

A

PASTORAL LETTER,

FROM A

MINISTER IN THE COUNTRY,

TO THOSE

OF HIS FLOCK

WHO REMAINED IN THE

CITY OF PHILADELPHIA DURING

THE

PESTILENCE OF

1798.

*Green (Ashbel)*

156

PHILADELPHIA:

PRINTED BY JOHN ORMROD, No. 41,  
CHESNUT-STREET.

1799.

**T**HE following Letter was originally written in haste, and intended only for a special occasion; and it is now published as it was written, with the alteration only of a few words. This has been done in compliance with the solicitation of the Author's Friends, who have expressed it as their opinion, that the publication might do good—To the consideration of doing good to souls, every other regard ought to be sacrificed by the Ministers of CHRIST: And, that this desirable end may, in some humble degree, be promoted, by what is here submitted to the eye of the public, is the earnest Prayer of

THE AUTHOR.

TO THE PEOPLE OF——WHO HAVE REMAINED IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA DURING THE PESTILENCE OF 1798.

MY DEAR PEOPLE,

THE Apostle Paul, in the Epistles which he addressed to the Churches where he had laboured, frequently speaks of being “absent in body but present in spirit;” and of being “taken from them for a short time in presence but not in heart.” Of these expressions I have very sensibly felt the meaning since I last saw you. From a conviction of duty, I remain absent from you in body, but my heart is truly with you: And I would now desire, in humble imitation of the Apostle, to address to you, in writing, a few thoughts, hoping shortly to see and speak to you, face to face.

It has pleased a wise and holy God to lay his chastising hand more heavily on our unhappy city for two months past, than perhaps at any former period. The frequent, and even annual recurrence, of this sore and awful scourge, might be sufficient, one would think, to alarm and awaken the most careless and secure. It would really seem as if the God of Heaven had *set* himself to punish the cities and towns of the United States, and was determined to inflict one stroke after another, till they were either reformed or utterly destroyed. Plain, however, as this may appear, to those who are accustomed to view and consider the hand of God in all the occurrences of life, and painful as the indurance of it certainly is to those who suffer in these calamities, yet reformation will not take place, nor even be thought

of, unless it should please Him with whom is the “residue of the spirit” to pour it out for the sanctifying of his providential dispensations; for the opening of blinded eyes, the unstopping of deaf ears, the softening of hard hearts, and the effectual turning to the Lord of those who, by nature and by practice, are enemies to him. Our past experience has surely been enough to convince us, that no providences, however afflictive, awful or awakening in themselves, will make us any better, but rather much worse, unless God accompany them by the influences of his grace.

It is, indeed, a very important truth, which we ought carefully to keep in mind, that all extraordinary dealings and dispensations of the Divine Hand, will make us either better or worse. They will not be indifferent; the Deity will not suffer them to stand for nothing: If they do not humble and reform us, they will certainly harden and estrange us the more from God, and thus be the occasion of filling up the measure of our iniquities, till “wrath come upon us to the uttermost.” Now, the gloomiest thing that I discern in the sufferings of our city and nation is, that the *bad* consequences of being chastised, and not the *good*, seem to have taken place among us. We have actually grown worse, and not better, by all the chastisements we have been made to feel for five years past. Even to a person acquainted with human nature and the depravity of the human heart, it may well seem strange and astonishing that the awful visitations which our city has received, should make so little impression as they have done: That they should be slighted and forgotten, even before the smart of them was over. Where, then, will this dreadful insensibility carry us! In what will it end! These are melancholy enquiries, indeed—God only knows the end of these things—It is enough for us, that we know our duty.

This duty consists in taking care to improve these providences to our own spiritual and eternal benefit, and to pray and labour that they may not be lost on others.

