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ON THE

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✓
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EMBRACING

SEVERAL ON PRACTICAL SUBJECTS.

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LETTERS TO THE AGED.

LETTER I.

THE autumn of our life has actually arrived. The scenes of our youth have fled forever; and the feelings and hopes of that period have passed away also, or are greatly changed. When we take a retrospect of the past, several weighty reflections cannot but press upon our minds and sadden our hearts. How true do we now find that trite remark, that the longest life in the retrospect appears exceedingly short, though in prospect, the same period appeared almost interminable! Old age has come upon us, (though its approaches were very gradual,) by surprise; and even now, except when feeling something of the infirmities of age, or when viewing our altered image in the mirror, we are prone to forget that we are old; and often are impelled to undertake labours to which our strength is no longer competent. Truly our life of three-score, or more, appears like a dream, when we awake from sleep. And as the past years have passed so quickly, the few that remain will not be less rapid in their flight. Indeed, to the aged, except when they are suffering protracted pain, time appears shorter than it did when they were young. Thus at least it seems to the writer: the year, when its days and weeks and months are numbered, is as long as ever, but to our *sense*, it seems to grow shorter. We are less absorbed and interested in passing scenes than the young. Life has with us become a sober reality. The enchanting visions of a youthful imagination have now entirely vanished. But it brings a solemn and tenderly melancholy feeling over the minds of the aged,

to inquire for the friends and companions of their youth. How few of these can we now find upon earth! The ministers whose labours were made useful to us, and the very sound of whose voice was sweeter than the richest music, are now lying beneath the clods of the valley. The beloved friends with whom we were wont to take sweet counsel, and to whom we could confidently open our whole hearts, have been torn from our side. Many dear relatives, loved it may be as our own life, have slept the sleep of death. Time may have healed the painful wounds made by such bereavements, but their loss often leaves a chasm which can never be supplied; and, at any rate, a scar which we shall carry to the grave. There is one reflection connected with this subject still more sad; it is, that some in whom we once delighted, and in whom we reposed strong confidence, have turned aside from the ways of truth and righteousness in which they appeared to be walking, and though they may be still walking up and down upon the earth, are dead to us, and to all those interests, which once seemed to be common to them and us. And as to those who remain steadfast, and have continued their pilgrimage without turning aside into crooked ways, what a sad change has time made upon their persons! Where is the bloom of youth, the robust strength of manhood, the eye sparkling with intelligence, and the countenance beaming with animation? Alas! they are fled; and in their place we see the decrepid body, the sunken eye, the withered countenance, and the tottering gait. All are not equally changed by the ravages of time. Indeed, to some the access of gray hairs and old age brings an addition of comeliness. There is something peculiarly lovely, as well as venerable, in the silvery locks and placid countenance of a good old man. There is in his countenance a chastened expression of benignity and sobriety, which long experience alone can produce.

But the bitterest of all reflections to the aged is that of sins committed, duties omitted, time wasted, and opportunities of doing good neglected.—Reflections of this kind, at certain times, become insufferably painful.

And although we could not wish to go a second time through such a pilgrimage; yet we cannot but wish often that with our present views, and with the aids of experience, we could enjoy again the opportunities of usefulness which were suffered to pass without improvement. But even in these painful regrets and this bitter repentance our deceitful hearts often impose upon us; and we give ourselves more credit for present good feelings than we deserve. For let us only ask ourselves, whether we now avail ourselves of all the advantages of our situation to do good. Are we not now guilty of as gross neglects, as when younger? The probability is, therefore, yea, the certainty, that if left to ourselves as much as we were, we should do no better, if we were permitted to live over our unprofitable lives a second time. But while we should lay aside all fruitless wishes, we ought certainly to reflect upon our sins and shortcomings, until our godly sorrow is so enkindled within us, as to work a repentance not to be repented of. We cannot atone for our sins by tears of penitence; for this we must have recourse to another fountain, even the blood of Christ, which cleanseth from all unrighteousness; but the flow of ingenuous, godly sorrow has a tendency to soften and purify the heart; and our iniquities are rendered by this means odious; so that while we are penetrated with unfeigned gratitude to God for pardoning mercy, we are rendered more watchful against our besetting sins, and made to walk more tenderly and circumspectly, and more humbly too; for I have thought, that the reason why a covenant-keeping God sometimes permits his children to fall into shameful acts of transgression, is because nothing else but such a sight of themselves as these falls exhibit, would sufficiently humble their proud hearts. The recollection of such sins serves all their life long to convince them that they ought to place themselves among the "chief of sinners" and "the least of saints." And this view of our exceeding depravity of heart, serves to show us the faithfulness and loving kindness of God in the strongest light. According to that which he speaks in Ezek. ch. xvi. 62, 63, "And I will establish my

covenant with thee ; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord : that thou mayest remember and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more, because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God."

My aged friends, permit me to counsel you not to give way to despondency, and unprofitable repining at the course of past events. Trust in the Lord, and encourage your hearts to hope in his mercy and faithfulness. Your afflictions may have been many and sore, and your present circumstances may be embarrassing, and your prospects for the future, gloomy. Providence may seem to have set you up as a mark for the arrows of adversity. Stroke upon stroke has been experienced. Billow after billow has gone over you, and almost overwhelmed you. Truly the time has come, when you can say, "My joys are gone." But though friends have been snatched from you, or have proved unfaithful—though children, once your hope and joy are numbered with the dead, or what is far worse, profligate or ungrateful ; though your property has wasted away, or your riches suddenly taken wings and flown like the eagle to heaven ; though bodily diseases and pain distress you ; still trust in the divine promise, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Though friends die, God forever liveth. Though your earthly comforts and supports are gone, you are heir to an inheritance "incorruptible, undefiled, and that never fadeth away." Take for your example the prophet Habakkuk, who triumphantly declares, "Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines ; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat ; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls ; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." Learn to live by faith : no class of people need the supports of faith and hope more than the aged.—And not only believe, but act. "Work while it is called to-day." "To do good, and communicate, forget not, for with such sacrifices, God is well pleased." Your work is never ended while you are in the body. It

