

True Faith-Moral Inability

by John Newton

True faith is not just rational assent, but the effect of immediate almighty power, wrought by the operation of God, to bring about a real change of heart and a deeper understanding of the Gospel.

Scripture: Psalm 110:3, John 3:14, John 6:44, Romans 5:1, Romans 9:15, Galatians 5:19, Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 3:7, Hebrews 11:1

Topics: "Saving Faith", "Divine Sovereignty"

Description

John Newton preaches about the importance of faith, grace, and the Holy Spirit in the process of salvation, emphasizing the need for a deep spiritual conviction of sin and a total reliance on Jesus for redemption. He discusses the distinction between faith and rational assent, highlighting that true faith is a gift from God and is always efficacious, leading to a transformed life and a personal relationship with Christ. Newton shares a powerful testimony of a clergyman who experienced a radical change in his views and preaching when he encountered the unsearchable mysteries of Christ's love and grace. He addresses the questions of predestination, election, and the role of God's providence in salvation, underscoring the sovereignty of God and the necessity of His invincible grace in the conversion of sinners.

Transcript

November 17, 1775

My Dear Friend,

At length I take up your favour of August 14, with design to give a more explicit answer. My delaying hitherto has been unavoidable. I am sorry to have your patience put to so long a trial, and should be more sorry, but I consider, that in my former papers, sermons, Omicron's letters, &c., you already possess the whole (in substance) of what I have to offer. My present part is but actum agere, to repeat what I have elsewhere expressed, only with some variety and enlargement.

You yourself well state the situation of our debate, when you say, "Nor in truth do you offer any arguments to convince me, nor does it seem very consistent on your grounds so to do. And if this important change is to be brought about by the intervention of some extraordinary impulse of the Holy Spirit, and cannot be brought about without it, I do not see any thing farther that I have to do than to keep my mind as much unbiassed as I can, and to wait and pray for it." I think my letter from London was to the purport of these your own words, though you seem dissatisfied with it. While we see through a different medium, it will be

easy for you to answer every text I might adduce in support of my sentiments, as you have those I have already brought, "That you understand them otherwise." In order to support my sense of one text, I should perhaps quote and argue from twenty more, and still "You would understand them otherwise." The life of man yea, of Methuselah, would hardly suffice to prove, object and defend all that might be alleged on both sides in this way; and at last we should leave off as we began, more fully confirmed in our own opinions, unless the Lord by His Holy Spirit should be pleased to show the person who maintained the wrong side of the argument where his mistake lay. However, I mean to take some notice of your queries as they offer themselves.

The first which occurs is complicated. -The substance, I think, is whether such belief and aims as you possess will stand you in no stead, unless you, likewise, believe grace irresistible, predestination absolute, faith in supernatural impulses, &c.? You may have observed, I have several times waived speaking about predestination or election,- not that I am ashamed of the doctrine; because, if it be indeed absurd, shocking, and unjust, the blame will not deservedly fall upon me, for I did not invent it, but upon the Scriptures, where I am sure, it is laid down in as plain terms as that God created the heavens and the earth. I own I cannot but wonder, that persons professing any reverence for the Bible, should so openly and strongly declare their abhorrence of what the Bible so expressly teaches, namely, that there is a discrimination of persons by the grace and good pleasure of God, where by nature there is no difference; and that all things respecting the salvation of these persons, is infallibly secured by a Divine predestination.

I do not offer this as a rational doctrine, (though it be highly so to me,) but it is Scriptural, or else the Scripture is a mere nose of wax, and without a determinate meaning. What ingenuity is needful to interpret many passages in a sense more favourable to our natural prejudices against God's sovereignty! Matt. xi. 25, 26, and xiii. 10-17; Mark xiii. 20, 22; John xvii. passim, John x. 26; Rom. viii. 28-30, and ix. 13-24, and xi. 7; Eph. i. 4, 5; I Pet. i. 2. Were I fond of disputing, as I am not, I think I could put a close reasoner hard to it, to maintain the truth of Scripture-prophecies, or the belief of a particular Providence, unless he would admit a Divine predestination of causes and events as the ground of his arguments.

However, as I said, I have chosen to waive the point; because, however true and necessary in itself, the knowledge and comprehension of it is not necessary to the being of a true Christian, though I can hardly conceive he can be an established consistent believer without it. This doctrine is not the turning point between you and me; the nature of justification, and the method of a sinner's acceptance with God, are of much more immediate importance; and, therefore, if I am to speak plainly, I must say, that I look upon your present sentiments, attainments, and advances, as you describe them, to constitute that kind of gain the apostle speaks of, and concerning which I hope you will one day be of his mind, and be glad to account it all loss, that you may win Christ, and be found in Him, "not having your own righteousness, which is of the law, but the righteousness which is of God by faith," Phil. iii. 4, 7-10.

