



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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Letters from Olney

by John Newton

Four letters from Newton to another minister, touching on such topics as grace, sin, God's sovereignty, and the nature of genuine faith. Newton writes with gentle warmth, deep personal experience, and a solid grasp of Scripture.

Selections from Eight Letters to Rev Mr S——

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LETTER V

The Failure of Moralistic Preaching—Calvinism—Moral Inability

October 21, 1775

My Dear Friend,

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

I am loath, for my own sake, to charge your silence to an unwillingness of continuing that intercourse which I have been, and still find myself, desirous to

improve on my part. For though we are not agreed in our views, yet while our preliminary agreement, to allow mutual freedom, and to exercise mutual candour, in expressing our sentiments, subsists, we may, and I hope shall, be glad to hear from each other. It may seem to intimate I have a better opinion of myself than of you, that while I seem confident your freedom will not offend me, I feel now and then a fear, lest mine should prove displeasing to you. But friendship is a little suspicious when exercised with long silence, and a plain declaration of my sentiments has more than once put amiable and respectable persons to the full trial of their patience.

I now return your sermons: I thank you for the perusal; I see much in them that I approve, and nothing in them but what I formerly espoused. But in a course of years, a considerable alteration has taken place in my judgment and experience. I hope, yea, I may boldly say I am sure, not for the worse. Then I was seeking, and now through mercy, I have found the pearl of great price. It is both the prayer and the hope of my heart, that a day is coming when you shall make the same acknowledgment. From your letters and sermons, I am encouraged to address you in our Lord's words, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." I am persuaded the views you have received will not suffer you to remain where you are. But fidelity obliges me to add, "Yet one thing thou lackest." "That one thing," I trust the Lord will both show you, and bestow upon you, in His due time. You speak somewhere of "atoning for disobedience by repentance." Ah! my dear sir, when we are brought to estimate our disobedience, by comparing it with such a sense of the majesty, holiness, and authority of God, and the spirituality, extent, and sanction of His holy law, as He, and He only, can impress upon the heart of a sinner, we shall be convinced, that nothing but the blood of the Son of God can atone for the smallest instance of disobedience.

I intimated, in my letter from London, one defect of your scheme, which will probably be the first to engage your notice. I am sure you have a desire to be useful to the souls of men, to be an instrument of reclaiming them from that course of open wickedness, or lifeless formality, in which you see them enslaved; and, in a word, to prevail with them to live soberly, righteously, and godly, according to the just and comprehensive sense you have given of those words, in your sermon on Tit. ii. 11, 12. Now, inward experience, and a pretty extensive observation of what passes abroad, have so perfectly convinced me there is but one mode of preaching which the Holy Spirit owns to the producing of these effects, that I am not afraid to pronounce confidently, you will not have the desires of your heart gratified upon your present plan: the people will give you a hearing, and remain just as they are, till the Lord leads you to speak to them as criminals

condemned already, and whose first essential step it is, to seek forgiveness by the blood of Jesus, and a change of heart and state by His grace, before they can bring forth any fruit acceptable to God.

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

LETTER VI

The Necessity of the Divine Light

October 28, 1775

My Dear Friend,

It never entered my pericranium, that you expected I should fully and directly answer your letter while I was in London; and yet you reasonably might, as you knew nothing of my engagements: but, indeed, it was impracticable; I could only send you a hasty line, as a token that I remembered you. I informed you, when I returned, that I was just going out again. Since I came home the second time, I have been engrossed by things that would admit of no delay; and, at length, not having so much as a note from you, I thought I would wait till I heard farther. But from first to last it was my intention, and I think my promise, to answer in the manner you proposed, as soon as I could. And even now I must beg a little longer time. Believe me, that as the wise and good providence of God brought us together, without any expectation of mine, I will do all in my power to preserve the connexion, and particularly by giving my thoughts on such questions as you propose. And though, to consider your questions in the manner you wish, and to point out the agreement of detached texts (as they occur) with my views, seems in prospect to require a volume rather than a sheet, yet I am not discouraged; only I beg you to make allowances for other things, and to be assured, that before I had the pleasure of corresponding with you, I had very little spare time. Expect, then, the best satisfaction I am able to give you, as soon as

possible. To prepare the way, I will try hard for a little leisure, to give you a few thoughts upon yours, which came last night.