is a sad mistake for aged persons to relinquish their usual pursuits, and resign every thing into the hands of their children. Many have dated their distressing melancholy from such a false step. The mind long accustomed to activity is miserable in a state of stagnation; or rather having lost its usual nutriment, it turns and preys upon itself. Lighten your burdens, but do not give up business or study, or whatever you have been accustomed to pursue. Imbecility and dotage are also prevented or postponed, or mitigated, by constant exercise of the mind. Keep also as much of your property if you have any, in your own hand, as is necessary for your own support, and make not yourselves dependent on the most affectionate and obedient children. They will be more affectionate and more respectful when you are not dependent. Dismiss corroding cares and anxieties about what you shall do to get a living. How strange it is, that the nearer men come to the end of their journey, the greater concern they feel as to the means of future subsistence! God's hand will provide. His command to us is, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."

"And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

LETTER II.

As an aged man, I would say to my fellow-pilgrims who are also in this advanced stage of the journey of life, ENDEAVOUR TO BE USEFUL, as long as you are continued upon earth. We are, it is true, subject to many peculiar infirmities, both of body and mind, to bear up under which requires much exertion, and no small share of divine assistance; but still we have some advantages not possessed by the young. We

have received important lessons from experience, which, if they have been rightly improved, are of inestimable value. The book of divine providence, which is in a great measure sealed to them, has been unfolded to us. We can look back and contemplate all the way along which the Lord has led us.—We can now see the wise design of our Father, in many events, which, at the time, were dark and mysterious. The knowledge to be derived from studying the book of God's providence, cannot be communicated to another; the lessons are like the name upon the white stone, which none can read but he that has it. The successive events of our lives we can make known, but the connexion which these events have with our character, our sins, and our prayers, can be fully understood only by ourselves. He who neglects to study the pages of this book, deprives himself of one most important means of improvement; yet many professors of religion appear to pay little or no attention to the providence of God, in relation to themselves. If they meet with some severe judgment, or some great deliverance, their attention is arrested, and they acknowledge the hand of God in the dispensation; but as to the succession of ordinary events, they seem to have no practical belief that they are ordered by divine providence, or have any important relation to their duty or interest. I would affectionately entreat my aged brethren to make the dealings of God's providence towards themselves, a subject of careful study. There is within our reach, except in the Bible, no source of instruction more important. And to aid you in this business, permit me to recommend to your careful perusal, two little volumes on Providence, which I have found useful and comfortable to myself. The first is, Flavel's "Mystery of Providence Opened;" and the other is, Boston's "Crook in the Lot." These excellent treatises may be read over and over again with profit. Perhaps, the best method of studying such books is, not to read the whole at once, or in a short time, but to peruse a few paragraphs at a time, and then reflect upon the subject, and make application of what we

read to our own case. And while I am recommending works on this subject, I ought not to omit mentioning Charnock's treatise on "Providence." I confess I am not so familiar with this as the treatises before mentioned, but I have found his other writings, especially those on the Divine Attributes, so surpassing in excellence, that I feel willing to recommend any thing which ever proceeded from his pen.

I began this letter with an exhortation, to endeavour to be useful, while you live. To comply with this, you should, in the first place, guard vigilantly against those faults and foibles, into which old people are apt to fall. We must be careful not to mistake moroseness for seriousness, austerity for gravity, or discontent with our condition, for deadness to the world.

Why should the aged be more peevish and morose than others? If they are pious, there can be no good reason for it; but it is not difficult to account for the *fact*. In the decline of life a gradual change takes place in our physical system, by which the mind is considerably affected; and often positive disease is added to this natural change. The nervous system is debilitated and shattered; and in consequence, the spirits are apt to sink, or to become irregular. To these may be added, the afflictions and disappointments which most experience in the course of a long life, by which the temper is apt to be soured. And when men, by reason of the decay of mind and body, become disqualified for the same active services which they were long accustomed to perform, and these fall into the hands of juniors, whom they knew when children, it is very natural to feel, as if the world was turning round—as if every thing was going wrong. Old men have always been wont to laud the times long past, when they were young, and to censure all the innovations which have come in since. Sometimes, also, the aged experience a neglect from the young, and even a want of respect from their own children, which is exceedingly mortifying, and tends much to foster that acerbity of temper so frequently found in the aged. But although these and other similar things

may be truly pleaded in extenuation of the fault under consideration; yet they do by no means amount to an apology which exculpates us from blame. And that old age is not necessarily accompanied by these unamiable traits of character is proved by many happy examples. Some aged persons exhibit an uniform cheerfulness and serenity of mind; and the remarkable fact has been recorded in regard to a few, that a naturally irritable temper has been softened and mellowed, instead of being exacerbated by old age. If I recollect rightly, this is mentioned as true in relation to the Rev. Dr. Rodgers of New York, by his biographer, my respected colleague, the Rev. Dr. Miller. The late venerable Dr. Livingston of the Dutch Reformed Church, President of their College and Seminary, was distinguished by uniform cheerfulness to a very advanced age; and his cordial and affectionate manners were remarked and felt by all who approached him. The Rev. John Newton, of London, seems to have possessed, with large measures of divine grace, a very happy physical temperament. It is delightful to contemplate the old age of such a man. And while I am mentioning recorded examples of a temper in old age deserving of imitation, I would recall to the remembrance of my readers the case of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Scott, who, at a period of life when most men relinquish all severe labour, actually undertook to learn the Arabic language, that he might be able to give instruction to the missionaries going to the East. It has often been noticed, that piety is apt to decline with the decline of manly vigour. If this be really a common event, it is exceedingly to be deplored. But, perhaps, it is more in appearance than reality. It requires much stronger faith, and feelings of warmer piety to enable an old man to go forward in his course with zeal and alacrity, than for a young man, who is buoyed up and borne along by the vigour of youthful passions, to do the same. But I rejoice to know, that piety does not always even appear to grow cold, by the descent into the vale of years. In some Christians it evidently goes on advancing; and their growth in grace is much more

