

# THE PLAN OF SALVATION

LETTERS

BY

**JOHN NEWTON**

## Letters by John Newton

# The Plan of Salvation.

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# The plan of salvation

December 8, 1775.

My Dear Friend,

Are you willing that I should still call you so, or are you quite weary of me? Your silence makes me suspect the latter. However, it is my part to fulfill my promise, and then leave the event to God. As I have but an imperfect remembrance of what I have already written, I may be liable to some repetitions. I cannot stay to comment upon every line in your letter—but I proceed to notice such passages as seem most to affect the subject in debate. When you speak of the Scripture's maintaining one consistent sense, which, if it is the Word of God, it certainly must do, you say you read and understand it in this one consistent sense; nay, you cannot remember the time when you did not.

It is otherwise with me, and with multitudes; we remember when it was a sealed book; and we are sure it would have been so still, had not the Holy Spirit opened our understandings. But when you add, "Though I pretend not to understand the whole—yet what I do understand appears perfectly consistent;" I know not how far this exception may extend; for perhaps the reason why you allow you do not understand some parts, is because you cannot make them consistent with the *sense* you put upon other parts. You quote my words, "That when we are conscious of our depravity, reasoning stands us in no stead." Undoubtedly reason always will stand rational creatures in some stead; but my meaning is, that, when we are deeply convinced of sin, all our former reasoning upon the ways of God, while we made our conceptions the standard by which we judge what is befitting Him to do, as if He were altogether such an one as ourselves—all those cobweb reasonings are swept away, and we submit to him without reasoning, though not without reason—for we have the strongest reason imaginable to acknowledge ourselves vile and lost, without righteousness and strength, when we actually feel ourselves to be so.

You speak of the Gospel *terms* of justification. The term is *faith*, Mar. 16:16; Act. 13:39; the Gospel propounds, admits, no other term. But this *faith*, as I endeavored to show in my former letter, is very different from *rational assent*. You speak likewise of the law of faith; by which, if you mean what some call the remedial law, which we are to obey as well as we can, and such obedience, together with our faith, will entitle us to acceptance with God—I am persuaded the Scripture speaks of no such thing. Grace, and works of any kind, in the point of acceptance with God—are mentioned by the Apostle not only as opposites, or contraries—but as absolutely contradictory to each other, like fire and water, light and darkness; so that the affirmation of one—is the denial of the other; Romans 4:5, and Romans 11:6. God justifies freely, justifies the ungodly, and him who works not. Though justifying faith is indeed an active principle, it works by love; yet not for acceptance. Those whom the Apostle exhorts "to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling," he considers as justified already; for he considers them as believers, in whom he supposed God had already begun a good work; and, if so, was confident that God would accomplish it; Phi. 1:6.

To them, the consideration that God (who dwells in the hearts of believers) wrought in them to will and to do, was a powerful motive and encouragement to them to work; that is, to give all diligence in his appointed means. As a right sense of the sin that dwells in us, and the snares and temptations around us, will teach us still to work with fear and trembling.

You suppose a difference between Christians (so called) who are devoted to God in baptism, and those who in the first ages were converted from abominable superstitions and idolatrous vices. It is true, in Christian countries we do not

worship Heathen divinities; and this is the principal difference I can find. Neither reason nor observation will allow me to think that human nature is a whit better now, than it was in the Apostle's time. I know no kinds or degrees of wickedness which prevailed among Heathens, which are not prevalent among *nominal Christians*, who have perhaps been baptized in their infancy; and therefore, as the streams in the life are equally worldly, sensual, devilish—I doubt not but the fountain in the heart is equally polluted and poisonous. It is as equally true, as in the days of Christ and his Apostles, that unless a man is born again—he cannot see the kingdom of God.

You sent me a sermon upon the new birth, or regeneration, and you have several of mine on the same subject. I wish you to compare them with each other, and with the Scripture; and I pray God to show you wherein the difference consists, and on which side the truth lies.

When you desire me to reconcile God's being the *author of sin* with his justice, you show that you misunderstand the whole strain of my sentiments; for I am persuaded you would not misrepresent them. It is easy to charge harsh consequences, which I neither allow, nor indeed do they follow from my sentiments. God cannot be the *author of sin*, in that sense you would fix upon me; but is it possible that upon your plan you find no difficulty in what the Scripture teaches us upon this subject? I conceive, that those who were concerned in the death of Christ were very great sinners, and that in nailing him to the cross they committed atrocious wickedness. Yet, if the Apostle may be believed—all this was according to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, Act. 2:23; and they did no more than what His hand and purpose had determined should be done, Act. 4:28. And you will observe, that this wicked act (wicked with respect to the perpetrators) was not only permitted—but foreordained, in the strongest and most absolute sense of the word.

The glory of God and the salvation of men, depended upon its being done, and just in that manner and with all those circumstances which actually took place; and yet Judas and the rest acted freely, and the wickedness was properly their own. Now, my friend, the arguments which satisfy you that the Scripture does not represent God as the author of this sin in this appointment, will plead for me at the same time; and when you think you easily overcome me by asking, "Can God be the author of sin?" your imputation falls as directly upon the Word of God himself.

God is no more the author of sin, than the sun is the cause of ice; but it is in the nature of water to congeal into ice when the sun's influence is *suspended* to a certain degree. So there is sin enough in the hearts of men to make the earth the very image of hell, and to prove that men are no better than incarnate devils—were he to suspend his influence and restraint. Sometimes, and in some instances, he is pleased to suspend it considerably; and so far as he does, human nature quickly appears in its true colors.

Objections of this kind have been repeated and refitted before either you or I were born; and the Apostle evidently supposes they would be urged against his doctrine, when he obviates the question, "Why does he yet find fault? Who has resisted his will?" To which he gives no other answer than by referring it to God's sovereignty, and the power which a potter has over the clay.

I acknowledge that I am fallible; yet I must again lay claim to a certainty about the way of salvation. I am as sure of some things—as of my own existence! However, my sentiments are confirmed by the testimonies of thousands who have lived before me, of many with whom I have personally conversed in different places and circumstances, unknown to each other; yet all have received the same views—because taught by the same Spirit. And I have likewise been greatly confirmed by the testimony of many with whom I have conversed in their dying hours. I have

seen them rejoicing in the prospect of death, free from fears, breathing the air of immortality; heartily disclaiming their duties and performances; acknowledging that their best actions were attended with evil sufficient to condemn them; renouncing every shadow of hope—but what they derived from the blood of Christ, as the sole cause of their acceptance; yet triumphing in him over every enemy and fear, and as sure of heaven as if they were already there!

Such were the Apostle's hopes, wholly founded on knowing whom he had believed, and his persuasion of his ability to keep that which he had committed unto him. This is faith, a renouncing of everything we are apt to call our own, and relying wholly upon the blood, righteousness, and intercession of Jesus. However, I cannot communicate this *my certainty* to you; I only tell you there is such a thing, in hopes, if you do not think I willfully lie both to God and man, you will be earnest to seek it from him who bestowed it on me, and who will bestow it upon all who will sincerely apply to him, and patiently wait upon him for it.

I cannot but wonder, that, while you profess to believe the *depravity of human nature*, you should speak of *good qualities inherent* in it. The Word of God describes it as evil, only evil, and that continually. "The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" Jeremiah 17:9. That there are such qualities as Stoics and infidels call *virtue*, I allow. God has not left man destitute of such dispositions as are necessary to the peace of society; but I deny there is any spiritual goodness in them, unless it is founded in a supreme love to God, has his glory for their aim, and is produced by faith in Jesus Christ. A man may give all his goods to feed the poor, and his body to be burned in zeal for the truth, and yet be a mere nothing, a tinkling cymbal, in the sight of Him who sees not as man sees—but judges the heart. Many infidels and avowed enemies to the Grace and Gospel of Christ, have made a fair show of what the world call *virtue*; but Christian virtue is grace, the effect of a new nature and new life; and works thus wrought in God are as different from the faint, partial imitations of them which fallen nature is capable of producing, as a living man is different from a statue! A statue may express the features and lineaments of the person whom it represents—but there is no life!

Your comment on the seventh to the Romans, latter part, contradicts my feelings. You are either of a different make and nature from me, or else you are not rightly apprised of your own state, if you do not find the Apostle's complaints very suitable to yourself. I believe it applicable to the most holy Christian upon earth. But controversies of this kind are worn thread-bare. When you speak of the spiritual part of a natural man, it sounds to me like the *living* part of a *dead* man, or the *seeing* part of a *blind* man! Paul tells me, that the natural man (whatever his *spiritual* part may be) can neither receive nor discern the things of God. What the Apostle speaks of himself in Romans 7, is no more, when rightly understood, than what he affirms of all who are partakers of a spiritual life, or who are true believers, Gal. 5:17.

The carnal, natural mind—is enmity against God, not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be. When you subjoin, "Until it be set at liberty from the law of sin," you do not comment upon the text—but make an addition of your own, which the text will by no means bear. The carnal mind is enmity. An *enemy* may be reconciled; but *enmity* itself is incurable. This *carnal mind, natural man, old man, flesh*—are all equivalent expressions, and denote and include the heart of man as he is by nature. This cannot be sanctified.

All that is godly or gracious in a person—is the effect of a new creation, a supernatural principle, wrought in the heart by the Gospel of Christ, and the agency of his Spirit; and until that is effected, the highest attainments, the finest qualifications in man, however they may exalt him in his own eyes, or recommend him to the notice of his fellow-worms, are but abominations in the sight of God!

Luke 16:15. The Gospel is calculated and designed—to stain the pride of human glory. It is provided, not for the wise and the self-righteous, for those who think they have good hearts and good works to plead—but for the guilty, the helpless, the wretched, for those who are ready to perish; it fills the hungry with good things—but it sends the rich empty away! See Rev. 3:17-18.

