

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.

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LETTER XXXVII.

SOME POINTS OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE CONSIDERED.

TO A FRIEND.

DEAR SIR,

I TRUST the difference of our sentiments, since we are agreed in the one thing needful, will no more interrupt our union and fellowship than the difference of our features or the tone of our voices. I wish you to believe that I would be no advocate for carelessness or formality. I hope my conscience bears me witness that, besides trusting in the letter of scripture, I likewise desire an increase of that inward and comfortable sense of divine things, in which I believe you are happy; and that I wish not only to be a subject of the kingdom of Jesus, but likewise to have that kingdom powerfully set up in my heart, which consists of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Indeed I see not how these can be distinguished, or what ground I could have to think myself a subject of his kingdom, unless I earnestly desired to have that kingdom in all its branches and blessings flourishing in my soul. I do not know that I live in the neglect of any means appointed of God for my growth in these blessings, or willingly allow myself in what is inconsistent with them: I think my heart is habitually in the pursuit of them, and that there is seldom an hour in any day when lively communion with my God, in Christ, is not present to my view as the chief good. To this purpose, through grace, I can venture to express myself to man, though still it is true, when I come before the Lord, notwithstanding the diligence and circumspection I would aim at, I see myself a poor inconsistent creature, that my strength is perfect weakness, and all I have is sin. I confess I am afraid of fixing the criterion of a work of grace too high, lest the mourners in Zion should be discouraged; because I find it is the will of God that such should not be discouraged, but comforted, and because it appears to me that the scriptural marks have respect rather to desires, if real, than to attainments, or at least to those attainments which are often possessed by persons who are kept very short of sensible comforts, Matth. v. 3-9, Luke xviii. 12. 13, 1 Pet. ii. 7.

The points between you and me seem chiefly the following: 1. When may a person be properly denominated a believer? 2. What are the proper evidences and necessary concomitants of a lively, thriving frame of spirit? 3. Whether such a degree of faithfulness to light received as is consistent with the remnant of a depraved nature in our present state will certainly and always preserve our soul from declensions and winter-seasons? 4. Whether

that gracious humility which arises from a due sense of our own vileness and of the riches of divine grace be ordinarily attainable without some mortifying experience of the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of our own hearts? A few lines upon each of these particulars will, I think, take in the chief parts of your letter.

1. We differ something with respect to what constitutes a believer. I own nothing has surprised me more, in the course of our friendly debate, than your supposing that a person should date his conversion and his commencing a believer from the time of his receiving the gospel truths with that clearness and power as to produce in him an abiding assurance. The apostle, in Eph. i. 13, makes a plain distinction between believing and being sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. By the experience and observation of many years, I have been more and more persuaded, that to represent assurance as being of the essence of faith, is not agreeable to scripture, which, in many places, either expressly asserts or strongly intimates the contrary, John i. 50, and xx. 29, Rom. x. 9, 1 John v. 1 Whoever is not a believer must be an unbeliever; there can be no medium. Either there are many believers who have not assurance, or else there are many unbelievers who love the Lord Jesus, hate sin, are poor in spirit, and adorn the doctrine of the gospel by their temper and conversation; and I doubt not but those who now have assurance, had, before they attained it, a something which wrought by love, and overcame the world. I know no principle capable of these effects but faith, which, though at first it be like a grain of mustard-seed, is the seed of God: though it be faint, it is genuine, as the dawning of light is of the same nature with that which flows from the noon-day sun. I allow that, while faith is weak, there may be little solid comfort, if by that expression abiding comfort be meant. Faith gives safety and spiritual life; abiding peace and establishment follow the sealing of the Spirit. But though an infant has not the strength, activity, and understanding, which he will attain when he arrives to the age of manhood, he is as fully possessed of a principle of life while he is an infant as at any time afterwards.

