

Man in His Fallen Estate



LETTERS BY
JOHN NEWTON

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Man in his fallen estate

"What is man, that he could be pure, or one born of woman, that he could be righteous?" Job 15:14

Dear Sir,

We hear much in the present day of *the dignity of human nature*. And it is allowed that man was an excellent creature as he came out of the hands of God; but if we consider this question with a view to fallen man, as depraved by sin, how can we but join with the Psalmist in wonder that the great God should make any account of him?

Fallen as man is from his original state of happiness and holiness, his natural faculties and abilities afford sufficient evidence that the hand which made him is Divine. He is capable of great things. His understanding, will, affections, imagination, and memory—are noble and amazing powers. But view him in a *moral* light, as an intelligent being, incessantly dependent upon God, accountable to him, and appointed by him to a state of existence in an unchangeable world: considered in this relation—man is a monster, a vile, base, stupid, obstinate, and mischievous creature; no words can fully describe him. Man, with all his boasted understanding and attainments, is a fool: so long as he is destitute of the saving grace of God, his conduct, as to his most important concerns, is more absurd and inconsistent than that of the most contemptible idiot; with respect to his affections and pursuits, he is degraded far below the beasts; and for the malignity and wickedness of his will, can be compared to nothing so properly as to the devil.

The question here is not concerning this or that man, a Nero or a Heliogabalus, but concerning human nature, the whole race of mankind, the few excepted who are born of God. There is indeed a difference among men, but it is owing to the restraints of Divine Providence, without which earth would be the very image of hell. A wolf or a lion, while chained, cannot do so much mischief as if they were loose, but the nature is the same in the whole species. Education and personal interest, fear and shame, human laws, and the secret power of God over the mind, combine to form many characters that are extremely decent and respectable; and even the most abandoned are under a restraint which prevents them from manifesting a thousandth part of the wickedness which is in their hearts. But the heart itself is universally deceitful, and desperately wicked.

Man is a **FOOL**. "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." Romans 1:22. He can indeed measure the earth, and almost count the stars; he abounds in arts and inventions, in science and policy—and shall he then be called a fool? The ancient Heathens, the inhabitants of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, were eminent for this kind of wisdom. They are to this day studied as models by those who aim to excel in history, poetry, painting, architecture, and other exertions of human genius, which are suited to polish the manners without improving the heart. But their most admired philosophers, legislators, logicians, orators, and artists, were as destitute as infants or idiots of that knowledge which alone deserves the name of true wisdom. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. Ignorant and regardless of God, yet conscious of their weakness, and of their dependence upon a Power above their own, and stimulated by an inward principle of fear, of which they knew neither the origin nor right application, they worshiped the creature instead of the Creator, yes, placed their trust in stocks and stones, in the works of men's hands, in non-entities and chimeras. An acquaintance with their mythology, or system of religious fables, passes with us for a considerable branch of learning, because it is drawn from ancient books written in languages not known to the vulgar; but in point of

certainty or truth, we might receive as much satisfaction from a collection of dreams, or from the ravings of lunatics.

If, therefore, we admit these admired sages as a tolerable specimen of mankind, must we not confess that man, in his best estate, while uninstructed by the Spirit of God, is a fool? But are we wiser than they? Not in the least, until the grace of God makes us so. Our superior advantages only show our folly in a more striking light. Why do we account any people foolish? A fool has no sound judgment; he is governed wholly by appearances, and would prefer a fine coat to the deed to a large estate. He pays no regard to consequences: fools have sometimes hurt or killed their best friends, and thought they did no harm. A fool cannot reason, therefore arguments are lost upon him. At one time, if tied with a straw, he dares not stir; at another time, perhaps, he can hardly be persuaded to move, though the house were on fire. Are these the characteristics of a fool? Then there is no fool like the sinner, who prefers the toys of earth to the happiness of heaven; who is held in bondage by the foolish customs of the world; and is more afraid of the breath of man, than of the wrath of God.

Again: Man in his natural state is a **BEAST**, yes, below the beasts which perish. In two things he strongly resembles them; in looking no higher than to sensual gratifications, and in that selfishness of spirit which prompts him to propose himself and his own interest as his proper and highest end. But in many respects he sinks sadly beneath them. Unnatural lusts, and the lack of natural affection towards their offspring, are abominations not to be found among the brute creation. What shall we say of mothers destroying their children with their own hands, or of the horrid act of self-murder! Men are worse than beasts likewise in their obstinacy; they will not be warned. If a beast escapes from a trap, he will be cautious how he goes near it again, and in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird. But man, though he be often reprov'd, hardens his neck; he rushes upon his ruin with his eyes open, and can defy God to his face, and dare damnation.

Once more: Let us observe how man resembles the **DEVIL**. There are spiritual sins, and from these in their height the Scripture teaches us to judge of Satan's character. Every feature in this description is strong in man; so that what our Lord said to the Jews is of general application, "You are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father you will do." Man resembles Satan in **pride**: this stupid, wicked creature values himself upon his wisdom, power, and virtue, and will talk of being saved by his good works; though if he can, Satan himself need not despair. He resembles him in **malice**; and this diabolical disposition often proceeds to murder, and would daily, if the Lord did not restrain it. He derives from Satan the hateful spirit of **envy**: he is often tormented beyond expression, by beholding the prosperity of his neighbors; and proportionably pleased with their calamities, though he gains no other advantage from them than the gratification of this rancorous principle.

He bears the image likewise of Satan in his **cruelty**. This evil is bound up in the heart even of a child. A disposition to take pleasure in giving pain to others, appears very early. Children, if left to themselves, soon feel a gratification in torturing insects and animals. What misery does the wanton cruelty of men inflict upon cocks, dogs, bulls, bears, and other creatures, which they seem to think were formed for no other end than to feast their savage spirits with their torments! If we form our judgment of men, when they seem most pleased, and have neither anger nor resentment to plead in their excuse, it is too evident, even from the nature of their amusements, whose they are and whom they serve. And they are the worst of enemies to each other. Think of the horrors of war, the rage of duellists, of the murders and assassinations with which the world is filled, and then say, "Lord, what is man!"

Further, if **deceit** and **treachery** belong to Satan's character, then surely man resembles him. Is not the universal observation, and complaint of all ages, an affecting comment upon the Prophet's words, "Trust not in a friend, put no confidence in a guide, keep the doors of your mouth from her that lies in your bosom, for they hunt every man his brother with a net?" How many have at this moment cause to say, with David, "The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart; his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords!"

Again: Like Satan, men are eager in **TEMPTING** others to sin; not content to damn themselves, they employ all their arts and influence to draw as many as they can with them into the same destruction.

Lastly: In direct **opposition to God** and goodness, in contemptuous enmity to the Gospel of his grace, and a bitter persecuting spirit against those who profess it, Satan himself can hardly exceed them. Herein, indeed, they are his agents and willing servants; and because the blessed God is himself out of their reach, they labor to show their despite to him in the people of his people.

I have drawn but a sketch, a few outlines, of the picture of fallen man. To give an exact copy of him, to charge every feature with its full aggravation of horror, and to paint him as he is—would be impossible. Enough has been observed to illustrate the propriety of the exclamation, "Lord, what is man!" Perhaps some of my readers may attempt to deny or extenuate the charge, and may plead, that I have not been describing mankind, but some of the most abandoned of the species, who hardly deserve the name of men. But I have already provided against this exception. It is human nature I describe; and the vilest and most profligate individuals cannot sin beyond the powers and limits of that nature which they possess in common with the more mild and moderate. Though there may be a difference in the fruitfulness of trees, yet the production of one apple decides the nature of the tree upon which it grew, as certainly as if it had produced a thousand: so in the present case, should it be allowed that these enormities cannot be found in all people, it would be a sufficient confirmation of what I have advanced, if they can be found in any; unless it could be likewise proved, that those who appeared more wicked than others, were of a different species from the rest.

But I need not make this concession; they must be insensible indeed who do not feel something within them so very contrary to our common notions of goodness, as would perhaps make them rather submit to be banished from human society, than to be compelled to disclose to their fellow-creatures every thought and desire which arises in their hearts.