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

You quite misunderstood what I spoke of the light and influence of the Spirit of God. He reveals to me no new truths, but has only shown me the meaning of His own written Word; nor is this light a particular revelation, it is common to all who are born again. And thus, though you and I cannot fully agree about it, yet I almost daily meet with persons from the east, west, north, and south, who, though I never saw them before, I find understand me at once. This (as you bid me be explicit) is the one thing which I think you at present lack. And I limited my expression to *one thing*, because it is our Lord's expression, and because that *one thing* includes many. As I said before, I cannot give it you; but the Lord can; and from the desire He has raised in your heart, I have a warm hope that He will. You place the whole stress of your inquiries upon reason; I am far from discarding reason, when it is enlightened and sanctified; but spiritual things must be spiritually discerned, and can be received and discerned no other way; for to our natural reason they are foolishness, I Cor. ii. 14, 15; Matt. xi. 25. This certain something I can no more describe to those who have not experienced it, than I could describe the taste of a pine-apple to a person who had never seen one. But Scriptural proofs might be adduced in abundance, yet not so as to give a solid conviction of it, till we actually experience it. Thus it was with my friend whose case I sent you. When God gave him the key, (as he expressed it,) then the Scriptures were unlocked. His wishing himself a Deist, some time before, was not from any libertine exceptions he made to the precepts of the Gospel, but from the perplexing embarrassments he had found, by endeavouring to understand the doctrines by dint of reason, though reason in him was as strong and penetrating as

in most men I ever met with. Upon your present plan, how can I hope to satisfy you, though even St. Paul asserts it, that the carnal mind is enmity against God? You will readily agree with me to the proposition as it stands in St. Paul's words, but I think will not so readily assent to what I have no more doubt than of my own existence, is the sense of it: that the heart of man, of any man, every man, however apparently amiable in his outward conduct, however benevolent to his fellow-creatures, however abundant and zealous in his devotions, is by nature enmity against God: not, indeed, against the idea he himself forms of God, but against the character which God has revealed of Himself in the Scripture. Man is an enemy to the justice, sovereignty, and law of God, and to the one method of salvation He has appointed in the Gospel by faith only, by such a faith, as it is no more in his power to contribute to the production of in himself, than he can contribute to raising the dead, or making a world. Whatever is of the flesh is flesh, and can rise no higher than its principle; but the Lord could convince you of this by a glance of thought.

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

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

I am, &c.

LETTER VII

True Faith—Moral Inability

November 17, 1775

My Dear Friend,

At length I take up your favour 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 should be more sorry, but I consider, that in my former papers, sermons, Omicron's letters, &c., you already possess the

whole (in substance) of what I have to offer. My present part is but *actum agere*, 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 any thing 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 purport of these your own words, though you seem 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 should perhaps quote and argue from twenty more, and still “You would understand them otherwise.” The life of man yea, of Methuselah, would hardly suffice to prove, object and defend all that might be alleged on both sides in this way; and at last we should 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 grace irresistible, predestination absolute, faith in supernatural impulses, &c.? 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 be indeed 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 own I cannot but wonder, that persons 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 a discrimination of persons by the grace and good pleasure of God, where by nature there is no difference; and that all things respecting the salvation of these persons, 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 favourable to our natural prejudices against God's sovereignty! Matt. xi. 25, 26, and xiii. 10-17; Mark xiii. 20, 22; John xvii. passim, John x. 26; Rom. viii. 28-30, and ix. 13-24, and xi. 7; Eph. i. 4, 5; I Pet. i. 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 me; 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," Phil. iii. 4, 7-10. For, as you tell me, you never remember a time when you were not conscious, before God, of great unworthiness, and intervals of earnest endeavours 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, 2 Cor. iv. 6, and v. 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 glowworm 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 farther sensible of the necessity of a Saviour, 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 awful 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. iii. 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, till we can look to Jesus, as the wounded Israelite 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 iii. 14, 15, and vi. 40; Isaiah xliii. 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, το υπερβαλλον μεγαθος της δυναμεως αυτου εις ημας τους πιστευοντας κατα την ενεργειαν του κρατους της ισχυος αυτου; 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, 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; faith is the effect of immediate almighty power. Another difference is, faith is always efficacious, "it worketh by love"; whereas assent is often given where it has little or no influence upon the conduct. Thus, for instance, every one 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, yet live as they might do if the reverse were true. But they who have Divine faith, feel, as well as say, 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, Rom. v. 1, 2; Heb. xi. 1; whereas, a calm, dispassionate reasoner may be compelled to assent to the external arguments in favour 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. Witness the lives and tempers of thousands, who yet would be

