

An Essay on the Genius, Works, and Times of Baxter ~ Excerpts

by Richard Baxter

Baxter reflects on the changes in his mind and priorities over time, emphasizing the importance of focusing on fundamental Christian doctrines and the imperfection of most men's care of their salvation.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:18, 1 Corinthians 13:2, Ephesians 4:3, Philippians 2:3, James 4:10

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Humility"

Description

Richard Baxter reflects on the changes in his character and spiritual journey over the years, emphasizing the importance of humility, self-denial, and a deepening love for God. He acknowledges his past zeal for controversies and scholastic writings, but now values fundamental doctrines and practical godliness above all. Baxter highlights the dangers of spiritual pride, selfishness, and the need for self-examination and repentance. He expresses a shift towards solitude, a focus on heavenly matters, and a greater concern for unity among Christians. Ultimately, Baxter's reflections serve as a call to sincere devotion, selfless love, and a humble pursuit of God's truth.

Transcript

Some few years before his death, Baxter took a minute and extensive survey of his own character, and committed it to paper. From this paper the following extracts are taken: -

"Because it is soul-experiments which those that urge me to this kind of writing do expect that I should especially communicate to others, and I have said little of God's dealing with my soul since the time of my younger years, I shall only give the reader so much satisfaction as to acquaint him truly what change God hath made upon my mind and heart since those unripe times, and wherein I now differ in judgment and disposition from myself. And, for any more particular account of heart-occurrences, and God's operations on me, I think it somewhat unsavory to recite them; seeing God's dealings are much the same with all his servants in the main, and the points wherein he varieth are usually so small, that I think such not fit to be repeated. Nor have I any thing extraordinary to glory in, which is not common to the rest of my brethren, who have the same spirit, and are servants of the same Lord. And the true reason why I do adventure so far upon the censure of the world, as to tell them wherein the case is altered with me, is, that I may take off young, inexperienced Christians from being over-confident in their first apprehensions, or overvaluing their first degrees of grace, or too much applauding and following unfurnished, inexperienced men; but may

somewhat be directed what mind and course of life to prefer, by the judgment of one that hath tried both before them.

"The temper of my mind hath somewhat altered with the temper of my body. When I was young, I was more vigorous, affectionate and fervent in preaching, conference, and prayer, than ordinarily I can be now: my style was more extemporary and lax; but by the advantage of affection, and a very familiar moving voice and utterance, my preaching then did more affect the auditory, than many of the last years before I gave over preaching; but yet what I delivered was much more raw, and had more passages that would not bear the trial of accurate judgments, and my discourses had both less substance and less judgment than of late.

"My understanding was then quicker, and could more easily manage any thing that was newly presented to it upon a sudden; but it is since better furnished, and acquainted with the way's of truth and error, and with a multitude of particular mistakes of the world, which then I was the more in danger of, because I had only the faculty of knowing them, but did not actually know them. I was then like a man of a quick understanding that was to travel a way which he never went before, or to cast up an account which he never laboured in before, or to play on an instrument of music which he never saw before; and I am now like one of somewhat a slower understanding, by that *prematura senectus*, which weakness and excessive bleedings brought me to, who is traveling a way which he hath often gone, and is casting up an account which he hath often cast up, and hath ready at hand, and that is playing on an instrument which he hath often played on: so that I can very confidently say, that my judgment is much sounder and firmer now than it was then; and I can now judge of the effects, as well as of the acting's of my understanding; and, when I peruse the writings which I wrote in my younger years, I can find the footsteps of my unfurnished mind, and of my emptiness and insufficiency: so that the man that followed my judgment then, was more likely to be misled by me than he who should follow it now.

"And yet, that I may not say worse than it deserveth of my former measure of understanding, I shall truly tell you what change I find now, in the perusal of my own writings. Those points, which then I thoroughly studied, my judgment is the same of now as it was then; and therefore, in the substance of my religion, and in those controversies which I then searched into, with some extraordinary diligence, I find not my mind disposed to a change. But in divers points that I studied slightly and by the halves, and in many things which I took upon trust from others, I have found since that my apprehensions were either erroneous, or very lame.