rapid in this period of life, than any other. As they approach nearer to heaven, their hearts and their conversation are more in heaven. O that it might be thus with us all! As these letters are intended also for my aged friends of the female sex, I would recommend to their notice and imitation the old age of Mrs. Hannah More. From her first appearance as a Christian, she seems to have gone on advancing in evangelical knowledge, and ardent piety, until she was completely superannuated. And even then, she lost nothing of the respect and affection, which by her pious and benevolent labours she had gained; for still, when her memory was so impaired that she did not remember the books she had written, the elevation of her piety and the enlargement of her benevolence remained unimpaired. And it is truly a delightful thought that when in the wreck of mind, the whole cargo of knowledge seems to be lost, and parents no longer recognize their own children, religion, where it was possessed, still remains. **JESUS CHRIST IS NEVER FORGOTTEN.** Pious sentiments are never obliterated. Cicero in his beautiful little treatise on Old Age, in which many judicious and pleasing sentiments are expressed, when speaking of the decay of the memory, says, that he never heard of a miser forgetting the place where he had buried his treasure. What the mind prizes most is longest retained in memory. It is often remarked, and justly, 'how beautiful does unaffected piety appear in youth!' But it may as truly be said, 'how amiable and venerable is exalted piety in old age!'

It has been said that avarice is peculiarly the sin of age: we often hear of an old, but scarcely ever of a young miser. This may be true in regard to those who have cherished the love of the world all their lives. They will hug their treasures with a closer grasp, and their affections will be more concentrated on them, when other objects are removed; but this vice does not originate in old age, it is only the mature fruit of the seed planted in early life; and though it becomes deeply radicated in old age, it is not now so much the desire of acquiring wealth, as of holding fast what they

have got. The folly of the miser who hoards his money without a thought of using it, is easily shown, and has often been ridiculed. But the truth is, that all ardent pursuit of worldly objects beyond what is necessary for the real wants of nature, might be demonstrated to be equally absurd. But whatever men of the world may do, let not Christians dishonour their holy profession by an inordinate love of the world. Especially, let not the aged professor bring into doubt the sincerity of his religion, by manifesting a covetous disposition. "Take heed," said the Great Teacher, "and beware of covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." Many begin the world with little, and the claims of an increasing family render it necessary to exercise much diligence and economy to make a living; but thus it often happens that an avaricious disposition under the semblance of necessity, and even of duty, strikes its roots deep into the soul, ere the man is aware of any danger. Indeed, it is almost impossible to convince a man of the sin of covetousness, while he avoids open acts of injustice or fraud. Dear friends, it is time for many of you to give up the further pursuit of wealth; unless your object is to acquire the means of doing good. But beware of the deceitfulness of the heart. Covetousness will allow you to *promise* such an appropriation of your gains. But put yourselves to the test by a simple experiment. Ask yourselves whether you are now willing to make that use of the property which God has given you, that his honour and the advancement of Christ's kingdom require. If you indeed find in yourself that disposition to consecrate all that you have to the glory of God, then it may be lawful to go on to acquire further means of usefulness. But whatever you now possess, or may hereafter acquire of this world's goods, for your soul's sake, set not your affections on these perishable things. Be not proud of your wealth. Neglect not while you live, to do good and communicate. Remember that you are but the steward of the wealth which you possess, and therefore it is required

of you to be faithful in the distribution of what is put into your hands. If you have tried the plan of parsimony, lest you should lessen your estate, now try the plan of wise liberality, and see whether that saying of Christ is not verified by experience, that "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Whether in the former periods of our lives, we have had prosperity or have passed through the deep waters of affliction, it is nearly certain that in our old age we shall feel the strokes of adversity. If our friends have been preserved in life thus far, yet we know they must all die. If hitherto we have enjoyed uninterrupted health, yet now we must expect to encounter pain and disease.—Old age itself may be called the common disease of our nature, which can only be escaped by death. Mr. Newton, in one of his last letters, says that he had but one disease, but that was incurable, which was old age. Then, my dear friends, let us set an example of patience and cheerful resignation under the afflictions which may be laid upon us. The passive virtues are more difficult to be exercised than the active; and God is perhaps more honoured by quiet submission to his will under sufferings, than by the greatest achievements of zeal and exertion. But let us never forget that we have not the least strength in ourselves. We are dependent on the grace of God for every good thought and desire. But if we trust in Him we shall never be ashamed.



LETTER III.

I HAVE no doubt that you have remarked with surprise, that the impression of the reality and importance of eternal things is not increased by the nearness of your approach to the end of your course. Time glides insensibly away, and it is with us in this respect, as in relation to the globe on which we reside. While other

