

LETTERS

by Isaac Penington

A collection of letters by the Quaker writer Isaac Penington, including his courageous letter to King Charles II from Aylesbury prison in 1661 counseling righteous governance, dependence on God, and respect for conscience.

4 Chapters

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LETTER - To George Fox By Isaac Penington

DEAR G. F.,

I feel the tender mercy of the Lord, and some portion of that brokenness, fear, and humility which I have long waited for, and breathed after. I feel unity with, and strength from, the body: oh! blessed be the Lord, who hath fitted and restored me, and brought up my life from the grave. I feel a high esteem and dear love to thee, whom the Lord hath chosen, anointed, and honored, and of thy brethren and fellow-laborers in the work of the Lord.

And, dear George Fox, I beg thy love, I entreat thy prayers, in faith and assurance that the Lord hears thee, that I may be yet more broken, that I may be yet more filled with the fear of the Lord, that I may be yet poorer and humbler before the Lord, and may walk in perfect humility and tenderness of spirit before him, all my days.

Dear George Fox, thou mayest feel my desires and wants <494> more fully than my own heart. Be helpful to me in tender love, that I may feel settlement and stability in the truth; and perfect separation from, and dominion in the Lord over, all that is contrary thereto.

I. P.

Aylesbury Jail, 15th of Fifth Month, 1667

I entreat thy prayers for my family, that the name of the Lord may be exalted, and his truth flourish therein. Dear G. F., indeed my soul longs for the pure, full, and undisturbed reign of the Life in me.

LETTER - To King Charles II

LETTER - To King Charles II By Isaac Pennington

O KING, The Lord God of heaven and earth is mighty, who hath often and greatly shaken this nation already: and this I have observed, that the seeming settlements, which hitherto have been, since the Lord began to shake, have been but preparative to a further shaking and dissettling. O! happy wert thou, if thou couldst wait for, and receive, such a guidance from God, as that thy government might be so pure, peaceable, and righteous, as it might need no further shaking by his hand. God sometimes raiseth man from a low estate, and exalteth him; but if he forget the Lord, and his heart be lifted up, He is able to bring him down again. O! fear the Lord in the days of thy prosperity, and let thy heart be abased before Him, and sensible of the need of his preservation. Indeed, it is a hard matter to govern these kingdoms aright, as the state now stands. Thou mayst easily err and dash upon the rocks. O that the pure eye were open in thee: whereby thou mightest see that as thou didst not gain these kingdoms by policy or strength; so neither canst thou retain them by those means, but only by the good pleasure of Him who hath all the earth at his dispose! I beseech thee, in that tender love I bear to thee, take heed of going about to plant what the Lord hath plucked up; or of endeavouring to pluck up what the Lord hath planted. If thou lookest with man's eye, thou canst not see what God is doing in the world; and so mayst easily run a course contrary to his will, and eternal counsel: and O how hazardous must this needs be to thee! The eternal peace of thy soul with God for ever, and thy prosperity, depend upon thy knowing the counsel of the Lord, and upon thy obedience thereunto. Oh! retire from this world's baits, snares, temptations, allurements, and vanities; which draw out and defile the mind; and retreat inward, that the Lord may teach thee his fear, and preserve thee from those lusts and desires of the fleshly mind, which, being hearkened to and followed, are very dangerous to the soul, and may prove perilous outwardly also. What shall my love say to thee? O that the Lord would speak to thee in spirit, and give thee an ear to hear, that thou mightest be happy now and for ever! Often have my bowels rolled over thee exceedingly, even in the day of thy adversity, and since thy prosperity. O that thou couldst remember God daily, and forget this world! Remember the years of thy affliction; and make use of the present day with an humble heart, and with a broken spirit. O! do nothing to provoke the <459> Lord against thee; for surely his eye is upon thee, and his heart pondereth all thy ways. And bow before him for his counsel, that thou mayest not arise against thy Maker, as the foregoing powers have done: for if He rise up in battle against thee, thou wilt no more be able to stand before Him than they were. Nay, the stronger thou art outwardly settled, the greater will the glory of his name be in overturning thee. O that thou mightest rule under God, and for God! and not with that wisdom, and with those self-ends, and interests, which are not of Him, and cannot but be against Him. I cannot but desire thy good; yea, the very breathings of my heart to the Lord have been often for thee: and upon that account singly do I write thus to thee; beseeching the Lord, if it be his pleasure, that when that work which is necessary to be done is finished, thine eyes may be opened to see the way of righteous government in the true light. From one who mourns over the misery of mankind, longing for the redemption of those that go astray, and a true lover of thy soul.