*Many useful reflections may be drawn from this unpleasant subject. We cannot at present conceive how much we owe to the guardian care of Divine Providence, that any of us are preserved in peace and safety for a single day in such a world as this. Live where we will, we have those near us, who, both by nature, and by the power which Satan has over them, are capable of the most atrocious crimes. But He whom they know not, restrains them, so that they cannot do the things that they would. When he suspends the restraint, they act immediately; then we hear of murders, rapes, and outrages. But did not the Lord reign with a strong hand, such evils would be perpetrated every hour, and no one would be safe in the house or in the field. God's ordinance of civil government is one great means of preserving the peace of society; but this is in many cases inadequate. **The heart of man, when fully bent upon evil, will not be intimidated or stopped by gibbets and racks.***

How wonderful is the love of God in giving his Son to die for such wretches! And how strong and absolute is the necessity of a new birth, if we would be happy! Can beasts and devils inherit the kingdom of God? The due consideration of this subject

is likewise needful, to preserve believers in an humble, thankful, watchful frame of spirit. Such we once were, and such, with respect to the natural principle remaining in us, which the Apostle calls the flesh, or the old man, we still are! **The propensities of fallen nature are not eradicated in the children of God**, though by grace they are made partakers of a new principle, which enables them, in the Lord's strength, to resist and mortify the body of sin, so that it cannot reign in them. Yet they are liable to sad surprisals; and the histories of Aaron, David, Solomon, and Peter, are left on record, to teach us what evil is latent in the hearts of the best men, and what they are capable of doing if left but a little to themselves. "Lord, what is man!"

The nature of fallen man agrees to the description the Apostle has given us of his boasted wisdom: it is earthly, sensual, devilish. I have attempted some general delineation of it in the preceding portion; but the height of its malignity cannot be properly estimated, unless we consider its actings with respect to the light of the Gospel. The Jews were extremely wicked at the time of our Lord's appearance upon earth; yet he said of them, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin:" that is, as the light and power of his ministry deprived them of all excuse for continuing in sin, so it proved the occasion of showing their wickedness in the most aggravated manner; and all their other sins were but faint proofs of the true state of their hearts, if compared with the discovery they made of themselves, by their pertinacious opposition to him.

In this sense, what the Apostle has observed of the Law of Moses, may be applied to the Gospel of Christ: it entered, that sin might abound. If we would estimate the utmost extent of human depravity, and the strongest effects it is capable of producing, we must select our instances from the conduct of those to whom the Gospel is known. The Indians, who roast their enemies alive, give sufficient proof that man is barbarous to his own kind; which may likewise be easily demonstrated without going so far from home: but the preaching of the Gospel discovers the enmity of the heart against God, in ways and degrees of which unenlightened savages and heathens are not capable.

By the Gospel, I now mean not merely the doctrine of salvation as it lies in the holy Scripture, but that public and authoritative dispensation of this doctrine, which the Lord Jesus Christ has committed to his true ministers; who, having been themselves, by the power of his grace, brought out of darkness into marvelous light, are by His Holy Spirit qualified and sent forth to declare to their fellow-sinners what they have seen, and felt, and tasted, of the word of life. Their commission is, to exalt the Lord alone, to stain the pride of all human glory. They are to set forth the evil and demerit of sin; the strictness, spirituality, and sanction of the law of God; the total apostasy of mankind; and from these premises to demonstrate the utter impossibility of a sinner's escaping condemnation by any works or endeavors of his own; and then to proclaim a full and free salvation from sin and wrath, by faith in the name, blood, obedience, and mediation of God manifest in the flesh; together with a denunciation of eternal misery to all who shall finally reject the testimony which God has given of his Son.

Though these several branches of the will of God respecting sinners, and other truths in connection with them, are plainly revealed and repeatedly inculcated in the Bible; and though the Bible is to be found in almost every house; yet we see, in fact, it is a sealed book; little read, little understood, and therefore but little regarded, except in those places which the Lord is pleased to favor with ministers who can confirm them from their own experience; and who, by a sense of his constraining love, and the worth of souls, are animated to make the faithful discharge of their ministry the one great business of their lives: who aim not to possess the wealth, but to promote the welfare of their hearers; are equally regardless of the frowns or

smiles of the world; and count not their lives dear, so that they may be wise and successful in winning souls to Christ.

When the Gospel, in this sense of the word, first comes to a place, though the people are going on in sin, they may be said to sin ignorantly; they have not yet been warned of their danger. Some are drinking down iniquity like water: others more soberly burying themselves alive in the cares and business of the world: others find a little time for what they call religious duties, which they persevere in, though they are utter strangers to the nature or the pleasure of spiritual worship; partly, as thereby they think to bargain with God, and to make amends for such sins as they do not choose to relinquish; and partly because it gratifies their pride, and affords them (as they think) some ground for saying, "God, I thank you I am not as other men."

The preached Gospel declares the vanity and danger of these several ways which sinners choose to walk in. It declares, and demonstrates, that, different as they appear from each other, they are equally remote from the path of safety and peace, and all tend to the same point, the destruction of those who persist in them. At the same time it provides against that despair into which men would be otherwise plunged, when convinced of their sins, by revealing the immense love of God, the glory and grace of Christ, and inviting all to come to him, that they may obtain pardon, life, and happiness. In a word, the gospel shows the pit of hell under men's feet, and opens the gate and points out the way to heaven. Let us now briefly observe the effects it produces in those who do not receive it as the power of God unto salvation. These effects are various, as tempers and circumstances vary; but they may all lead us to adopt the Psalmist's exclamation, "Lord, what is man!"

Many, who have heard the Gospel once or a few times, will hear it no more; **it awakens their scorn, their hatred, and rage.** They pour contempt upon the wisdom of God, despise his goodness, defy His power; and their very looks express the spirit of the rebellious Jews, who told the prophet Jeremiah to his face, "As to the word which you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken to you at all." Those ministers who preach it, are accounted as men who turn the world upside down; and the people who receive it, fools or hypocrites. The word of the Lord is a burden to them, and they hate it with a total hatred. How strongly is the disposition of the natural heart manifested by the confusion which often takes place in families, where the Lord is pleased to awaken one or two in a house, while the rest remain in their sins! To profess, or even to be suspected of, an attachment to the Gospel of Christ, is frequently considered and treated as the worst of crimes, sufficient to cancel the strongest obligations of family or friendship. Parents, upon such a provocation, will hate their children, and children ridicule their parents: many find, agreeable to our Lord's declaration, that from the time a sense of his love engaged their hearts to love him again, their worst foes have been those of their own household; and that those who expressed the greatest love and tenderness for them before their conversion, can now hardly bear to see them.

The bulk of a people will perhaps continue to hear, at least now and then; and to those who do, the Spirit of God usually, at one time or other, bears testimony to the truth: their consciences are struck, and for a season they believe and tremble. But what is the consequence? No man who has taken poison seeks more earnestly or speedily for an antidote, than those do for something to stifle and smother their convictions. They run to company, to drink, to anything, for relief against the unwelcome intrusion of serious thoughts; and when they succeed, and recover their former indifference, they rejoice as if they had escaped some great danger. The next step is, to ridicule their own convictions; and next to that, if they see any of their acquaintance under the like impressions, to use every art, and strain every nerve, that they may render them as obstinate as themselves. For this purpose, they watch as a fowler for the bird; flatter or revile, tempt or threaten: and if they can prevail,

and are the occasion of hardening any in their sins, they rejoice and triumph, as if they accounted it their interest and their glory, to ruin the souls of their fellow-creatures.

By frequent hearing, they receive more light. They are compelled to know, whether they will or not, that the wrath of God hangs over the children of disobedience. They carry a sting in their consciences, and at times feel themselves most miserable, and cannot but wish they had never been born, or that they had been dogs or toads, rather than rational creatures. Yet they harden themselves still more. They affect to be happy and at ease, and force themselves to wear a smile when anguish preys upon their hearts. They blaspheme the way of truth, watch for the faults of professors, and with a malicious joy publish and aggravate them. They see perhaps how the wicked die, but are not alarmed; they see the righteous die, but are not moved. Neither providences nor ordinances, mercies nor judgments, can stop them; for they are determined to go on and perish with their eyes open, rather than submit to the Gospel.