"And I must say further, that what I last mentioned on the by, is one of the most notable changes of my mind. In my youth I was quickly past my fundamentals, and was running up into a multitude of controversies, and greatly delighted with metaphysical and scholastic writings, though, I must needs say, my preaching was still on the necessary points. But, the older I grew, the smaller stress I laid upon these controversies and curiosities, (though still my intellect abhorreth confusion,) as finding far greater uncertainties in them than I at first discerned, and finding less usefulness comparatively, even when there is the greatest certainty. And now it is the fundamental doctrines of the catechism which I most highly value, and daily think of, and find most useful to myself and others. The creed, the Lord's prayer, and the ten commandments, do find me now the most acceptable and plentiful matter for all my meditations. They are to me as my daily bred and drink. And, as I can speak and write of them over and over again, so I had rather read or hear of them, than any of the school niceties, which once so pleased me. And thus I observed it was with old Archbishop Usher, and with many other men; and I conjecture that this effect also is mixed of good and bad, according to it's causes.

"The bad cause may, perhaps, be some natural infirmity and decay. And, as trees, in the spring, shoot up into branches, leaves, and blossoms, but, in the autumn, the life draws down into the root; so possibly my nature, conscious of its infirmity and decay, may find itself insufficient for numerous particles, and to rise up for the attempting of difficult things, and so my mind may retire to the root of christian principles; and also I have often been afraid, lest ill-rooting at first, and many temptations afterwards, have made it more necessary for me than many others to retire to the root, and secure my fundamentals. But, upon much observation, I am afraid lest most others are in no better a case; and that, at the first, they take it for a granted thing, that Christ is the Saviour of the world, and that the soul is immortal, and that there is a heaven and a hell, &c. while they are studying abundance of scholastic superstructures, and at last will find cause to study more soundly their religion itself, as well as I have done.

"The better causes are these:- 1. I value all things according to their use and ends, and I find in the daily practice and experience of my soul, that the knowledge of God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit, and the truth of Scriptures, and the life to come, and of a holy life, is of more use to me than all the most curious speculations. 2. I know that every man must grow, as trees do, downwards and upwards both at once, and that the roots increase as the bulk and branches do. 3. Being near death and another world, I am the more regardful of those things which my everlasting life or death depend on. 4. Having most to do with ignorant, miserable people, I am commanded, by my charity and reason, to treat with them of that which their salvation lieth on, and not to dispute with them of formalities and niceties, when the question is presently to be determined, whether they shall dwell for ever in heaven or hell. In a word, my meditations must be most upon the matters of my practice and my interest, so must it be of my meditation. That is the best doctrine and study, which maketh men better, and tendeth to make them happy. I abhor the folly of those unlearned persons, who revile or despise learning, because they know not what it is; and I take not any part of true learning to be useless. And yet my soul approveth of the resolution of holy Paul, who determined to know nothing among his hearers, that is, comparatively to value and make ostentation of no other wisdom, but the knowledge of a crucified Christ. To know God in Christ is life eternal. As the stock of the tree affordeth timber to build houses and cities, when the small, though higher multifarious branches are but to make a crow's nest, or a blaze; so the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, of heaven and holiness, doth build up the soul to endless blessedness, and affordeth it solid peace and comfort, when a multitude of school niceties serve but for vain janglings, and hurtful divisions and contentions. I would persuade my reader to study and live upon the essential doctrines of Christianity and godliness. And, the he may know that my testimony is somewhat regardable, I presume to say, that in this I as much gainsay my natural inclination to subtly and accuracy in knowing, as he is like to do by his, if he obey my counsel. And I think, if he lived among infidels and enemies of Christ, he would find that to make good the doctrine of faith and of life eternal, were not only his noblest and most useful study, but also that which would require the height of all his parts, an the utmost of his diligence, to manage it skillfully to the satisfaction of himself and others.