Those who have remained in the city during the pestilence have, probably, in general, felt the present calamity most severely. This, however, is no indication at all, that their criminality has been greater than that of others, nor even as great as that of many who have fled away, and felt nothing. The afflictions of those who have suffered may be made the means of their greatest benefit, while the monstrous stupidity of those whose feelings have not been touched at all, is certainly one of the most dreadful curses that they could have experienced. It may be an awful forerunner of a heavy doom yet before them, even in this life; or of something more awful than any thing that can be inflicted here, in the world to come. God, no doubt, has called home to himself, and to their everlasting rest, a number of his own dear children by this destroying disease. They have gained, and we who remain, have lost much, by this removal. They have escaped from all sin and all suffering, to the abodes of perfect holiness and joy, to the immediate presence of God, and of the Lamb: We have lost the benefit of their company, their prayers, and their labours.— We are yet called to do and to suffer more, while their doing and suffering is past forever. There are, no doubt, others of God's children who have survived the disease, that will have reason to praise their Heavenly Father to all eternity, for what they have been able to do, and for what they have been called to see and to feel. Their labours of love, their painful cares or distressing sickness, their wonderful support, their numerous mercies in the midst of a host of evils, the shocking scenes that have passed before them, the distinguishing goodness of God to them and to their families, their gloomy hours, their seasons of divine

consolation, their dispondent thoughts, their triumphant hopes, their loss of dear relatives and friends, their living in the near views of eternity, their being spared and disposed yet to labour in the vineyard of the Lord; all, all shall "work together for their good;" shall speed them in their christian course, shall brighten their various graces, shall increase their future reward,—shall add value and splendor to the eternal "crown of glory" which shall be finally bestowed upon them. Let the people of God comfort themselves with these reflections. Let them rejoice that "the Lord reigneth, that his counsel will stand and that he will do all his pleasure." Let them fly to him as to "their strong tower," and hide themselves under "the shadow of his wings, till the indignation be over past." Let them leave the government of the world, and the disposal of his creatures to the God who made them. Let them call to mind the divine promises, and keep in view the important truth, that however dark the aspect of Divine Providence may be, or however grievous the things that they are called to witness, yet "verily there is a reward for the righteous, verily there is a God who judgeth in the earth." He will yet "arise and plead for Zion." He will not suffer his faithfulness to fail. He will remember and fulfil all his promises to his Son, and all his engagements to his church and people.

It is predicted that "in the last days perilous times shall come." Those days it is our lot to behold. The present times are indeed perilous throughout our land, and throughout the world: And it requires the exercise of much vigilance, much faith, and much patience, in the christian, who would support his character, maintain his steadfastness, and adorn his profession, at such a period, and in such circumstances as those in which we are placed. But "great will be the reward in Heaven" of those who are found faithful; and there is a

sufficient supply of grace and assistance treasured up in our adorable Redeemer, for every possible want that any of his followers can feel. "It hath pleased the Father that in him all fullness should dwell—In him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily—From his fullness have we all received and grace for grace." What inestimably precious words are these! Oh to think that this blessed Jesus, in whom there is such fullness, is the spiritual head, the husband, the brother, of every believer! Yet divine truth assures us that such is the fact. Who is there, then, that wants *pardon*—that wants much of it—that wants it constantly and unceasingly? Behold there is a *fullness* of pardon in Christ: His divine, his infinite nature is *full* of it. You may take all you can want—you may take it *freely*—you may take it as often as you please and always when you need, and yet you will not diminish that fathomless fullness that there is in him. It has washed away sins of every dye, and cleansed sinners of every description, and yet its quantity is not impaired, nor its efficacy lost. Come, then, believer as often as you will, and take a fullness of pardon for all your sins, from the fullness of your precious Saviour. Who is there, in like manner, that wants "grace to help in time of need?" That wants corruption slain, unbelief subdued, darkness chased away, coldness and indifference removed, love enkindled, confidence inspired, hope animated, zeal and diligence quickened, direction in duty afforded, assistance in duty bestowed, resignation to the divine will granted and preparation for it conferred? behold in the fullness of Christ all this furniture, all this variety of gifts, is found and is freely offered; nay it is kindly pressed on your acceptance. "My grace is sufficient for thee—my strength is made perfect in weakness."—These are his own gracious words. Go, then, with your wants to Christ, and try to get as pressing a sense of them as you can; for the more your wants are felt, the