affronted if their assent to the Gospel should be questioned. To sum up all in a word, “He that 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. v. 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 Saviour’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. It 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 endeavours (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 laboured with much earnestness upon your plan, was very exemplary in his whole conduct, preached almost incessantly, (two or three times every day in the week, 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-priest 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. He lived in such retirement and recess, that he was unacquainted with the persons and principles of any who are now branded as enthusiasts and Methodists. One day, reading Eph. iii. in his Greek Testament, his thoughts were stopped by the word ἀνεξιχνίαστον (unsearchable) in verse 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, depths, and lengths, and breadths, and unsearchables, where I seem to find every thing 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 endeavours, 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 every one that believeth. He felt himself, and laboured 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, till he himself be first made accepted in the Beloved. Nor did he labour 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 Ghost, and in much assurance; and their endeavours 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 liveth in me, and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God."

Such a change of views and sentiments I pray God my friend 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 era of the Reformation, till a little before Laud's time, that set forth any other. There were few pulpits, till 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 be of faith or of works; whether faith be of our own power, or of God's operation; whether Christ's obedience, or our own, be the just ground of our hope; whether a man can truly call Jesus Lord, but by the teaching of the Holy Ghost. 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 travelled both roads, may have, perhaps, some stronger reasons to determine me which is the right, than you can have who have only travelled one.

Your two sheets may lead me to write as many queries, if I do not check myself. 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 was 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 that leadeth 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, 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*. Till then, I hold it best to take things upon His word, and not too harshly determine what it becomes Jehovah to do. Instead of saying what I think, let it suffice to remind you of what St. Paul thought, Rom. ix. 15-21. But farther, I say, that unless mercy were afforded to those who are saved, in a way peculiar to themselves, and which is not afforded to those who perish, I believe no one soul could be saved. For I believe fallen man, universally considered as such, is as incapable of doing the least thing towards his salvation, till prevented by the grace of God, (as our Article speaks,) 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. Yea, His first approaches to our hearts are undesired too; for, till He seeks us, we cannot, we will not, seek Him, Psalm cx. 3. It is in the day of His power and not before, His people are made willing. But, I believe, where the Gospel is preached, they who do perish do willfully resist the 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 life. At the same time, it is true that they cannot, unless they are supernaturally drawn of God, John v. 40; vi. 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, but a moral inability; 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, till the grace of God powerfully enlightens his mind, and overcomes his obstacles. But this brings me to your second query.

Do I think that God, in the ordinary course of His providence, grants this 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 He 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 till he is made so. Why does he at all refuse? Because he is insensible of his state; because he knows not the evil of sin, the strictness of the law, the majesty of God whom he has offended, nor the total apostasy of his heart; because he is blind to eternity, and ignorant of the excellency of Christ; because he is comparatively whole, and sees not his need of this great Physician; because he relies upon his own wisdom, power, and supposed righteousness. Now, in this state of things, when God comes with a purpose of 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 discovers to him the necessity, sufficiency, and willingness of Christ to save them that are ready to perish, without money or price, without doings or deservings. 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 hart 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 that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise 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 he falls beyond the power of recovery;—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 of our spiritual concerns. Sinners are called and warned by the Word; but they are wise

in their own eyes, and take but little notice till the Lord gives them light, which He is not bound to give to any, and therefore cannot be bound to give to all. They who have it, have reason to be thankful, and subscribe to the apostle's words, "By grace are ye 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 beforehand 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 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 a 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 always be 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, &c.

