if these words do not teach us, that it is in some respects our duty to give a preference to the poor, I am at a loss to understand them.

I was enabled to set out upon the plan I recommend to you, at a time when my certain income was much too scanty for my own provision, and before I had the expectation or promise of assistance from any person upon earth. Only I knew that the Lord could provide me with whatever he saw needful; and I trusted, that, if he kept me dependent upon himself, and desirous to live for his service only, he assuredly would do so. I have as yet seen no cause to repent it. I live upon his promise; for, as to any present ways or means, everything here below is so uncertain, that *I consider myself in the same situation with the birds of the air, who have neither storehouse nor barn.* Today I have enough for myself, and something to impart to those who lack: as to futurity, the Lord must provide; and for the most part I can believe he will. I can tell you, however, that now and then my heart is pinched: unbelief creeps in, and *self* would much rather choose a strong box, or what the world calls a certainty, than *a life of absolute dependence upon the providence of God.* However, in my composed hours I am well satisfied. Hitherto he has graciously taken care of me; therefore may my heart trust in him, and not be afraid.

Consider, my friend, the Lord has done well for you likewise. He has settled you peaceably in a good and honorable employment; he has now answered your prayers, in giving you a partner, with whom you may take sweet counsel, one who will help and strengthen you in your best desires. Beware, therefore, of that reasoning which might lead you to distrust the Lord your God, or to act as if you did. You complain that *there is too much of an expensive taste among some people in your congregation.* If you set yourself to discountenance this, and should at the same

time too closely shut up your hands, they will be ready to charge you with being governed by the same worldly spirit, though in another form. If you have been hitherto tender and bountiful to the poor, and should make too great and too sudden an alteration in this respect, if the blame should not fall upon you, it probably would upon your wife, who, I believe, would be far from deserving it. If the house which has been open to the poor in former times, should be shut against them, now that you live in it, would it not open the mouths of those who do not love your ministry, to say, that, notwithstanding all your zeal about doctrines, you know how to take care of your own selfish interest, the same as those whom you have thought indifferent and lukewarm in the cause of the Gospel? Would it not?—But I forbear. I know you need not such arguments. Yet consider how many eyes are upon you, watching for your halting.

Now, at your first setting out, is the proper time seriously to seek the Lord's directions, that you may from the beginning adopt such a plan as may be most for your own comfort, the honor of your character as a minister, the glory of him who has called you, and the edification of your people. *It is easier to begin well, than to make alterations afterwards.* I trust the Lord will guide and bless you in your deliberations. And for my own part, I am not in the least afraid that you will ever have cause to blame me for the advice I have given, if you should be disposed to follow it.

I have given you my opinion freely, and perhaps with an appearance of more strictness than is necessary. But I would apply our Lord's words in another case to this: "All men cannot receive this saying: he who is able to receive it, let him receive it." If the Lord has given you this confidence in his word, you are happy. It is better than the possession of thousands by the year.

The practical influence of faith

Sir,

The use and importance of faith, as it respects a sinner's justification before God, has been largely insisted on. **But faith is likewise of great use and importance in the daily concerns of life.** Faith gives evidence and reality to things not seen, and realizes the great truths of the Gospel, so as that they become abiding and living principles of support and direction while we are passing through this wilderness. Thus, faith is as the eye and the hand, without which we cannot take one step with certainty, or attempt any service with success. It is to be wished, that this practical exercise of faith were duly attended to by all professors. We would not then meet with so many cases which perplex us, and leave us at a great difficulty to reconcile what we see in some of whom we would willingly hope well—with what we read in Scripture of the inseparable attendants of a true and living faith. For how can we but be staggered, when we hear people speaking the language of assurance—that they know their acceptance with God through Christ, and have not the least doubt of their interest in all the promises—while at the same time we see them under the influence of unsanctified tempers, of a proud, passionate, worldly, selfish, or churlish behavior?

