

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DIS-
COURSES 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 XXII.

ON THE ADVANTAGES OF A STATE OF POVERTY.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I CONFESS myself almost ashamed to write to you. You are pinched by poverty, suffer the want of many things; and your faith is often sharply tried, when you look at your family, and, perhaps, can hardly conceive how you shall be able to supply them with bread to the end of the week. The Lord has appointed me a different lot. I am favoured, not only with the necessaries, but with the comforts of life. Now, I could easily give you plenty of good advice; I could tell you, it is your duty to be patient, and even thankful, in the lowest state; that if you have bread and water, it is more than you deserve at the Lord's hands; and that, as you are out of hell, and made a partaker of the hope of the gospel, you ought not to think anything hard that you meet with in the way to heaven. If I should say thus, and say no more, you would not dispute the truth of my assertions; but, as coming from me, who live at ease, to you, who are beset with difficulties, you might question their propriety, and think that I know but little of my own heart, and could feel but little for your distress. You would probably compare me to one who should think himself a mariner, because he had studied the art of navigation by the fireside, though he had never seen the sea. Yet I hope, by my frequent converse with the Lord's poor (for I live in the midst of an afflicted and poor people), I have made some observations, which, though not strictly the fruit of my own experience, may not be wholly unseasonable or unacceptable to you.

Whether the rich or the poor, who live without God in the world, are most to be pitied, is not easy to determine. It is a dreadful case to be miserable in both worlds; but yet the parade and seeming prosperity in which some live for a few years, will be no abatement, but rather a great aggravation, of their future torment. A madman is equally to be pitied, whether he is laid upon a bed of state or a bed of straw. Madness is in the heart of every unregenerate sinner; and the more he possesses of this world's goods, he is so much the more extensively mischievous. Poverty is so far a negative good to those who have no other restraint, that it confines the effects of the evil heart within narrower bounds, and the small circle of their immediate connections; whereas the rich, who live under the power of sin, are unfaithful stewards of a larger trust, and, by their pernicious influence, are often instrumental in diffusing profaneness and licentiousness through a country or a kingdom, besides the innumerable acts of oppression, and the ravages of war, which are perpetrated to gratify the insatiable demands of luxury, ambition, and pride. But to leave this, if we turn our eyes from the false

maxims of the world, and weigh things in the balance of the sanctuary, I believe we shall find that the believing poor, though they have many trials which call for our compassion, have some advantages above those of the Lord's people to whom he has given a larger share of the good things of the present life. Why else does the apostle say, "God hath chosen the poor?" or why do we see, in fact, that so few of the rich, or wise, or mighty, are called? Certainly he does not choose them because they are poor; for "he is no respecter of persons;" rather, I think, we may say, that knowing what is in their hearts, the nature of the world through which they are to pass, and what circumstances are best suited to manifest the truth and efficacy of his grace, he has, in the general, chosen poverty as the best state for them. Some exceptions he has made, that his people may not be wholly without support and countenance, and that the sufficiency of his grace may be made known in every state of life; but, for the most part, they are a poor and afflicted people; and in this appointment he has had a regard to their honour, their safety, and their comfort. I have room for but a very brief illustration of these particulars.

Sanctified poverty is an honourable state; not so, indeed, in the judgment of the world. The rich have many friends; the poor are usually despised. But I am speaking of that honour which cometh from God only. The poor, who are "rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom," are honoured with the nearest external conformity to Jesus, their Saviour, who, though he was Lord of all, was pleased, for our sakes, to make himself so poor, that he had not where to lay his head, and submitted to receive assistance from the contributions of his followers, Luke viii. 3. By this astonishing humiliation, he poured contempt upon all human glory, and made the state of poverty honourable; and now, "he that reproacheth the poor despiseth his Maker." And as he was, so were his apostles in this world. They were not only destitute of rank, titles, and estates, but were often in hunger and nakedness, and had no certain dwelling-place. To infer from hence, as some have done, that riches, and the accommodations of life, are unsuitable to the state of a christian, is the mark of a superstitious and legal spirit. There were, in those days, several believers that were in a state of affluence, as, for instance, Theophilus, whom Luke addresses by a title of honour, Κρατιστε (most noble, or excellent), the same which St. Paul ascribes to the Roman governor. But we may safely infer, that that state of life in which our Lord was pleased to converse with men, and which was the lot of his apostles, and most favoured servants, is honourable in the sight of God.