But they do not always openly reject the Gospel truths. Some, who profess to approve and receive them, do thereby discover the evils of the heart of man, if possible, in a yet stronger light. They make Christ the minister of sin, and turn his grace into licentiousness. Like Judas, they say, Hail, Master! and betray him. This is the highest pitch of iniquity. They pervert all the doctrines of the Gospel. From election they draw an excuse for continuing in their evil ways; and contend for salvation without works, because they love not obedience. They extol the righteousness of Christ, but hold it in opposition to personal holiness. In a word, because they hear that God is good, they determine to persist in evil. "Lord, what is man!"

Thus willful and impenitent sinners go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. The word which they despise becomes to them a savor of death unto death. **They take different courses, but all are traveling down to the same pit;** and, unless sovereign mercy interposes, they will soon sink to rise no more. The final event is usually two fold. Many, after they have been more or less shaken by the word, settle in formality. If hearing would supply the place of faith, love, and obedience, they would do well; but by degrees they become sermon-proof; the truths which once struck them lose their power by being often heard: and thus multitudes live and die in darkness, though the light has long shone around them.

Others are more openly given up to a reprobate mind. Contempt of the Gospel makes Infidels, Deists, and Atheists. They are filled with a spirit of delusion to believe a lie. These are scoffers, walking after their own lusts, for where the principles of true religion are given up, the conduct will be vile and abominable. Such people sport themselves with their own deceivings, and strongly prove the truth of the Gospel while they dispute against it. We often find that people of this cast have formerly been the subjects of strong convictions; but when the evil spirit has seemed to depart for a season, and returns again, the last state of that person is worse than the first.

It is not improbable that some of my readers may meet with their own characters under one or other of the views I have given of the desperate wickedness of the heart, in its actings against the truth. May the Spirit of God constrain them to read with attention! Your case is dangerous, but I would hope not utterly desperate. Jesus is mighty to save. His grace can pardon the most aggravated offenses, and subdue the most inveterate habits of sin. The Gospel you have hitherto slighted, resisted, or opposed, is still the power of God unto salvation. The blood of Jesus, upon which you have hitherto trampled, speaks better things than the blood of Abel, and is of virtue to cleanse those whose sins are scarlet and crimson, and to make them white as snow. As yet you are spared; but it is high time to stop, to throw down your arms

of rebellion, and humble yourselves at his feet. If you do, you may yet escape; but if not, know assuredly that wrath is coming upon you to the uttermost; and you will shortly find, to your unspeakable dismay, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Indwelling Sin and the Believer

Three letters by John Newton to the Earl of Dartmouth

Letter I. What a believer would do—if he could.

February, 1772.

My Lord—I have been sitting, perhaps a quarter of an hour, with my pen in my hand, and my finger upon my upper lip, contriving how I should begin my letter. . . . At length my suspense reminded me of the apostle's words, Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. These are *contrary* the one to the other—so that ***you cannot do the things that you would!***" This is a humbling but a just account of a Christian's attainments in the present life, and is equally applicable to the strongest and to the weakest. The weakest need not say less—the strongest will hardly venture to say more. The Lord has given his people a desire and will aiming at great things; without this they would be unworthy of the name of Christians; but they cannot do as they would. Their best desires are weak and ineffectual, not absolutely so (for He who works in them to will, enables them in a measure to do likewise)—but in comparison with the noble mark at which they aim. So that while they have great cause to be thankful for the *desire* He has given them, and for the degree in which it is answered—they have equal reason to be ashamed and abased under a sense of their continual defects, and the evil mixtures which taint and debase their best endeavors. It would be easy to make out a long list of particulars, which a believer would do if he could—but in which, from first to last, he finds a mortifying inability. Permit me to mention a few, which I need not transcribe from books, for they are always present to my mind.

He would willingly enjoy God in **prayer**. He knows that prayer is his duty; but, in his judgment, he considers it likewise as his greatest honor and privilege. In this light he can recommend it to others, and can tell them of the wonderful condescension of the great God, who humbles himself to behold the things that are in heaven, that He should stoop so much lower, to afford his *gracious ear* to the *supplications of sinful worms* upon earth. He can bid them to expect a pleasure in waiting upon the Lord, different in kind and greater in degree than all that the world can afford. By prayer he can say, You have liberty to cast all your cares upon him who cares for you. By one hour's intimate access to the throne of grace, where the Lord causes his glory to pass before the soul that seeks him—you may acquire more true spiritual knowledge and comfort, than by a day or a week's converse with the best of men, or the most studious perusal of many folios. And in this light he would consider it and improve it for himself. But, alas; how seldom can he do as he would! How often does he find this privilege a mere task, which he would be glad of a just excuse to omit! and the chief pleasure he derives from the performance, is to think that his task is finished! He has been drawing near to God with his lips—while his heart was far from him. Surely this is not doing as

he would, when (to borrow the expression of an old woman here,) he is dragged before God like a slave, and comes away like a thief.

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

He would willingly have abiding, admiring thoughts of the person and love of the Lord **Jesus** Christ. Glad he is, indeed, of those occasions which recall the Savior to his mind; and with this view, notwithstanding all discouragements, he perseveres in attempting to pray and read, and waits upon the ordinances. Yet he cannot do as he would. Whatever claims he may have to the exercise of gratitude and sensibility towards his fellow-creatures—he must confess himself mournfully ungrateful and insensible towards his *best Friend and Benefactor*. Ah! what trifles are capable of shutting Him out of our thoughts, of whom we say: 'He is the Beloved of our souls, who loved us, and gave himself for us, and whom we have deliberately chosen as our chief good and portion!' What can make us amends for the loss we suffer here? Yet surely if we could, we would set him always before us; his love would be the delightful theme of our hearts:
From morn to noon, from noon to dewy eve!

But though we *aim* at this good—evil is present with us: we find we are renewed but in part, and have still cause to plead the Lord's promise, to take away the heart of stone, and give us a heart of flesh.

He would willingly acquiesce in all the dispensations of divine **Providence**. He believes that all events are under the direction of infinite wisdom and goodness, and shall surely issue in the glory of God, and the good of those who fear him. He has no doubts that the hairs of his head are all numbered, that the blessings of every kind which he possesses, were *bestowed* upon him, and are preserved to him—by the bounty and special favor of the Lord whom he serves! He fully believes that afflictions do not spring out of the ground—but are fruits and tokens of Divine love, no less than his comforts! He is sure that there is a need-be, whenever for a season he is in heaviness. Of these principles he can no more doubt, than of what he sees with his eyes; and there are seasons when he thinks they will prove sufficient to reconcile him to the sharpest trials.

But often when he aims to *apply* them in an hour of present distress—he cannot do what he would! He feels a law in his

members warring against the law in his mind; so that, in defiance of the clearest convictions, seeing as though he perceived not—he is ready to complain, murmur, and despond! Alas! how vain is man in his best estate! How much weakness and inconsistency, even in those whose hearts are right with the Lord! and what reason have we to confess that we are unworthy, unprofitable servants!

It were easy to enlarge in this way—would paper and time permit. But, blessed be God, we are not under the law—but under grace! And even these distressing effects of the remnants of indwelling sin are overruled for good. By these experiences—the believer is weaned more from SELF, and taught more highly to prize and more absolutely to rely on Him, who is our Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption! The more vile we are in our own eyes—the more precious He will be to us! A deep repeated sense of the evil of our hearts—is necessary to preclude all boasting, and to make us willing to give the whole glory of our salvation where it is due!

Again, a sense of these evils will (when hardly anything else can do it) reconcile us to the thoughts of DEATH! Yes, they make us desirous to depart that we may sin no more, since we find depravity so deep-rooted in our nature, that, like the leprous house, the whole fabric must be taken down before we can be freed from its defilement!

Then, and not until then—we shall be able to do the thing that we would! When we see Jesus—we shall be transformed into His image, and be done with sin and sorrow forever!

Letter II.—The evil a believer would not do—if he could.

March, 1772.

