

Letters Home

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."
Galatians 4:4-6



Dear God,

I long for You more today than I did yesterday. I long for You more this month, than the same month last year. For with each passing month it seems that the world pulls further away from You. Sometimes it takes me with it—it has, for just a moment, fooled me into turning my gaze away from Your light. But more often when the world widens the gulf that exists between it and You, I do everything in my power (and Yours) to let it continue on its way without me.

For You see, Lord, they are trying to forget You. They are trying to forget You exist. And there is a smarmy bit of foolishness going on right now that illustrates how people down here behave as if You never did...

Sometimes I get the feeling that there has been a role reversal down here. It used to be that the small people of the world—small people like me—would gain strength and encouragement by looking up to our leaders. They were individuals with vision, clarity of purpose, and good moral fiber. They were people whose heads, no matter their physical height, were lifted above the rest. They held places of responsibility and honor because they were willing to

Aspects

Encouraging believers to know God and His ways, and to enjoy a more intimate communion with Him

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live sacrificially, setting the welfare of others before their own.

But now it seems that very often it is the small people who are the ones with character and discernment—people of character forced to look with scorn upon the disreputable behavior of their leaders.

We have a Democratic Congressman from California who has been found out as a philanderer, adulterer, and just maybe—at this point only he and You know the full truth on this matter—involved in the disappearance of one of his recent paramours. For several months the politician has remained mute on his apparent transgressions, while all around him has accumulated a mountain of damning evidence.

Finally, the other night the representative orchestrated an opportunity to finally come clean, show a little remorse, be forthright with his constituents about what he has been up to. But in the customary way of our leaders these days, he just squandered the opportunity, using it, instead, to stonewall and lie some more—only this time with words, instead of silence.

But Father, what troubles me more than the sight of a government leader cheating on his wife—certainly this world’s *second* oldest occupation—is that such behavior is no longer considered immoral. The last question of the interview with the politician was “Do you think you’re a moral man?”

Well, let’s see: Several women, along with others who have substantiated their claims, have given detailed, corroborating evidence about his chronic philandering. Yet, to the interviewer, to his wife sitting in the next room, to his constituents, and to the rest of the nation, his reply was, “I think I am a moral man. Yes.”

During sad, embarrassing moments such as this, I remember the shortest verse in Your word, in John’s gospel: “Jesus wept.”

There is no sorrow in heaven for Your children, but does Jesus weep over the ignorance of His creation? Does He weep over the choices we make, the many times we choose our own self-centered way over Yours? Does He sometimes wish He could return *before* His final Return, just to box us about the ears and knock some sense into our thick skulls?

Are You ever sorry You gave us free will?



Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible. Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free. If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will—that is, for making a live world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings—then we may take it it is worth paying. C.S. Lewis



Dear God,

Though we down here may surround ourselves with objects of apparent permanence—our home, bookshelves, furniture, those items with which we have established an emotional bond—most of what flows into our lives only remains for a moment before passing on through to be disposed of in one way or another.

In this disposable society, most of the objects we use every day have a relatively short life span. They are used, then thrown away. And in a typical city environment, where many people live in a small area, trash is usually hauled away by professionals: out of sight, out of mind.

But out here in the country, where You have put us, there are more disposal options. In a rural setting, where water comes from a well, and human waste is sent not to a sewage treatment plant, but into a septic tank sitting under the front lawn, the discards of a life may meet with one of any number of ends.

As You know Father, my wife and I are not tree-huggers. We aren’t eco-terrorists, or even adamant, fundamentalist recyclers. We are just frugal, practical people who don’t like paying for anything we don’t have to. Most of all, we don’t like paying others to do what we can do ourselves. So when our waste management service recently doubled its rate, we decided to consider alternatives.

We have always done a certain amount of recycling. Plastic milk jugs, tin cans and glass jars usually have been delivered to the large metal bins at the local dump, rather than included with the rest of the garbage. But for the most part, whatever was thrown away was placed into a pair of larger garbage cans and set down at the end of the drive, where every Monday a truck would come and swallow their contents.

