

Loneliness--Mathematics--Academia

by John Newton

The sermon emphasizes the importance of humility and recognizing God's presence in times of difficulty and academic pursuits.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:2, James 4:10

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Humility"

Description

In March 1776, John Newton writes a letter to a college student, encouraging him to see the hand of the Lord in both times of strength and weakness. Newton highlights the importance of humility and dependence on God, especially in the midst of academic success and recognition. He acknowledges the challenges of balancing academic pursuits with spiritual growth, emphasizing the need for grace to guard against pride and spiritual numbness. Newton shares his own experience with mathematical studies and the redirection of his focus to matters of eternal significance, cautioning against being consumed by earthly knowledge and achievements.

Transcript

March, 1776. Dear Sir, I know not the length of your college terms, but hope this may come time enough to find you still resident. I shall not apologize for writing no sooner, because I leave other letters of much longer date unanswered that I may write so soon. It gave me particular pleasure to hear that the Lord helped you through your difficulties, and succeeded your desires. And I have sympathized with you in the complaints you make of a dark and mournful frame of spirits afterwards. But is not this, upon the whole, right and salutary, that, if the Lord is pleased at one time to strengthen us remarkably in answer to prayer, he should leave us at another time, so far as to give us a real sensibility that we were supported by his power, and not our own?

Besides, as you feel a danger of being elated by the respect paid you, was it not a merciful and seasonable dispensation that made you feel your own weakness, to prevent your being exalted above measure? The Lord, by withdrawing his smiles from you, reminded you that the smiles of men are of little value, otherwise perhaps you might have esteemed them too highly. Indeed, you scholars that know the Lord are singular instances of the power of his grace; for (like the young men in Dan. 3.) you live in the very midst of the fire.

Mathematical studies in particular have such a tendency to engross and fix the mind to the contemplation of cold and uninteresting truth, and you are surrounded with so much intoxicating applause if you succeed

in your researches, that for a soul to be kept humble and alive in such a situation, is such a proof of the Lord's presence and power as Moses had when he saw the bush unconsumed in the midst of the flames. I believe I had naturally a turn for the mathematics myself, and dabbled in them a little way; and though I did not go far, my head, sleeping and waking, was stuffed with diagrams and calculations. Every thing I looked at that exhibited either a right line or a curve, set my wits a wool-gathering. What then must have been the case had I proceeded to the interior arcana of speculative geometry? I bought my namesake's Principia; but I have reason to be thankful that I left it as I found it, a sealed book, and that the bent of my mind was drawn to something of more real importance before I understood it.

I say not this to discourage you in your pursuits: they lie in your line and path of duty; in mine they did not. As to your academics, I am glad that the Lord enables you to shew those among whom you live, that the knowledge of his Gospel does not despoil you either of diligence or acumen. However, as I said, you need a double guard of grace, to preserve you from being either puffed up or deadened by those things, which, considered in any other view than quoad hoc (as long as they are necessary), to preserve your rank and character in the University while you remain there, are, if taken in the aggregate, little better than a splendidum nihil. (A splendid nothing). If my poor people at *** could form the least conception of what the learned at Cambridge chiefly admire in each other, and what is the intrinsic reward of all their toil, they would say (supposing they could speak Latin) Quam suave istis suavitatibus carere! (How delightful to be deprived of such delights!) How gladly would some of them, if such mathematical and metaphysical lumber could by any means get into their heads, how gladly would they drink at Lethe's stream to get it out again! How many perplexities are they freed from by their happy ignorance, which often pester those to their lives' end who have had their natural proneness to vain reasoning sharpened by academical studies!

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