

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,
LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER I.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,

I MAKE no doubt but you have at times had pleasing reflections upon that promise made to the Israelites, Deut. viii. 2. They were then in the wilderness, surrounded with difficulties, which were greatly aggravated by their own distrust and perverseness: they had experienced a variety of dispensations, the design of which they could not as yet understand; they frequently lost sight of God's gracious purposes in their favour, and were much discouraged by reason of the way. To compose and animate their minds, Moses here suggests to them, that there was a future happy time drawing near, when their journey and warfare should be finished; that they should soon be put in possession of the promised land, and have rest from all their fears and troubles; and then it would give them pleasure to look back upon what they now found so uneasy to bear:—"Thou shalt remember all the way, by which the Lord thy God led thee through this wilderness."

But the importance and comfort of these words is still greater, if we consider them in a spiritual sense, as addressed to all who are passing through the wilderness of this world to a heavenly Canaan; who by faith in the promises and power of God are seeking eternal rest in that kingdom which cannot be shaken. The hope of that glorious inheritance inspires us with some degree of courage and zeal to press forward, to where Jesus has already entered as our forerunner; and when our eye is fixed upon him, we are more than conquerors over all that would withstand our progress. But we have not yet attained it; we still feel the infirmities of a fallen nature: through the remains of ignorance and unbelief, we often mistake the Lord's dealings with us, and are ready to complain, when, if we knew all, we should rather rejoice. But to us likewise there is a time coming, when our warfare shall be accomplished, our views enlarged, and our light increased: then, with what transports of adoration and love shall we look back upon the way, by which the Lord led us! We shall then see and acknowledge, that mercy and goodness directed every step; we shall see, that what our ignorance once called adversities and evils, were in reality blessings which we could not have done well without: that nothing befell us without a cause: that no trouble came upon us sooner, or pressed us more heavily, or continued longer, than our case required: in a word, that our many afflictions were each in their place among the means employed by divine grace and wisdom, to bring us to the possession of that exceeding and eternal weight of glory, which the Lord has prepared for his people. And even in this imperfect state, though we are seldom able to judge aright of our present circumstances, yet, if we look upon the years of our past life, and compare the dispensations we have been brought through, with the frame of our minds under each successive period; if we consider, how wonderfully one thing has been connected with another; so that what we now number amongst our greatest advantages, perhaps, took their first rise from incidents which we thought hardly worth our notice; and that we have sometimes escaped the greatest dangers that threatened us, not by any wisdom or foresight of our own, but by the intervention of circumstances, which we neither desired nor thought of;—I say, when we compare and consider these things by the light afforded us in the holy scriptures, we may collect indisputable proof, from the narrow circle of our own concerns, that the wise

and good providence of God watches over his people from the earliest moment of their life, overrules and guards them through all their wanderings in a state of ignorance, leads them in a way they know not, till at length his providence and grace concur in those events and impressions, which bring them to the knowledge of him and themselves.

I am persuaded that every believer will, upon due reflection, see enough in his own case to confirm this remark; but not all in the same degree. The outward circumstances of many have been uniform; they have known but little variety in life; and with respect to their inward change, it has been effected in a secret way, unnoticed by others, and almost unperceived by themselves. The Lord has spoken to them, not in thunder and tempest, but with a still small voice he has drawn them gradually to himself; so that, though they have a happy assurance of the thing, that they know and love him, and are passed from death unto life; yet of the precise time and manner, they can give little account. Others he seems to select, in order to show the exceeding riches of his grace, and the greatness of his mighty power: he suffers the natural rebellion and wickedness of their hearts to have full scope; while sinners of less note are cut off with little warning, these are spared, though sinning with a high hand, and, as it were, studying their own destruction. At length, when all that knew them are perhaps expecting to hear, that they are made signal instances of divine vengeance, the Lord (whose thoughts are high above ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth) is pleased to pluck them as brands out of the fire, and to make them monuments of his mercy, for the encouragement of others; they are, beyond expectation, convinced, pardoned, and changed. A case of this sort indicates a divine power no less than the creation of a world: it is evidently the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in the eyes of all those, who are not blinded by prejudice and unbelief.

Such was the persecuting Saul: his heart was full of enmity against Jesus of Nazareth, and therefore he persecuted and made havoc of his disciples. He had been a terror to the church of Jerusalem, and was going to Damascus with the same views. He was yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against all that loved the Lord Jesus. He thought little of the mischief he had hitherto done. He was engaged for the suppression of the whole sect; and hurrying from house to house, from place to place, he carried menaces in his look, and repeated threatenings with every breath. Such was his spirit and temper, when the Lord Jesus, whom he hated and opposed, checked him in the height of his rage, called this bitter persecutor to the honour of an apostle, and inspired him with great zeal and earnestness, to preach that Faith which he had so lately attempted to destroy.