With the exception of vegetable matter for the garden compost pile, everything went into the same trash receptacle: meat scraps, cereal boxes, papers, envelopes, used kitty litter (25 pounds per week), aluminum foil, leftovers that had begun to take root in the back of the fridge, old gravy and soups, coffee grounds and burned-out light bulbs. Roughly eight, 30-gallon garbage cans were filled and emptied every month.

Under our new system, though, everything gets shunted off into other directions, and what once resembled a fairly direct pipeline from 'in' to 'out,' now resembles an octopus, with tentacles flared out in many directions.

We now recycle an even wider assortment of plastics, and now the compost pile receives a greater amount of scraps. I have set up a cage out west of the house where I now burn a rather staggering amount of paper, plastic, egg cartons, butter wrappers, and those highly irritating stacks of Sunday newspaper ads. As much as possible, things such as newspapers and plastic bags are used more than once, for a variety of purposes, before being consumed. And some things, such as the aforementioned twenty-five pounds of used kitty litter, are broadcast out across the open field to let them weather down into their original, natural state.

Under the new system, we have reduced down to one, small grocery bag the amount of garbage in a month that cannot in any other way be destroyed. Things such as meat scraps and aluminum foil, old shoes or thick chunks of plastic are taken into the woods and buried—as they always have been by the official garbage men.

Father, You have always flowed stuff into our life. It comes in by invitation, by choice, and sometimes—seemingly, from our perspective—by official fiat. It comes in when we want it, and in the back door when we're not looking. Most of it we find useful to one immediate purpose or another, but some stuff seems to us to be superfluous from the outset. Some stuff is Your much-desired answer to our earnest prayers, while the arrival of some stuff leaves us scratching our head in bewilderment.

You pour the raw material into our lives, then wait to see what we will do with it. Into our brief lives You pour brand new qualities that will belong only to us, some qualities of others, a smattering of earthly goods, and a large helping of Yourself. Some You announce with loud fanfare, but some You slip in when we're not looking.

We amuse ourselves by thinking we retain some control over what flows into our lives, and for a few things this is true. But for the most part we can't control what comes in, or when. But we certainly have control over what we do with it once it has. Do we reuse or recycle, making the most of Your generosity? Or do we compost, using what we have discarded to feed someone else? Sadly, Father, I'm afraid we more often receive and discard quickly, unthinkingly, burning up those things that just might be of use to others.

And then You come along, examine what we have done, and must decide what You will do with us.



And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

“He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!
2 Corinthians 9:8-11,15

Dear God,

Few sensations are as miserable to human flesh as the sour-belly twistings of homesickness—that feeling of nausea-tinged ennui brought on by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, away from the security and familiarity of home.

I suppose there are some who never experience this emotion. The chronic adventurer, the one whose bag is always packed and whose passport is always up-to-date, the one with few friends and no family, but many ‘contacts’ around the world—these may never suffer the pangs of wishing they were somewhere else. But most of us are a softer lot, people with ties to loved ones, and a visceral connection to home and hearth.

One of the worst moments for me, Father, was the day I boarded the ship that would carry me across the Pacific toward a land called Vietnam. Already half a country away from family and home, this teenager was beginning a journey that would extend the physical distance by thousands of miles—and the emotional distance by light-years.

A naval vessel is little more than a floating factory: everything made of metal and coated with the aroma of paint and fuel oil. There are few soft surfaces, and those few are reserved for individuals of higher rank. Though conditions may be different now, on that day in 1970 the ship was peopled by men only—‘men’ being a figurative term, since most were still no more than youth.

Being just temporary citizens of the *U.S.S. Chicago* for the duration of the six-month cruise, my group boarded without billets. Landlubbers at heart, just the motion of the ship leaving port had some of us holding our bellies. We huddled miserably against the gray-metal bulkhead, and more than one of us had to hurriedly visit the rail before we even cleared the breakwater. Having no billets yet, the first night we were scattered throughout the sleeping compartments, here and there, wherever a spare rack could be found. That night I ended up in who-knows-where, without a blanket, using a scrawny government-issue towel to keep warm, surrounded by fellows who wished I weren’t there at all.