2. We seem to differ likewise as to the marks of a lively, thriving spirit; at least if any are supposed to be better or surer than those to which our Lord has promised blessedness, Matth. v. 3-9. He has said, "Blessed are they that mourn;" but he has not said, More blessed are they that are comforted. They are, to be sure, more happy at present; but their blessedness consists not in their present comforts, but in those perceptions of gospel-truths which form them to that contrite spirit in which God delighteth, Is. lvii. 18. and which make them capable of divine comforts, and spiritual hungering and thirsting after them. Perhaps we do not argue

ad idem;¹ we may mean different things. I would not represent myself as a stranger to peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. In the midst of all my conflicts I have a heartfelt satisfaction from the gospel, which nothing else could give. But I mean, though this be with me as an abiding principle, it rarely affords me what I think you intend when you speak of sensible comforts. I cannot feel that warmth of heart, that glowing of love, which the knowledge of such a Saviour should inspire. I account it my sin, and I feel it my burden, that I cannot. And when I truly do this, when I can abhor myself for my stupidity, mourn over it, and humbly look up to the Lord for relief against it, I judge my soul to be at such times as much alive to God as it would be if he saw fit to increase my comfort. Let me always either rejoice in him or mourn after him: I would leave the alternative to him, who knows best how to suit his dispensations to my state; and I trust he knows that I do not say this because I set a small value upon his presence. As to the experience of the apostles, I believe they were patterns to all succeeding believers: but, with some regard to the several trials and services to which we may be called in this world, he distributes severally to all his people according to his own will, yet with a wise and gracious accommodation to the circumstances and situations of each. The apostle Paul connects the abounding of his consolations with the abounding of his afflictions, and with the state of the people to whom he preached, 2 Cor. i 4-7; and if, instead of preaching the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum in the face of persecution, he had lived in a land of liberty, and been confined to a parochial cure, for aught I know, his cup might not have run over so often. Succeeding ministers of the gospel, when called to very laborious and painful services, have, for the like reasons, been often favoured with a double portion of that joy which makes hard things easy and bitter things sweet; and, in general, all the Lord's people who walk humbly before him, may expect that in, or after seasons of great trial, and in proportion to their pressures, he will favour them with peculiar comforts. It is in this way he, in a great measure, fulfils his promise of making their strength equal to their day; and I am enabled to trust him in this matter, that if he should, at any time, see fit to call me to a more difficult and dangerous sphere of service, or lead me into the furnace of affliction, he would, if he saw it needful, support and refresh me by such manifestations of his glory and love, as I know but little of at present. In a word, a humble, dependent frame of spirit, perseverance in the use of appointed means, care to avoid all occasions of sin, an endeavour to glorify God in our callings, and an eye to Jesus as our all in all;—these things are to me sure indications that the soul is right, that the Lord is present, and that grace is thriving and in

¹ ["of the same mind."]

exercise, whether sensible consolations abound or not.

3. I propose the third question, concerning such a degree of faithfulness to light received, as is consistent with the remnants of a depraved nature, because I apprehend one effect of indwelling sin is, to render it morally impossible for us to be entirely faithful to that light and power which God has given us. It may sound like a contradiction, to say we cannot do what we can do; but there are many enigmas in a believer's experience, at least in mine; and I never expect to meet the man that knows his own heart, that will say he is always faithful, diligent, and obedient, to the full extent of his ability; I rather expect he would confess with me, that he feels a need of more ability, and fresh supplies of grace, to enable him to make a better improvement of what he had already received. If some, as you suppose, in their dullest frames can read the Bible, go to the throne of grace, and mourn (as they ought) over what is amiss, I must say for myself, I can, and I cannot. Without doubt I can take the Bible in my hand, and force myself to read it; I can kneel down, and I can see I ought to mourn; but to understand and attend to what I read, to engage my heart in prayer, or to be duly humbled under the sense of so dark and dissipated a state of mind; these things at some seasons, I can no more do than I can raise the dead, and yet I cannot plead positive inability; I am satisfied that what prevents me is my sin, but it is the sin of my nature, the sin that dwelleth in me: and I expect it will be thus with me at times, in a greater or less degree, till this body of sin shall be wholly destroyed. Yet I believe the Lord is with me, even when he seems to be absent, otherwise my corruptions, at such seasons, might easily prevail to betray me into open or allowed sin, which, blessed be the grace and care of my good Shepherd, is not the case. I know not if I rightly understand the expression, "We may humbly hope, that those things we fall into, which are not in our power to prevent, will not be set to our account." The least of the evils I feel, and which seem most involuntary, if set to my account, would ruin me; and I trust, that even my worst deviations shall not appear against me, because I am a believer in Jesus; and I know, and am sure, that I do not wish to continue in sin that grace may abound. My conscience bears me witness, that I would not desire the rule of duty to be narrowed or accommodated to my imperfections in a single instance. If the expression only means, that these unavoidable effects of our evil nature should not break our peace of conscience, or discourage us in our approaches to God, I am of the same mind; through mercy I have seldom any more doubt of my acceptance in the Beloved, when in a dark frame than when I am most favoured with liberty.