things appear to be in motion, our feeling is that we are stationary. The mere circumstance of being old seems to affect no one with a more lively concern about the salvation of the soul.—None appear to be more blind and stupid in regard to religious matters, than many who are tottering on the brink of the grave. This, indeed, is so commonly the fact, with those who have grown old without religion, that very little hope is entertained of the conversion of the aged, who have from their youth enjoyed the means of grace. And it is also a fact, that real Christians are not rendered more deeply sensible of the awful importance of eternal things, by becoming old and infirm. The truth is, that nothing but an increase of faith by the operation of the Holy Spirit, will be effectual to prepare us for that change which we know is rapidly approaching. Counsels and exhortations, however, are not to be neglected, as God is pleased to work by means. I have, therefore, undertaken to address to you such considerations as occur to me. Having already spoken of the infirmities and sins which are apt to cleave to us in advanced years, I propose in this letter, to inquire what are the peculiar duties incumbent on the aged. What would the Lord have us to do?—for undoubtedly, we are not privileged to fold our hands, and sit down in idleness, as if our work was ended. Indeed, it would be no privilege to be exempt from all occupation. Such a life to the aged or the young, must be a life of misery; for man never was made to be idle, and his happiness is intimately connected with activity. We may be no longer qualified for those labours which require much bodily strength—we may, indeed, be so debilitated or crippled by disease, that we can scarcely move our crazy frame—and some among us may be vexed with excruciating pain—yet still we have a work to perform for God, and for our generation. If we cannot use our hands and feet, so as to be useful in the labours which we were wont to perform, yet we may employ our tongues to speak the praises of our God and Saviour. We may drop a word of counsel to those around us; and especially, the aged owe a duty to the young, to whom

they may have access, and who are related to them. Every aged Christian must have acquired much knowledge from experience, which he should be ready to communicate as far as it is practicable. Why is it, my dear friends, that we suffer so many opportunities of usefulness to pass without improvement? Why are we so often silent, when the suggestions of our own conscience urge us to speak something for God? How is it, that we consume hours in unprofitable talk, and seldom attempt to say any thing which can profit the hearers? We may plead inability—we may excuse ourselves, because we are unlearned and not able to speak eloquently and correctly—but let us be honest; is not the true reason because our own hearts are so little affected with these things? We cannot consent to play the hypocrite, by uttering sentiments which we do not feel; and we have often been disgusted with the attempts of others, who, in a cold and constrained manner, have introduced religious conversation. It is easy to see where the fault lies; it is in the state of our own hearts. Let us never rest, then, until we find ourselves in a better state of mind. Let us get our hearts habitually under the influence of divine things, and then conversation on this subject, will be as easy as on any other. “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh.” There are companies and occasions, when to obtrude remarks on religion, would be unseasonable and imprudent; for we must not cast our pearls before swine: but, in most cases, an aged person may give utterance to seasonable and solemn truths, without offence—and very often a word spoken in season, has been the means of saving a soul; and the advice and exhortation of parents and pious friends, are remembered and prove salutary, after their heads are laid low under the clods of the valley.

I have often heard aged persons, incapable any longer of active service, express surprise that their unprofitable lives were so long protracted; while the young and laborious servants of God were cut off in the midst of their years. The dispensations of God are indeed inscrutable—“his ways are past finding out”—and we

are too little acquainted with his counsels, to sit in judgment on them. But I would say to those who think that they can be of no further use in the world, that they do not form a just estimate of the nature of the service which God requires, and by which he is glorified by his creatures upon earth. All true obedience originates in the heart, and consists essentially of the affections of the heart: external duties are to be performed, but are only holy as connected with holy motives. The aged man may serve God, therefore, as sincerely and fervently as any others, if only the heart be right in the sight of God. He can glorify God in his spirit, by thinking affectionately of his glorious name, by contemplating his divine attributes, and by exercising love and gratitude towards him.—His devotion might thus approach more nearly to our conceptions of the services and exercises of the saints in heaven. But it may be that the lives of some are lengthened out, that they may offer up many prayers for the church and for the world; for, after all the activity and bustle and zeal apparent, there is no service which can be performed by mortals, so effectual as prayer.—Here there is a work to which the aged may be devoted. While Joshua and the men of war contend with the Amalekites in the battle, Moses assists by lifting up his hands in prayer; and when he is, through fatigue, no longer able to hold them up, he is assisted by Aaron on one side, and Hur on the other. If you cannot preach, you can, by prayer, hold up the hands of those who do. You can follow the missionary, who leaves all to go and labour in heathen lands, with your daily and fervent prayers. It is not in vain for you to live, while you have access to a throne of grace. Before the advent of Christ, there were some aged persons who seem to have been preserved in life, that they might pray for this event, and that they might enjoy the pleasure of seeing the answer of their prayers, and embracing Him in their arms, whom they had so often embraced by faith. While all around was spiritual death and desolation, and corruption and error had infected all classes, from the priesthood downward,

there was a little band who had taken up their residence in the temple, or often frequented this holy place, who were waiting for the consolation of Israel. Two of these were Simeon and Anna; but there were others of the same character; for we read that this very aged and pious widow, who departed not from the temple, but served God with fasting and prayers, night and day, "spake of Christ after she had seen him, *to all them who looked for redemption in Israel.*" The darker the times, the more closely do the truly pious adhere to each other. This little knot of praying people knew each other, and no doubt spake often one to another; and in this case, the Lord hearkened and heard; for the object of their desires and prayers was given to them. Was the life of Anna an unprofitable life, although she never left the temple, and did nothing but fast and pray? Was Simeon a useless member of the church, because he was probably too old for labour? The truth was—and the same is often verified—that the true church of God was at this time confined to a few pious souls; while the priests and the scribes and the rulers, had neither part nor lot in the matter. As God preserved Simeon, according to a promise made to him, until he saw the Lord's Christ, so he may be lengthening out the lives of some of you, my aged brethren, until you may have the opportunity of seeing the salvation of Israel come out of Zion. Do you not wish to be witnesses of the rise and glory of the church? Pray then incessantly for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem. Consider it as your chief business, to pray that the kingdom of God may come.—What though the signs of the times be discouraging—what though you live in troublous times—what though the church may be shaken, and the prospects of her increase be dark, yet remember that she is founded on a rock, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against her. The vessel which carries Christ, though it be buffeted by storms, is in no danger of being wrecked. But to govern and direct does not belong to you; your duty is to pray—to pray without ceasing—to wrestle with the angel

of the covenant, and not to let him go until he bless you. Give him no rest until he establish and make Jerusalem a praise in all the earth. You cannot offend by importunity, but by this you will be sure to prevail; for "will not God hear his own elect, who cry day and night unto him?"—Therefore, never hold your peace, but as long as you live intercede with him to fulfil his gracious promises, and to cause the earth to be filled with the knowledge of himself as the waters cover the sea, when his people shall be all righteous, and there shall be no need any longer for any one to say to his neighbour, Know the Lord, for all shall know him from the least to the greatest.