My Lord—I think my last letter turned upon the apostle's thought, Galatians 5:17, "*You cannot do the things that you would.*" In the parallel place, Romans 7:19, there is another clause subjoined, "*The evil which I would not do—that I do.*" This, added to the former, would complete the dark side of my experience. Permit me to tell your lordship a little part, (for some things must not, cannot be told,) not of what I have read—but of what I have *felt*, in illustration of this passage.

I would not be the sport and prey of wild, vain, foolish, and vile imaginations; but this evil is present with me! My heart is like an open highway—like a city without walls or gates. Nothing so false, so frivolous, so absurd, so impossible, or so horrid—but it can obtain access, and that at any time, or in any place! Neither the study, the pulpit, nor even the Lord's table—exempt me from their intrusion.

But if this awful effect of heart-depravity cannot be wholly avoided in the present state of human nature—yet, at least, I would not allow and indulge it; yet this I find I do. In defiance of my best judgment and best wishes, I find something within me, which cherishes and cleaves to those evils, from which I ought to be

horrified by, and flee from—as I would if a toad or a serpent was put in my food or in my bed. Ah! how vile must the heart (at least my heart) be, that can hold a parley with such abominations, when I so well know their nature and their tendency. Surely he who finds himself capable of this, may, without the least affectation of humility (however fair his outward conduct appears), subscribe himself less than the least of all saints, and the very chief of sinners!

I would not be influenced by a principle of *SELF* on any occasion; yet this evil I often do. I see the baseness and absurdity of such a conduct—as clearly as I see the light of the day. I do not affect to be thought ten feet tall—and I know that a desire of being *thought wise or good*, is equally contrary to reason and truth. I would be grieved or angry if my fellow-creatures *supposed* I had such a desire! And therefore, I fear the very principle of *SELF*, of which I complain, has a considerable share in prompting my desires to conceal it. The pride of others often offends me, and makes me studious to hide my own; because their good opinion of me—depends much upon their not perceiving it. But the Lord knows how this dead fly taints and spoils my *best services*, and makes them no better than splendid sins.

I would not indulge vain reasonings concerning the counsels, ways, and *providences* of God; yet I am prone to do it! That the Judge of all the earth will do right, is to me as evident and necessary as that *two plus two make four*. I believe that He has a sovereign right to do what He will with his own, and that this *sovereignty* is but another name for the *unlimited exercise of wisdom and goodness*. But my reasonings are often such, as if I had never heard of these principles, or had formally renounced them! I feel the workings of a presumptuous spirit, that would account for every thing—and venture to dispute whatever it cannot comprehend. What an evil is this, for a potsherd of the earth to contend with its Maker! I do not act thus towards my fellow-creatures; I do not find fault with the decisions of a judge, or the dispositions of a general, because, though I know they are fallible—yet I suppose they are wiser in their respective departments than myself. But I am often ready to take this liberty when it is most unreasonable and inexcusable.

I would not cleave to a *covenant of works*. It would seem from the foregoing particulars, and many others which I could mention, that I have reasons enough to deter me from this. Yet even this I do. Not but that I say, and I hope from my heart, "Enter not into judgment with your servant, O Lord." I embrace it as a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save *sinners*; and it is the main pleasure and business of my life, to set forth the necessity and all sufficiency of the Mediator between God and Man, and to make mention of his righteousness, even of his alone. But here, as in everything else, I find a vast difference between my *judgment* and my *experience*.

I am invited to take the water of life *freely*—yet am often discouraged, because I have nothing with which to *pay* for it. If I

am at times favored with some liberty from the above-mentioned evils, it rather gives me a more favorable opinion of myself, than increases my admiration of the Lord's goodness to so unworthy a creature; and when the returning tide of my corruptions convinces me that I am still the same—an unbelieving legal spirit would urge me to conclude that the Lord is changed. At least I feel a *weariness* of being indebted to him for such continued multiplied forgiveness. And I fear that some part of my striving against sin, and my desires after an increase of sanctification, arise from a secret wish that I might *not* be so absolutely and entirely indebted to him.

This, my lord, is only a faint sketch of my depraved heart; but it is taken from the life! It would require a volume rather than a letter, to fill up the outlines. But I believe you will not regret that I choose to say no more upon such a subject. But though my disease is grievous, it is not desperate; I have a gracious and infallible Physician. I shall not die—but live, and declare the works of the Lord.

Letter III.—The existence of indwelling sin overruled for good.

April, 1772.

My Lord—My two last letters turned upon a mournful subject—the *depravity of the heart*—which impedes us when we would do good, and pollutes our best intended services with evil. We have cause, upon this account, to walk softly all our days; yet we need not sorrow as those who have no hope. The Lord has provided his people relief under those complaints, and teaches us to draw improvement from them. If the evils we feel were not capable of being overruled for good—He would not permit them to remain in us. This we may infer from his hatred to sin—and the love which He bears to his people.

As to the *remedy*, neither *our state* nor *his honor* are affected by the workings of indwelling sin—in the hearts of those whom He has taught to wrestle, strive, and mourn, on account of what they feel. Though sin wars in us—it shall not reign in us. And though it breaks our peace—it cannot separate from his love. Nor is it inconsistent with his holiness, and perfection, to manifest his favor to such poor defiled creatures, or to admit them to communion with himself; for they are not considered as in themselves—but as one with Jesus, to whom they have fled for refuge, and by whom they live a life of faith.

They are accepted in the Beloved. They act from a *principle* of love. They *aim* at no less than his glory. Their habitual desires are supremely fixed upon himself. There is a difference in kind between the feeblest efforts of faith in a real believer, while he is covered with shame at the thoughts of his sins—and the highest and most splendid attainments of those who are wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight.

Nor shall this conflict remain long, or the enemy finally prevail over them. They are supported by almighty power—and led on to certain victory. They shall not always be—as they are now; yet a little while, and they shall be freed from this vile body, which, like the leprous house, is incurably contaminated, and must be entirely taken down. Then they shall see Jesus as He is, and be like him, and with him forever.

The gracious purposes to which the Lord makes the sense and feeling of our depravity subservient, are manifold. Hereby his own power, wisdom, faithfulness, and love, are more signally displayed.

His **power** is displayed—in *maintaining* his own work in the midst of so much opposition, like a spark burning in the water, or a bush unconsumed in the flames.

His **wisdom** is displayed—in defeating and controlling all the devices which Satan, who from his knowledge of the evil of our nature, is encouraged to practice against us. He has overthrown many a fair *professor*, and, like Goliath, he challenges the whole army of Israel; yet he finds that there are some against whom, though he thrusts sorely, he cannot prevail. Notwithstanding any seeming advantage he gains at some seasons—they are still delivered, for the Lord is on their side.

The unchangeableness of the Lord's **love**, and the riches of his mercy, are likewise more illustrated by the *multiplied pardons* He bestows upon his people—than if they needed no forgiveness at all.

Hereby the Lord **Jesus** Christ is more endeared to the soul; all boasting is effectually excluded, and the glory of a full and free salvation is ascribed to him alone.

The righteous are said to be *scarcely* saved, not with respect to the *certainty* of the event, for the purpose of God in their favor cannot be disappointed—but in respect of their *own apprehensions*, and the great *difficulties* they are brought through. But when, after a long experience of their own deceitful hearts, after repeated proofs of their weakness, wilfulness, ingratitude, and insensibility—they find that none of these things can separate them from the love of God in Christ; Jesus becomes more and more precious to their souls. They love much, because much has been forgiven them!

They dare not, they will not ascribe anything to themselves, but are glad to acknowledge, that they must have perished a thousand times over—if Jesus had not been their Savior, their Shepherd, and their Shield! When they were wandering—He brought them back. When they were fallen—He raised them. When they were wounded—He healed them. When they were fainting—He revived them. By him, out of weakness, they have been made strong. He has taught their hands to battle, and covered their heads in the day of battle. In a word, some of the clearest proofs they have had of *his excellence*—have been occasioned by the mortifying proofs they have had of *their own vileness*. They would not have

known so much of *him*—if they had not known so much of *themselves!*

Further, a spirit of *humiliation*, which is both the strength and beauty of our profession—is greatly promoted by our feeling, as well as reading—that *when we would do good—evil is present with us*. A broken and contrite spirit is pleasing to the Lord. He has promised to dwell with those who have it; and experience shows, that the exercise of all our graces is in proportion to the humbling sense we have of the depravity of our nature.

