

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV. JOHN NEWTON

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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.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

EDINBURGH

Printed at the University Press, for

PETER BROWN AND THOMAS NELSON.

1830.

LETTER III.

A LETTER TO A FRIEND, ON THE QUESTION, WHETHER THE SINS OF BELIEVERS SHALL BE PUBLICLY DECLARED AT THE GREAT DAY? OR, HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND THE APOSTLE'S ASSERTION, "WE MUST ALL APPEAR BEFORE THE JUDGMENT-SEAT OF CHRIST; THAT EVERY ONE MAY RECEIVE THE THINGS DONE IN HIS BODY, ACCORDING TO THAT HE HATH DONE, WHETHER IT BE GOOD OR BAD?" 2 COR. V. 10, COMPARED WITH ROM. XIV. 12.

MY DEAR SIR,

MY heart congratulates you. What changes and events many, in younger life, may be reserved to see, who can tell? But your pilgrimage is nearly finished; you stand upon the river's brink, with the city full in view, waiting and wishing for the appointed hour. You need not be anxious concerning your passage; for every circumstance attending it is already adjusted by infinite wisdom and love, and the King himself will be ready to receive you. While you continue here, I am glad to hear from you, and should be glad to contribute in any way or degree to your satisfaction, or even to show my willingness, if I can do no more. I can propose little more than the latter, by offering my thoughts on the subject you propose from 2 Cor. v. 10, and the apparent difficulty of understanding that passage, in full harmony with the many texts which seem expressly to assert, that the sins of believers are so forgiven as to be remembered no more.

There is doubtless, as you observe, a perfect consistence in every part of the word of God; the difficulties we meet with are wholly owing to the narrowness of our faculties, and the ignorance which, in some degree, is inseparable from our present state of imperfection. And we may, in general, rest satisfied with the thought, that there is a bright moment approaching, when the veil shall be wholly taken away. It is the part of faith to rest upon the plain declarations of scripture, without indulging a blameable curiosity of knowing more than is clearly revealed; yet, while we humbly depend upon divine teaching, it is right to aim at as enlarged a sense of what is revealed as we can attain to. Every acquisition of this kind is more valuable than gold, especially respecting those points which have an immediate tendency to comfort and support us under the view of an approaching dissolution. The question you have proposed is undoubtedly of this nature.

May the Lord direct my thoughts and pen, that I may not "darken counsel by words without knowledge!" I have been looking over the passage you refer to in Dr. Ridgley, and think I might be well excused from saying anything further on the subject, as he hath briefly and fully stated all the arguments that have occurred to me on either side of the question, and closes with a proper caution not to be peremptory in determining, lest by attempting to be wise above what is written, I should betray my own folly. Yet, as

you desire to have my thoughts, I must say something. I wish I may not give you reason to think that this caution has been lost upon me.

I think all the great truths in which we are concerned, are clearly, and expressly laid down, not only in one, but in many places of scripture; but it sometimes happens, that here and there we meet with a text, which, in the first and obvious sound of the words, seems to speak differently from what is asserted more largely elsewhere; which texts, singly taken, afford some men their only ground for the hypothesis they maintain. Thus the Arians lay a great stress on John xiv. 28, and the Arminians on James ii. 24, &c. But their true interpretation is to be sought according to the analogy of faith. They are capable of a sense agreeable to the others, though the others are not intelligible in the sense they would fix upon these. In like manner, I would say, whatever may be the precise meaning of 2 Cor. v. 10, we are sure it cannot be designed to weaken what we are taught in almost every page, of the free, absolute, and unalterable nature of a believer's justification; the benefit of which, as to the forgiveness of sin, is signified by the phrases of "blotting out,"—"not remembering,"—"casting behind the back,"—and "into the depths of the sea." The sins of a believer are so effectually removed, that even when, or if they are sought for, they cannot be found; for Jesus has borne them away: believers are complete in him, and clothed in his righteousness. They shall stand before God without spot or wrinkle. Who shall lay anything to their charge?

But it is probable that those stray expressions chiefly, if not entirely, respect the guilt, imputation, and deserved consequences of sin.—None can suppose that the Lord will, or can forget the sins of his people, or that they can ever be hid from his all-comprehending view. Neither can I think they themselves will forget them. Their song is founded upon a recollection of their sins and their circumstances in this life, Rev. v. 9; and their love, and consequently, their happiness, seems inseparably connected with the consciousness of what they were, and what they had done, Luke vii. 47. And I think those are the sweetest moments in this life, when we have the clearest sense of our own sins, provided the sense of our acceptance in the Beloved is proportionably clear, and we feel the consolations of his love, notwithstanding all our transgressions. When we arrive in glory, unbelief and fear will cease forever; our nearness to God, and communion with him, will be unspeakable beyond what we can now conceive. Therefore, the remembrance of our sins will be no abatement of our bliss, but rather the contrary. When Pharaoh and his host were alive, and pursuing them, the Israelites were terrified; but afterwards, when they saw their enemies dead upon the shore, their joy and triumph were not abated, but heightened, by the consideration of their number.

With respect to our sins being made known to others, I acknowledge with you, that I could not now bear to have any of my fellow-creatures made ac-

quainted with what passes in my heart for a single day; but, I apprehend it is a part, and a proof of my present depravity, that I feel myself disposed to pay so great a regard to the judgment of men, while I am so little affected with what I am in the sight of a pure and holy God. But I believe that hereafter, when self shall be entirely rooted out, and my will perfectly united to the divine will, I should feel no reluctance, supposing it for the manifestation of his glorious grace, that men, angels, and devils, should know the very worst of me. Whether it will be so or no, I dare not determine. Perhaps the difficulty chiefly lies in the necessity of our being at present taught heavenly things by earthly. In the descriptions we have of the great day, allusion is made to what is most solemn in human transactions. The ideas of the judgment-seat, the great trumpet, of the books being opened, and the pleadings, Matth. xxv. 37-44, seem to be borrowed from the customs that obtain amongst men, to help our weak conceptions, rather than justly and fully to describe what will be the real process. Now, when we attempt to look into the unseen world, we carry our ideas of time and place, and sensible objects, along with us; and we cannot divest ourselves of them, or provide ourselves with better: yet, perhaps, they have as little relation to the objects we aim at, as the ideas which a man born blind acquires from what he hears and feels, have to the true nature of light and colours. Mr. Locke mentions one, who, after much thought and conversation, supposed he had got a tolerable notion of scarlet, and that it was something nearly resembling the sound of a trumpet. Perhaps, this is no improper emblem of the utmost we can attain to, when we are endeavouring to realize the solemnities of the judgment-day. What we mean by memory and reasoning, may possibly have no place in the world of spirits. We guess at something more suitable, perhaps, when we use the term intuition. But I apprehend we must die before we can fully understand what it signifies: perhaps, thoughts may be as intelligible there as words are here.

In a word, my dear Sir, if I have not given you satisfaction (I am sure I have not satisfied myself), accept my apology in the words of a much wiser, and an inspired man: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me: it is high, I cannot attain unto it." Ere long we shall know: in the meanwhile our cause is in sure hands, we have a Shepherd who will guide us below, an Advocate who will receive and present us before the throne above. I trust we meet daily before the throne of grace, hereafter we shall meet in glory. The paper will allow no more. Believe me yours in the Lord, &c.