You ask, If man can do nothing without an extraordinary impulse from God—is he to sit still and careless? By no means! I am far from saying man can do nothing, though I believe he cannot open his own spiritual eyes, or give himself faith. I wish every man to abstain carefully from sinful company and sinful actions, to read the Bible, to pray to God for His heavenly teaching. For this waiting upon God, he has a moral ability; and if he perseveres thus in seeking, the promise is sure, that he shall not seek in vain. But I would not have him mistake the *means* for the *end*; think himself *good* because he is preserved from gross vices and follies; or trust to his religious course of duties for acceptance with God; nor be satisfied until Christ is revealed in him, formed within him, dwells in his heart by faith, and until he can say, upon good grounds, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I— but Christ lives in me!" I need not tell you these are Scriptural expressions; I am persuaded, if they were not, they would be exploded by many as unintelligible jargon.

True faith unites the soul to Christ—and thereby gives access to God, and fills it with a *peace* passing understanding, a living *hope*, a *joy* unspeakable and full of glory. True faith teaches us that we are weak in ourselves—but enables us to be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. To those who thus believe, Christ is precious! He is their beloved; they hear and know his voice; the very sound of his name gladdens their hearts; and he manifests himself to them as he does not to the world. Thus the Scriptures speak, thus the first Christians experienced; and this is precisely the language which in our days is despised as enthusiasm and folly.

For it is now as it was then, though these things are revealed to babes, and they are as sure of them as that they see the noon-day sun—they are hidden from the wise and prudent, until the Lord makes them willing to renounce their own wisdom, and to become fools, that they may be truly wise, 1Co. 1:18-19; 1Co. 3:8; 1Co. 8:2. Attention to the *education of children* is an undoubted duty; and it is a mercy when it so far succeeds as to preserve them from gross wickedness; but it will not change the heart! Those who receive Christ are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man—but of God! John 1:13.

If a man *professes* to love the Lord Jesus, I am willing to believe him, if he does not give me proof to the contrary; but I am sure, at the same time, no one can love him, in the Scriptural sense, who does not know the need and the worth of a Savior; in other words, who is not brought, as a ruined helpless sinner, to live upon him for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Those who love him thus, will speak highly of him, and acknowledge that he is their all in all. And those who thus love him, and speak of him, will get little thanks for their pains in such a world as this: "All who live godly in Christ Jesus—must suffer persecution." The world which hated him—will hate them. And though it is possible by his grace to put to silence, in some measure, the ignorance of foolish men; and though his providence can protect his people, so that not a hair of their heads can be hurt without his permission; yet the world will show their teeth—even if they are not allowed to bite.

"You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane!" Acts 26:24. "What is this babbler trying to say?" Acts 17:18. The Apostles were accounted as *foolish babblers*. I need not point out to you the force of these expressions. We are no better than the Apostles; nor have we reason to expect much better treatment—so far as we walk in their steps. On the other hand, there is a way of speaking of God, and goodness, and benevolence, and morality—which the

world will bear well enough. But if we preach Christ as the only way of salvation, lay open the horrid evils of the human heart, tell our hearers that they are dead in trespasses and sins, and have no better ground of hope in themselves than the vilest malefactors; if we tell the virtuous and decent, as well as the profligate, that unless they are born again, and made partakers of living faith, and count all things loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ—that they cannot be saved—this is the message they cannot bear! We shall be called knaves or fools, uncharitable bigots, and twenty harsh names! If you have met with no treatment like this—you should suspect whether you have yet received the right key to the doctrines of Christ; for, depend upon it—the offense of the cross is not ceased!

I am grieved and surprised that you seem to take little notice of anything in the account of my deceased friend—but his wishing himself to be a Deist, and his having play-books about him in his illness. As to the plays, they were Shakespeare's, which, as a man of taste, it is no great wonder he should sometimes look at. Your remark on the other point shows that you are not much acquainted with the exercises of the human mind under certain circumstances. I believe I observed formerly, that it was not a libertine wish. Had you known him, you would have known one of the most amiable and unblemished characters. Few were more beloved and admired for an uniform course of integrity, moderation, and benevolence; but he was discouraged. He studied the Bible; believed it in general to be the Word of God; but his wisdom, his strong turn for reasoning, stood so in his way, that he could get no solid comfort from it. He felt the vanity of the schemes proposed by many men admired in the world as teachers of divinity; and he felt the vanity likewise of his own. He was also a minister, and had a sincere design of doing good. He wished to reform the profligate, and comfort the afflicted, by his preaching; but as he was not acquainted with that one kind of preaching which God owns to the edification of the hearers, he found he could do neither. A sense of disappointments of this kind distressed him. Finding in himself none of that peace which the Scripture speaks of, and none of the influence he hoped for attending his ministry, he was led sometimes to question the truth of the Scripture.

We have a spiritual enemy always near, to press upon a mind in this despondent situation: nor am I surprised that he should then wish himself a Deist; since, if there were any hope for a sinner but by faith in the blood of Jesus, he had as much of his own goodness to depend upon, as most I have known. As for the rest, if you could see nothing admirable and wonderful in the clearness, the dignity, the spirituality of his expressions, after the Lord revealed the Gospel to him, I can only say, I am sorry for it. This I know—that some people of sense, taste, learning, and reason, and far enough from my sentiments, have been greatly struck with them.

You say a death-bed repentance is what you would be sorry to give any hope of. My dear friend, it is well for poor sinners that God's thoughts and ways are as much above men's, as the heavens are higher than the earth. We agreed to communicate our sentiments freely, and promised not to be offended with each other's freedom, if we could help it. I am afraid of offending you by a thought just now upon my mind, and yet I dare not in conscience suppress it. I must therefore venture to say, that I hope those who depend upon such a repentance as your scheme points out, will repent of their repentance itself upon their death-bed at least, if not sooner.

You and I, perhaps, would have encouraged the fair-spoken young man, who said he had kept all the commandments from his youth—and would have left the thief upon the cross to perish like a villain, as he lived. But Jesus thought differently. I do not encourage sinners to defer their repentance to their death-beds; I press the necessity of a repentance this moment! But then I take care to tell them, that repentance is the gift of God; that Jesus is exalted to bestow it; and that all their endeavors that way, unless they seek to him for grace, will be vain as washing a black-man, and transient as washing a swine—which will soon return to the mire again!

I know the evil heart will abuse the grace of God; the Apostle knew this likewise, Romans 3:8, and Romans 6:8; but this did not tempt him to suppress the glorious grace of the Gospel, the power of Jesus to save to the uttermost, and his merciful promise, that whoever comes unto him, he will never cast out. The repentance of a natural heart, proceeding wholly from fear, like that of some malefactors, who are sorry—not that they have committed robbery or murder—but that they must be hanged for it! This kind of repentance, undoubtedly, is worth nothing, whether in time of health, or in a dying hour. But that gracious change of heart, views, and dispositions, which always takes place when Jesus is made known to the soul as having died that the sinner might live, and been wounded that he might be healed; this, at whatever period God is pleased to afford and effect it by his Spirit, brings a sure and everlasting salvation with it.

Still I find I have not done: you ask my exposition of the parables of the Talents and Pounds; but at present I can write no more. I have only just time to tell you, that when I begged your acceptance of my book, *Omicron*, nothing was farther from my expectation than a correspondence with you. The frank and kind manner in which you wrote, presently won upon my heart. In the course of our letters, I observed an integrity and unselfishness in you, which endeared you to me still more. Since then, our debates have taken a much more interesting turn. I have considered it as a call, and an opportunity put in my hand, by the especial providence of Him who rules over all. I have embraced the occasion to lay before you simply, and rather in a way of testimony than argumentation, what (in the main) I am sure is truth. I have done enough to discharge my conscience—but shall never think I do enough to answer the affection I bear you. I have done enough likewise to make you weary of my correspondence, unless it should please God to fix the subject deeply upon your mind, and make you attentive to the possibility and vast importance of a mistake in matters of everlasting concernment.

I pray that the Spirit of God may guide you into all truth. He only is the effectual teacher. I still retain a cheerful hope, that some things you can not at present receive—will be hereafter the joy and comfort of your heart: but I know it cannot be—until the Lord's own time. I cannot promise to give such long answers as your letters require, to clear up every text that may be proposed, and to answer every objection that may be started; yet I shall be glad to exchange a letter now and then. At present it remains with you, whether our correspondence continues or not, as this is the third letter I have written since I heard from you, and therefore must be the last until I do. I would think what remains might be better settled in person; for which purpose I shall be glad to see you, or ready to wait on you when leisure will permit, and when I know it will be agreeable. But *if* (as life and all its affairs are precarious) we should never meet in this world, I pray God we may meet at the right hand of Jesus, in the great day, when he shall come to gather up his jewels, and to judge the world! There is an endless diversity of opinions in matters of religion—which of them are right and safe, and will lead to eternal glory. I am still in a manner lost amidst more engagements than I have time to comply with; but I feel and know that I am, etc.



# Questions on salvation

November 17, 1775.

My dear Friend,

At length I take up your letter of August 14, with design to give a more explicit answer. My delaying hitherto has been unavoidable; I am sorry to have your patience put to so long a trial; and would be more sorry—but that I consider, that in my former papers, sermons, *Omicron's Letters*, etc. you already possess the whole (in substance) of what I have to offer. My present part is but to repeat what I have elsewhere expressed, only with some *variety* and *enlargement*.

You yourself well state the situation of our debate, when you say, "Nor in truth do you offer any arguments to convince me, nor does it seem very consistent on your grounds so to do. And if this important change is to be brought about by the intervention of some extraordinary impulse of the Holy Spirit, and cannot be brought about without it—I do not see anything farther that I have to do, than to keep my mind as much unbiased as I can, and to wait and pray for it."

I think my letter from London was to the purpose of these your own words, though you seemed dissatisfied with it. While *we see through a different medium*, it will be easy for you to answer every text I might adduce in support of my sentiments, as you have those I have already brought, "That you understand them otherwise." In order to support my sense of one text, I could perhaps quote and argue from twenty more, and still "You would understand them otherwise." The life of man, yes of Methuselah, would hardly suffice to prove and defend all that might be alleged on both sides in this way; and at last we would leave off as we began, more fully confirmed in our own opinions—unless the Lord, by his Holy Spirit, should be pleased to show the person who maintained the wrong side of the argument, where his mistake lay. However, I mean to take some notice of your queries as they offer themselves.