It is not only plain, from the general tenor of Scripture, that a covetous, a proud, or a censorious spirit, is no more consistent with the spirit of the Gospel, than drunkenness or whoredom; but there are many express texts directly pointed against the evils which too often are found among professors. Thus the Apostle James assures us, "That if any man seems to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, his religion is vain;" and the Apostle John, "That if any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him;" and he seems to apply this character to any man, whatever his profession or pretenses may be, "who having this world's goods, and seeing his brother have need, shuts up his compassion from him." Surely these texts more than intimate, that **that faith which justifies the soul, does likewise receive grace from Jesus, whereby the heart is purified, and the life regulated as befits the Gospel of Christ.**

There are too many who would have preaching limited to the privileges of believers; and when the *fruits of faith*, and the tempers of the mind, which should be manifest in those who have "tasted that the Lord is gracious," are inculcated, think they sufficiently evade all that is said, by calling it *legal preaching*. I would be no advocate for legal preaching; but we must not be deterred, by the fear of a hard word, from declaring the whole counsel of God; and we have the authority and example of Paul, who was a champion of the doctrines of free grace, to animate us in exhorting professors to "walk worthy of God, who has called them to his kingdom and glory." And indeed the expression of a believer's privilege is often misunderstood. It is a believer's privilege to walk with God in the exercise of faith, and, by the power of his Spirit, to mortify the whole body of sin, to gain a growing victory over the world and self, and to make daily advances in conformity to the mind of Christ. And nothing that we profess to know, believe, or hope for, deserves the name of a privilege, farther than we are **influenced by it to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness.** Whoever is possessed of true faith, will not confine his inquiries to the single point of his acceptance with God, or be satisfied with the distant hope of heaven hereafter. He will be likewise solicitous how he may glorify God in the world, and enjoy such foretastes of heaven as are attainable while he is yet upon earth.

Faith, then, in its practical exercise, has for its object the whole word of God, and forms its estimate of all things with which the soul is at present concerned,

according to the standard of Scripture. Like Moses, it "endures, as seeing him who is invisible."

When our Lord was upon earth, and conversed with his disciples, their eyes and hearts were fixed upon him. In danger he was their defender; their guide when in perplexity; and to him they looked for the solution of all their doubts, and the supply of all their needs. He is now withdrawn from our eyes; but faith sets him still before us, for the same purposes, and, according to its degree, with the same effects, as if we actually saw him! His spiritual presence, apprehended by faith, is a restraint from evil, an encouragement to every service, and affords a present refuge and help in every time of trouble.

To this is owing the delight a believer takes in ordinances, because there he meets his Lord: and to this, likewise, it is owing, that his religion is not confined to public occasions; but he is the same person in secret as he appears to be in the public assembly; for he worships him who sees in secret; and dares appeal to his all-seeing eye for the sincerity of his desires and intentions. By faith he is enabled to use prosperity with moderation; and knows and feels, that what the world calls *good* is of small value, unless it is accompanied with the presence and blessings of Him whom his soul loves.

And his faith upholds him under all trials, by assuring him, that every painful dispensation is under the direction of his Lord; that chastisements are a token of his love; that the season, measure, and continuance of his sufferings, are appointed by Infinite Wisdom, and designed to work for his everlasting good; and that grace and strength shall be afforded him, according to his need. Thus, his heart being fixed, trusting in the Lord, to whom he has committed all his concerns; and knowing that his best interests are safe; he is not greatly afraid of evil tidings, but enjoys a stable peace in the midst of a changing world. For, though he cannot tell what a day may bring forth, he believes that he who has invited and enabled him to cast all his cares upon him, will allow nothing to befall him but what shall be made subservient to his chief desire—the glory of God in the sanctification and final salvation of his soul. And if, through the weakness of his flesh, he is liable to be startled by the first impression of a sharp and sudden trial, he quickly flees to his strong refuge, remembers it is the Lord's doing, resigns himself to his will, and patiently expects a happy outcome.