For, as you tell me, you never remember a time when you were not conscious, before God, of great unworthiness, and intervals of earnest endeavours to serve Him, though not with the same success, yet something in the same way as at present: this is but saying, in other words, you never remember a time when old things passed away, and all things became new; and yet the apostle insists much upon this, 2 Cor. iv. 6, and v. 17. The convictions of natural conscience, and those which are wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, are different, not only in degree, but in kind; the light of a glowworm and of the sun do not more essentially differ.

The former are partial and superficial, leave us in possession of a supposed power of our own, are pacified by some appearances of an outward change, and make us no farther sensible of the necessity of a Saviour, than to make our doings and duties (if I may so express myself) full weight, which, perhaps, might otherwise be a little deficient, when brought to the balances of the sanctuary. But truly spiritual convictions give us far other views of sin; they lead us to a deep and awful consideration of the root, our total absolute depravity, and our utter apostasy from God, by which we are incapable of doing good, as a dead man is of performing the functions of life.

They lead us to the rule and standard, the strict, holy, inflexible law of God, which reaches to the thoughts and intents of the heart; requires perfect, universal, persevering, obedience; denounces a curse upon every failure, Gal. iii. 10; and affords neither place nor strength for repentance. Thus they sweep away every hope and refuge we had before, and fix upon us a sense of guilt and condemnation, from which there is no relief, till we can look to Jesus, as the wounded Israelite did to the brazen serpent which was not to give efficacy to medicines and plasters of their own application, but to heal them completely of itself, by looking at it, John iii. 14, 15, and vi. 40; Isaiah xliii. 22.

You wish me to explain my distinction between faith and rational assent; and though I know no two things in the world more clearly distinct in themselves, or more expressly distinguished in Scripture, yet, I fear, I may not easily make it appear to you. You allow faith, in your sense, to be the gift of God; but, in my sense, it is, likewise, wrought by the operation of God, to uperballon megeJoV thV dunamewV autou eiV hmaV touV pisteuontaV kata thn energeian tou kratouV thV iscuoV autou that same energy of the power of His strength, by which the dead body of Jesus was raised from the dead. Can these strong expressions intend no more than a rational assent, such as we give to a proposition in Euclid? I believe fallen reason is, of itself, utterly incapable even of assenting to the great truths of revelation; it may assent to the terms in which they are proposed, but it must put its own interpretation upon them, or it would despise them. The natural man can neither receive nor discern the things of God: and if any one would be wise, the apostle's first advice to him is, Let him become a fool, that he may be wise; for the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God.

Indeed, when the heart is changed, and the mind enlightened, then reason is sanctified, and, if I may so say, baptized, renounces its curious disquisitions, and is content humbly to tread in the path of revelation. This is one difference, assent may be the act of our natural reason; faith is the effect of immediate almighty power. Another difference is, faith is always efficacious, "it worketh by love"; whereas assent is often given where it has little or no influence upon the conduct. Thus, for instance, every one will assent to this truth, all men are mortal. Yet the greatest part of mankind, though they readily assent to the proposition, and it would be highly irrational to do otherwise, yet live as they might do if the reverse were true. But they who have Divine faith, feel, as well as say, they are pilgrims and sojourners upon earth.

Again, faith gives peace of conscience, access to God, and a sure evidence and subsistence of things not seen, Rom. v. 1, 2; Heb. xi. 1; whereas, a calm, dispassionate reasoner may be compelled to assent to the external arguments in favour of Christianity, and yet remain a total stranger to that communion with God, that spirit of adoption, that foretaste of glory, which is the privilege and portion of believers. So, likewise, faith overcomes the world, which rational assent will not do. Witness the lives and tempers of thousands, who yet would be affronted if their assent to the Gospel should be questioned. To sum up all in a word, "He that believes shall be saved."

But surely many who give a rational assent to the Gospel live and die in those sins which exclude from the kingdom of God, Gal. v. 19-21. Faith is the effect of a principle of new life implanted in the soul that was before dead in trespasses and sins; and it qualifies not only for obeying the Saviour's precepts, but chiefly and primarily for receiving from, and rejoicing in, His fullness, admiring His love, His work, His person, His glory, His advocacy. It makes Christ precious, enthrones Him in the heart, presents Him as the most delightful object to our meditations; as our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and strength; our Root, Head, Life, Shepherd, and Husband. These are all Scriptural expressions and images, setting forth, so far as words can declare, what Jesus is in Himself and to His believing people. But how cold is the comment which rational assent puts upon very many passages wherein the apostle Paul endeavours (but in vain) to express the fullness of his heart upon this subject!