" I add, therefore, that this is another thing which I am changed in; that whereas, in my younger days, I never was tempted to doubt of the truth of Scripture or Christianity, but all my doubts and fears were exercised at home, about my own sincerity and interest in Christ, and this was it which I called unbelief; since then, my sorest assaults have been on the other side; and such they were, that, had I been void of internal experience, and the adhesion of love, and the special help of God, and had not discerned more reason for my religion than I did when I was younger, I had certainly apostatized to infidelity, though, for atheism or ungodliness, my reason seeth no stronger arguments than may be brought to prove that there is no earth, air, or sun. I am now, therefore, much more apprehensive than heretofore, of the necessity of

well-grounding men in their religion, and especially of the witness of Christ and Christianity to the world. And though the folly of fanatics tempted me long to overlook the strength of this testimony of the Spirit, while they placed it in a certain internal assertion, or enthusiastic inspiration, yet now I see that the Holy Ghost, in another manner, is the witness of Christ and his agent in the world. The spirit in the prophets was his first witness, and the spirit by miracles was the second; and the Spirit by renovation, sanctification, illumination, and consolation, assimilating the soul to Christ and heaven, is the continued witness to all true believers. And, 'if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, the same is none of his,' Rom viii. 9; even as the rational soul in the child is the inherent witness, or evidence, that he is the child of rational parents. And, therefore, ungodly persons have a great disadvantage in their resisting temptations to unbelief, and it is no wonder if Christ be a stumbling-block to the Jews, and to the gentiles foolishness. There is many a one that hideth his temptations to infidelity, because he thinketh it a shame to open them, and because it may degenerate doubts in others; but, I fear, the imperfection of most men's care of their salvation, and of their diligence and resolution in a holy life, doth come from the imperfection of their belief of Christianity and the life to come. For my part, I must profess, that when my belief of things eternal, and of the Scripture, is most clear and firm, all goeth accordingly in my soul, and all temptations to sinful compliances, worldliness, or flesh-pleasing, do signify worse to me than an invitation to the stocks or bedlam; and no petition seemeth more necessary to me, than, 'Lord, increase our faith: I believe, help thou my unbelief.'

"In my younger years, my trouble for sin was most about my actual failings, in thought, word, or action, except hardness of heart, of which more anon; but now I am much more troubled for inward defects, and omission or want of the vital duties or graces in the soul. My daily trouble is so much for my ignorance of God, and weakness of belief, and want of greater love to God, and strangeness to him, and to the life to come, and for want of a greater willingness to die, and longing to be with God in heaven, as that I take not some immoralities, though very great, to be in themselves such great and odious sins, if they could be found as separate from these. Had I all the riches of the world, how gladly should I give them, for a fuller knowledge, belief, and love of God and everlasting glory! These wants are the greatest burdens of my life, which often makes my life itself a burden. And I cannot find any hope of reaching so high in these, while I am in the flesh, as I once hoped before this time to have attained; which maketh me the wearier of this sinful world, which is honored with so little of the knowledge of God.

"Heretofore I placed much of my religion in tenderness of heart, and grieving for sin, and penitential tears; and less of it in the love of God, and studying his love and goodness, and in his joyful praises, than I now do. Then I was little sensible of the greatness and excellency of love and praise, though I coldly spake the same words in its commendation as I now do. And now I am less troubled for want of grief and tears, though I more value humility, and refuse not needful humiliation; but my conscience now looketh at love and delight in God, and praising him, as the top of all my religious duties, for which it is that I value and use the rest.

" My judgment is much more for frequent and serious meditation on the heavenly blessedness, than it was heretofore in my younger days. I then thought that a sermon on the attributes of God, and the joys of heaven, were not the most excellent; and was wont to say, 'Every body knoweth this, that God is great and good, and that heaven is a blessed place; I had rather hear how I may attain it.' And nothing pleased me so well as the doctrine of regeneration, and the marks of sincerity, because these subjects were suitable to me in that state. But now I had rather read, hear, or meditate on God and heaven, than on any other subject; for I perceive that it is the object that altereth and elevateth the mind, which will be such as that is which it most frequently feedeth on; and that it is not only useful to our comfort, to be much in heaven in

our believing thoughts, but that it must animate all out other duties, and fortify us against every temptation and sin; and that the love of the end is the poise, or spring, which setteth every wheel agoing, and must put us on to all means; and that a man is no more a christian indeed, than he is heavenly.