I lay there, shivering under my cotton terry, thinking of home. As with any other rebellious youth, I had had my quarrels with my parents. There had been moments when I had wished to live anywhere but beneath my parents’ roof, under their rules and regulations. I had yearned for the unbridled freedom that exists only in the mind of youth, for the chance to break free from the bonds of middle-class, middle-America convention and conservatism.

But now I knew what it was like to be out in that ‘freedom’—in a place I didn’t want to be, going to a place I didn’t want to go. I was alone, around people I didn’t know and, for the moment at least, didn’t want to know. I was cold and miserable, and my belly was twisted into a knot of regret and longing. My whole body ached with the realization that I was not where I wanted to be. Now I was indeed out from under the shelter of my parents—and I desired only to return.

Father, there still are days when I experience that same feeling of being in the wrong place. But this time the object of my longing is no more the family and home of my youth, but a home I’ve not yet even visited. My longing is for *Your* home, the home You have made for me. There are times that I feel surrounded by aliens, by those who have no connection with who I am, and who I wish to be.

Your Spirit has changed my sight. I no longer view my surroundings as home, but as a temporary way-station at which I must dwell for a while. I am on a journey upward, but I have not yet sprouted wings. Yet You have set within my heart a nostalgic longing, an aching for Your presence that dwells in the expanse of eternity.

As I am a nonsmoker, I always know when either family or guests have been in a smoke-filled room. Although they got used to the smoke, I can smell it on their clothes as soon as they come into the house.

The world is like a smoke-filled room in which we have to live and breathe, and go about our daily business. Before we became Christians, it was normal for us, because it was home to us. But when we came to Christ, God gave us a new ability, by the Holy Spirit who lives within, to sense the world as an alien atmosphere. For what the Holy Spirit does...is to give us a foretaste of our real home—of heaven itself.

John F. Balchin

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."
Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
Psalm 91:1-4

We have had our quarrels, and there have been moments in which I have longed for a freedom that does not exist. But I have learned, Lord, that there is no freedom outside of Your grace.

I love You, Father, and until I return home—my *real* home—I will long for it like a stripling youth longing for the peace and security that can only be found beneath his parents' roof.



Dear God,

Sometimes it is hard to love the people with which we are to live. They can be, at times, thoroughly unlovely—poster children for the depraved state in which we all are born.

Take the irate motorist, involved in a minor fender bender in California, who vented his anger by heaving the opposing motorist's dog into oncoming traffic. Or the crowd of people who, stuck in a rush-hour traffic jam because the police had cordoned off the area, encouraged a suicidal young woman to go ahead and jump from a bridge so they could get on with their business. A police spokesman told a reporter he wouldn't even repeat some of the ugly things motorists were yelling at the obviously troubled woman, who did eventually jump.

But then I'm reminded that we need not list the foul acts of the unregenerate without including those of the redeemed. Your children can behave as badly as those who have rejected You. From personal experience alone I can itemize acts of slander, gossip, vitriol, revenge—all within the church. And, to my shame, Father, I have to confess that some of these observations were made not by a bystander, but by a participant.

It is hard to love You while living in the stench of Your creation. Clearly, the life of Your Son must be the standard by which we are to

reconcile the two. Jesus was able to move among the people of this world with His heart filled with love, rather than hate. If the behavior of those in this world are such an affront to me—one of them—how offensive they must have seemed to one so spotless and pure as the Lord! Yet Jesus was able to actually accomplish the platitude we so easily recite, but find so difficult to put into practice: Hate the sin, but love the sinner. More often than not, we practice, instead, the efficiency of expunging from our hallowed presence both the sinner and his offending acts.

Help me to learn from Him, Father. Help me to ache for the condition of the lost, while still loathing their behavior. Let me not become numbed to the stench—let me not forget how to blush. But soften my heart toward those who do not yet know You.