more truly you will desire relief and the nearer you probably are to a deliverance. In deep humility, at the throne of grace, tell your God and Saviour, that such and such are your wants; that in such a particular, especially, your necessity is indeed very urgent. Tell him that you have come there, a poor child, a poor prodigal, on his own free and gracious invitation: Tell him that though he was under no obligation to make one gracious promise, nor to bring one guilty sinner to plead it, yet, having given the promise and the disposition or desire to plead it, his faithfulness is engaged to answer—and you know it is ready to answer—the demands that faith shall make upon it. Then lay your case to the covenant—humbly put God on his own word of promise—tell him that you trust it—tell him that you do look to his faithfulness to make it good, and to do the best for you in this strait. Oh believer! you never did this; and no disciple of Jesus ever did it, without getting an answer of peace. God never did refuse to help, nor long delay his help, when thus the soul has rested on his word. He would sooner destroy the universe than be found unfaithful in such a case. And who can tell the value of this privilege, of having an Almighty God to go to, for a sure relief in all our necessities. It is indeed a richer portion than if we had a thousand worlds entirely at our command. How foolishly do Christians act, that they do not make more use of this privilege. Their heavenly Father does not grudge them the use of it. He is never so well pleased with them, as when they thus come and put him on his word to answer them—The answer, indeed, will be in his own time, and in his own way—but it will be in the *best* time and in the *best* way; and it will almost always be a better and a fuller answer even than the Christian himself had formed any conception of. It will, also, commonly be a very *sensible* answer, the soul will be sensible that its prayer was verily answered. But this delightful subject has led me farther than I intended.

It was my purpose to remark, that the "perilous times" which we now experience will, ere long, be past; and that, then, God will do wonderful things for his church. "A thousand years are with the Lord as one day." The time that seems long and tedious to us, is all an instant with him. His works, future as to us, are all present with himself. He now sees all his promises fulfilled, and all events that lead to their fulfilment accomplished. Let us then wait in faith. Let faith often act upon that precious promise, the last, and one of the richest, in the book of life—"He which testifieth these things saith surely I come quickly, Amen:" And let faith repeat with earnestness—"Even so, come, Lord Jesus"—Come in thy power into the souls of thy people, come to convince and convert the ungodly world, come to gather in thy elect, come to accomplish all thy purposes, come to judgment, and let all thy people come, in full perfection, to thy blissful presence.

With our prayers, our endeavours, for the good of precious souls, must also be united. In every way in which we have influence or opportunity to oppose vice, to promote virtue, to adorn our profession, to stir up the careless, to alarm the secure, to direct the enquiring, to comfort the feeble-minded, and to recal the wandering, we must let our zeal and diligence appear: And who can tell but "a time of refreshing may come to us from the presence of the Lord?" who can tell but our eyes may yet see glorious days of the Son of Man on earth? But however this may be, all who are "faithful unto death" will assuredly receive "a crown of life."

If this letter should be read in the hearing of any whose consciences testify against them, that they have never yet given themselves to the Lord, and committed their souls into the Saviour's hands, I would desire to intreat them "by

the mercies of God," that they forthwith yield themselves as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him, which is their most reasonable service." Is it not a mercy which ought to melt your heart, that you have been spared amidst the ravages of death that have been all around you? that you have not been cut off in your sins? that you are not in hopeless misery? but yet receiving the calls and invitations of the gospel. Surely every principle of gratitude should make you resolve, in the strength of God, that you will now be for him and for no other. 'To his grace I commend you, making it my constant and earnest prayer, that you may be found of him in peace—"Brethren pray for us"—Farewell.

*Your affectionate Pastor.*

*Abdul Greene*