The first which occurs is complicated. The substance I think is, whether such belief and aims as you possess will stand you in no stead, unless you likewise believe irresistible grace, absolute predestination, etc. You may have observed, I have several times waived speaking about predestination or election—not that I am ashamed of the doctrine, because, if it indeed is absurd, shocking, and unjust—the blame will not deservedly fall upon me, for I did not invent it—but upon the Scriptures, where I am sure it is laid down in as plain terms—as that God created the heavens and the earth.

I cannot but wonder, that people professing any reverence for the Bible, should so openly and strongly declare their abhorrence of what the Bible so expressly teaches—namely, that there is an election of people by the grace and good pleasure of God—where by nature there is no difference; and that all things respecting the salvation of these people is infallibly secured by a Divine predestination.

I do not offer this as a *rational* doctrine (though it be highly so to me)—but it is *Scriptural*, or else the Scripture is a mere nose of wax, and without a determinate meaning. What ingenuity is needful to interpret many passages in a sense more favorable to our natural prejudices against God's sovereignty! Mat. 11:25-26, and Mat. 13:10-17; Mar. 13:20-22; John 17; John 10:26; Romans 8:28-30, and Romans 9:13-24, and Romans 11:7; Eph. 1:4-5; 1 Pe. 1:2. Were I fond of disputing, as I am not, I think I could put a close reasoner hard to it, to maintain the truth of Scripture prophecies, or the belief of a particular providence, unless he would admit a Divine predestination of causes and events as the ground of his arguments. However, as I said, I have chosen to waive the point; because, however true and necessary in

itself, the knowledge and comprehension of it is not necessary to the being of a true Christian, though I can hardly conceive he can be an established, consistent believer without it.

This doctrine is not the turning point between you and I. The nature of justification, and the method of a sinner's acceptance with God, are of much more immediate importance; and therefore, if I am to speak plainly, I must say, that I look upon your present sentiments, attainments, and advances, as you describe them, to constitute that kind of gain the Apostle speaks of, and concerning which I hope you will one day be of his mind, and be glad to account it all loss, that you may win Christ, and be found in him, "not having your own righteousness, which is of the law—but the righteousness which is of God by faith," Phi. 3:4, Phi. 3:7-10.

For, as you tell me, that you never remember a time when you were not conscious before God of great unworthiness, and intervals of earnest endeavors to serve him, though not with the same success—yet something in the same way as at present; this is but saying, in other words, you never remember a time when old things passed away, and all things became new—and yet the Apostle insists much upon this, 2Co. 4:6, and 2Co. 5:17.

The convictions of natural conscience, and those which are wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, are different, not only in degree—but in kind; the light of a glow-worm and of the sun do not more essentially differ. The former are partial and superficial, leave us in possession of a supposed power of our own, are pacified by some appearances of an outward change, and make us no further sensible of the necessity of a Savior than to make our doings and duties (if I may so express myself) full weight, which perhaps might otherwise be a little deficient when brought to the balances of the sanctuary.

But truly spiritual convictions give us far other views of sin—they lead us to a deep and solemn consideration of the root, our total absolute depravity, and our utter apostasy from God, by which we are incapable of doing good, as a dead man is of performing the functions of life! They lead us to the rule and standard—the strict, holy, inflexible law of God, which reaches to the thoughts and intents of the heart; requires perfect, universal, persevering obedience; denounces a curse upon every failure, Gal. 3:10; and affords neither place nor strength for repentance. Thus they sweep away every hope and refuge we had before, and fix upon us a sense of guilt and condemnation, from which there is no relief, until we can look to Jesus, as the wounded Israelites did to the brazen serpent—which was not to give efficacy to medicines and plasters of their own application—but to heal them completely of itself by looking at it! John 3:14-15, and John 6:40; Isa. 43:22.

You wish me to explain my distinction between *faith* and *rational assent*; and though I know no two things in the world more clearly distinct in themselves, or more expressly distinguished in Scripture—yet I fear I may not easily make it appear to you. You allow faith, in your sense, to be the gift of God; but, in my sense, it is likewise wrought by the operation of God, Col. 2:12, and the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. Eph. 1:19. It is that same energy of the power of his strength, by which the dead body of Jesus was raised from the dead. Can these strong expressions intend no more than a rational assent, such as we give to a proposition in Euclid? I believe fallen reason is, of itself, utterly incapable even of assenting to the great truths of Revelation; it may assent to the terms in which they are proposed—but it must put its own interpretation upon them, or it would despise them. The natural man can neither receive nor discern the things of God. And if any one would be wise, the Apostle's first advice to him is, "Let him become a fool, that he may be wise; for the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God."

Indeed, when the heart is changed, and the mind enlightened; then reason is sanctified, and, if I may so say, baptized. It renounces its curious disquisitions, and is content humbly to tread in the path of Revelation. This is one difference: assent may be the act of our natural reason; but faith is the effect of immediate Almighty power.

Another difference is, Faith is always efficacious. Whereas assent is often given where it has little or no influence upon the conduct. Thus, for instance, everyone will assent to this truth, *All men are mortal*. Yet the greatest part of mankind, though they readily *assent* to the proposition, and it would be highly irrational to do otherwise, *live* as they might do—if the reverse were true! But those who have Divine faith, feel, as well as say, that they are pilgrims and sojourners upon earth.

Again: faith gives peace of conscience, access to God, and a sure evidence and subsistence of things not seen; Romans 5:1-2; Heb. 11:1 : where as a calm, dispassionate reasoner may be compelled to assent to the external arguments in favor of Christianity, and yet remain a total stranger to that communion with God, that Spirit of adoption, that foretaste of glory—which is the privilege and portion of believers.

So likewise, faith overcomes the world, which rational assent will not do. To sum up all in a word, "He who believes shall be saved!" But surely many who give a *rational assent* to the Gospel, live and die in those sins which exclude from the kingdom of God, Gal. 5:19-21. Faith is the effect of a principle of new life implanted in the soul, that was before dead in trespasses and sins; and it qualifies, not only for obeying the Savior's precepts—but chiefly and primarily for receiving from and rejoicing in his fullness, admiring his love, his work, his person, his glory, his advocacy. Faith makes Christ precious; enthrones him in the heart; presents him as the most delightful object to our meditations—as our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and strength; our root, head, life, shepherd, and husband. These are all Scriptural expressions and images, setting forth, so far as words can declare—what Jesus is in himself and to his believing people.

But how cold is the comment which *rational assent* puts upon very many passages, wherein the Apostle Paul endeavors (but in vain) to express the fullness of his heart upon this subject! A most valued friend of mine, a Clergyman now living, had for many years given a rational assent to the Gospel. He labored with much earnestness upon your plan; was very exemplary in his whole conduct; preached almost incessantly (two or three times every day, for years), having a parish in the remote parts of Yorkshire, of great extent, and containing five or six different hamlets at some distance from each other. He succeeded likewise with his people so far as to break them off from outward irregularities; and was mentioned, in a letter to the Society for propagating the Gospel (which I have seen in print) as the most perfect example of a parish pastor which this nation, or perhaps this age, has produced. Thus he went on for many years, teaching his people what he knew, for he could teach them no more. One day, reading Ephes. 3 in his Greek Testament, his thoughts were stopped by the a word in Eph. 3:8. He was struck, and led to think with himself to this purpose: The Apostle, when speaking of the love and riches of Christ, uses remarkable expressions; he speaks of heights, and depths, and lengths, and breadths, and unsearchables, where I seem to find everything plain, easy, and rational. He finds mysteries where I can perceive none. Surely, though I use the words Gospel, faith, and grace, with him—my ideas of them must be different from his. This led him to a close examination of all His Epistles, and, by the blessing of God, brought on a total change in his views and preaching. He no longer set his people to keep a law of faith; to trust in their sincerity and endeavors, upon some general hope that Christ would help them out where they came short; but he preached Christ himself, as the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes. He felt himself, and labored to convince others, that there is no hope for a

sinner but merely in the blood of Jesus; and no possibility of his doing any works acceptable to God, until he himself is first made accepted in the Beloved. Nor did he labor in vain. Now his preaching effected, not only an outward reformation—but a real change of heart, in very many of his hearers. The word was received, as Paul expresses it, not with a rational assent only—but with demonstration and power, in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. And their endeavors to observe the Gospel precepts were abundantly more extensive, uniform, and successful, when they were brought to say, with the Apostle, "I am crucified with Christ! Nevertheless I live—yet not I—but Christ lives in me; and the life which I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God."

Such a change of views and sentiments, I pray God—that you may experience. These things may appear uncouth to you at present, as they have done to many who now bless God for showing them what their reason could never have taught them. My divinity is unfashionable enough at present—but it was not so always; you will find few books, written from the area of the Reformation, until a little before Laud's, that set forth any other. There were few pulpits until after the Restoration from which any other was heard. A lamentable change has indeed since taken place; but God has not left himself without witnesses. You think, though I disclaim infallibility, I arrogate too much in speaking with so much certainty. I am fallible indeed; but I am sure of the main points of doctrine I hold. I am not in the least doubt, whether salvation is by faith or by works; whether faith is of our own power or of God's operation; whether Christ's obedience, or our own, is the just ground of our hope; whether a man can truly call Jesus Lord—but by the teaching of the Holy Spirit. I have no more hesitation about these points, than I should have were I asked whether it was God or man who created the heavens and the earth!

Besides, as I have more than once observed, your sentiments were once my own; so that I, who have traveled both roads, may have perhaps some stronger reasons to determine which is the right, than you can have, who have only traveled one.

I now come to the two queries you propose, the solution of which you think will clearly mark the difference of our sentiments. The substance of them is,

1st, Whether I think any sinner ever perished in his sins (to whom the Gospel has been preached) because God refused to supply him with such a proportion of his assistance as was absolutely necessary to his believing and repenting; or without his having previously rejected the incitements of his Holy Spirit? A full answer to this would require a sheet. But, briefly, I believe, that, all mankind being corrupt and guilty before God, he might, without impeachment to his justice, have left them all to perish, as we are assured he did the fallen angels. But he has been pleased to show mercy—and mercy must be free. If the sinner has any claim to it—so far it is justice, not mercy. He, who is to be our Judge, assures us, that few find the gate which leads to life, while many throng the road to destruction.

Your question seems to imply, that you think God either did make salvation equally open to all, or that it would have been more becoming his goodness to have done so.