Whoever is truly humbled—will not be easily angry, nor harsh or critical of others. He will be compassionate and tender to the infirmities of his fellow-sinners, knowing that if there is a difference—it is grace alone which has made it! He knows that he has the seeds of every evil in his own heart. And under all trials and afflictions—he will look to the hand of the Lord, and lay his mouth in the dust, acknowledging that he suffers much less than his iniquities have deserved.

These are some of the *advantages* and *good fruits* which the Lord enables us to obtain from that *bitter root*—indwelling sin.

That bitter root, indwelling sin!

April, 1772

Dear sir,

My two last letters turned upon a mournful subject, the depravity of the heart, which impedes us when we would do good, and pollutes our best-intended services with evil. We have cause, upon this account, to go softly all our days—yet we need not sorrow as those who have no hope. The Lord has provided his people, relief under those complaints, and teaches us to draw improvement from them. If the evils we feel were not capable of being over-ruled for good, he would not permit them to remain in us. This we may infer from his *hatred* to sin, and the *love* which he bears to his people.

As to the *remedy*—neither our *state* nor his *honor* are affected by the workings of indwelling sin, in the hearts of those whom he has taught to wrestle, strive, and mourn on account of what they feel. Though sin *wars*—it shall not *reign*! And though it breaks our peace—it cannot separate from his love! Nor is it inconsistent with his holiness and perfection, to manifest his favor to such poor defiled creatures, or to admit them to communion with himself; for they are not considered as in *themselves*—but as one with *Jesus*, to whom they have fled for refuge, and by whom they live a life of faith. They are *accepted in the Beloved*, they have an Advocate with the Father, who once made an atonement for their sins, and who ever lives to make intercession for them. Though they cannot fulfill the law, he has fulfilled it for them. Though the obedience of the *members* is defiled and imperfect, the obedience of the *Head* is spotless and complete. Though there is much *evil* in them, there is something good, the *fruit* of his own gracious Spirit. They act from a principle of love, they aim at no less than his glory, and their habitual desires are supremely fixed upon himself.

There is a difference in kind, between the feeblest efforts of faith in a real believer, while he is covered with shame at the thoughts of his miscarriages, and the highest and most specious attainments of those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight. Nor shall this conflict remain long, or the enemy finally prevail over them. They are *supported by Almighty power*, and led on to certain victory. They shall not always be as they are now; in a little while, they shall be freed from this vile body, which, like the leprous house, is incurably contaminated, and must be entirely taken down! Then they shall see Jesus as he is—and be like him and with him for ever!

The gracious purposes to which the Lord makes the sense and feeling of our depravity subservient, are manifold. Hereby his own power, wisdom, faithfulness, and love, are more signally displayed. His *power*, in maintaining his own work in the midst of so much opposition, like a *spark* burning in the midst of an ocean, or a *bush* unconsumed in the flames. His *wisdom*, in defeating and controlling all the devices which Satan, from his knowledge of the evil of our nature, is encouraged to practice against us. He has overthrown many a fair professor, and, like Goliath, he challenges the whole army of Israel; yet he finds there are some against whom, though he thrusts sorely, he cannot prevail. Notwithstanding any seeming advantage he gains at some seasons, they are still delivered, for the Lord is on their side. The unchangeableness of the Lord's love, and the riches of his mercy, are likewise more illustrated by the multiplied pardons he bestows upon his people, than if they needed no forgiveness at all.

Hereby the Lord Jesus Christ is more endeared to the soul; all boasting is effectually excluded, and the glory of a full and free salvation is ascribed to him alone!

If a *mariner* is surprised by a storm, and after one night spent in jeopardy is presently brought safe into port; though he may rejoice in his deliverance, it will not affect him so sensibly, as if, after being tempest-tossed for a long season, and experiencing a great number and variety of hair-breadth escapes, he at last gains the desired haven. The righteous are said to be *scarcely saved*, not with respect to the certainty of the event, for the purpose of God in their favor cannot be disappointed—but in respect of their own apprehensions, and the great difficulties they are brought through! But when, after a long experience of their own deceitful hearts, after repeated proofs of their weakness, willfulness, ingratitude, and insensibility, they find that none of these things can separate them from the love of Jesus—He becomes more and more precious to their souls. They love much, because much has been forgiven them. They dare not, they will not ascribe anything to themselves—but are glad to acknowledge, that they must have perished (humanly speaking) a thousand times over, if Jesus had not been their Savior, their shepherd, and their shield. When they were wandering—he brought them back; when fallen—he raised them; when wounded—he healed them; when fainting—he revived them! By him, out of weakness—they have been made strong! He has taught their hands to war, and covered their heads in the day of battle. In a word, some of the clearest proofs they have had of his excellence, have been occasioned by the humiliating proofs they have had of their own vileness. They would not have known so much of him—if they had not known so much of themselves!

Further, a *spirit of humiliation*, which is both the strength and beauty of our profession, is greatly promoted by our *feeling*, as well as *reading*, that when we would do good, evil is present with us. A broken and contrite spirit is pleasing to the Lord—he has promised to dwell with those who have it. Experience shows, that the exercise of all our graces, is in proportion to the humbling sense we have of the depravity of our nature.

That we are so totally depraved, is a truth which no one ever truly learned by being only *taught* it. Indeed, if we could receive, and habitually maintain, a right judgment of ourselves, by what is plainly declared in Scripture, it would probably save us many a mournful hour! But *experience* is the Lord's school, and those who are taught by him usually learn that they have no *wisdom*—by the mistakes they make; and that they have no *strength*—by the slips and falls they meet with. Every day draws forth some new corruption, which before was little observed, or at least discovers it in a stronger light than before. Thus by degrees, they are weaned from leaning to any supposed wisdom, power, or goodness in themselves! They feel the truth of our Lord's words, "without me—you can do nothing;" and the necessity of crying with David, "O lead me and guide me!"

It is chiefly by this frame of mind, that one Christian is different from another; for, though it is an inward feeling, it has very observable outward effects, which are expressively intimated, Ezekiel 16:63, "You will remember your sins and cover your mouth in silence and shame—when I forgive you of all that you have done, says the Sovereign Lord." That is—the knowledge of God's full and free forgiveness of your innumerable backslidings and transgressions, shall make you ashamed, and silence the unruly workings of your heart. You shall open your mouth in praise; but you shall no more boast in yourself, or censure others, or repine at my dispensations.

In these respects, we are exceedingly prone to speak unadvisedly with our lips; but a sense of *our* great unworthiness, and *God's* great grace and forgiveness, checks these evils. Whoever is truly humbled will not be easily angry, will not be positive and rash, will be compassionate and tender to the infirmities of his fellow-sinners; knowing, that, if there is a difference—it is grace which has made that difference; and that he has the seeds of every evil in his own heart!

Likewise, under all trials and afflictions, he will look to the hand of the Lord, and lay his mouth in the dust, acknowledging that he suffers much less than his iniquities have deserved.

These are some of the advantages and good fruits which the Lord enables us to obtain from **that bitter root, indwelling sin**

Addressing the Unconverted

Dear sir,

In a late conversation you desired my thoughts concerning a Scriptural and consistent manner of addressing the consciences of unawakened sinners in the course of your ministry. It is a point on which many eminent ministers have been, and are not a little divided; and it therefore befits me to propose my sentiments with modesty and caution, so far as I am constrained to differ from any, from whom, in general, I would be glad to learn.

Some think that it is sufficient to preach the great truths of the Word of God in their hearing; to set forth the utterly ruined and helpless state of fallen man by nature, and the appointed method of salvation by grace, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and then to leave the application entirely to the agency of the Holy Spirit, who alone can enlighten the dark understandings of sinners, and enable them to receive, in a due measure, the doctrines of either the Law or the Gospel. And they apprehend that all exhortations, arguments, and motives, addressed to those who are supposed to be still under the influence of a carnal mind, are inconsistent with the principles of free grace, and the acknowledged inability of such persons to perform any spiritual acts; and that, therefore, the preachers who, avowing the doctrines of free grace, do, notwithstanding, plead and expostulate with sinners, usually contradict themselves, and retract in their application, what they had labored to establish in the course of their sermon.