" I was once wont to meditate most on my own heart, and to dwell all at home, and look little higher. I was still poring either on my sins or wants, or examining my sincerity. But now, though I am greatly convinced of the need of heart-acquaintance and employment, yet I see more need of a higher work; and that I should look oftener upon Christ, and God, and heaven, than upon my own heart. At home I can find distempers to trouble me, and some evidences of my peace; but it is above that I must find matter of delight and joy, and love and peace itself. Therefore I would have one thought at home, upon myself and sins, and many thoughts above, upon the high, and amiable, and beautifying objects.

"Heretofore I knew much less than now, and yet was not half so much acquainted with my ignorance. I had a great delight in the daily new discoveries which I made, and of the light which shined in upon me, like a man that cometh into a country where he never was before; but I little knew, either how imperfectly I understood those very points, whose discovery so much delighted me, nor how much might be said against them, nor how many things I was yet a stranger to: but now I find far greater darkness upon all things, and perceive how very little it is that we know in comparison of that which we are ignorant of; and I have far meaner thoughts of my own understanding, though I must needs know that it is better furnished than it was then.

"Accordingly, I had then a far higher opinion of learned persons and books than I have now; for what I wanted myself, I thought every reverend divine had attained, and was familiarly acquainted with. And what books I understood not, by means of the strangeness of the terms or matter, I the more admired, and thought that others understood their worth. But now, experience hath constrained me, against my will, to know that reverend, learned men are imperfect, and know but little as well as I, especially those who think themselves the wisest; and, the better I am acquainted with them, the more I perceive that we are all yet in the dark. And the more I am acquainted with holy men, that are all for heaven, and pretend not much to subtilties, the more I value and honour them. And, when I have studied hard to understand some abstruse admired book, as 'De Scientia Dei,' De Providentia circa malum.' De Decretis,' De Predeterminatione,' De Libertate Creature,' &c. I have but attained the knowledge of human imperfection, and to see that the author is but a man as well as I.

"And at first I took more upon my author's credit than now I can do; and when an author was highly commended to me by others, or pleased me in some part, I was ready to entertain the whole; whereas now I take and leave in the same author, and dissent in some things from him that I like best, as well as from others.

"And at first the style of the authors took as much with me as the argument, and made the arguments seem more forcible; but now I judge not of truth at all by any such ornaments or accidents, but by its naked evidence.

"I now see more good and more evil in all men than heretofore I did. I see that good men are not so good as I once thought they were, but have more imperfections; and that nearer approach, and fuller trial, doth make the best appear more weak and faulty, than their admirers at a distance think. And I find that few are so bad, as either their malicious enemies, or censorious separating professors, do imagine. In some, indeed, I find that human nature is corrupted into a greater likeness to devils than I ever thought any on

earth had been; but, even in the wicked, usually there is more for grace to make advantage of, and more to testify for God and holiness, than I once believed there had been.

"I less admire gifts of utterance, and bare profession of religion, than I once did; and have much more charity for many, who, by want of the gifts, do make an obscurer profession than they. I once thought, that almost all that could pray movingly and fluently, and talk well of religion, had been saints. But experience hath opened to me what odious crimes may consist with high profession; and I have met with divers obscure persons, not noted for any extraordinary profession, or forwardness in religion, but only live a quiet, blameless life, whom I have found to have long lived, as far as I could discern, a truly godly and sanctified life; only their prayers and duties were, by accident, kept secret from other men's observation. Yet he that upon this pretense would confound the godly and the ungodly, may as well go about to lay heaven and hell together.

"I am not so narrow in my special love as heretofore. Being less censorious, and talking more than I did for saints, it must needs follow that I love more as saints than I did before.

"I am much more sensible how prone many young professors are to spiritual pride, and self-conceitedness, and unruliness, and division, and so to prove the grief of their teachers, and firebrands in the church; and how much of a minister's work lieth in preventing this, and humbling and confirming such young, inexperienced professors, and keeping them in order in their progress in religion.

"Yet I am more sensible of the sin and mischief of using men cruelly in matters of religion, and of pretending men's good, and the order of the church, for acts of inhumanity and uncharitableness. Such know not their own infirmity, nor yet the nature of pastoral government, which ought to be paternal, and by love; nor do they know the way to win a soul, nor to maintain the church's peace.