A most valued friend of mine, a clergyman, now living, had for many years given a rational assent to the Gospel. He laboured with much earnestness upon your plan, was very exemplary in his whole conduct, preached almost incessantly, (two or three times every day in the week, for years,) having a parish in the remote parts of Yorkshire, of great extent, and containing five or six different hamlets at some distance from each other. He succeeded, likewise, with his people, so far as to break them off from outward irregularities; and was mentioned in a letter to the Society for Propagating the Gospel (which I have seen in print) as the most perfect example of a parish-priest which this nation, or, perhaps, this age, has produced. Thus he went on, for many years, teaching his people what he knew, for he could teach them no more. He lived in such retirement and recess, that he was unacquainted with the persons and principles of any who are now branded as enthusiasts and Methodists. One day, reading Eph. iii. in his Greek Testament, his thoughts were stopped by the word *anexichniaston* (unsearchable) in verse 8. He was struck, and led to think with himself to this purpose; "The apostle, when speaking of the love and riches of Christ, uses remarkable expressions; he speaks of heights, depths, and lengths, and breadths, and unsearchables, where I seem to find every thing plain, easy, and rational. He finds mysteries where I can perceive none. Surely, though I use the words Gospel, faith, and grace with him, my ideas of them must be different from his." This led him to a close examination of all his epistles, and, by the blessing of God, brought on a total change in his views and preaching. He no longer set his people to keep a law of faith, to trust in their sincerity and endeavours, upon some general hope that Christ would help them out where they came short, but he preached Christ Himself, as the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. He felt himself, and laboured to convince others, that there is no hope for a sinner but merely in the blood of Jesus, and no possibility of his doing any works acceptable to God, till he himself be first made accepted in the Beloved. Nor did he labour in vain. Now his preaching effected not only an outward reformation, but a real change of heart in very many of his hearers. The word was received, as Paul expresses it, not with a rational assent only, but with demonstration, and power in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; and their endeavours to observe the Gospel-precepts were abundantly more extensive, uniform, and successful, when they were brought to say with the apostle, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God."

Such a change of views and sentiments I pray God my friend may experience. These things may appear uncouth to you at present, as they have done to many, who now bless God for showing them what their reason could never have taught them. My divinity is unfashionable enough at present, but it was not so always; you will find few books written from the era of the Reformation, till a little before Laud's time, that set forth any other. There were few pulpits, till after the Restoration, from which any other was heard. A lamentable change has, indeed, since taken place; but God has not left himself without witnesses. You

think, though I disclaim infallibility, I arrogate too much in speaking with so much certainty. I am fallible indeed but I am sure of the main points of doctrine I hold. I am not in the least doubt, whether salvation be of faith or of works; whether faith be of our own power, or of God's operation; whether Christ's obedience, or our own, be the just ground of our hope; whether a man can truly call Jesus Lord, but by the teaching of the Holy Ghost. I have no more hesitation about these points than I should have, were I asked, Whether it was God or man who created the heavens and the earth? Besides, as I have more than once observed, your sentiments were once my own; so that I, who have travelled both roads, may have, perhaps, some stronger reasons to determine me which is the right, than you can have who have only travelled one.

Your two sheets may lead me to write as many queries, if I do not check myself. I now come to the two queries you propose, the solution of which, you think, will clearly mark the difference of our sentiments. The substance of them is, 1st, Whether I think any sinner ever perished in his sins, (to whom the Gospel has been preached,) because God refused to supply him with such a proportion of His assistance as was absolutely necessary to his believing and repenting, or without his having previously rejected the incitements of his Holy Spirit? A full answer to this would require a sheet. But briefly, I believe that all mankind being corrupt and guilty before God, He might, without impeachment to His justice, have left them all to perish, as we are assured He did the fallen angels. But He was pleased to show mercy, and mercy must be free. If the sinner has any claim to it, so far it is justice, not mercy. He who is to be our Judge assures us, that few find the gate that leadeth to life, while many throng the road to destruction. Your question seems to imply, that you think God either did make salvation equally open to all, or that it would have been more becoming His goodness to have done so.