LETTER VIII

**Faith—Spiritual Knowledge—Seeking—True
Repentance**

December 8, 1775

My Dear Friend,

Are you willing 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 fulfil 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 Scriptures maintaining one consistent sense, which, if 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 reasonings upon the ways of God, while we make 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 His *αυτος εφη* (authority) 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 term of justification. This term is faith, Mark xvi. 16; Acts xiii. 39. The Gospel propounds, admits no other term. But this faith, as I endeavoured 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, Rom. iv. 5, and xi. 6. God justifies freely, justifies the ungodly, and him that worketh not. Though justifying faith be indeed an active principle, it worketh 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 he would accomplish it (Phil. i. 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 to His appointed means; as a right sense of the sin that dwelleth 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 *eo nomine* (by those names). 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 of the heart is equally polluted and poisonous; and that it is as true as it was in the days of Christ and His apostles, that unless a man be 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, Acts ii. 28; and they did no more than what His hand and purpose had determined should be done, chap. iv. 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 their wickedness was properly their own.

Now, my friend, the arguments which satisfy you, that the Scripture does not present 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 colours. Objections of this kind have been repeated and refuted 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 doth He yet find fault? Who hath 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 think I have, in a former letter, made some reply to the charge of positiveness in my own opinion. 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; I should be so, if there was no human creature upon earth but myself. However, my sentiments are confirmed by the suffrages 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. And 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 every thing 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*. 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 moral goodness in them, unless they are founded in a supreme love to God, have His glory for their aim, and are 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 seeth, not as man seeth, but judgeth the heart. Many infidels and avowed enemies to the grace and Gospel of Christ, have made a fair show of what the world calls 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 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 complaint 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, Rom. vii. 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. V. 17. The carnal natural mind is enmity against God, not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. When you subjoin, "Till 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, for the expressions are all equivalent, and denote, and include, the heart of man as he is by nature, may be *crucified*, must be *mortified*, but cannot be *sanctified*. All that is *good* or *gracious* 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 till that is effected, the το υψηλονγ, the highest attainment, 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 abomination in the sight of God, Luke xvi.15.

The Gospel is calculated and designed to stain the pride of human glory. It is provided, not for the wise and the righteous, for those who think they have good dispositions 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. iii. 17, 18.

You ask, If man can do nothing without an extraordinary impulse from on high, 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 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 persevere 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, nor be satisfied till Christ be revealed in him, formed within him, dwell in his heart by faith, and till he can say, upon good grounds, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth 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, my dear Sir, unites the soul to Christ, and thereby gives access to God, and fills it with a peace passing understanding, a hope, a joy unspeakable, and full of glory; 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—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, till the Lord makes them willing to renounce their own wisdom, and to become fools, that they may be truly wise, I Cor. i. 18, 19; iii. 8; viii. 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. They 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 i. 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 Saviour; in other words, who is not brought, as a ruined, helpless sinner, to live

upon Him for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. They who love Him thus, will speak highly of Him, and acknowledge that He is their all in all. And they who thus love Him, and speak of Him, will get little thanks for their pains in such a world as this:— “All that live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution: the world that 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*, if they are not allowed to *bite*. The apostles were accounted babblers, and ως περικαθαρματα του κοσμου εγενηθημεν παντων περιψημα (we are become as the garbage of the world and the offscouring of all things, 1 Cor. 4:13). 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 sober decent way of speaking of God, and goodness, and benevolence, and sobriety, which the world will bear well enough;—nay, we may say a little about Jesus Christ, as ready to make up the deficiencies of our honest and good endeavours, and this will not displease them. But if we preach Him as the only foundation, 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 in order to exalt the glory of Jesus, as saving those who are saved wholly and freely for His own name’s sake; 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, they cannot be saved; this the world cannot bear. We shall be called knaves or fools, uncharitable bigots, and twenty hard names. If you have met with nothing like this, I wish it may lead you to 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 any thing in the account of my deceased friend, but his wishing himself to be a Deist, and his having playbooks 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 into. 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 a 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 desponding 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 persons 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 they 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 rather 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 endeavours that way, unless they seek to Him for grace, will be vain as washing a blackmoor, 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, Rom. iii. 8, and vi. 1. 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 whosoever cometh unto Him, He will in no wise 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 undoubtedly is nothing worth, whether in time of health or in a dying hour. But that μετανοια, 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 finished; 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 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 upon Subscription, I observed an integrity and disinterestedness in you, which endeared you to me still more. Since that 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 ruleth 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 good 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 cannot at present receive, will hereafter be the joy and comfort of your heart; but I know it cannot be till 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 till I do. I should think what remains might be better settled *viva voce* (in personal conversation) 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, *Dies iste indicabit* (the day itself will show) 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, &c.

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