Thanksgiving is also a duty peculiarly incumbent on the aged. In the providence of God you are spared, whilst most of your coevals have been cut off in the midst of their career. Some of you have enjoyed almost uninterrupted prosperity. When you consider the dispensations of God's providence towards you, in the time and place and circumstances of your birth, in giving you pious and intelligent parents, who took care of your health and education, and in following you with goodness and mercy all the days of your life; giving you kind friends, faithful teachers, health and reason, together with abundant religious privileges, how thankful ought you to be! But that which above all other things enhances your obligations to gratitude is, that in his own good time He effectually called you from the devious paths of iniquity, and adopted you as a child into his own household and family, and perhaps has made you the instrument of much good to others; if not on a large scale, yet in your own family, and in the church of which you are a member. If now, to all these blessings, he has given you pious children, who promise, when you are gone, more than to supply your place in society; or even if they have been preserved from infidelity and disgraceful immoralities, and are disposed to pay a serious attention to the preaching of the gospel, no words can express your obligations to give thanks unto the Lord, and continu-

ally to praise his name, whose mercy endureth forever and ever. "Let us, therefore, offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually—that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name."

LETTER IV.

THERE is one remaining subject, my dear friends, to which I wish to call your attention. I refer to the solemn event of our departure out of life. Whatever may be uncertain in the future, concerning this there cannot exist the shadow of a doubt,—“It is appointed unto men once to die.” “I know that thou wilt bring me to the house appointed for all living.” “The grave is mine house.” But we do not need the voice of revelation to assure us of our mortality: the evidence is daily before our eyes. Hundreds of our race close their eyes in death every day. The grave is never satisfied; nor says, It is enough. Of the thousands of millions who have inhabited this globe, no more than two have escaped the dissolution of the body. And we are as certain as we can be of any thing, that all future generations shall go the same way, until Christ shall suddenly make his glorious appearance, coming in the clouds of heaven, with all his mighty angels. The men who shall then be found upon the earth shall not die, but they shall undergo a transformation equivalent to the death and resurrection of the body. “Behold,” says Paul, “I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump, for the trumpet shall sound.” If then the second coming of Christ should occur, before our departure from life, we should, indeed, escape a literal death; but we can scarcely cherish the faintest hope of this kind. Prophecy leads us to believe, that many ages of the world are still future, and that the most

glorious period of the church is to come; when the gospel shall not only be preached to all nations, but shall be embraced by all; "when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea."

DEATH, when viewed merely by the light of nature, is truly an appalling event. It is commonly preceded by disease, or the decrepitude of old age. The separation between the soul and body is usually accompanied with a convulsive struggle, and the appearance of extreme agony; so that "the pangs of death," and "the agonies of death," are familiar phrases among all people. It is manifestly an unnatural event; that is, these constituent parts of human nature do not seem willing to part, but the severance of the one from the other is brought about by the operation of some violent cause. That the soul instinctively and strongly cleaves to its tenement as long as it can, and by every possible means resists the separation, requires no proof. That in some instances this adherence to life is counteracted, so that persons voluntarily put an end to this union of soul and body, or desire to leave the body, furnishes no evidence to the contrary: it only shows that it is possible for causes to be put into operation which are even stronger than our attachment to this life. Besides the pains and agonies of dissolution, there are other circumstances which render death an object abhorrent to human feelings. It is a forcible and everlasting separation from all persons and things with which we have been conversant on earth. In it, we take a final leave of our dearest friends and beloved relatives, dear to our hearts as our own lives. Husbands are divorced from their wives; parents separated from their children; brothers and sisters must part; friends—who often stick closer than brothers—here have the tenderest bonds sundered. The scenes to which we have long been accustomed; the houses in which we have long dwelt; the churches where we have met the solemn assembly of God's people, must all be left behind. The old man's arm-chair is left vacant; his place in the house of God is empty; the social circle of which

he formed a part is broken; and the work which he was accustomed to perform stands still, or falls into other hands. And he who departs, leaving behind him numerous attached friends, cannot avoid the foresight of the deep affliction. Already, before his eyes are closed, he sees the mournful group crowding around his dying bed, to catch the last look of affection,—to hear the last broken tones of a voice soon to be silent in death. The heart-breaking and tears of affectionate relatives often form one of the most painful circumstances attending the death of a good man. He might well express his feelings in the language of Paul, on another occasion: “What mean ye to weep and to break my heart?” But if the dearest friends which the dying man has, attempt to save themselves and him from the almost intolerable pang of separation, by withdrawing from the mournful scene; this, in a very small degree, if at all, mitigates the dreaded pang. The imagination often paints the scene in more vivid colours than the reality. When the husband gasping for his last breath, observes the absence of the beloved partner of his joys and sorrows, he knows that she is gone into some secret chamber “to weep there.” And she cannot withdraw into any recess so secluded, as not to seem to hear the deep-drawn sighs and heavy groans, to see the ghastly looks and contortions of him on whom all her earthly reliance has been long placed. I would say then, take her not away from the bed-side of the dying husband. Let her hold his trembling, cold hand to the last. Let him have the comfort of casting his last look on the object of his tenderest affections. The Rev. Samuel Davies—a name so deservedly loved and revered in Virginia—has a poem, in which he describes the feelings of a husband and wife, tenderly attached, in the prospect of the dissolution of either first. But there is not much to choose between the two cases, as far as relates to the parting scene. Those, however, who are left behind are most deserving of compassion. They *who die in the Lord* are at once blessed, because they rest from their labours; but they who survive are often burdened with sorrow, and