But he is the potter—and we are the clay. His ways and thoughts are above ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth. The Judge of all the earth will do right. He has appointed a day, when he will manifest, to the conviction of all—that He has done right. Until then, I hold it best to take things upon his Word, and not too harshly determine what it befits Jehovah to do. Instead of saying what *I* think, let it suffice to remind you of what *Paul* thought, Romans 9:15-21.

But, farther, I say, that unless mercy were afforded to those who are saved, in a way special to themselves, and which is not afforded to those who perish—no one soul could be saved. For fallen man, universally, considered as such, is as incapable of

doing the least thing towards his salvation, until saved by the grace of God—as a dead body is of restoring itself to life. Whatever difference takes place between men in this respect, is of grace, that is—of God, undeserved. Yes, his first approaches to our hearts are undesired too; for, until he seeks us, we cannot, we will not seek him, Psa. 110:3. It is in the day of his power, and not before—that his people are made willing.

Where the Gospel is preached, those who perish, do willfully resist the Gospel light, and choose and cleave to darkness, and stifle the convictions which the truths of God, when his true Gospel is indeed preached, will, in one degree or other, force upon their minds. The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the love of other things, the violence of sinful appetites, their prejudices, pride, and self-righteousness either prevent the reception, or choke the growth of the good seed. Thus their own sin and obstinacy is the proper cause of their destruction. They *will* not come to Christ—that they may have eternal life.

At the same time, it is true that they *cannot*, unless they are supernaturally drawn by God; John 5:40; John 6:44. They *will* not and they *cannot* come. Both are equally true, and they are consistent. For a man's *cannot*, is not a *natural* inability—but a *moral* inability. It is not an impossibility in the nature of things, as it is for me to walk upon the water, or to fly in the air—but such an inability as, instead of extenuating, does exceedingly enhance and aggravate his guilt. He is so blinded by Satan, so alienated from God by nature and wicked works, so given up to sin, so averse from that way of salvation which is contrary to his pride and natural wisdom—that he will not embrace it or seek after it! And therefore he cannot receive it, until the grace of God powerfully enlightens his mind, and overcomes his obstacles.

But this brings me to your second query,

II. Do I think that God, in the ordinary course of his providence, grants his assistance in an irresistible manner, or effects faith and conversion without the sinner's own hearty consent and concurrence? I rather choose to term grace *invincible*, than *irresistible*. For it is too often resisted, even by those who believe; but, because it is invincible, it triumphs over all resistance, when God is pleased to bestow it. For the rest, I believe no sinner is converted without his own hearty will and concurrence. But he is not willing—until he is made so. Why does he at all refuse? Because he is insensible of his lost and dreadful condition. He does not know the evil of sin, the strictness of God's law, the majesty of God whom he has offended, nor the total apostasy of his heart! He is blind to eternity, and ignorant of the excellency of Christ! He thinks that he is whole, and sees not his need of this great Physician! For salvation, he relies upon his own wisdom, power, and supposed righteousness.

Now, in this state of things, when God comes with a purpose of saving mercy, he begins by convincing the person of sin, judgment, and righteousness; causes him to feel and know that he is a lost, condemned, helpless creature; and then reveals to him the necessity, sufficiency, and willingness of Christ to save those who are ready to perish, without money or price, without doings or deserving. Then he sees *faith* to be very different from a *rational assent*; finds that nothing but the power of God can produce a well-grounded hope in the heart of a convinced sinner; therefore looks to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of faith, to enable him to believe. For this he waits in what we call the *means of grace*; he prays, he reads the Word, he thirsts for God as the deer pants for the water-brooks. And, though perhaps for a while he is distressed with many doubts and fears, he is encouraged to wait on, because Jesus has said, "Him who comes unto me, I will never cast out."

The obstinacy of the will remains while the understanding is dark—and ceases when that is enlightened. Suppose a man walking in the dark, where there are pits

and precipices of which he is not aware. You are sensible of his danger, and call after him; but he thinks he knows better than you, refuses your advice, and is perhaps angry with you for your importunity. He sees no danger, therefore will not be persuaded there is any. But if you go with a light, get before him, and show him plainly, that if he takes another step, that he will fall to his death—then he will stop of his own accord, blame himself for not minding you before, and be ready to comply with your farther directions. In either case, man's will acts with equal freedom—the difference of his conduct arises from conviction.

Something like this is the case in our spiritual concerns. Sinners are called and warned by the Word; but they are wise in their own eyes, and take but little notice—until the Lord gives them light, which he is not bound to give to any, and therefore cannot be bound to give to all. Those who have it, have reason to be thankful, and subscribe to the Apostle's words, "By grace are you saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

I have not yet half done with the first sheet! I shall consider the rest at leisure; but send this as a specimen of my willingness to clear my sentiments to you as far as I can. Unless it should please God to make what I offer satisfactory, I well know before-hand what objections and answers will occur to you; for these points have been often debated; and, after a course of twenty-seven years, in which true religion has been the chief object of my thoughts and inquiries, I am not entirely a stranger to what can be offered on either side. What I write, I write simply and in love; beseeching Him, who alone can set a seal to his own truth, to guide you and bless you. This letter has been more than a week in hand; I have been called from it I suppose ten times, frequently in the middle of a period or a line. My leisure, which before was small, is now reduced almost to nothing. But I am desirous to keep up my correspondence with you, because I feel an affectionate interest in you, and because it pleased God to put it into your heart to apply to me. You cannot think how your first letter struck me—it was so unexpected, and seemed so improbable, that you should open your mind to me, I immediately conceived a hope that it would prove for good. Nor am I yet discouraged.

When you have leisure and inclination—write. I shall be always glad to hear from you, and I will proceed in answering what I have already by me, as fast as I can. But I have many letters now waiting for answers, which must be attended to.

I recommend you to the blessing and care of the great Shepherd; and remain, etc.

# Our divine Shepherd

November 5, 1774

Dear sir,

I have not very lately had recourse to the expedient of descanting upon a text, but I believe it the best method I can take, to give my thoughts upon a few obvious topics, which I suppose uniformly present themselves to my mind when I am about to write to you. Just now, that sweet expression of David occurred to my thoughts, "*The Lord is my Shepherd.*" Permit me, without plan or premeditation, to make a few observations upon it; and may you feel the peace, the confidence, the blessedness, which a *believing application* of the words is suited to inspire.

David had a **divine Shepherd**, whose wisdom and power were infinite; and might therefore warrantably conclude he should not lack, and need not fear. And we also may conclude the same, if our Shepherd is the Lord. Besides, the very nature of the Shepherd's office respecting the state of such frail creatures as we are, requires those attributes, for the due discharge of it, which are incommunicably Divine. He must intimately know every individual of the flock. His eye must be upon every one, and his ear open to their prayers, and his hand stretched out for their relief, in all places and in all ages. Every thought of every heart must be open to his view; and his wisdom must penetrate, and his arm control and over-rule, all the hidden and complicated machinations of the powers of darkness. He must have the administration of universal providence, over all the nations, families, and peoples upon earth, or he could not effectually manage for those who put their trust in him, in that immense variety of cases and circumstances in which they are found.

Reason, as well as Scripture, may convince us, that he who gathers the outcasts of Israel, who heals the broken in heart, who upholds all that fall, raises up all that are bowed down, and upon whom the eyes of all wait for their support—can be no other than He who counts the number of the stars, and calls them all by their names, who is great in power, and whose understanding is infinite! To this purpose likewise, the prophet Isaiah describes this mighty Shepherd, Isaiah 40:9-17, both as to his person and office.

But is not this indeed, the great mystery of godliness? How just is the Apostle's observation, that no man can say, *Jesus Christ is the Lord*—but by the Holy Spirit! How astonishing the thought—that the Maker of heaven and earth, the Holy One of Israel, before whose presence the earth shook, the heavens dropped, when he displayed a faint emblem of his majesty upon Sinai, should afterwards appear in the form of a servant, and hang upon a cross, the sport and scorn of wicked men!

I cannot wonder, that to the wise men of the world this appears absurd, unreasonable, and impossible; yet to right reason, to reason enlightened and sanctified, however amazing the proposition be—yet it appears true and necessary, upon a supposition that a holy God is pleased to pardon sinners in a way suited to display the solemn glories of his justice. The same arguments which prove that the blood of bulls and goats is insufficient to take away sin, will conclude against the utmost doings or sufferings of men or angels. The Redeemer of sinners must be mighty; he must have a personal dignity, to stamp such a value upon his undertakings, as that thereby God may appear *just*, as well as *merciful*, in justifying the ungodly for his sake; and he must be all-sufficient to bless, and almighty to protect—those who come unto him for safety and life.

Such a one is our Shepherd. This is He of whom we, through grace, are enabled to say—*we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture*. We are his by every tie and right: he made us, he redeemed us, he reclaimed us from the hand of our enemies;

and we are his by our own voluntary surrender of ourselves; for though we once slighted, despised, and opposed him—he made us willing in the day of his power! He knocked at the door of our hearts; but we (at least I) barred and fastened it against him as much and as long as possible—but when he revealed his love, we could stand out no longer. Like sheep, we are weak, destitute, defenseless, prone to wander, unable to return, and always surrounded with wolves; but all is made up in the fullness, ability, wisdom, compassion, care, and faithfulness of our great Shepherd. He guides, protects, feeds, heals, and restores, and will be our guide and our God—even until death. Then he will meet us, receive us, and present us unto himself—and we shall be *near* him, and *like* him, and *with* him forever.

Ah! my friend, what a subject is this! I trust it is the joy of your heart. Placed as you are by his hand in a superior rank, you see and feel that the highest honors, and the most important concerns that terminate with the present life—are as trivial as the sports of children, in comparison with the views and the privileges you derive from the glorious Gospel. And your situation in life renders the grace bestowed upon you—the more conspicuous and distinguishing. I have somewhere met with a similar reflection of Henry the Fourth of France, to this purpose, that, though many came into the world the same day with him, he was probably the only one among them, who was born to be a king. Your Lordship is acquainted with many, who, if not born on the same day with you, were born to titles, estates, and honors; but how few of them were born to the honor of making a public and consistent profession of the glorious Gospel! The hour is coming, when all honors and possessions—but this which comes from God alone, will be eclipsed and vanish, and, "like the baseless fabric of a vision, leave not a wreck behind." How miserable will they then be, who must leave their all!