Again, poverty is honourable, because it affords a peculiar advantage for glorifying God, and evidencing the power of his grace, and the faithfulness of his promises, in the sight of men. A believer, if rich, lives by faith, and his faith meets with various trials. He himself knows by whom he stands;

but it is not ordinarily so visible to others, as in the case of the poor. When ministers speak of the all-sufficiency of God to those who trust in him, and the certain effect of the principles of the gospel, in supporting, satisfying, and regulating the mind of man, the poor are the best and most unsuspected witnesses for the truth of their doctrine. If we are asked, Where do these wonderful people live, who can delight themselves in God, esteem a day in his courts better than a thousand, and prefer the light of his countenance to all earthly joy? we can confidently send them to the poor of the flock. Amongst the number who are so called, there are some who will not disappoint our appeal. Let the world, who refuse to believe the preachers, believe their own eyes; and when they see a poor person content, thankful, rejoicing, admiring the Lord's goodness for affording him what they account hard fare, and, in the midst of various pressures, incapable of being bribed by offers, or terrified by threats, to swerve a step from the path of known duty, let them acknowledge that this is the finger of God. If they harden themselves against this evidence, "neither would they be persuaded, though one should arise from the dead."

And as poverty is an honourable, so it is comparatively a safe state. True, it is attended with its peculiar temptations; but it is not near so suitable to draw forth and nourish the two grand corruptions of the heart, self-importance, and an idolatrous cleaving to the world, as the opposite state of riches. They who are rich in this world, and who know the Lord and their own hearts, feel the wisdom and propriety of the apostle's charge, "Not to be high-minded, nor to trust in uncertain riches." If poor believers consider the snares to which their rich brethren are exposed, they will rather pray for and pity, than envy them. Their path is slippery; they have reason to cry continually, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe;" for they live in the midst of the hurries and vanities of the world, are engaged in a large sphere of action, and are incessantly exposed to interruptions and snares. The carriage of all around them reminds them of their supposed consequence; and, by the nature of their situation, they are greatly precluded from plain dealing and friendly advice. But the poor are not surrounded with flatterers, nor teased with impertinencies. They meet with little to stimulate their pride, or to soothe their vanity. They not only believe in their judgments, but are constrained to feel, by the experience of every day, that this world cannot afford them rest. If they have food and raiment, and grace therewith to be content, they have reason to be thankful for an exemption from those splendid cares and delusive appearances, which are the inseparable attendants of wealth and worldly distinction, and which, if not more burdensome, are, humanly speaking, much more dangerous, and greater impediments to the progress of a spiritual life, than the ordinary trials of the poor.

The believing poor have likewise, for the most part, the advantage in

point of spiritual comfort, and that principally in two respects. First, as they are called to a life of more immediate dependence upon the promise and providence of God (having little else to trust to), they have a more direct and frequent experience of his interposition in their favour. Obadiah was a servant of God, though he lived in the court of Ahab. He, doubtless, had his difficulties in such a situation; but he was not in want. He had not only enough for himself in a time of dearth, but was able to impart to others. We may believe that he well knew he was indebted to the Lord's goodness for his provision; but he could hardly have so sweet, so strong, so sensible an impression of God's watchful care over him as Elijah had, who, when he was deprived of all human support, was stately fed by the ravens. Such of the Lord's people who have estates in land, or thousands in the bank, will acknowledge, that even the bread they eat is the gift of the Lord's bounty; yet, having a moral certainty of a provision for life, I should apprehend that they cannot exercise faith in the divine providence, with respect to their temporal supplies, so distinctly as the poor, who, having no friend or resource upon earth, are necessitated to look immediately to their Father, who is in heaven, for their daily bread. And though it is not given to the world to know what an intercourse is carried on between heaven and earth, nor with what acceptance the prayers of the poor and afflicted enter into the ears of the Lord of hosts; yet many of them have had such proofs of his attention, wisdom, faithfulness, power, and love, in supplying their wants, and opening them a way of relief, when they have been beset with difficulties on all sides, as have been, to themselves at least, no less certain and indisputable, I had almost said, no less glorious, than the miracles which he wrought for Israel, when he divided the Red Sea before them, and gave them food from the clouds. Such evidences of the power of faith, the efficacy of prayer, and the truth of the scriptures (preferable to mountains of gold and silver, and for which the state of poverty furnishes the most frequent occasions), are a rich overbalance for all its inconveniencies. But,