with a desolate heart go mourning all the day, enveloped in the sombre weeds of grief, and their heads hang down as the bulrush. It seems to me, however, that the mourning on account of the decease of pious friends, ought to be very moderate, and our tears soon dried up. What better can we ask for our friends, than that they might be safely lodged in the bosom of Abraham; where they will enjoy to the full such "good things" as they could never hope to enjoy in this world? There is, however, one case of the death of dear relatives, to which the aged especially are liable, in which there is but one topic of consolation; that is, the departure from life of those in whose end there is no ground for scriptural hope. At the prospect of this judgment my soul has often trembled. May a merciful God avert it from every pious parent! If we were persuaded that we had uniformly done our duty towards our deceased friends, the stroke would not be so heavy; but when remorse for unfaithfulness mingles its bitter streams with the sorrow occasioned by bereavement, the cup must be bitter beyond conception. On this subject, however, I have met, among professing Christians, with what I consider a fault on both extremes. A venerable clergyman, who had lost a beloved son, who never gave, as far as known, any evidence of genuine repentance or faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, was unable to bear up under the reflection that his dear child was in a state of hopeless misery; he therefore sought relief to his agonized mind, by cherishing an error contrary to the analogy of his whole system of theology. He said to me, I cannot bring myself to think that a moral and amiable person, brought up under the gospel, and assenting to its doctrines, will, by a gracious God, be made eternally miserable in hell, although he may not have experienced a change of heart. O sad necessity, which drives a good man to such a resource for support and comfort! But this is the practical belief of multitudes of professors. They hold the doctrine of regeneration and its necessity as a matter of creed and theory, but in fact, they believe otherwise. A gay and blooming young

lady, who probably had never spent one half hour in serious thought, was suddenly carried off by an acute disease, which was so rapid and violent in its progress, that little or no opportunity was afforded for conversation with the pastor or pious friends.—When some serious person lamented the unprepared state of the deceased, the suggestion was received in a Christian congregation and by nominal Christians with a sort of indignation; as though it was an evidence of uncharitable bigotry, to believe one of the plainest doctrines of the Bible.—The other extreme is—peremptorily deciding upon the case of those who die without having given evidence of a change of heart. This case I will also illustrate by an anecdote which I know to be true. The brother of a zealous preacher of the gospel came to his end suddenly by the starting of his horse, by which his brains were knocked out against a tree; and it was conjectured that the young man had been indulging too freely in the use of intoxicating liquor. When the brother above mentioned came to the house, where the corpse was laid out, he raised the covering from the face, and, after a solemn pause, said, with an audible voice, “There lies the senseless body, but the soul is burning in hell:” And this, too, when the room was full of people. The true doctrine on this subject is, that friends may indulge hope in relation to these deceased friends, as far as they can consistently with the truth of God; but let no one seek healing for his wounded spirit, by “denying the faith.” Even when there is no positive evidence of a change, we may resort to the possibility that it might have taken place in the last moments; for who has a right to set limits to the mercy of God, when he has not limited himself? There is great danger, however, of expressing opinions or hopes, which may lead careless sinners to indulge in carnal security. It is much better, in such cases, to be silent. Some ministers, whom I have known, have been so solicitous to keep sinners from delaying repentance, that they have inculcated the opinion, that a death-bed repentance is not only uncertain, but absolutely ineffectual, and that no hope can

be justly entertained for those who never repented until the last hour. It is true, that many who on a sick-bed appear penitent, when they recover, soon lose all their serious impressions, and return with renewed avidity to the pursuits of the world. Their repentance is thus proved to have been spurious. But every fit of fear, produced by the near prospect of death, ought not to be called repentance; or at any rate, *that* repentance which, in scripture, is connected with the pardon of sin—which is a real change of the views and tempers of the mind—by which a man becomes a new creature, old things having passed away, and all things having become new. All repentance on a death-bed is not, however, by these instances proved to be spurious, any more than all conversions of people in health are proved to be counterfeit—because a great many such are to be met with. I have seen cases of repentance on a death-bed, as satisfactory, and in which I had as much confidence as in any that I have known among those in health, prior to the evidence of a good life. And why should it be supposed that a gracious God will never manifest his power and grace in the conversion of a sinner on a sick-bed? If this should once be admitted as a principle, it would be worse than useless for a minister of the gospel, or any other pious person, to visit an unconverted sinner when on a sick-bed; or to give any answer to his most anxious inquiry, “What shall I do to be saved?” I recollect to have heard a preacher from the pulpit, solemnly aver that there was no instance in the Bible of the conversion of an aged sinner. This is another *ultra-ism*, which has no good foundation. One of the most remarkable cases of the conversion of an exceeding great sinner, recorded in the sacred Scriptures, is of an aged man. I refer to the late repentance of king Manasseh. There is no man, of whom mention is made in the sacred volume, to whom a worse character is given, as one that exceeded the worst of the heathen in his abominable idolatries:—“Moreover, Manasseh shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to the other.” It is true, it is

not expressly said, that his repentance occurred in his old age, but it may, with strong probability, be inferred from the history. (2 Chron. xxxiii.)

If, among my readers, there should be any aged persons who are still impenitent, I would earnestly and affectionately exhort them, not to despair of God's mercy; there still may be hope in their case. My dear fellow-sinners, there is nothing in God's word, which excludes you from salvation, unless you voluntarily and obstinately exclude yourselves, by a rejection of the overture of reconciliation. Christ says to you, as much as to others, "Ye will not come unto me that ye may have life."