But grace and faith can make the lowest state of life supportable, and make a dismissal from the highest state of life desirable. Of the former I have many living proofs and witnesses around me. Your Lordship, I trust, will have sweet experience of the latter, when, after having fulfilled the will of God in your generation, you shall be called (I hope in some yet distant day) to enter into your Master's joy. In the mean time, how valuable are life, talents, influence, and opportunities of every kind—if we are enabled to improve and lay out all for him who has thus loved us, thus provided for us!

As to myself, I would hope there are few, who have so clear a sense of their obligations to him, who make such unsuitable and languid returns as I do. I think I have a desire to serve him better; but, alas! evil is present with me. Surely I shall feel something like shame and regret for my coldness, even in heaven; for I find I am never happier—than when I am most ashamed of myself upon this account here.



# The city was pure gold

April, 1770

My friend,

Glorious things are spoken of the *city of God*, or (as I suppose) the *state of glory*, in Rev. 21:10 onwards. The description is doubtless mystical, and perhaps nothing short of a happy experience and participation, will furnish an adequate exposition. One expression, in particular, has I believe puzzled wiser heads than mine to explain: "The street of **the city was pure gold**, as it were transparent glass." The construction likewise in the Greek is difficult. Some render it, pure gold, as transparent as glass. If our reading is right, we must understand it either of gold, pure, bright, and perspicuous as the finest transparent glass (for all glass is not transparent); or else as two distinct comparisons—as splendid and durable as the purest gold, as clear and transparent as the finest glass.

In that happy world, the beauties and advantages which here are divided and incompatible, will unite and agree. Our *glass* is clear—but brittle; our *gold* is shining and solid—but it is opaque, and reveals only a surface. And thus it is with our minds. The powers of the imagination are lively and extensive—but transient and uncertain; the powers of the understanding are more solid and regular—but at the same time more slow and limited, and confined to the outside properties of the few objects around us. But when we arrive within the veil, the perfections of the *glass* and the *gold* will be combined, and the imperfections of each will entirely cease. Then we shall *know* more than we can now *imagine!* The glass will be all gold. And then we shall apprehend Truth in its relations and consequences; not (as at present) by that tedious and fallible process which we call Reasoning—but by a single glance of thought, as the sight pierces in an instant through the largest transparent body. The gold will be all glass.

I do not offer this as the sense of the passage—but as a thought which once occurred to me while reading it. I daily groan under a desultory, ungovernable imagination, and a palpable darkness of understanding, which greatly impede me in my attempts to contemplate the truths of God. Perhaps these complaints, in a greater or less degree, are common to all our fallen race, and exhibit mournful proofs that our nature is essentially depraved. The grace of God affords some assistance for correcting the wildness of the *imagination*, and enlarging the capacity of the *mind*; yet the cure at present is but palliative; but before long it shall be *perfect*, and our complaints shall cease forever. Now it costs us much pains to acquire a pittance of solid and useful knowledge; and the ideas we have collected are far from being at the disposal of judgment, and, like men in a crowd, are perpetually clashing and interfering with each other. But it will not be so, when we are completely freed from the *effects of sin*. *Confusion* and *darkness* will not follow us into the world where light and order reign. Then, and not until then, our knowledge will be perfect, and our possession of it uninterrupted and secure.

Since the radical powers of the soul are thus enfeebled and disordered, it is not to be wondered at that the best of men, and under their highest attainments, have found cause to make the acknowledgment of the Apostle, "When I would do good—evil is present with me!" But, blessed be God, though we must feel hourly cause for shame and humiliation for what we are in ourselves; we have cause to rejoice continually in Christ Jesus, who, as he is revealed unto us under the various names, characters, relations, and offices, which he bears in the Scripture, holds out to our faith a *balm* for every wound, a *cordial* for every discouragement, and a sufficient *answer* to every objection which sin or Satan can suggest against our peace. If we are guilty—He is our Righteousness; if we are sick—He is our infallible Physician; if we are weak, helpless, and defenseless—He is the compassionate and faithful Shepherd

who has taken charge of us, and will not allow anything to disappoint our hopes of heaven, or to separate us from his love. He knows our frame, he remembers that we are but dust, and has engaged to *guide* us by his counsel, *support* us by his power, and at length to *receive* us to his glory—that we may be with him forever!

# The doctrines of election and final perseverance

Dear Sir,

Your letter breathes the spirit of a Christian, though you say you are not a Calvinist. I would have still confined myself, in my letters, to the great truths in which we are agreed, if you had not invited me to touch upon the points wherein we differ. If you were insistent in your present sentiments, I would not think it my duty to debate with you: in that case, we might contend as much for victory as for truth. But as you profess yourself an inquirer, and are desirous of forming your judgment agreeably to the word of God, without being influenced by the authority of names and parties, I willingly embrace the occasion you offer me.

You say, that though you are not prejudiced against the doctrines of election and perseverance of the saints, they appear to you attended with such difficulties, that you cannot yet heartily and fully assent to them. May the Lord the Spirit, whose office it is to guide his people into all truth, dictate to my pen, and accompany what I shall write with his blessing. It is not my intention to prove and illustrate these doctrines at large, or to encounter the various objections that have been raised against them. So much has been done in this way already, that I could only repeat what has been said to greater advantage by others. Nor need I refer you to the books which have been professedly written upon this argument. In a letter to a friend, I shall not aim at the exactness of a disputant, but only offer a few unpremeditated hints, in the same manner as if I had the pleasure of personally conversing with you.

Permit me to remind you, in the first place, of that important aphorism, John 3:27, (which seems to speak strongly in favor, of the doctrines in question): "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from Heaven." If you should accede to my opinions upon my persuasion only, you would be little benefited by the exchange. **The Lord alone can give us the true, vital, comfortable, and useful knowledge of his own truths.** We may become wise in notions, and so far masters of a system, or scheme of doctrine, as to be able to argue, object, and fight, in favor of our own hypothesis, by dint of application, and natural abilities; but we rightly understand what we say, and whereof we affirm, no farther than we have a spiritual perception of it wrought in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not, therefore, by noisy disputation, but by humble waiting upon God in prayer, and a careful perusal of his holy word, that we are to expect a satisfactory, experimental, and efficacious knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. I am persuaded that you are seeking in this way: if so, I am confident you shall not seek in vain. The Lord teaches effectually, though for the most part gradually. The path of the just is compared to the light, which is very faint at the early dawn, but shines more and more to the perfect day.

If you sincerely seek the Lord's direction by prayer, you will of course make use of his appointed means of information, and search the Scriptures. Give me leave to offer you the following advises, while you are reading and comparing spiritual things with spiritual. First, Not to lay too great stress upon a few detached texts, but seek for that sense which is most agreeable to the general strain of the Scripture. The infallible word of God must, doubtless, be consistent with itself: if it does not appear so to us, the obscurity and seeming inconsistency must be charged to the remaining darkness and ignorance of our minds. As many locks, whose wards differ, are opened with equal ease by one master-key; so there is a certain comprehensive view of scriptural truth, which opens hard places, solves objections, and happily reconciles, illustrates, and harmonizes many texts, which to those who have not this master-key, frequently styled *the analogy of faith*, appear little less than contradictory to each other. When you obtain this key, you will be sure that you have the right sense.

Again: You will do well to consult experience as you go along. For though this is not to be depended upon in the first instance, but must itself be subjected to the rule of the written word, yet it is a good subordinate help. Consider which sense is most agreeable to what passes within you and around you, and which best answers to the dealings of God with yourself, and to what you can observe of his dealings with others.

Farther: When you are led (as I think you will be, if you are not already) to view the Calvinist doctrines in a favorable light, be not afraid of embracing them, because there may be perhaps some objections which, for lack of a full possession of the key I mentioned, you are not able to clear up; but consider if there are not as strong or stronger objections against the other side. We are poor weak creatures; and the clearing up of every difficulty is not what we are immediately called to, but rather to seek that light which may strengthen and feed our souls.

Lastly: Compare the *tendency* of different opinions. This is an excellent rule, if we can fairly apply it. Whatever is from God, has a sure tendency to ascribe glory to him, to exclude boasting from the creature, to promote the love and practice of holiness, and increase our dependence upon his grace and faithfulness. The Calvinists have no reason to be afraid of resting the merits of their cause upon this issue; notwithstanding the unjust misrepresentations which have been often made of their principles, and the ungenerous treatment of those who would charge the miscarriages of a few individuals, as the necessary consequence of embracing those principles.

But I must check myself, or I shall finish my letter before I properly begin my subject. You have objections to the doctrine of **election**. You will however agree with me, that Scripture does speak of it, and that in very strong and express terms, particularly Paul. I have met with some sincere people, as I believe, who have told me, they could not bear to read his 9th chapter to the Romans, but always passed it over: so that their prejudices against election prejudiced them against a part of the Scripture likewise. But why so, unless because the dreaded doctrine is maintained too plainly to be evaded? But you will say, that some writers and preachers attempt to put an easier sense upon the Apostle's words. Let us judge then, as I lately proposed, from experience.

Admitting, what I am sure you will admit, the total depravity of human nature, *how can we account for the conversion of a soul to God, unless we likewise admit an election of grace?* The work must begin somewhere. Either the sinner first seeks the Lord, or the Lord first seeks the sinner. The former is impossible, if by nature we are dead in trespasses and sins; if the god of this world has blinded our eyes, and maintains the possession of our hearts; and if our carnal minds, so far from being disposed to seek God, are enmity against him.

Let me appeal to yourself. I think you know yourself too well to say, that you either sought or loved the Lord first: perhaps you are conscious, that for a season, and so far as in you lay, you even resisted his call; and must have perished, if he had not made you willing in the day of his power, and saved you in defiance of yourself. In your own case, you acknowledge that he began with you; and it must be the case universally with all who are called, if the whole race of mankind are by nature enemies to God. Then, farther, there must be an election, unless all are called. But we are assured that the broad road, which is thronged with the greatest multitudes, leads to destruction. Were not you and I in this road? Were we any better than those who continue in it still? What has made us differ from our former selves? Grace! What has made us differ from those who are now as we once were? Grace! Then this grace, by the very terms, must be differencing, or distinguishing grace; that is, in other words, electing grace.