I. P.

Aylesbury prison, where I am visiting some of my dear Friends in God's eternal truth, 17th 7th mo.
1661

POSTSCRIPT

Let thy government be like unto God's: even a yoke to the unjust, but liberty to the just. O, when shall the cry of the innocent cease, throughout all thy borders? Restore unto the Lord his dominion over men's consciences, while it is in the power of thine hand to do it -- O! seek after love, meekness, righteousness, tenderness, towards all thy subjects: which hath God's blessing with it, and is the way to win all their hearts towards thee. And do not harden multitudes of them against thee, by unnecessary yokes over their consciences: which they that do not eye God in all, and in lowliness of spirit bow before Him, may be apt to kick against and strive to throw off. -- And I beseech thee, take heed of this world's pleasures and vanities; which steal away the heart from God, and make it thick and gross, that it cannot hear his voice or know his counsel. I am satisfied with what the Lord shall do; but it is the earnest desire of my heart, that thou mightest be spared in the day of God's visitation, which is <460> coming upon this nation. -- This is my desire for thee, that thy heart might be brought into, and kept in, that frame which God loves and delights to be present with, and to instruct, and [that] all such things might be eschewed and avoided by thee, which may prove dangerous to thy soul for ever, and to thy government here. For though thou beest a great king here, yet, if thou wilt obtain the blessing and inheritance of eternal life, and escape eternal misery and destruction, thou must take up the cross to thy lusts, and walk in the same path of mortification and self-denial, which God, who is no respecter of persons, hath chalked out to the meanest of thy subjects. Hear, O king, turn towards the Lord, bow before Him in soul and spirit, in thy whole conversation. It is a greater honour to be a subject to Him, than to reign over men.

LETTER - To Thomas Ellwood

LETTER - To Thomas Ellwood By Isaac Penington

DEAR THOMAS,

Great hath been the Lord's goodness to thee, in calling thee out of that path of vanity, and death, wherein thou wast running toward destruction; to give thee a living name, and an inheritance of life, among his people: which certainly will be the end of thy faith in Him, and obedience to Him. And let it not be a light thing in thine eyes that He now accounteth thee worthy to suffer among his choice lambs, that He might make thy crown weightier, and thine inheritance the fuller. O that that eye and heart may be kept open in thee, which knoweth the value of these things! and that thou mayst be kept close to the feeling of the life, that thou mayst be fresh in thy spirit in the midst of thy sufferings, and mayst reap the benefit of them: finding that pared off thereby, which hindereth the bubblings of the everlasting springs, and maketh unfit for the breaking forth and enjoyment of the pure power! This is the brief salutation of my dear love to thee, which desireth thy strength and settlement in the power; and the utter weakening of thee, as to thyself. My love is to thee, with dear Thomas Goodyare, and the rest of the imprisoned Friends.

I remain thine in the Truth, to which the Lord my God preserve me single and faithful.

I. P. From Aylesbury Jail, 14th of 12th month, 1660

LETTER - To his father

LETTER - To his father By Isaac Penington TO HIS FATHER* AH! DEAR FATHER,

Why dost thou so often give me occasion of mourning before the Lord, on account of hard and unrighteous charges from thee! How often have I solemnly professed, that there was never any desire in me, or endeavor used by me, to draw thee to this way [of religious profession]. All that is in my soul is this, that thou mightst have the true knowledge of Christ, that thou mightst indeed hear his sayings, and do them, and not set up thy own or other men's imaginations and invented reasonings, instead of the sayings of Christ.

Now, though I am not for ways or opinions, but only for Christ, the substance, the living power of God in the heart; yet, because thou stumblest at these things, and, through prejudice, refuseth the living testimony of God concerning Christ, the Rock, building upon that which thou hast imagined concerning the Saviour, in love and pity to thy soul, I cannot but say somewhat; for who knows but God may, at length, give thee repentance to the acknowledgment of the truth, and to the disclaiming of the way of error. My father lays down three reasons why he cannot believe this way to be of God.