I find that I shall be under the necessity of claiming the old man's privilege of rambling from one subject to another: and, in writing to the aged, I hope I shall be excused for my prolixity in this letter. I have not fulfilled my own purpose, either as to the subject matter or length; and the consequence will be the *infliction* of another epistle. But before I conclude this, I wish to say that death, viewed in the light of Scripture, exhibits a very different aspect from what it does when viewed by the light of nature; both as it relates to the sinner and the saint. In regard to the former, we are taught in the volume of truth, "that death was introduced by the transgression of man." The penalty of the original law given to man was, "In the day thou eatest thereof (that is, of the forbidden fruit) thou shalt surely die." And when man became guilty, the sentence was denounced, "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return"—the execution of which penalty has been going on from that day to this, sweeping off generation after generation, until almost every part of the earth is filled with dust which once constituted the bodies of men. Even reason, when soberly consulted, would indicate that death comes as the punishment of sin; for otherwise, the transition from one state of existence to another, would not, under the government of a good God, be attended with so much pain and fear. But, what reason discovers only in dim perspective, revelation writes as with a sunbeam:

“THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH.” “AS BY ONE MAN SIN ENTERED INTO THE WORLD, AND DEATH BY SIN; SO DEATH HATH PASSED ON ALL MEN, FOR THAT ALL HAVE SINNED.”

On the other hand, true believers are now delivered from the curse of the law, and consequently from death, as it is a curse. We may say, therefore, that the righteous shall never taste death; for Christ, the Lord, hath solemnly averred, “If a man keep my sayings, he shall never see death.” Accordingly, the inspired writers of the New Testament, commonly speak of the decease of Christians as a “sleep.” “Them that sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” And of Stephen, it is said, when he “kneeled down, and said with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge, HE FELL ASLEEP.” But when the word *death* is retained, it must be understood to have a new sense in relation to the children of God. It is death despoiled of his sting. It is the outward appearance of death, while its nature is entirely changed—so changed, that the curse is converted into a blessing. That which is a rich gain cannot be a curse; but to the sincere follower of Christ, “TO DIE IS GAIN.” That which may be lawfully an object of ardent desire, cannot be of the nature of a penalty or curse; but Paul had a desire to depart and be with Christ, and the same desire has been felt by thousands since. But to cut the matter short, death is placed in the category of the richest blessings. “For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or DEATH, or things present, or things to come, all are yours.” The true Christian, then, has no reason to be appalled at the necessity of entering this darkly shaded valley. Dear friends, if we only approach, holding up the torch of revelation by faith, the dismal gloom which has gathered over the tomb will be immediately dissipated. Faith looks beyond this darkness and across this valley, and beholds a celestial city, the new Jerusalem. Though much indebted to John Bunyan,—one of the most fertile geniuses the world ever produced—I can-

not easily forgive him for making the passage over Jordan to Canaan so very difficult for Christian. If he had carried out the allegory, he would have turned the swelling waves backward, and have shewn a dry path across the stream; for no sooner had the priests, who carried the ark of the testimony, dipped their feet in the brim of the river than—"all the Israelites passed over on dry ground." But, after all, perhaps, the honest tinker drew his picture from the fact; for as Christians seldom enjoy in life the comfort provided for them, so it is analogous, that in death they should want that comfort to which in Christ they are entitled.



LETTER V.

CAN we do any thing to render our death—which cannot be far off—both safe and comfortable? No doubt, by God's assistance, we can do much to accomplish these desirable ends, if we will set about the work in good earnest. I know that there is a feeling of despondency habitually existing in the minds of some aged persons of serious disposition, which leads them to conclude, that if they are not now prepared to die, they never will be. And from all the acquaintance which I have had with professors of religion, I am constrained to think that, as their near approach to the grave does not increase their impressions of the importance of eternal realities, so old age has no tendency to render the evidences of their union with Christ more clear and satisfactory. You may frequently inquire of a dozen such professors in succession, whether they have obtained a comfortable assurance of the goodness of their spiritual condition, and the probability is, that four out of five, if not nine out of ten, will answer in the negative, and will express serious doubts whether they were ever the subjects of regenerating grace. It was not, I believe, always so with those who cordially received

the doctrines of grace, and rested their souls upon them. To say nothing about the joyful confidence and assured hope of the apostles and primitive Christians, the members of the first reformed churches seem to have derived from the pure doctrines of the Bible a high degree of peace and joy. The same was the fact among the pious Puritans of Old and New England; and the Presbyterians of Scotland, in the best and purest days of the Scottish church. The question has often occurred, why does the belief of these doctrines afford less comfort now, than in former times? It is not my purpose, at present, to attempt to account for this fact. I adduce it merely to show, that most professors among us, are not *actually* prepared for death. Even if their state should be one of safety, they cannot view their approaching end with confidence and comfort. And whilst their evidences of genuine piety are so dubious, they of course cannot know that they are in a safe condition. It is, then, of the utmost importance that all professors of the above description, and especially the aged, should be importunately urged "to give diligence to make their calling and election sure." I am aware that some Christians, who enjoy very comfortable evidences of being the adopted children of God, are not willing to profess that they have arrived at full assurance. They suppose that they who have attained to this high privilege are in a state of uninterrupted joy, and that no shadow of doubt ever passes over their minds. The truth is, they do possess a solid assurance, although their frames of mind are not always equally comfortable, and although the evidence is not so great that it cannot be increased. I recollect, when very young, to have heard a judicious minister conversing with an eminently pious old lady, who had belonged to the church under the care of the Rev. Samuel Davies, in the county of Hanover. In answer to some inquiry respecting the comfort which she enjoyed in the service of her Divine Master, she said, after expressing lively feelings of faith, penitence and gratitude, "but, my dear friend, I have never yet attained to the faith of assurance; all I can say is, that I have the faith of

reliance." "Well," said the minister, "if you know that you have the faith of reliance, that is assurance." The degrees of evidence possessed by different Christians, are various, from the feeblest hope up to strong confidence, and the clearness of the evidence to the same person varies exceedingly; but in general, there seems to be in our church a sad falling below *par* in respect to this matter. It has, however, often been correctly observed, that we are not to expect *dying grace*, before the dying hour arrives. God gives strength as we need it; and when the believer is called to severe trials, or to difficult duties, he commonly receives aid proportioned to the urgency of his wants, and is surprised to find himself held up by a power not his own. Thus we have often seen the sincere humble Christian, who, during life, was subject to bondage through fear of death, triumphing in the dying hour. This expectation of special aid ought to be encouraged. It is, indeed, a part of that preparation which we should make; and if we confidently rely on the great Shepherd to meet us, and comfort us, while walking through the valley and shadow of death, he will not disappoint us.