And to suppose that God would make this election or choice only at the time of our calling, is not only unscriptural, but contrary to the dictates of reason, and the ideas we have of the Divine perfections, particularly those of omniscience and immutability. Those who believe there is any power in man by nature, whereby he can turn to God, may contend for a conditional election upon the foresight of faith and obedience: but while others dispute, let you and I admire, for we know that the Lord foresaw us (as we were) in a state utterly incapable either of believing or obeying, unless he was pleased to work in us to will and to do according to his own good pleasure.

As to **final perseverance**, whatever judgment we form of it in a doctrinal view, unless we ourselves do so persevere, our profession of religion will be utterly vain; for only "those who endure to the end shall be saved." It would seem that whoever believes this, and is duly apprised of his own weakness, the number and strength of his spiritual enemies, and the difficulties and dangers arising from his situation in this evil world, will at least be desirous to have (if possible) some security that his labor and expectation shall not be in vain. To be at an uncertainty in a point of so great importance; to have nothing to trust to for our continuance in well-doing, but our own feeble efforts, our partial diligence and shortsighted care; must surely be distressing, if we rightly consider how unable we are in ourselves to withstand the forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil, which are combined against our peace.

In this view I would expect, that the opposers of this doctrine, if thoroughly sensible of their state and situation, upon a supposition, that they should be able to prove it unscriptural and false, would weep over their victory, and be sorry that a sentiment, so apparently suited to encourage and animate our hope, should not be founded in truth. It is not to be wondered at, that this doctrine, which gives to the Lord the glory due to his name, and provides so effectually for the comfort of his people, should be opposed and traduced by men of corrupt hearts. But it may well seem strange, that those who feel their need of it, and cannot be comfortable without it, should be afraid or unwilling to receive it. Yet many a child of light is walking in darkness upon this account. Either they are staggered by the sentiments of those whom they think wiser than themselves, or stumbled by the falls of professors who were once advocates for this doctrine, or perplexed because they cannot rightly understand those passages of Scripture which seem to speak a different language. But, as light and knowledge increase, these difficulties are lessened. The Lord claims the honor; and he engages for the accomplishment of a complete salvation, that no power shall pluck his people out of his hand, or separate them from his love.

Their perseverance in grace, besides being asserted by many express promises, may be proved with the fullest evidence from the unchangeableness of God, the intercession of Christ, the union which exists between him and his people, and from the principle of spiritual life he has implanted in their hearts, which in its own nature is connected with everlasting life; for *grace is the seed of glory*. I have not room to enlarge on these particulars, but refer you to the following texts, from which various strong and invincible arguments might be drawn for their confirmation: Luke 14:28-30, compared with Phi. 1:6; Heb. 7:25, with Rom. 8:34-39; John 14:19, with John 15:1-2; John 4:14. Upon these grounds, my friend, why may not you, who have fled for refuge to the hope set before you, and committed your soul to Jesus, rejoice in his salvation; and say, "While Christ is the foundation, root, head, and husband of his people, while the word of God is Yes and Amen, while the counsels of God are unchangeable, while we have a Mediator and High Priest before the throne, while the Holy Spirit is willing and able to bear witness to the truths of the Gospel, while God is wiser than men, and stronger than Satan—so long the believer in Jesus is and shall be safe? Heaven and earth must pass away; but the promise, the oath, the blood, on which my soul relies, affords me a security which can never fail."

As the doctrines of election and perseverance are comfortable, so *they cut off all pretense of boasting and self-dependence when they are truly received in the heart, and therefore tend to exalt the Savior.* Of course they stain the pride of all human glory, and leave us nothing to glory in but the Lord. The more we are convinced of our utter depravity and inability from first to last, the more excellent will Jesus appear. The whole may give the physician a good word, but the sick alone know how to prize him. And here I cannot but remark a difference between those who have nothing to trust to but free grace, and those who ascribe a little at least to some good disposition and ability in man. We assent to whatever they enforce from the word of God on the subject of sanctification. We acknowledge its importance, its excellency, its beauty; but we could wish they would join more with us in exalting the Redeemer's name. Their experience seems to lead them to talk of themselves, of the change that is wrought in them, and the much that depends upon their own watchfulness and striving. We likewise would be thankful if we could perceive a change wrought in us by the power of grace; we desire to be found watching likewise. But when our hopes are most alive, it is less from a view of the imperfect beginnings of grace in our hearts, than from an apprehension of him who is our all in all. His person, his love, his sufferings, his intercession, his compassion, his fullness, and his faithfulness—these are our delightful themes, which leave us little leisure, when in our best frames, to speak of ourselves. How do our hearts soften, and our eyes melt, when we feel some liberty in thinking and speaking of him! For we had no help in time past, nor can have any in time to come, but from him alone.

If any people have contributed a mite to their own salvation, it was more than we could do. If any were obedient and faithful to the first calls and impressions of his Spirit, it was not our case. If any were prepared to receive him beforehand, we know that we were in a state of alienation from him. **We needed sovereign, irresistible grace to save us, or we would be lost forever!** If there are any who have a power of their own, we must confess ourselves poorer than they are. We cannot watch, unless he watches with us; we cannot strive, unless he strives with us; we cannot stand one moment, unless he holds us up; and we believe we must perish after all, unless his faithfulness is engaged to keep us. But this we trust he will do, not for our righteousness, but for his own name's sake, and because, having loved us with an everlasting love, he has been pleased in loving kindness to draw us to himself, and to be found by us when we sought him not.

Can you think, dear Sir, that a person who lives under the influence of these sentiments, will desire to continue in sin because grace abounds? No! you are too candid an observer of men and manners, to believe the calumnies which are propagated against us. It is true, there are too many false and empty professors among us; but are there none among those who hold the opposite sentiments? And I would observe, that the objection drawn from the miscarriages of reputed Calvinists is quite beside the purpose. We maintain, that no doctrines or means can change the heart, or produce a gracious conversation, without the efficacious power of Almighty grace: therefore, if it is found to be so in fact, it should not be charged against our doctrine, but rather admitted as a proof and confirmation of it. We confess, that we fall sadly short in everything, and have reason to be ashamed and amazed that we are so faintly influenced by such animating principles; yet, upon the whole, our consciences bear us witness, and we hope we may declare it both to the church and to the world without just fear of contradiction, that **the doctrines of grace are doctrines according to godliness.**

# The inefficacy of mere knowledge

Dear Sir,

To be enabled to form a clear, consistent, and comprehensive judgment of the truths revealed in the Scripture, is a great privilege; but those who possess it are exposed to the temptation of thinking too highly of themselves, and too lowly of others, especially of those who not only refuse to adopt their sentiments, but venture to oppose them. We see few controversial writings, however excellent in other respects, but are tinged with this spirit of self-superiority. And if they are attentive to what passes in their hearts, may feel it working within them, upon a thousand occasions; though, so far as it prevails, it brings forcibly home to ourselves the charge of ignorance and inconsistency, which we are so ready to fix upon our opponents.

I know nothing, as a means, more likely to correct this evil, than a serious consideration of *the amazing difference between our acquired judgment, and our actual experience*; or, in other words, *how little influence our knowledge and judgment have upon our own conduct*. This may confirm to us the truth and propriety of the Apostle's observation, "If any man thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." Not that we are bound to be insensible that the Lord has taught us what we were once ignorant of; nor is it possible that we should be so; but because, if we estimate our knowledge by its effects, and value it no farther than it is experimental and operative (which is the proper standard whereby to try it), we shall find it so faint and feeble as hardly to deserve the name.

How firmly, for instance, are we persuaded, in our judgments, that **God is omnipresent!** Great as the difficulties may be which attend our conceptions of this point, the truth itself is controverted by few. It is generally acknowledged by unawakened people; and, I may add, too frequently known even by believers—as if they knew it not! If the eyes of the Lord are in every place, how strong a guard should this thought be upon the conduct of those who profess to fear him! We know how we are often affected when in the presence of a fellow-worm: if he is one on whom we depend, or who is considerably our superior in life—how careful are we to compose our behavior, and to avoid whatever might be deemed improper or offensive!

Is it not strange, that those who have taken their ideas of the Divine majesty, holiness, and purity, from the Scriptures, and are not wholly insensible of their inexpressible obligations to regulate all they say or do by his precepts—should upon many occasions be betrayed into improprieties of behavior—from which the presence of a nobleman, or prince, would have effectually restrained them, yes, sometimes perhaps even the presence of a child?

Even in the exercise of prayer, by which we profess to draw near the Lord, the consideration that his eye is upon us, has little power to engage our attention, or prevent our thoughts from wandering, like the fool's eyes, to the ends of the earth. What would we think of a person, who, being admitted into the king's presence, upon business of the greatest importance, should break off in the midst of his address, to pursue a butterfly? Could such an instance of weakness be met with, it would be but a faint emblem of the inconsistencies which those who are acquainted with their own hearts can often charge themselves with in prayer. They are not wholly ignorant in what a frame of spirit it becomes a needy dependent sinner to approach that God, before whom the angels are represented as veiling their faces; yet, in defiance of their better judgment, their attention is diverted from him with whom they have to do, to the merest trifles; they are not able to realize that presence

with which they believe themselves to be surrounded, but speak as if they were speaking into the air!

Farther, if our sense that God is always present, was in any good measure answerable to the conviction of our judgment, would it not be an effectual preservative from the many importunate though groundless fears with which we are harassed? God says, "Fear not, I am with you;" he promises to be a shield and a guard to those who put their trust in him; yet, though we profess to believe his word, and to hope that he is our protector, we seldom think ourselves safe, even in the path of duty, a moment longer than danger is kept out of our view. Little reason have we to value ourselves upon our knowledge of this indisputable truth, when it has no more *effective and habitual influence upon our conduct!*

The doctrine of **God's sovereignty** likewise, though not so generally owned as the former, is no less fully assented to by those who are called Calvinists. We zealously contend for this point, in our debates with the Arminians; and are ready to wonder that any should be hardy enough to dispute the Creator's right to do what he will with his own. While we are only engaged in defense of the election of grace, and have a comfortable hope that we are ourselves of that number, we seem so convinced, by the arguments the Scripture affords us in support of this truth, that we can hardly forbear charging our adversaries with perverse obstinacy and pride, for opposing it.