4. Whether true evangelical humility, and an enlarged view of the grace of God in Christ, triumphing over all obstacles, be ordinarily attainable without an experience of declensions, backslidings, and repeated forgive-

ness, is the last question I shall consider. I dare say you will do me the justice to believe, that I would not advise anyone to run into sin in order to get a knowledge of his own heart. David broke his bones thereby: he obtained an affecting proof of his inability of standing in his own strength, and of the skill and goodness of his Physician who healed him; yet no man in his wits would break his bones for the sake of making experiments, if he were ever so sure they would be well set again. You think that a believer is never more humble in his own eyes, or admires Jesus more, than when he is filled with joy and peace. I readily allow, that the present impressions of divine love are humbling: however, the direct tendency of gracious consolations in themselves is one thing; what evils they may afterwards occasion through the desperate depravity of our hearts, is another. We have a memorable case in point to explain my meaning. The apostle Paul's recollection of his course while in a natural state, and the singular manner of his conversion, were evidently suited to make him an humble christian, and he was so. By an especial favour of the Lord, he was afterwards taken up into the third heaven; what he saw or heard there he has not told us, but surely he met with nothing that could have a tendency to make him proud; doubtless he saw Jesus in his glory, and the humble spiritual worship of heaven; a sight which we might deem sufficient to make him walk in self-abasement all the days of his life: but Paul, though an eminent saint, was still liable to the effects of indwelling sin; he was in danger of being exalted through the abundance of revelations, and the Lord, his wise and gracious keeper, saw fit, in order to prevent it, that a messenger from Satan should be given him to buffet him. Pride is so subtle, that it can gather strength, even from those gracious manifestations which seem directly calculated to mortify it; so dangerous, that a messenger from Satan himself may be esteemed a mercy, if over-ruled and sanctified by the Lord, to make or keep us more humble: therefore, though we can never be too earnest in striving against sin, too watchful in abstaining from all appearance of evil, and though they who wait upon the Lord may comfortably hope, that he will preserve them from such things as would dishonour their profession in the sight of men, yet I apprehend they who appear most to adorn the gospel in their outward conversation, are conscious of many things between the Lord and their own souls, which covers them with shame, and that his tenderness and mercy to them, notwithstanding their perverseness, constrains them with admiration to adopt the language of Micah, "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage?" and I believe likewise, that, without such striking and repeated proofs of what is in their hearts, they would not so feelingly enter into the spirit of Job's confession, "Behold, I am vile!" nor would they have such a lively sense of their obligations to the merciful care and

faithfulness of their great Shepherd, or of their entire and absolute dependence upon him, for wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. I find these considerations useful and necessary to reconcile me to my lot. The Lord knows what I need, and what I can bear: gladly would I receive, earnestly would I desire, more of comforts while here; but if I mourn now, I hope to be comforted in heaven. In the meantime it is more immediately necessary for me, both as a Christian and as a minister, that I should be humbled; the Lord's will be done. I cannot pretend to determine what ministers, or what body of people come nearest the character of the primitive times, but in my judgment they are the happiest who have the lowest thoughts of themselves, and in whose eyes Jesus is most glorious and precious.

I am, &c.