"I am more deeply afflicted for the disagreements of Christians, than I was when I was a younger christian. Except the case of the infidel world, nothing is so sad and grievous to my thoughts, as the case of the divided churches; and, therefore, I am more deeply sensible of the sinfulness of those prelates and pastors of the churches who are the principal cause of these divisions. Oh how many millions of souls are kept by them in ignorance and ungodliness, and deluded by faction as if it were true religion! How is the conversion of infidels hindered by them, and Christ and religion heinously dishonored! The contentions between the Greek church and the Roman, the papists and the protestants, the Lutherans and the Calvinists, have woefully hindered the kingdom of Christ.

"I am further than ever I was from expecting great matters of unity, splendour, or prosperity to the church on earth, or that saints should dream of a kingdom of this world, or flatter themselves with the hopes of a golden age, or reigning over the ungodly, till there be a new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. And, on the contrary, I am more apprehensive that sufferings must be the church's most ordinary lot, and Christians must indeed must be self-denying cross-bearers, even where there are none but formal, nominal Christians to be the cross-makers. And though, ordinarily, God would have vicissitudes of summer and winter, day and night, that the church may grow extensively in the summer of prosperity, and intensively and rootedly in the winter of adversity; yet, usually, their night is longer than their day, and that day itself hath its storms and tempests.

"I do not lay so great a stress upon the external modes and forms of worship, as many young professors do. I have suspected myself, as perhaps the reader may do, that this is from a cooling and declining from my former zeal, though the truth is, I never much complied with men of that mind; but I find that judgment

and charity are the causes of it, as far as I am able to discover. I cannot be so narrow in my principles of church communion as many are, that are so much for liturgy, or so much against it, so much for ceremonies, or so much against them, that they can hold no communion with no church which is not of their mind and way. If I were among the Greeks, the Lutherans, the independents, yea, the Anabaptists, that own no heresy, nor set themselves against charity and peace, I would hold, sometimes, occasional communion with them as Christians, if they will give me leave, without forcing me to any sinful subscription or action; though my most usual communion should be with that society which I thought most agreeable to the word of God, if I were free to choose. I cannot be of their opinion, that think God will not accept him that prayeth by the Common Prayer book, and that such forms are a self-invented worship which God rejected; nor yet can I be of their mind that say the like of extemporary prayers.

"I am much less regardful of the approbation of man, and set much lighter by contempt or applause, than I did long ago. I am often suspicious that this is not only from the increase of self-denial and humility, but partly from my being glutted and surfeited with human applause, and all worldly things appear most vain and unsatisfactory when we have tried them most. But though I feel that this hath some hand in the effect, yet, as far as I can perceive, the knowledge of man's nothingness, and God's transcendent goodness, with whom it is that I have most to do, and the sense of the brevity of human things, and the nearness of eternity, are the principal causes of this effect, which some have imputed to self-conceitedness and moroseness.

"I am more and more pleased with a solitary life; and though, in a way of self-denial, I could submit to the most public life, for the service of God, when he requireth it, and would not be unprofitable that I might be private; yet, I must confess, it is much more pleasing to myself to be retired from the world, and, to have very little to do with men, and to converse with God and conscience, and good books.

"Though I was never much tempted to the sin of covetousness, yet my fear of dying was wont to tell me, that I was not sufficiently loosened from this world. But I find that it is comparatively very easy to me to be loose from this world, but hard to live by faith above. To despise earth is easy to me; but not so easy to be acquainted and conversant in heaven. I have nothing in this world which I could not easily let go; but to get satisfying apprehensions of the other world, is the great and grievous difficulty.

"I am much more apprehensive than long ago of the odiousness and danger of the sin of pride; scarce any sin appeareth more odious to me. Having daily more acquaintance with the lamentable naughtiness and frailty of man, and of the mischiefs of that sin, and, especially, in matters spiritual and ecclesiastical, I think, so far as any man is proud, he is kin to the devil, and utterly a stranger to God to himself. It is a wonder that it should be a possible sin, to men that still carry about with them, in soul and body, such humbling matter of remedy as we all do.

"I more than ever lament the unhappiness of the nobility, gentry, and great ones of the world, who live in such temptation to sensuality, animosity, and wasting of their time about a multitude of little things; and whose lives are too often the transcripts of the sins of Solomon- pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness, and want of compassion to the poor. And I more value the life of the poor labouring man, but especially of him that hath neither poverty nor riches.