There are others, who, though they would be extremely unwilling to derogate from the free grace and sovereign power of God in the great work of conversion, or in the least degree encourage the mistaken notion which every unconverted person has of his own power; yet think it their duty to deal with sinners as rational and moral agents; and as such, besides declaring the counsel of God in a doctrinal way, *to warn them*, by His tender mercies, that they receive not the grace of God in a preached Gospel in vain. Nor can it be denied but that some of them, when deeply affected with the worth of souls, and the awful importance of eternal things, have sometimes, in the warmth of their hearts, dropped unguarded expressions, and such as have been justly liable to exception.

If we were to decide to which of these different methods of preaching the preference is due, by the *discernible effects* of each, it will, perhaps, appear in fact, without making any invidious comparisons, that those ministers whom the Lord has honored with the greatest success in awakening and converting sinners, have generally been led to adopt the more popular way of exhortation or address; while those who have been studiously careful to avoid any direct application to sinners, as unnecessary

and improper, if they have not been altogether without seals to their ministry, yet their labors have been more owned in building up those who have already received the knowledge of the truth, than adding to their number.

Now, as "he who wins souls is wise," and as every faithful laborer has a warm desire of being instrumental in raising the dead in sin to a life of righteousness, this seems at least a presumptive argument in favor of those who, besides stating the doctrines of the Gospel, endeavor, by earnest persuasions and exhortations, to impress them upon the hearts of their hearers, and entreat and warn them to consider "How they shall escape, if they neglect so great salvation." For it is not easy to conceive that the Lord should most signally bear testimony in favor of that mode of preaching which is least consistent with the Truth, and with itself.

But not to insist on this, nor to rest the cause on the authority or examples of men, the best of whom are imperfect and fallible, let us consult the Scriptures, which, as they furnish us with the whole subject-matter of our ministry, so they afford us perfect precepts and patterns for its due and orderly dispensation. With respect to the subject of our inquiry, the examples of our Lord Christ, and of His authorized ministers, the Apostles, are both *our rule and our warrant*.

The Lord Jesus was the great Preacher of free grace, "who spoke as never man spoke"; and His ministry, while it provided relief for the weary and heavy-laden, was eminently designed to stain the pride of all human glory. He knew what was in man, and declared that none would come unto Him, unless drawn and taught of God—John 6:44-46. And yet He often speaks to sinners in terms, which, if they were not known to be *His*, might perhaps, be censured as inconsistent and legal—John 6:27, Luke 13:24-27, John 12:35. It appears, both from the context and the tenor of these passages, that they were immediately spoken not of His disciples—but to the multitude. The Apostles copied from their Lord—they taught that we have no sufficiency of ourselves, even to think a good thought, and that "it is not of him that wills or of him that runs—but of God who shows mercy"; yet they plainly call upon sinners (and that *before* they had given evident signs that they were pricked in the heart as Acts 2:21) to "repent" and turn from their vanities to the living God—Acts 3:19, 14:15, 17:30.

Peter's advice to Simon Magus is very full and express to this point—for though he perceived him to be "in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity," he *exhorted* him "to repent, and to pray, if perhaps the thought of his heart might be forgiven." It may be presumed that we cannot have stronger evidence, that any of our readers are in a carnal and unconverted state, than Peter had in the case of Simon Magus; and therefore there seems no sufficient reason why we should hesitate to follow the Apostle's example.

You have been told that repentance and faith are spiritual acts, for the performance of which a principle of spiritual life is absolutely necessary; and that therefore, to exhort an unregenerate sinner to

repent or believe, must be as vain and fruitless as to call a dead person out of his grave. To this it may be answered that we might cheerfully and confidently undertake even to call the dead out of their graves, if we had the command and promise to warrant the attempt; for then we might expect His power would accompany our word.

The vision of Ezekiel in chapter 37, may be fitly accommodated to illustrate both the difficulties and the encouragement of a Gospel ministry. The deplorable state of many of our hearers may often remind us of the Lord's question to the Prophet, "Can these dry bones live?" Our response, like that of the Prophet's is entirely in the sovereignty, grace, and power of the Lord, "O Lord, You know, impossible as it is to us, it is easy for You to raise them unto life; therefore *we renounce our own reasonings*, and though we see that they are dead, we call upon them at Your bidding, as if they were alive, and say, O you dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord! The means is our part, the work is Yours, and to You be all the praise." The dry bones could not hear the Prophet; but while he spoke, the Lord caused breath to enter into them, and they lived—but the word was spoken to them *considered as dry and dead*.

It is true the Lord can, and I hope He often does, make that preaching effectual to the conversion of sinners, wherein little is said expressly *to them*, only the truths of the Gospel being declared in their hearing; but He who knows the frame of the human heart, has provided us with a variety of topics which have a moral suitableness to engage the faculties, affections, and consciences of sinners, so far at least as to leave them condemned if they persist in their sins, and by which He often effects the purposes of His grace; though none of the means of grace by which He ordinarily works, can produce a real change in the heart, unless they are accompanied with the efficacious power of His Spirit.

Should we admit that an unconverted person is not a proper subject of ministerial exhortation, because he has no power in himself to comply, the just consequence of this position would, perhaps, *extend too far*, even to prove the impropriety of *all* exhortation universally—for when we invite the weary and heavy laden to come to Christ, that they may find rest; when we call upon backsliders to remember from whence they are fallen, "to repent and do their first works"; yes, when we exhort believers "to walk worthy of God, who has called them to His kingdom and glory"—in each of these cases we press them to acts for which *they have no* inherent power of their own; and unless the Lord the Spirit is pleased to apply the Word to their hearts, we do but speak to the air; and our endeavors can have no more effect in these instances than if we were to say to a dead body "arise, and walk." For an exertion of Divine power is no less necessary to the healing of a wounded conscience, than the breaking of a hard heart; and only He who has begun the good work of grace, is able either to revive or to maintain it.

Though sinners are destitute of spiritual life, they are not therefore *mere machines*. They have a power to do many things, which they may be called upon to exert. They are capable of considering their ways; they know they are mortal; and the bulk of them are persuaded in their consciences that after death there is an appointed judgment. They are not under an inevitable necessity of living in known and gross sins; that they do so, is not for lack of power—but for lack of will. The most profane swearer can refrain from his oaths, while in the presence of a person whom he fears, and to whom he knows it would be displeasing. Let a drunkard see poison put into his liquor, and it may stand by him untasted from morning until night. And many would be deterred from sins to which they are greatly addicted, by the presence of a child, though they have no fear of God before their eyes.

They have a power likewise of attending upon the means of grace; and though the Lord alone can give them true faith and evangelical repentance, there seems no impropriety to invite them, upon the ground of the Gospel-promises, to seek to Him who is exalted to bestow these blessings, and who is able to do for them that which they cannot do for themselves, and who has said "him who comes unto Me, I will never cast out."

Perhaps it will not be easily proved that entreaties, arguments, warnings, formed upon these general principles, which are in the main agreeable and adequate to the remaining light of natural conscience, are at all inconsistent with those doctrines which ascribe the whole of a sinner's salvation from first to last, to the free sovereign grace of God.

We should, undoubtedly, endeavor to maintain a consistency in our preaching; but unless we keep the plan and manner of Scriptures constantly in view, and attend to every part of it, a design of "consistency" may fetter our sentiments, and greatly *preclude* our usefulness. We need not wish to be more "consistent" *than the inspired writers*, nor be afraid of speaking as *they* have spoken before us! We may easily perplex ourselves and our hearers *by nice reasonings* on the nature of human liberty, and the Divine agency on the hearts of men; but such disquisitions *are better avoided*. We shall, perhaps, never have full satisfaction on these subjects until we arrive in the world of Light.

In the meantime, the path of duty, the good old way, lies plain before us. If when you are in the pulpit, the Lord favors you with a lively sense of the greatness of the trust, and the worth of the souls committed to your charge, and fills your heart with His constraining love, many little curious distinctions, which amuse you at other times, will be forgotten. Your soul will go forth with your words; and while your affections yearn over poor sinners, you will not hesitate a moment, whether you ought to warn them of their danger or not. That great champion of free grace, John Owen, has a very solemn address to sinners, the running title to which is, "Exhortations unto believing." It is in his Exposition of the 130th Psalm, which I recommend to your attentive consideration.