Undoubtedly the ground of this opposition lies in the pride of the human heart: but this evil principle is not confined to any party; and occasions frequently arise, when *those who contend for the Divine sovereignty are little more practically influenced by it than their opponents!* This humiliating doctrine concludes as strongly for submission to the will of God, under every circumstance of life, as it does for our acquiescing in his purpose to have saving mercy on whom he will have mercy. But, alas! how often do we find ourselves utterly unable to apply it, so as to reconcile our spirits to those afflictions which he is pleased to allot us!

So far as we are enabled to say, when we are exercised with poverty, or heavy losses or crosses, "I was silent and opened not my mouth, because You are the one who has done this!" so far, and no farther, are we truly convinced that God has a sovereign right to dispose of us, and all our concerns—as he pleases. How often, and how justly, at such seasons, might the argument we offer to others, as sufficient to silence all their objections, be retorted upon ourselves, "Nay, but who are you, O man, who replies against God? Shall the thing formed say unto him that formed it, Why have you made me thus?" —a plain proof that our knowledge is more *notional* than *experimental*. What an inconsistency, that, while we think God is just and righteous in withholding from others the things which pertain to their everlasting peace, we should find it so hard to submit to his dispensations to ourselves in matters of unspeakably less importance!

But the Lord's appointments, to those who fear him, are not only sovereign, but wise and gracious. He has connected their good with his own glory, and is engaged, by promise, to make all things work together for their advantage. **He chooses for his people better than they could choose for themselves!** If they are in heaviness, there is a need-be for it. And he withholds nothing from them but what, upon the whole, it is better they should be without. Thus the Scriptures teach, and thus we profess to believe.

Furnished with these principles, we are at no loss to suggest motives of patience and consolation to our brethren that are afflicted: we can assure **them**, without hesitation, that, if they are savingly interested in the promises, their concerns are in safe hands; that the things which at present are not joyous, but grievous, shall in due season yield the peaceable fruits of righteousness; and that their trials are as



certainly mercies—as their comforts. We can prove to them, from the history of Joseph, David, Job, and other instances recorded in Scripture, that, notwithstanding any present dark appearances, it shall certainly be well with the righteous; that God can and will make crooked things straight; and that he often produces the greatest good from those events which we are apt to look upon as evil. From hence we can infer, not only the sinfulness, but the folly, of finding fault with any of God's dispensations. We can tell them, that, at the worst, the sufferings of the present life are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed; and that therefore, under the greatest pressures, they should so weep as those who expect in a little time to have all their tears wiped away.

**But when the case is our own**, when we are troubled on every side, or touched in the tenderest part—how difficult is it to feel the force of these reasonings, though we know they are true to a demonstration! Then, unless we are endued with fresh strength from on high, we are as liable to complain and despond, as if we thought our afflictions sprung out of the ground, and the Lord had forgotten to be gracious!

I might proceed to show the difference between our *judgment* when most enlightened, and actual *experience*, with respect to every spiritual truth.

We know there is no proportion between time and eternity, between God and the creature, the favor of the Lord and the favor or the frowns of men; and yet often, when these things are brought into close competition, we are sorely put to it to keep steadfast in the path of duty. No, without new supplies of grace, we would certainly fail in the time of trial, and our knowledge would have no other effect than to render our guilt more inexcusable.

We seem to be as sure that we are weak, sinful, fallible creatures—as we are that we exist; and yet we are prone to act as if we were wise and perfect. In a word, we cannot deny, that a great part of our knowledge is, as I have described it, like the light of the moon, destitute of heat and influence; and yet we can hardly help thinking of ourselves too highly upon the account of it.

May we not say, with the Psalmist, "Lord, what is man!" yes, what an enigma, **what a poor inconsistent creature, is a believer!** In one view, how great is his character and privilege! He knows the Lord; he knows himself. His understanding is enlightened to apprehend and contemplate the great mysteries of the Gospel. He has just ideas of the evil of sin, the vanity of the world, the beauties of holiness, and the nature of true happiness. He was once "darkness, but now he is light in the Lord." He has access to God by Jesus Christ; to whom he is united, and in whom he lives by faith. While the principles he has received are enlivened by the agency of the Holy Spirit, he can do all things. He is humble, gentle, patient, watchful, faithful. He rejoices in afflictions, triumphs over temptation, lives upon the foretastes of eternal glory, and counts not his life dear, so that he may glorify God his Savior, and finish his course with joy.

But his strength is not his own; he is absolutely dependent; and is still encompassed with infirmities, and burdened with a depraved nature. If the Lord withdraws his power, he becomes weak as another man, and drops, as a stone sinks to the earth by its own weight. His inherent knowledge may be compared to the windows of a house, which can transmit the light, but cannot retain it. **Without renewed and continual communications from the Spirit of grace, he is unable to withstand the smallest temptation, to endure the slightest trial, to perform the least service in a due manner, or even to think a good thought!** He knows this, and yet he too often forgets it. But the Lord reminds him of it frequently, by suspending that assistance, without which he can do nothing. Then he feels what he is, and is easily prevailed upon to act in contradiction to his better judgment. Thus repeated experience of his own weakness teaches him by degrees where his strength lies; that

it is not in anything that he has already attained, or can call his own, but in the grace, power, and faithfulness of his Savior. He learns to cease from his own understanding, to be ashamed of his best endeavors, to abhor himself in dust and ashes, and to glory only in the Lord!

From hence we may observe, that **believers who have most Biblical knowledge, are not therefore necessarily the most spiritual.** Some may and do walk more honorably and more comfortably with two talents, than others with five. He who experimentally knows his own weakness, and depends simply upon the Lord, will surely thrive, though his acquired knowledge and abilities may be but small. While he who has the greatest gifts, the clearest judgment, and the most extensive knowledge, if he indulges high thoughts of his advantages, is in imminent danger of mistaking, and falling at every step; for the Lord will allow none whom he loves to boast in themselves. He will guide the **meek** with his eye, and fill the hungry with good things—but the **rich** he sends empty away. It is an invariable maxim in His kingdom, that whoever exalts himself shall be abased; but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.

# Difference between acquired and experimental knowledge

April, 1766

My friend,

I shall embrace your permission to fill my paper. As to the *subject*, that which has been a frequent theme of my heart of late—I shall venture to lay before you; I mean, the **remarkable and humbling difference** which I suppose all who know themselves may observe, between their *acquired* and their *experimental knowledge*. In other words, the difference between their *judgment* and their *practice*. To hear a believer speak his apprehensions of the evil of sin, the vanity of the world, the love of Christ, the beauty of holiness, or the importance of eternity—who would not suppose him to be armored against temptation? To hear with what strong arguments he can recommend watchfulness, prayer, forbearance, and submission, when he is teaching or advising others—who would not suppose but he could also teach himself, and influence his own conduct! Yet, alas! The person who rose from his knees before he left his chamber—as a poor, indigent, fallible, dependent creature, who saw and acknowledged that he was unworthy to breathe the air or too see the light—may meet with many occasions, before the day is closed, to discover the *corruptions of his heart*, and to manifest how weak and faint his *best principles* and *clearest convictions* are, in their actual exercise!

And in this view—how vain is man! what a *contradiction* is a believer to himself! He is called a *Believer* emphatically, because he cordially assents to the Word of God; but, alas! how often unworthy of the name!

If I were to describe him from the **Scriptural portrait**—I would say that he is one whose heart is athirst for God, for His glory, and for His presence; that his affections are fixed upon an unseen Savior; that his treasures, and consequently his thoughts, are on eternal realities, far beyond the bounds of sense. Having experienced much God's forgiveness, he is full of mercy and forgiveness to all around. Having been often deceived by his own heart, he dares trust it no more—but lives by faith in the Son of God, for wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification, and derives from Him grace upon grace; sensible that without Him he has not sufficiency even to think a good thought! In short—he is dead to the world, to sin, to self; but alive to God, and lively in His service. Prayer is his breath, the Word of God his food, and the ordinances more precious to him than the light of the sun. Such is a believer—in his judgment and prevailing desires.

But was I to describe him from his **actual experience**, especially at some times—how different would the picture be! Though he knows that communion with God is his highest privilege, he too seldom finds it so; on the contrary, if duty, conscience, and necessity did not compel him—he would leave the throne of grace unvisited from day to day! He takes up the Bible, conscious that it is the fountain of life and true comfort; yet perhaps, while he is making the reflection, he feels a secret distaste, which prompts him to lay it down, and give his preference to a newspaper! He needs not to be told of the vanity and uncertainty of the world, and all beneath the sun; and yet is almost as much elated or cast down by a trifle—as those who have their only portion in this world! He believes that all things shall work together for his good, and that the most high God appoints, adjusts, and overrules all his concerns; yet he feels the risings of fear, anxiety, and displeasure, as though the contrary was true! He owns himself to be ignorant, and liable to be deceived by a thousand fallacies; yet he is easily betrayed into flattering views of himself, and self-conceit! He feels himself to be an unprofitable, unfaithful, unthankful servant, and therefore blushes to harbor a thought of desiring the esteem and commendations of men—yet he cannot suppress it! Finally (for I must observe some bounds), on account of these and many other inconsistencies, he is struck dumb before the Lord,

stripped of every hope and plea, but what is provided in the free grace of God—and yet his heart is continually leaning and returning to a covenant of works.

Two questions naturally arise from such a view of ourselves.

First: How can these things be—or why are they permitted? Since the Lord hates sin, teaches his people to hate it and cry against it, and has promised to hear their prayers—how is it that they go thus burdened by sin? Surely, if he could not, or would not, over-rule evil for good—he would not permit it to continue. By these exercises of sin and grace, the Lord teaches us more truly to know and feel the utter depravity and corruption of our whole nature, that we are indeed defiled in every part! His *method of salvation* is likewise hereby exceedingly endeared to us! We see that it is and must be of grace, wholly of grace; and that the Lord Jesus Christ, and his perfect righteousness, is and must be our all in all.