By the same principle of faith, a believer's conduct is regulated towards his fellow-creatures; and in the discharge of the several duties and relations of life, his great aim is to please God, and to let his light shine in the world. He believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness, and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him a habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit. Humbled under a sense of much forgiveness to himself, he finds it easy to forgive others, if he has anything against any. A due sense of what he is in the sight of the Lord, preserves him from giving way to anger, malice, and resentment. He is not easily provoked, but is "swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to become angry;" and if offended, easy to be entreated, and disposed, not only to yield to a reconciliation, but to seek it.

As Jesus is his life, and righteousness, and strength—so he is his **pattern**. By faith he contemplates and studies this great Exemplar of philanthropy. With a holy ambition he treads in the footsteps of his Lord and Master, and learns of him to be meek and lowly, to requite injuries with kindness, and to overcome evil with good. From the same views, by faith he derives a benevolent spirit, and, according to his sphere and ability, he endeavors to promote the welfare of all around him. The *law of love* being thus written in his heart, and his soul set at liberty from the low and narrow dictates of a selfish spirit, his language will be truth, and his dealings equity. His promise may be depended on, without the interposition of oath, bond, or witness; and the feelings of his own heart, under the direction of an enlightened

conscience and the precepts of Scripture, prompt him "to do unto others as he would desire they, in the like circumstances, should do unto him."

If he is a master, he is gentle and compassionate; if a servant, he is faithful and obedient; for in either relation he acts by faith, under the eye of his Master in heaven. If he is a trader, he neither dares nor wishes to take advantage either of the ignorance or the necessities of those with whom he deals. And the same principle of love influences his whole conversation. A sense of his own infirmities makes him sympathetic to those of others: he will not readily believe bad reports about them, without sufficient proof; and even then, he will not repeat them, unless he is lawfully called to it. He believes that the precept, "Speak evil of no man," is founded upon the same authority as those which forbid committing adultery or murder; and therefore he "keeps his tongue as with a bridle."

Lastly, Faith is of daily use as a preservative from a compliance with the corrupt customs and maxims of the world. The believer, though in the world, is not of it; by faith he triumphs over its smiles and enticements. He sees that all that is in the world, suited to gratify the desires of the flesh or the eye, is not only to be avoided as sinful, but as incompatible with his best pleasures. He will mix with the world so far as is necessary, in the discharge of the duties of that station of life in which the providence of God has placed him, but no farther. His leisure and inclinations are engaged in a different pursuit. Those who fear the Lord are his chosen companions: and the blessings he derives from the word, and throne, and ordinances of grace, make him look upon the poor pleasures and amusements of those who live without God in the world, with a mixture of disdain and pity. And by faith he is armored against the world's frowns. He will obey God rather than man; he will "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but will rather reprove them." And if, upon this account, he should be despised and injuriously treated, whatever loss he suffers in such a cause, he accounts his gain, and esteems such disgrace his glory.

I am not aiming to draw a perfect character, but to show **the proper effects of that faith which justifies, which purifies the heart, works by love, and overcomes the world.** A habitual endeavor to possess such a frame of spirit, and thus to adorn the Gospel of Christ, and that with growing success, is what I am persuaded you are not a stranger to; and I am afraid that those who can content themselves with aiming at anything short of this in their profession, are too much strangers to themselves, and to the nature of that liberty with which Jesus has promised to make his people free. That you may go on from strength to strength, increasing in the light and image of our Lord and Savior, is my sincere prayer.

The Lord only afflicts for our good

December 21, 1776.

My dear Friend,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All things work together for good

September 28, 1774.

My dear friend,

I see the necessity of having, if possible, my principles at my fingers' ends, that I may apply them as occasions arise every hour.