John Newton, 1770

N.B. We heartily commend the above to the thoughtful and prayerful perusal of those of our ministerial brethren who are inclined to be hyper-Calvinistic. The above was written by one who was a marvelous trophy of sovereign grace, deeply taught in Divine things, wondrously helped in maintaining the *balance* of truth, and mightily used in the blessing of souls. Personally, we have often lamented the fact that Mr. *Gadsby*, and later, Mr. *Philpot*, followed what we believe was the error of *William Huntington*, instead of adhering to that path which had been almost uniformly trodden by the Reformers and Puritans. Had they done so, we believe that the Strict and Particular Baptist churches would be in a far healthier and livelier spiritual state than they are now in.

Arthur Pink

Blinded by Satan

April 20, 1774

Dear sir,

I have been pondering a good while for a subject, and at last I begin without one, hoping that (as it has often happened) while I am writing one line, something will occur to fill up another. Indeed, I have an inexhaustible fund at hand; but it is to me often like a *prize in the hand of a fool*—I lack skill to improve it. O for a warm, a suitable, a seasonable train of thought, that might enliven my own heart, and not be unworthy your perusal! Methinks the poets can have but cold comfort, when they invoke a fabled muse; but we have a warrant, a right, to look up for the influence of the Holy Spirit, who ordains strength for us, and has promised to work in us. What a comfort, what an honor is this—that sinful worms have liberty to look up to God! and that he, the High and Holy One, who inhabits eternity, is pleased to look down upon us, to maintain our peace, to supply our needs, to guide us with his eye, and to inspire us with wisdom and grace suitable to our occasions! Those who profess to know something of this fellowship, and to depend upon it, are, by the world, accounted *enthusiasts*, who know not what they mean; or perhaps *hypocrites*, who pretend to what they have not, in order to cover some base designs. But we have reason to bear their reproaches with patience.

Well then may the believer say, Let them laugh, let them rage; let them, if they please, point at me for a fool as I walk the streets! If I do but take up the Bible, or run over in my mind the inventory of the blessings with which the Lord has enriched me—I have sufficient amends. Jesus is mine—in him I have wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, a saving interest in all the promises and in all the perfections of God. He will *guide* me by his counsel, *support* me by his power, *comfort* me with his presence, while I am here; and afterwards, when flesh and heart fail—he will receive me to his glory!

Let them say what they will, they shall not dispute or laugh us out of our spiritual senses. If all the *blind men* in the kingdom should endeavor to bear me down, that the sun is not bright, or that the rainbow has no colors, I would still believe my own eyes. I have seen them both—they have not. I cannot prove to their satisfaction what I assert, because they are destitute of *sight*, the necessary medium; yet their disputations produce no uncertainty in my mind. They would not question me, they could not hesitate a moment, if they were not blind. Just so, those who have been taught of God, who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, have an *experimental perception* of the truth, which armors them against all the sophistry of infidels.

I am persuaded we have many plain people here, who, if a wise man of the world was to suggest that the Bible is a human invention, would be quite at a loss how to answer him by arguments drawn from external evidences; yet they have found such *effects* from this blessed book, that they would be no more moved by the insinuation, than if they were told that a clever man, or set of men, invented the sun, and placed it in the skies! So, if a wise Socinian was to tell them that the Savior was only a man like themselves, they would conceive just such an opinion of his skill in divinity, as a philosopher would do of a clown's skill in astronomy, who would affirm that the sun was no bigger than a cart-wheel.

It remains therefore a truth, in defiance of all the cavils of the ignorant, that the Holy Spirit does influence the hearts of all the children of God; or, in other words, they are inspired, not with new revelations—but with *grace* and *wisdom* to understand, apply, and feed upon the great things already revealed in the Scriptures, without which the Scriptures are as useless as *eye-glasses* to the blind. Were it not so, when we become acquainted with the poverty, ignorance, and wickedness of our

hearts—we must sit down in utter despair of being ever able to think a good thought, to offer a single petition aright in prayer, or to take one safe step in the path of life. But now we may be content with our proper weakness, since the power and Spirit of Christ are engaged to rest upon us; and while we are preserved in a simple dependence upon this help, though unable of ourselves to do anything, we shall find an ability to do everything that our circumstances and duty call for.

What is weaker than a worm? yet the Lord's "worm" shall, in his strength, "thresh the mountains, and make the hills as chaff!" But this life of faith, this living and acting by a power above our own, is an inexplicable mystery, until *experience* makes it plain.

I have often wondered that Paul has obtained so much quarter at the hands of some people, as to pass with them for a man of sense; for surely the greatest part of his writings must be, to the last degree, absurd and unintelligible upon their principles. How many contradictions must they find, for instance, if they give any attention to what they read in that one passage, Gal. 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

And as believers are thus inspired by the Holy Spirit, who furnishes them with *desires, motives, and abilities*, to perform what is agreeable to his will; so I apprehend, that those who live without God in the world, whom the Apostle styles sensual, not having the Spirit, are, in a greater or less degree, recipients, under what I may call a *black inspiration*. After making the best allowances I can, both for the extent of human genius, and the deplorable evil of the human heart, I cannot suppose that one half of the wicked wit, of which some people are so proud, is properly their own. Perhaps such a one as Voltaire would neither have written, or have been read or admired so much, if he had not been the amanuensis of an abler hand in his own way. *Satan* is always near, when the heart is disposed to receive him and the Lord withdraws his restraints, to heighten the sinner's ability of sinning with a vengeance, and assisting him with such strokes of blasphemy, malice, and falsehood, as perhaps he could not otherwise have attained. Therefore I do not wonder that they are clever and smart, that they raise a laugh, and are received with applause among those who are like-minded with themselves.

But, unless the Lord is pleased to grant them repentance (though it is rather to be feared some of them are given up to *judicial hardness of heart*), how much better would it have been for them had they been born idiots or lunatics, than to be distinguished as the witty and successful instruments of the powers of darkness—in beguiling, perverting, and ruining the souls of men! Alas, what are abilities and talents, or any distinctions which give pre-eminence in life, unless they are sanctified by the grace of God, and directed to the accomplishment of his will and glory!

From the expression, "Bind them in *bundles* and burn them," I have been led to think, that the *deceivers* and the *deceived*; those who have prostituted their abilities or influence to encourage others in sin, and those who have perished by their means; may, in another world, have some peculiar and inseparable connection, and spend an eternity in fruitless lamentations that ever they were connected here on earth!

I doubt not, that you feel the force of that line:
"Oh to *grace* how great a debtor—
daily I'm constrained to be!"

Had not the Lord separated you for himself—your rank, your abilities, your influence, which now you chiefly value as enlarging your opportunities of gospel

usefulness; might, nay certainly would, have been diverted into the opposite channel!

When we see the world in flames!

December 8, 1774

Dear sir,

How wonderful is the patience of God towards sinful men! In him they live, and move, and have their being; and if he were to withdraw his support for a single moment, they must perish! He maintains their lives, guards their persons, supplies their needs—while they employ the powers and faculties they receive from him in a settled course of opposition to his will. They trample upon his laws, affront his government, and despise his grace—yet still he spares! To silence all his adversaries in a moment, would require no extraordinary exertion of his power; but his forbearance towards them manifests his glory, and gives us cause to say, "*Who is a God like unto you?*"

Sometimes, however, there are striking instances of his displeasure against sin. When such events take place immediately upon a public and premeditated contempt offered to Him who sits in the heavens. For though his long-suffering is astonishing, and many dare him to his face daily, with seeming impunity; yet he sometimes strikes a dreadful and unexpected blow, and gives an illustration of that solemn word, "Who ever hardened himself against the Lord, and prospered?" But who am I, to make this observation? I ought to do it with the deepest humiliation, remembering that I once stood (according to my years and ability) in the *foremost* rank of his avowed opposers; and with a determined and unwearied enmity—renounced, defied, and blasphemed him! "But he will have mercy on whom He will have mercy;" and therefore I was spared, and reserved to speak of his goodness.