1. God's way is a way of love, peace, and unity.

Answer. If my father had that eye which can see the things of God, and did apply himself to look therewith, he might see that peace, that love, that unity, among this people, which other men do but talk of; but if he take things by the report of the enemies both to God and to them, he shall be sure to hear and believe bad enough. They have no war with any thing but unrighteousness; and with that they cannot have peace, no, not in their dearest relations. They love the souls of their enemies, and think no pains or hazard too great for the saving of them. Being persecuted, they bless; being reviled, they entreat, and pray for their persecutors. They are at unity with whatever is of God; but with the seed of the serpent, they cannot be at unity: they know the "generation of vipers" in this present age, and can witness against them under their several painted coverings, as freely as ever Christ and his apostles did against the Scribes and Pharisees. For the spirit of the Scribes and Pharisees is now in the world; and the spirit of Christ and his apostles is also in the world; and they cannot but fight, each with their proper weapons: the one with their stocks, whips, fines, prisons, &c., the other with the spiritual armour of Christ. Thus the one of these wrestles with flesh and blood, fights with the creature, hurts that; the other loves the creature, seeks the saving of it, and fights only with the power of darkness, which rules the creature. Now which of these are the ministers of Christ? These that stir up the magistrate to afflict the body, or these that use the sword of the Spirit to wound the conscience? And this peace, this love, this unity, they attain, not by their own strivings after it, but by receiving it from above. Indeed all our religion lies in receiving a gift: without which, we are nothing, and can do nothing; and in which, nothing is too hard for us. Yea, being kept in that, up to God, we can do all things, we can believe all things, we can suffer all things. Never was there a generation brought forth weaker in themselves, more foolish, more ridiculous to the fleshly wisdom, more exposed to sufferings from the world and worldly professors;

yet, being kept faithful to Him that hath called us, we sometimes feel strength and wisdom, even such as the most zealous in the worldly ways <423> of religion have not an ear to hear the relation of.

2. God's way is a way of humility.

Answer. If they had not been broken and humbled by God, they could never have entered into this way; which is that which the lofty, fleshly part abhors. Nor is this a voluntary humility; but a humility which crosseth and breaketh the will all the day long. Thou judgest at a distance, and with that which is not to judge, but to be judged.

3. That God is a God of order, not of confusion.

Answer. Blessed be the Lord, who hath recovered some of the true churches' order for us; and delivered out of the confusion of antichrist. We know order in the light, order in the Spirit, order in Christ, the truth; but that which man in his wisdom, calls order, is but antichrist's order, which, with God, is confusion. To have man's spirit speak and God's Spirit stopt, this is the order of all the antichristian congregations and churches; but to have man's spirit stopt and God's Spirit speak, this is the order of Christ's church; and this order we know, and rejoice in, finding that raised in us, which teaches us to "cease from man," and his voice [as man] is not at all "accounted of;" but the voice of the living God is heard, known, loved, and obeyed, by that which he hath quickened in us, and made to live to himself. The Lord is judging that which loved man's meanings and inventions, all that the human part in us could gather from the Scriptures, and is nourishing that which is of himself, that which can receive no food but from his hand. My father doth not believe that Mr. Gurden (as the world calls him), or any other godly man, doth persecute them for their consciences.

Answer. I know no godly man can persecute. The lamb never did worry the wolf. But the grossest persons will not acknowledge that they persecute for conscience; but accuse those whom they persecute, for evil-doers, and say they suffer as evil-doers. Cannot my Father see the narrowness of this covering? -- Would the Scribes, and Pharisees, and zealous among the Jews, confess that they put Christ and Stephen to death for conscience? Did they not put them to death as evil-doers, as blasphemers, as <424> speaking against the holy temple of God, the laws and ordinances of Moses? Ah! -- , the children of wisdom were never justified by that wisdom wherewith thou judgest of things. The Scribes and Pharisees were as confident that Christ and his disciples were deceivers, and that they brought up a new way of religion contrary to Moses, as any can be that these people are deceivers, and that their way is new. The scene is turned; the same things that were then are now; and the eye of that spirit is as blind now as it was then: it cannot see its own deceit. The last part of the letter consists of very harsh and unrighteous charges, mixed with bitter expressions, which I shall pass over -- only I confess it is somewhat hard to one part of me, that my own father should deal thus with me.

About having comfort in me, and wishing me more comfort in my son, I must needs say this. There is a part which God hath struck at, and is destroying, and I have no comfort here, and that is able to yield little comfort to any one else. -- If I were in any formal way of religion, I might be a comfort to my father (for he could be gratified with that, or at least bear with that); but because the Lord hath seized upon my heart by the power of his Truth, and I can bow to none but him (no, not to my

most dear father), now I am no comfort. I am sure I have had little comfort all my days, in seeing my father's course of religion, which I ever could testify of, as not being of God (yea, my late dear mother would often bewail it to me); and many times have I poured out my soul before the Lord. -- Yet hear my words, O my father, hear my words. Oh! pierce into the nature of things. Set not up shadows instead of the truth. Wait for the gift. Receive the true love, the true peace, the true unity, the true humility, (which lies not in the will of the creature, but destroys it), and we shall soon know one another, and have comfort in one another.

I.P.

14th of 12th Month, 1658 -----

*The letter printed here is found partly in the 1863 Works and partly in Joseph Bevan's Memoir of Isaac Penington (1830), pp. 50-53; it is Bevan who identifies it as a letter to the author's father.

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