

From the Letters of John Newton, to a nobleman

John Newton, as you will know, of Amazing Grace fame, was a converted slave trader turned gospel preacher who served in Olney, Northamptonshire for many years. Unusually, his letters were published before his death. But we can see why! They breathe such grace and it is their spiritual attractiveness that secures a place in the history of the church.

My Lord, April, 1766.

I SHALL embrace your permission to fill my paper. As to subject, that which has been a frequent theme of my heart of late, I shall venture to lay before your Lordship; I mean, the remarkable and humbling difference which I suppose all who know themselves may observe, between their acquired and their experimental knowledge, or, in other words, between their judgment and their practice. To hear a believer speak his apprehensions of the evil of sin, the vanity of the world, the love of Christ, the beauty of holiness, or the importance of eternity, who would not suppose him proof against temptation? To hear with what strong arguments he can recommend watchfulness, prayer, forbearance, and submission, when he is teaching or advising others, who would not suppose but he could also teach himself, and influence his own conduct? Yet, alas! *Quam dispar sibi!* The person who rose from his knees before he left his

chamber a poor, indigent, fallible, dependent creature, who saw and acknowledged that he was unworthy to breathe the air or too see the light, may meet with many occasions, before the day is closed, to discover the corruptions of his heart, and to shew how weak and faint his best principles and clearest convictions are in their actual exercise. And in this view, how vain is man! What a contradiction is a believer to himself! He is called a Believer emphatically, because he cordially assents to the word of God; but, alas! how often unworthy of the name! If I was to describe him from the Scripture character, I should say, he is one whose heart is athirst for God, for his glory, his image, his presence; his affections are fixed upon an unseen Saviour his treasures, and consequently his thoughts, are on high, beyond the bounds of sense. Having experienced much forgiveness, he is full of bowels of mercy to all around; and having been often deceived by his own

heart, he dares trust it no more, but lives by faith in the Son of God, for wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification, and derives from him grace for grace; sensible that without him he has not sufficiency even to think a good thought. In short, He is dead to the world, to sin, to self; but alive to God, and lively in his service. Prayer is his breath, the word of God his food, and the ordinances more precious to him than the light of the sun. Such is a believer - in his judgment and prevailing desires.

But was I to describe him from experience, especially at some times, how different would the picture be? Though he knows that communion with God is his highest privilege, he too seldom finds it so; on the contrary, if duty, conscience, and necessity did not compel, he would leave the throne of grace unvisited from day to day. He takes up the Bible, conscious that it is the fountain of life and true comfort; yet perhaps, while he is making the reflection, he feels a secret distaste, which prompts him to lay it down, and give his preference to a newspaper. He needs not to be told of the vanity and uncertainty of all beneath the sun; and yet is almost as much elated or cast down by a trifle, as those who have their portion in this world. He believes

that all things shall work together for his good, and that the most high God appoints, adjusts, and overrules all his concerns; yet he feels the risings of fear, anxiety, and displeasure, as though the contrary was true. He owns himself ignorant, and liable to be deceived by a thousand fallacies; yet is easily betrayed into positiveness and self-conceit. He feels himself unprofitable, unfaithful, unthankful servant, and therefore blushes to harbour a thought of desiring the esteem and commendations of men, yet he cannot suppress it.

Finally (for I must observe some bounds), on account of these and many other inconsistencies, he is struck dumb before the Lord, stripped of every hope and plea, but what is provided in the free grace of God, and yet his heart is continually leaning and returning to a covenant of works.

Two questions naturally arise from such a view of ourselves. First: How can these things be, or why are they permitted? Since the Lord hates sin, teaches his people to hate it and cry against it, and has promised to hear their prayers, how is it that they go thus burdened? Surely, if he could not, or would not, over-rule evil for good, he would not permit it to continue. By these exercises he teaches us more truly to know and

feel the utter depravity and corruption of our whole nature, that we are indeed defiled in every part. His method of salvation is likewise hereby exceedingly endeared to us : we see that it is and must be of grace, wholly of grace; and that the Lord Jesus Christ, and his perfect righteousness, is and must be our all in all. His power likewise, in maintaining his own work notwithstanding our infirmities, temptations, and enemies, is hereby displayed in the clearest light ; his strength is manifested in our weakness. Satan likewise is more remarkably disappointed and put to shame, when he finds bounds set to his rage and policy, beyond which he cannot pass ; and that those in whom he finds so much to work upon, and over whom he so often prevails for a season, escape at last out of his hands. He casts them down, but they are raised again; he wounds them, but they are healed; he obtains his desire to sift them as wheat, but the prayer of their great Advocate prevails for the maintenance of their faith. Farther, by what believers feel in themselves they learn by degrees how to warn, pity, and bear with others. A soft, patient, and compassionate spirit, and a readiness and skill in comforting those who are cast down, is not perhaps attainable in

any other way. And, lastly, I believe nothing more habitually reconciles a child of God to the thought of death, than the wearisomeness of this warfare. Death is unwelcome to nature; - but then, and not till then, the conflict will cease. Then we shall sin no more. The flesh, with all its attendant evils, will be laid in the grave. Then the soul, which has been partaker of a new and heavenly birth, shall be freed from every incumbrance, and stand perfect in the Redeemer's righteousness before God in glory.

But though these evils cannot be wholly removed, it is worth while to inquire, Secondly, How they may be mitigated? This we are encouraged to hope for. The word of God directs and animates to a growth in grace : and though we can do nothing spiritually of ourselves, yet there is a part assigned us. We cannot conquer the obstacles in our way by our own strength ; yet we can give way to them; and if we do, it is our sin, and will be our sorrow. The disputes concerning inherent power in the creature, have been carried to inconvenient lengths ; for my own part, I think it safe to use Scriptural language. The Apostles exhort us to give all diligence, to resist the devil, to purge ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit; to give ourselves to reading, meditation; and prayer;

to watch, to put on the whole armour of God, and to abstain from all appearance of evil. Faithfulness to light received, and a sincere endeavour to conform to the means prescribed in the word of God, with an humble application to the Blood of sprinkling and the promised Spirit, will undoubtedly be answered by increasing measures of light, faith, strength, and comfort; and we shall know, if we follow on to know the Lord.

I need not tell your Lordship that I am an extempore writer. I dropped the consideration of whom I was addressing from the first paragraph; but I now return, and subscribe myself, with the greatest deference, &c.