Josephus, when speaking of the death of Herod Agrippa, ascribes it to a natural cause, and says, he was seized with excruciating pains in his intestines. But Luke informs us of the true cause—an angel of the Lord smote him! Had we a modern history, written by an inspired pen, we would probably often be reminded of such an interposition where we are not ordinarily aware of it. For though the springs of actions and events are concealed from us for the most part, and vain men carry on their schemes with confidence, as though the Lord had forsaken the earth; yet they are under his eye and control. Faith in some measure, instructed by the specimens of his government recorded in the Scripture, can trace and admire *his hand*, and can see how he takes the wise in their own craftiness, and stains the pride of human glory; and that, when sinners speak proudly, he is above them, and makes everything bend or break before him.

While we lament the growth and pernicious effects of infidelity, and see how wicked men and seducers wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived; what gratitude should fill our hearts to Him, who has been pleased to call us out of the horrid darkness in which multitudes are bewildered and lost—into the glorious light of His Gospel!

Faint are our warmest conceptions of this mercy. In order to understand it fully—we should have a full and adequate sense of the evil from which we are delivered; the glory to which we are called; and especially of the astonishing means to which we owe our great salvation—the humiliation, sufferings, and death of the Son of God!

But our views of these points, while in our present state—are and must be exceedingly weak. We know them but in part, we see but a dim reflection of them. And though they are faithfully represented in the mirror of God's Word, to us they appear indistinct, because we see them through a gross medium of ignorance and unbelief.

In heavenly glory, every veil shall be removed; and we shall fully know—the unspeakable evil of sin, and the unsupportable dreadfulness of God's displeasure against it, when we see the world in flames, and hear the final sentence denounced upon the ungodly!

We shall have far other thoughts of **Jesus** when we see him as he is; and shall then be able to make a more affecting estimate of the love which moved him to be made a substitute and a curse for us. And we shall then know what great things God has prepared for those who love him. Then with transport, we shall adopt the queen of Sheba's language, "It was a true report we heard in yonder dark world; but, behold, the half, the thousandth part, was not told us!" In the mean time, may such conceptions as we are enabled to form of these great truths, fill our hearts, and be mingled with all our thoughts and all our concerns. May the Lord, by faith, give us an abiding evidence of the reality and importance of these eternal realities—so shall we be enabled to live above the world while we are in it, uninfluenced either by its blandishments or its frowns; and, with a noble simplicity and singularity, avow and maintain the cause of God in truth, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. He whom we serve is able to support and protect us; and he well deserves at our hands, that we should be willing to endure, for his sake, much more than he will ever permit us to be exercised with.

You are not indeed called to serve God quite alone; but among those of your own rank, and with whom the station in which he has placed you—how few are there who can understand or approve, the principles upon which you act, or easily bear a conduct which must impress conviction, or reflect dishonor upon themselves! But you are not alone; the Lord's people (many of whom you will not know until you meet them in glory) are helping you here with their prayers; his angels are commissioned to guard and guide your steps; yes, the Lord himself fixes his eye of mercy upon your private and your public path, and is near you at your right hand, that you may not be moved! That he may comfort you with the light of his countenance, and uphold you with the arm of his power, is my frequent prayer.

The history of mankind

July, 1777

Dear sir,

I have recently read "*Robertson's History of Charles V*", which, like most other histories, I consider as a comment upon those passages of Scripture which teach us the depravity of man, the deceitfulness of the heart, the ruinous effects of sin; and the powerful, though secret, rule of Divine Providence, moving, directing, controlling the designs and actions of men, with an unerring hand, to the accomplishment of his own purposes, both of mercy and judgment. Without the clue and the light which the Word of God affords—**the history of mankind**, of any, of every age, only presents to view—a labyrinth and a chaos; a detail of wickedness and misery to make us tremble; and a confused jumble of interfering incidents, as destitute of stability, connection, or order—as the clouds which fly over our heads.

But with *the Scripture key*—all is plain, all is instructive. Then I see, truly there is a God, who governs the earth, who pours contempt upon princes, takes the wise in their own craftiness, over-rules the wrath and pride of man to bring his own designs to pass, and restrains all that is not necessary to that end; blasting the best concerted enterprises at one time, by means apparently slight, and altogether unexpected, and at other times producing the most important events from instruments and circumstances which are at first thought too feeble and trivial to deserve notice.

I would like to see a writer of Dr. Robertson's abilities give us a history upon this plan; but I think his reflections of this sort are too general, too cold, and too few. What an empty phantom do the great men of the world pursue, while they wage war with the peace of mankind, and butcher (in the course of their lives) perhaps hundreds of thousands, to maintain the shadow of authority over distant nations, whom they can reach with no other influence than that of oppression and devastation! But when we consider those who are *sacrificed to their ambition* as justly suffering for their sins, then heroes and conquerors appear in their proper light, and worthy to be classed with earthquakes and pestilences—as *instruments of Divine vengeance*. So many cares, so much pains, so many mischiefs, merely to support the idea which a *human worm* has formed of his own grandeur, is a proof that man, by nature, is not only depraved—but infatuated. How awful is the case of those who live and die in such a spirit, and who have multiplied miseries upon their fellow-creatures, in order to support and feed their pride and arrogance! Perhaps they may, upon their entrance to the eternal state, be accosted by multitudes, to the purpose of that sarcastic language in the prophet's sublime ode of triumph over the king of Babylon, Isa. 14:5-17.

But though the effects of this *principle of SELF* are more extensive and calamitous in proportion as those who are governed by it are more elevated, the principle itself is deep-rooted in every heart, and is the spring of every action—until grace infuses a new principle, and self, like Dagon, falls before the Lord Almighty. Great and small are but relative terms; and the passions of discontent, pride, and envy, which, in the breast of a potentate are severely felt by one half of Europe, exert themselves with equal strength in the heart of a peasant, though, for lack of materials and opportunities, their operations are confined within narrow bounds. We are fallen into a state of gross idolatry—and SELF is the idol we worship!

Little trials

October 15, 1774.

My dear friend,

I think the greatness of trials is to be estimated rather by the impression they make upon our spirits, than by their outward appearance. The smallest will be too heavy for us if we are left to grapple with it in our own strength, or rather weakness. And if the Lord is pleased to put forth his power in us, he can make the heaviest trial light. A lively impression of his love, or of his sufferings for us, or of the glories within the veil, accompanied with a due sense of the misery from which we are redeemed; these thoughts will enable us to be not only submissive—but even joyful, in tribulations. When faith is in exercise, though the *flesh* will have its feelings, the *spirit* will triumph over them.

But it is needful that we should know that we have no sufficiency in ourselves, and in order to know it, we must feel it; and therefore the Lord sometimes withdraws his sensible influence, and then the *buzzing of a fly* will be an overmatch for our patience. At other times he will show us what he can do in us and for us; then we can adopt the Apostle's words, and say—I can do and suffer all things, through Christ strengthening me. He has said, My grace is sufficient for you.

It is observable, that the children of God seldom disappoint our expectations under great trials; if they show a wrongness of spirit, it is usually in such little incidents that we are ready to wonder at them. For which, two reasons may be principally assigned. When great trials are in view, we run simply and immediately to our all-sufficient Friend, feel our dependence, and cry in good earnest for help; but if the occasion seems small, we are too apt secretly to lean to our own wisdom and strength, as if in such slight matters we could make shift without him. Therefore in these we often fail.

Again: the Lord deals with us as we sometimes see mothers with their children. When a child begins to walk, he is often very self-important: he thinks he needs no help, and can hardly bear to be supported by the finger of another. Now in such a case, if there is no danger of harm from a fall, as if he is on a plain carpet, the mother will let him alone to try how he can walk. He is pleased at first—but shortly, down he goes! A few experiments of this kind convince him that he is not so strong and able as he thought, and make him willing to be led. But was he upon the brink of a river or a precipice, from whence a fall might be fatal, the tender mother would not trust him to himself—no not for a moment! I have not room to make the application, nor is it needful. It requires the same grace to bear with a right spirit a cross *word*—as a cross *injury*; or the breaking of a china plate—as the death of an only son.