God's *power* likewise, in maintaining his own work notwithstanding our infirmities, temptations, and enemies, is hereby displayed in the clearest light; his strength is manifested in our weakness!

*Satan* likewise is more remarkably disappointed and put to shame, when he finds bounds set to his rage and wiles, beyond which he cannot pass; and that those in whom he finds so much evil to work upon, and over whom he so often prevails for a season—escape at last out of his hands! He casts them down—but they are raised again! He wounds them—but they are healed! He obtains his desire to sift them as wheat—but the prayer of their great Advocate prevails for the maintenance of their faith.

Farther, by what believers feel in themselves—they learn by degrees how to warn, pity, and bear with others. A soft, patient, and compassionate spirit, and a readiness and skill in comforting those who are cast down, is not perhaps attainable in any other way.

And, lastly, I believe that nothing more habitually reconciles a child of God to the thought of death, than the wearisomeness of this warfare with sin and temptation. Death is unwelcome to human nature. But the Christian knows that not until death—will conflict cease! Then we shall sin no more. The flesh, with all its attendant evils, will be laid in the grave. Then the soul, which has been partaker of a new and heavenly birth, shall be freed from every encumbrance, and stand perfect in the Redeemer's righteousness before God in eternal glory!

But though these evils cannot be wholly removed, it is worth while to inquire, Secondly, *How they may be mitigated?* This we are encouraged to hope for. The Word of God directs and animates to a growth in grace—and though we can do nothing spiritually of ourselves—yet there is a part assigned us. We cannot *conquer* the obstacles in our way by our own strength; yet we *can give way* to them; and if we do, it is our *sin*—and will be our *sorrow*.

The disputes concerning *inherent power in the creature*, have been carried to inconvenient lengths; for my own part, I think it safe to use Scriptural language. The Apostles exhort us to give all diligence—to resist the devil; to purge ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit; to give ourselves to reading, meditation, and prayer; to watch; to put on the whole armor of God; and to abstain from all appearance of evil. Faithfulness to light received, and a *sincere endeavor* to conform to the means prescribed in the Word of God, with a humble application to the Blood of sprinkling and the promised Holy Spirit, will undoubtedly be answered by increasing measures of light, faith, strength, and comfort. We shall know—if we follow on to know the Lord.

# Our imperfect knowledge of Christ's love

April 29, 1776.

My dear Miss M,

I thank you for your last letter; and I rejoice in the Lord's goodness to you. To be drawn by love; to be exempted from those distressing terrors and temptations which some are beset with; to be favored with the ordinances and means of grace, and connected with those, and with those only, who are disposed and qualified to assist and encourage you in seeking the Savior—these are special privileges, which all concur in your case. He loves you, he deals gently with you, he provides well for you, and accompanies every outward privilege with his special blessing; and I trust he will lead you on from strength to strength, and show you still greater things than you have yet seen.

Those whom he teaches, are always increasing in knowledge, both of *themselves* and of *him*. The heart is deep, and, like Ezekiel's vision, presents so many chambers of imagery, one within another, that it requires time to get a considerable acquaintance with it, and we shall never know it thoroughly. It is now more than twenty-eight years since the Lord began to open mine to my own view; and from that time to this, almost every day has discovered to me something which until then was unobserved; and the farther I go, the more I seem convinced that I have entered *but a little way*. A person who travels in some parts of Derbyshire may easily be satisfied that the country is cavernous; but how large, how deep, how numerous the caverns may be, which are hidden from us by the surface of the ground, and what is contained in them—are questions which our most discerning inquirers cannot fully answer. Thus I judge of my heart—that it is very deep and dark, and full of evil; but as to particulars, I know not one of a thousand!

And if our own hearts are beyond our comprehension, how much more incomprehensible is the *heart of Jesus*! If sin abounds in us—grace and love superabound in him! His ways and thoughts are higher than ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth; his love has a height, and depth, and length, and breadth, which passes all knowledge! The riches of his grace are unsearchable riches! Eph. 3:8, Eph. 3:18, Eph. 3:19. All that we have received or can receive from him, or know of him in this life, compared with what he is in himself, or what he has for us—is but as the drop of a bucket—compared with the ocean; or a single ray of light—compared with the sun. The waters of the sanctuary flow to us at first almost ankle deep—so graciously does the Lord condescend to our weakness; but they rise as we advance, and constrain us to cry out, with the Apostle, *O the depth!* We find before us, as Dr. Watts beautifully expresses it,

A sea of love and grace unknown,  
Without a bottom or a shore!

O the excellency of the knowledge of Christ! It will be growing upon us through time—yes, I believe through eternity! What an astonishing and what a cheering thought—that this high and lofty One should unite himself to our nature, that so, in a way worthy of his adorable perfections, he might by his Spirit unite us to himself! Could such a thought have arisen in our hearts, without the warrant of his Word (but it is a thought which no created mind was capable of even *conceiving* until he revealed it), it would have been presumption and blasphemy! But now he has made it known, it is the foundation of our hope, and an inexhaustible spring of life and joy. Well may we say, *Lord what is man, that you should thus visit him!*

# The heavenly Builder

November 11, 1775.

My dear Miss M,

Our last visit was very pleasant to myself; if anything that passed was of service to you, we know to whom the thanks are due; for we can neither communicate nor receive anything—but so far as he is pleased to enable us. One reason why he often disappoints us—is that we may learn to depend on him alone. We are prone, as you observe, to rest too much upon sensible comforts—yet they are very desirable, only as to the measure and seasons. It is well to be submissive to his will; to be thankful for them when we have them, and humbly waiting for them when we have them not. They are not, however, the proper ground of our hope; a good hope springs from such a sense of our needs, and such a persuasion of his power and grace—as engages the heart to venture, upon the warrant of his promises, to trust in him for salvation.

In a sense, we are often hindering him by our impatience and unbelief. But, strictly speaking, when he really begins the good work, and gives us a desire which will be satisfied with nothing short of himself—he will not be hindered from carrying it on; for he has said, I will work, and none shall hinder it. Ah! had it depended upon myself, upon my wisdom or faithfulness, I would have hindered him, and ruined myself long ago! How often have I grieved and resisted his Spirit! But hereby I have learned more of his patience and tenderness, than I could otherwise have known.

He knows our frame, and what effects our evil nature, fermented by the artifices of Satan, will have; he sees us from first to last. A thousand evils arise in our hearts, a thousand wrongnesses in our conduct, which, as they do arise, are new to ourselves, and perhaps at some times we are ready to think we were incapable of such things; but none of them are new to him, to whom past, present, and future are the same. The foresight of them did not prevent his calling us by his grace. Though he knew we were vile, and would prove ungrateful and unfaithful—yet he would be found of us; he would knock at the door of our hearts, and gain himself an entrance. Nor shall they prevent his accomplishing his gracious purpose. It is our part to be abased before him, and quietly to hope and wait for his salvation in the use of his appointed means. The power, success, and blessing—are wholly from himself.

To make us more sensible of this, he often withdraws from our perceptions; and as, in the absence of the sun, the wild beasts of the forest roam abroad; so, when Jesus hides himself, we presently perceive what is in our hearts, and what a poor shift we can make without him. When he returns, his light chases the evils away, and we are well again.

It is your great and singular mercy, my dear Miss, that he has taught you to seek him so early in life. You have entered in the way of salvation—but you must not expect all at once. The work of grace is compared to the corn, and to a building; the *growth* of the one, and the carrying forward of the other, are *gradual*. In a *building*, for instance, if it is large, there is much to be done in preparing and laying the foundation, before the walls appear above ground; much is doing within, when the work does not seem perhaps to advance without; and when it is considerably forward—yet, being encumbered with scaffolds and rubbish—a bystander sees it at a great disadvantage, and can form but an imperfect judgment of it. But all this while the architect himself, even from the laying of the first stone, conceives of it according to the plan and design he has formed; he prepares and adjusts the materials, disposing each in its proper time and place—and views it, in idea, as already finished. In due season it is completed—but not in a day. The top-stone is

fixed, and then, the scaffolds and rubbish being removed—it appears to others as he intended it should be.

Men, indeed, often plan what, for want of skill or ability, or from unforeseen disappointments, they are unable to execute. But nothing can disappoint *the heavenly Builder*; nor will he ever be reproached with forsaking the work of his own hands, or beginning that which he could not or would not accomplish; Phi. 1:6. Let us therefore be thankful for *beginnings*, and patiently wait the outcome. His enemies strive to retard the work, as they did when the Jews, by his order, set about rebuilding the Temple. Yet it was finished, in defiance of them all.

# The heavenly gardener

July 22, 1777.

My dear Sir,

The complaints you make of what passes within, encourage me under what I feel myself. Indeed, if those, who, I have reason to believe, are more spiritual and humble than I am, did not give some testimony that they find their hearts made of the same materials as mine is, I should be sometimes hard put to it to believe that I have any part or lot in the matter, or any real knowledge of the life of faith! But this concurrent testimony of many witnesses, confirms me, in what I think the Scripture plainly teaches—that the *soil of human nature*, though many spots are certainly better weeded, planted, and fertilized than others—is everywhere the same—universally bad! The heart is so bad, that it cannot be worse—and of itself is only capable of producing noxious weeds, and nourishing venomous creatures!

We know that culture, skill, and expense will make a garden—where all was desert before. When Jesus, the heavenly gardener, encloses a soil, and separates it from the wasteland of the world, to make it a residence for Himself—a change presently takes place; it is planted and watered from above, and visited with beams infinitely more nourishing and fertilizing than those of the material sun.

But its natural propensity to bring forth weeds still continues, and one half of God's dealings with us, may be compared to a company of weeders, whom He sends forth into His garden—to pluck up all which He has not planted with His own hand; and which, if left to grow, would quickly overpower and over top the rest!

But, alas! the ground is so impregnated with evil seeds, and they shoot in such quick succession, that if this weeding work were not constantly repeated, all former labor would be lost! Hence arises the necessity of daily crosses and disappointments, and such multiplied convictions that we are nothing, and can do nothing, of ourselves! All these trials are needful, and barely sufficient, to prevent our hearts from being overrun with pride, lust, worldliness and self-dependence.