But, in dealing with professors troubled with doubts, we are too apt to proceed on the assumed principle, that notwithstanding their sad misgivings and fears, they are at bottom sincere Christians, and have the root of the matter in them; while in regard to many, this may be an entire mistake, and we are in danger of cherishing in them a fatal delusion. Here the skill and fidelity of the spiritual watchmen are put to the test; and while they should not deviate a hair's-breadth from the rule of the divine word, it is better that the pious Christian should suffer some unnecessary pain, than that the false professor should be bolstered up with delusive hopes. I must say, therefore, that the true reason why many professors have no comfortable evidence of their religion, is because they have none. They have never experienced the new birth; and being still dead in trespasses and sins, it is no wonder that that they cannot find in themselves what does not exist.

I abhor a censorious spirit, which, upon slight grounds, judges this and that professor to be graceless; but all my experience and observation lead me to believe that, in our day as well as in former times, the "foolish virgins" constitute a full moiety of the visible church. What I would urge, therefore, on you, my aged friends, and on myself, is a more serious, impartial, and thorough examination into the foundation of our hope of heaven, than perhaps we have ever yet made.—Let us go back to the commencement of our religious course, and see whether, in our present more mature judgment, we can conclude that we were then the subjects of a saving change. I do not ask you whether you had an increase of serious feelings, or whether your sympathies were strongly excited and experienced some change from a state of terror or distress to comfort; for all these things may be experienced, and have been experienced by unregenerate persons. Let us carefully inquire whether the habitual tenor of our lives has been such as to satisfy us that a new nature was received. If we have fallen into sin, have we deeply and sincerely repented of it? Have we wept bitterly for our sin, like Peter? or have we mourned in deep sorrow, like David? Not such repentance as some experience, who, after all their convictions and confessions, return again to the same course of iniquity. But, after all examinations of past experience, the main point is, what is the present, habitual state of our hearts? Do we now love God as his character is exhibited in his word? Do we hunger and thirst after holiness, or a complete conformity to the law of God? Would we be willing that that law should be relaxed in its demands to afford us some indulgence? Do we seek our chief happiness in the favour of God, and in communion with him in his word and ordinances? Is his glory uppermost in our desires, and do we sincerely wish and determine to do all that we can to promote the kingdom of the Redeemer? Do we sincerely love the people of God, of every sect and name, because they bear his image, and are the redeemed children of God? Again: what is the ground on which we expect the pardon of sin and

the favour of God? Is it because we are better than many others? Is it because we have had what we esteem great experiences? Is it on account of our moral demeanour, or charitable benefactions? Dare we trust in any measure to our own goodness and righteousness? If we build on any of these, or on any similar grounds, then are we on a sandy foundation, and all our towering hopes must fall. But, methinks, I hear the humble penitent saying, "all these things I count loss for Christ—I feel that I deserve to die—I never was more convinced of any thing, than that it would have been perfectly just for God to send me to hell. And now, all my trust and all my hope, if I know my own heart, is in the LORD JESUS CHRIST, and in his perfect righteousness and intercession; and all my confidence of being able to serve God hereafter, or to persevere for a single day, is in the grace of the Holy Spirit. The whole evidence of Christian character may be reduced to two particulars—entire trust in Christ for justification, and a sincere and universal love of holiness, with a dependence on the Holy Spirit for its existence, continuance and increase. If, my friend, you have these evidences *now*, you need not perplex yourself by a multitude of scruples. You may dismiss your doubts. God's word will never deceive any who rely upon its guidance. You may not know the day nor even the year, when spiritual life commenced in your soul; and yet, if you now feel its warm pulsations—if you breathe its genuine aspirations—if your heart's treasures are in heaven, and if the cause of God is dearer to you than any other interest—if his people are dearer to you than any other people—if your most constant and supreme desire is to glorify God your Redeemer, whether by living or dying—then may you welcome death. He is no king of terrors to you. You may say, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!"

Perhaps some of you are afraid of the pangs of death. You have heard of the convulsive struggle—the dying groans—the difficult breathing—and the ghastly countenance! Well, it must be confessed, the scene is appalling; but it is soon over, forever. I am of opinion,

however, that often, there is the appearance of dreadful suffering where the patient is unconscious of any very acute pain; and very frequently, the departure of the immortal spirit is, at the last, like falling into a gentle sleep. And not unfrequently, while the body is racked with pain, or with what would produce pain in other circumstances, the soul is so supported and comforted by the sweet peace of God poured into it, that the disorders and convulsions of the body are scarcely thought of. And in many instances, God takes his people away by a sudden stroke;—they know nothing about it, until they awake in heaven. O! what a transition! Or, if it be necessary to let in the light of glory gradually, God, who knows our constitution, will order all things well. But I would advise you to meditate much on death. Collect, and have in memory, a number of precious promises for the occasion. Put up many prayers for grace and strength for a dying hour. Beg an interest in the intercessions of your Christian friends. Keep your minds calm, and yield not to perturbing cares. Be found at your post, when the summons comes, with your loins girded and lights burning. Settle beforehand all your worldly affairs.