But He is the potter, we are the clay: His ways and thoughts are above ours, as the heavens are higher than the earth. The Judge of all the earth will do right. He has appointed a day when He will manifest, to the conviction of all, that he has done right. Till then, I hold it best to take things upon His word, and not too harshly determine what it becomes Jehovah to do. Instead of saying what I think, let it suffice to remind you of what St. Paul thought, Rom. ix. 15-21. But farther, I say, that unless mercy were afforded to those who are saved, in a way peculiar to themselves, and which is not afforded to those who perish, I believe no one soul could be saved. For I believe fallen man, universally considered as such, is as incapable of doing the least thing towards his salvation, till prevented by the grace of God, (as our Article speaks,) as a dead body is of restoring itself to life. Whatever difference takes place between men, in this respect, is of grace, that is of God, undeserved. Yea, His first approaches to our hearts are undesired too; for, till He seeks us, we cannot, we will not, seek Him, Psalm cx. 3. It is in the day of His power and not before, His people are made willing. But, I believe, where the Gospel is preached, they who do perish do willfully resist the light, and choose and cleave to darkness and stifle the convictions which the truths of God, when His true Gospel is, indeed, preached, will, in one degree or other, force upon their minds. The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, the love of other things, the violence of sinful appetites, their prejudices, pride, and self-righteousness, either prevent the reception or choke the growth of the good seed: thus their own sin and obstinacy is the proper cause of their destruction: they will not come to Christ that they may have life. At the same time, it is true that they cannot, unless they are supernaturally drawn of God, John v. 40; vi. 44. They will not, and they cannot, come. Both are equally true, and they are consistent. For a man's cannot is not a natural, but a moral inability; not an impossibility in the nature of things, as it is for me to walk upon the water, or to fly in the air; but such an inability, as, instead of extenuating, does exceedingly enhance and aggravate his guilt. He is so blinded by Satan, so alienated from God by nature and wicked works, so given up to sin, so averse from that way of salvation, which is contrary to his pride and natural wisdom, that he will not embrace it, or seek after it; and, therefore, he

cannot, till the grace of God powerfully enlightens his mind, and overcomes his obstacles. But this brings me to your second query.

Do I think that God, in the ordinary course of His providence, grants this assistance in an irresistible manner or effects faith and conversion without the sinner's own hearty consent and concurrence? I rather choose to term grace invincible than irresistible: For it is too often resisted even by those who believe; but because it is invincible, it triumphs over all resistance, when He is pleased to bestow it. For the rest, I believe no sinner is converted without his own hearty will and concurrence.

But he is not willing till he is made so. Why does he at all refuse? Because he is insensible of his state; because he knows not the evil of sin, the strictness of the law, the majesty of God whom he has offended, nor the total apostasy of his heart; because he is blind to eternity, and ignorant of the excellency of Christ; because he is comparatively whole, and sees not his need of this great Physician; because he relies upon his own wisdom, power, and supposed righteousness.

Now, in this state of things, when God comes with a purpose of mercy, he begins by convincing the person of sin, judgment, and righteousness; causes him to feel and know that he is a lost, condemned, helpless creature, and then discovers to him the necessity, sufficiency, and willingness of Christ to save them that are ready to perish, without money or price, without doings or deservings. Then he sees faith to be very different from a rational assent, finds that nothing but the power of God can produce a well-grounded hope in the heart of a convinced sinner; therefore looks to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of faith, to enable him to believe.

For this he waits in what we call the means of grace; he prays, he reads the word, he thirsts for God, as the hart pants for the water-brooks; and though perhaps for a while he is distressed with many doubts and fears, he is encouraged to wait on, because Jesus has said, "Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out." The obstinacy of the will remains while the understanding is dark, and ceases when that is enlightened. Suppose a man walking in the dark, where there are pits and precipices of which he is not aware: you are sensible of his danger, and call after him; but he thinks he knows better than you, refuses your advice, and is perhaps angry with you for your importunity.

He sees no danger, therefore will not be persuaded there is any: but if you go with a light, get before him, and show him plainly, that if he takes another step he falls beyond the power of recovery; then he will stop of his own accord, blame himself for not minding you before, and be ready to comply with your farther directions. In either case man's will acts with equal freedom; the difference of his conduct arises from conviction. Something like this is the case of our spiritual concerns.

Sinners are called and warned by the Word; but they are wise in their own eyes, and take but little notice till the Lord gives them light, which He is not bound to give to any, and therefore cannot be bound to give to all. They who have it, have reason to be thankful, and subscribe to the apostle's words, "By grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

I have not yet half done with the first sheet; I shall consider the rest at leisure, but send this as a specimen of my willingness to clear my sentiments to you as far as I can. Unless it should please God to make what I offer satisfactory, I well know beforehand what objections and answers will occur to you; for these points have been often debated; and after a course of twenty-seven years, in which religion has been the chief object of my thoughts and inquiries, I am not entirely a stranger to what can be offered on either side. What I write, I write simply and in love; beseeching Him, who alone can set a seal to His own truth, to

guide you and bless you. This letter has been more than a week in hand; I have been called from it I suppose ten times, frequently in the middle of a period or a line. My leisure, which before was small, is now reduced almost to a nothing. But I am desirous to keep up my correspondence with you, because I feel an affectionate interest in you, and because it pleased God to put it into your heart to apply to me. You cannot think how your first letter struck me: it was so unexpected, and seemed so improbable that you should open your mind to me, I immediately conceived a hope that it would prove for good. Nor am I yet discouraged.

When you have leisure and inclination, write; I shall always be glad to hear from you, and I will proceed in answering what I have already by me, as fast as I can. But I have many letters now waiting for answers, which must be attended to.

I recommend you to the blessing and care of the great Shepherd; and remain, &c.

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