"We know that **all things work together for good** to those who love God—to those who are called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28. Certainly, if my *ability* was equal to my *inclination*, I would remove *your tumor* with a word or a touch—I would exempt you instantly and constantly from every inconvenience and pain! But you are in the hands of One who could do all this and more, and who loves you infinitely better than I can do—and yet He is pleased to permit you to suffer. What is the plain lesson? Certainly, that at the present juncture, He, to whom all the chains of events, and their consequences are present in one view, sees it better for you to have this tumor than to be without it! For I have no more idea of a tumor rising (or any other incidental trial befalling you), without a cause, without a need-be, without a designed advantage to result from it, than I have of a mountain or pyramid rising up of its own accord in the middle of Main Street. The promise is express, and literally true—that all things, universally and without exception, shall work together for good to those who love God. But they work **together!** The *smallest* as well as the *greatest* events have their place and use—like several stones in the arch of a bridge, where no one would singly be useful—but every one in its place is necessary to the structure and support of the arch; or, rather, like the movement of a watch, where, though there is an evident subordination of parts, and some pieces have a greater comparative importance than others—yet the smallest pieces have their place and use, and are so far equally important, that the whole design of the machine would be obstructed for lack of them.

Some workings and turns of Divine Providence may be compared to the main-spring or main-wheels, which have a more visible, sensible, and determining influence upon the whole tenor of our lives. But the more ordinary occurrences of every day are at least *pins* and *pivots*, adjusted, timed, and suited with equal accuracy, by the hand of the same great Artist who planned and executes the whole! We are sometimes surprised to see how much more depends and turns upon these minor events, than we were aware of. Then we admire his skill, and say "he has done all things well!" Indeed, with respect to his works of providence, as well as of creation, he well deserves the title of *Maximus in minimis*.

Such thoughts as these, when I am enabled to realize them, in some measure reconcile me to whatever he allots for myself or my friends, and convinces me of the propriety of that verse, which speaks the language of love, as well as authority, "Be still—and know that I am God!"

I sympathize with you in your severe trial, and pray and trust that your *Shepherd* will be your *Physician*; will superintend and bless the use of means; will give you in his good time health and cure, and at all times reveal unto you abundance of peace.

His promises and power are necessary for our preservation, in the *smoother scenes* he has allotted for us, and they are likewise sufficient for the *roughest*. We are always equally in danger in ourselves, and always equally safe under the shadow of his wings. No storms, assaults, sieges, or pestilences, can hurt us, until we have filled up his appointed measure of service! And when our work is done, and he has ripened us for glory—it is no great matter by what means he is pleased to call us home to himself!

All our concerns are in His hands

November 6, 1777.

My dear Sir,

You say you are more disposed to cry *misery* than *hallelujah*. Why not both together? When the treble is praise, and heart humiliation for the base, the melody is pleasant, and the *harmony* good. However, if not both together, we must have them alternately: not all singing, not all sighing—but an interchange and balance, that we may be neither lifted too high—nor cast down too low—which would be the case if we were very *comfortable* or very *sorrowful* for a long continuance.

But though *we* change—the *Savior* changes not! All our concerns are in his hands, and therefore safe. His path is in the deep waters; his thoughts and methods of conduct are as high above ours—as the heavens are high above the earth; and he often takes a course for accomplishing his purposes, which is directly contrary to what our narrow views would prescribe. He wounds—in order to heal. He kills—that he may make alive. He casts down—when he designs to raise. He brings a death upon our feelings, wishes, and prospects—when he is about to give us the desire of our hearts. These things he does to test us; but he himself knows, and has determined before-hand, what he will do. The test indeed, usually turns out to our shame. Impatience and unbelief show their ugly heads, and prompt us to suppose this, that, and the other thing, yes perhaps all things, are against us; to question whether He is with us and for us, or not. But it issues likewise in the praise of his goodness, when we find, that, over all our unkind complaints and suspicions—he is still working wonderfully for us, causing light to shine out of darkness, and doing us good in defiance of ourselves!