Secondly, I apprehend that the humble and believing poor have, in general, the greatest share of those consolations, which are the effect of the light of God's countenance lifted up upon the soul, of his love shed abroad in the heart, or of a season of refreshment from his presence. By such expressions as these, the scriptures intimate that "joy unspeakable and full of glory;" a description of which, those who have tasted it will not require, and those who are strangers to it, could not understand. This joy is not always the companion of faith, not even of strong faith; but it is that which a believer, whether rich or poor, incessantly thirsts after; and, in comparison whereof, all worldly good is but vanity and disappointment. The Lord imparts this joy to his people, in season and measure, as he sees fit; but his poor people have the largest share. They have little comfort from the

world, therefore, he is pleased to be their comforter. They have many trials and sufferings; and he with whom they have to do, knows their situation and pressures: he has promised to make their strength equal to their day, and to revive their fainting spirits with heavenly cordials. When it is thus with them, they can say with Jacob, "I have enough;" or, as it is in the original, "I have all." This makes hard things easy, and the burden light, which the flesh would otherwise complain of as heavy. This has often given a sweeter relish to bread and water, than the sensualist ever found to be in the most studied and expensive refinements of luxury. Blessed are the poor, who are rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which God has promised to them that love him. They often enjoy the most lively foretastes of the glory which shall be revealed.

Have not you, my friend, found these things true in your own experience? Yes; the Lord has sanctified your crosses, and supported you under them. Hitherto he has helped you, and he will be with you to the end. As you have followed him upon earth, you will ere long follow him to heaven. You are now called to sow in tears; there you shall reap in joy, and God shall wipe away all tears from your eyes. In the meantime, be thankful that he honours you, in appointing you to be a witness for the truth and power of his grace, in the midst of an unbelieving world.

It is true, that even where the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. You have sharp trials, which, for the present, cannot be joyous, but grievous; and you have doubtless felt the depravity of your nature, and the subtlety of Satan, at sometimes prompting you to impatience, envy, and distrust. But these evils are not peculiar to a state of poverty; you would have been exposed to the same had you lived in affluence, together with many others, from which you are now exempted; for riches and poverty are but comparative terms, and it is only the grace of God that can teach us to be content in any possible situation of life. The rich are as prone to desire something which they have not as the poor; and they who have most to lose have most to fear. That a man's life (the happiness of his life) "consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth," is an aphorism founded upon the highest authority, and confirmed by universal experience and observation.

In a word, you are not poor, but rich. The promises are your inheritance; heaven is your home; the angels of the Lord are ministering spirits, who rejoice to watch over you for good; and the Lord of angels himself is your sun, and shield, and everlasting portion. It is impossible that you, to whom he has given Himself, his Son, his Spirit, his grace, his kingdom, can want anything that is truly good for you. If riches were so, he could pour them upon you in abundance, as easily as he provides you your daily bread. But these, for the most part, he bestows on those who

have no portion but in the present life. You have great reason to rejoice in the lot he has appointed for you, which secures you from numberless imaginary wants and real dangers, and furnishes you with the fairest opportunities for the manifestation, exercise, and increase of the graces he has implanted in you.—Influenced by these views, I trust you can cheerfully say,

What others value I resign:
Lord, 'tis enough that thou art mine.

I commend you to the blessing of our covenant God, and to Jesus our Saviour, who, when he was rich, made himself poor for our sakes, that we through his poverty might be rich.

I am, &c.