Nor are we without remarkable displays of the same sovereign, efficacious grace in our own times;—I may particularly mention the instance of the late colonel Gardiner. If any real satisfaction could be found in a sinful course, he would have met with it; for he pursued the experiment with all possible advantages. He was habituated to evil; and many uncommon, almost miraculous deliverances, made no impression upon him. Yet he was likewise made willing in the day of God's power: and the bright example of his life, illustrated and diffused by the account of him, published since his death, has afforded an occasion of much praise to God, and much comfort to his people.

After the mention of such names, can you permit me, Sir, to add my own? If I do, it must be with a very humbling distinction. These once eminent

sinners, proved sincere Christians: much had been forgiven them, therefore they loved much. St Paul could say, "The grace bestowed upon me was not in vain; for I laboured more abundantly than they all." Colonel Gardiner likewise was as a city set upon a hill, a burning and a shining light: the manner of his conversion was hardly more singular, than the whole course of his conversation from that time to his death. Here, alas! the parallel greatly fails. It has not been thus with me;—I must take deserved shame to myself, that I have made very unsuitable returns for what I have received. But, if the question is only concerning the patience and long-suffering of God, the wonderful interposition of his providence in favour of an unworthy sinner, the power of his grace in softening the hardest heart, and the riches of his mercy in pardoning the most enormous and aggravated transgressions; in these respects, I know no case more extraordinary than my own. And indeed many persons, to whom I have related my story, have thought it worthy of being preserved.

I never gave any succinct account in writing, of the Lord's dealing with me, till very lately; for I was deterred, on the one hand, by the great difficulty of writing properly where self is concerned; on the other, by the ill use which persons of corrupt and perverse minds are often known to make of such instances. The Psalmist reminds us that a reserve in these things is proper, when he says, "Come unto me, all you that fear God, and I will tell you what he hath done for my soul;" and our Lord cautions us not to "cast our pearls before swine." The pearls of a Christian are, perhaps, his choice experiences of the Lord's power and love in the concerns of his soul; and these should not be at all adventures made public, lest we give occasion to earthly and grovelling souls, to profane what they cannot understand. These were the chief reasons of my backwardness but, a few weeks since, I yielded to the judgment and request of a much respected friend, and sent him a relation at large, in a series of eight letters. The event has been, what I little expected; I wrote to one person, but my letters have fallen into many hands: amongst others, I find they have reached your notice; and instead of blaming me for being too tedious and circumstantial, which was the fault I feared I had committed, you are pleased to desire a still more distinct detail. As you and others of my friends apprehend my compliance with this request may be attended with some good effect, may promote the pleasing work of praise to our adorable Redeemer, to confirm the faith of some or other of his people, I am willing to obey; I give up my own reasonings upon the inexpediency of so inconsiderable a person as myself adventuring in so public a point of view. If God may be glorified on my behalf, and his children in any measure comforted or instructed by what I have to declare of his goodness, I shall be satisfied; and am content to leave all other possible consequences of this undertaking in his hands, who does all things well.

I must again have recourse to my memory, as I retained no copies of the letters you saw. So far as I can recollect what I then wrote, I will relate, but shall not affect a needless variety of phrase and manner, merely because those have been already perused by many. I may, perhaps in some places, when repeating the same facts, express myself in nearly the same words; yet I propose, according to your desire, to make this relation more explicit and particular than the former, especially towards the close, which I wound up hastily, lest my friend should be wearied. I hope you will likewise excuse me, if I do not strictly confine myself to narration, but now and then intersperse

such reflections as may offer, while I am writing: and though you have signified your intentions of communicating what I send you to others, I must not, on this account, affect a conciseness and correctness which is not my natural talent, lest the whole should appear dry and constrained. I shall therefore (if possible) think only of you, and write with that confidence and freedom which your friendship and candour deserve. This sheet may stand as a preface, and I purpose, as far as I can, to intermit many other engagements, until I have completed the task you have assigned me. In the meantime, I entreat the assistance of your prayers, that in this, and all my poor attempts, I may have a single eye to his glory, who was pleased to call me out of horrid darkness, into the marvellous light of his gospel.

I am, with sincere respect,

Dear Sir,

Your obliged and affectionate servant.

January 12, 1763.