"I am much more sensible than heretofore of the breadth, and length, and depth of the radical, universal, and odious sin of selfishness, and therefore have written so much against it; and of the excellency and necessity of self-denial, and of a public mind, and of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

"I am more and more sensible that most controversies have need of right stating than of debating; and, if my skill be increased in anything, it is in that, in narrowing controversies by explication, and separating the real from the verbal, and proving to many contenders, that they differ less than they think they do.

"I am more solicitous than I have been about my duty to God, and less solicitous about his dealings with me, as being assured that he will do all things well; and as acknowledging the goodness of all the declarations of his holiness, even in punishment of man, and, as knowing that there is no rest but in the will and goodness of God.

"Though my works were never such as could be any temptation to me to dream of obliging God by proper merits in commutative justice; yet one of the most ready, constant, undoubted evidences of my uprightness and interest in his covenant, is the consciousness of my living as devoted to him. And I the more easily believe the pardon of my failings, through my Redeemer, while I know that I serve no other master, and that I know no other end, or trade, or business of my life, with my longing desires after perfection, in the knowledge, and belief, and love of God, and in a holy and heavenly mind and life, are the two standing, constant, discernible evidences, which most put me out of doubt of my sincerity. And I find that constant action and duty is it that keepeth the first always in sight; and constant wants and weaknesses, and coming short of my desires, do make those desires still the more troublesome, and so the more easily still perceived.

"Though my habitual judgment, and resolution, and scope of life be still the same, yet I find a great mutability as to actual apprehensions, and degrees of grace; and, consequently, find that so mutable a thing as the mind of man, would never keep itself, if God were not it's keeper. When I have been seriously musing upon the reasons of Christianity, with the concurrent evidences methodically placed in their just advantages before my eyes, I am so clear in my belief of the christian verities, that Satan hath little room for a temptation. But, sometimes, when he hath on a sudden set some temptation before me, when the foresaid evidences have been out of the way, or less upon my thoughts, he hath by such surprises amazed me, and weakened my faith in the present age. So also as to the love of God, and trusting in him, sometimes, when the motives are clearly apprehended, the duty is more easy and delightful. And, at other times, I am merely passive and dull, if not guilty of actual despondency and distrust.

"Thus much of the alterations of my soul, since my younger years, I thought best to give the reader, instead of all those experiences and actual motions and affections, which I suppose him rather to have expected an account of. And having transcribed thus much of a life which God hath read, and conscience hath read, and must further read, I humbly lament it, and beg pardon of it, as sinful, and too unequal and unprofitable. And I warn the reader to amend that in his own, which he findeth to be amiss in mine; confessing, also, that much hath been amiss, which I have not here particularly mentioned, and that I have not lived according to the abundant mercies of the Lord. But what I have recorded, hath been especially to perform my vows, and declare his praise to all generations, who hath filled up my days with his invaluable favours, and bound me to bless his name for ever.

"And that which I named before on the by, is grown one of my great diseases. I have lost much of that zeal which I had to propagate any truths to others, save the mere fundamentals. When I perceive people or ministers, which is too common, to think they know what indeed they do not, and to dispute those things which they never thoroughly studied, or expect I should debate the case with them, as if an hour's talk would serve instead of an acute understanding and seven year's study, I have no zeal to make them of my opinion, but an impatience of continuing discourse with them on such subjects, and am apt to be silent, or

to turn to something else; which, though there be some reason for it, I feel cometh from a want of zeal for the truth, and from an impatient temper of mind. I am ready to think that people should quickly understand all in a few words; and, if they cannot, lazily to despair of them, and leave them to themselves. And I the more know that it is sinful in me, because it is partly so in other things, even about the faults of my servants, or other inferiors; if three or four times warning do no good on them, I am much tempted to despair of them, and turn them away and leave them to themselves.

"I mention all these distempers, that my faults may be a warning to others to take heed, as they call on myself for repentance and watchfulness. O Lord, for the merits, and sacrifice, and intercession of Christ, be merciful to me a sinner, and forgive my known and unknown sins."

Richard Baxter

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