And when those within Your family behave as those without, give me the wisdom and courage to remain true to my one standard—the only one truly above it all: Jesus, my Lord.



Dear God,

Your grace—from the human perspective—leaves You easily ignored. We down here are accustomed to reaching out for help from others only when we need it. And when we do need help, we invariably turn first to those of our own ilk: of flesh, immediate, corporeal. We naturally think in a horizontal direction; our arms more naturally extend out, rather than up.

Some of us, however, have come to learn that in times of need, Your help can be as immediate as that from a neighbor. We have learned that Your help is tangible, dependable, and always correct. Going to You is like going to someone who is the supreme authority in whatever field is pertinent: Do we need a counselor? a traffic cop? a judge? Do we require the services of pest control? a hospital? financial manager? Do we need to consult with a scholar? a philosopher? a bricklayer? In all these fields—and all the rest—You have absolute authority, so are eminently qualified to come to our aid.

I have learned that no problem is beyond Your expertise, so I am comfortable coming to You regardless the situation. You have helped me with questions of logic, of ethics, of physical construction—You even came to my rescue when I was stumped by the writing of computer code. Because You know how everything works, You always know how to fix whatever is wrong.

Keeping our relationship on this level, though, can make it seem that You are more like a Swiss army knife than God—more like a paramedic than a personal Lord. In my horizontal relationships I enjoy the company of close friends at any time, not just when I desperately need their help. So why shouldn't it be the same with You?

When I was a young boy I mostly thought of my dad as someone to do for me—to keep me reasonably clothed, fed, and maintain the roof over my head. That's not to say I didn't have a close relationship with him; he was a good man, a good father, and I loved him. But as a child, my relationships with adults were mostly selfish in nature. The motivating force was what they could do for me.

But by the time my dad was close to the end of his short life, I was an adult, and I could now enjoy the company of my father just because of who he was—as a unique individual, as a person with many experiences under his belt, as a loving father and husband, as a strong Christian man. I no longer expected him to care for me—indeed, we both were approaching ages where those responsibilities might soon be reversed.

The difference in our relationship had little to do with him; between those two life-stations Dad had changed little. But I had changed a lot. I had grown up. I had gradually acquired the mind of an adult—a *young* adult, yes, but one with considerably more maturity than that child who knew only to take from his parents. And when he went home to be with You, what I lost was not a caregiver, but a close, valued friend.

I am still young, by some standards, and I can still be selfish. You give so much that it is easy to develop the habit of wanting even more, to see You as primarily a caregiver. But I'm old enough to know that what I really want is a more substantial, mature relationship with You. I want to love You even when I want no more from You than Your company. I want to spend time with You, and to find new ways to give of myself to You.

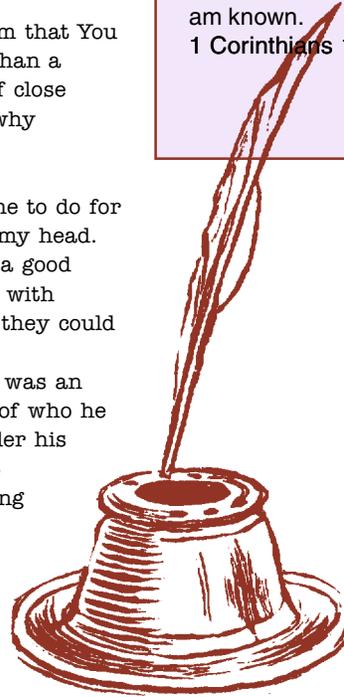
Your presence, Father, represents my link to home. Your company affords me a glimpse of how it will be to at last dwell beneath Your roof. Time spent with You is time spent with my roots, my family.

So teach me how to love You even in the good times. Teach me to depend on You as much during times that are pleasant and agreeable, as when I am in desperate straits. Teach me, Father, to give—even with You—more than I receive.



When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 Corinthians 13:11-12 nkjv



*My Father is rich in houses and lands,
He holdeth the wealth of the world in His hands!
Of rubies and diamonds, of silver and gold,
His coffers are full, He has riches untold.*

*My Father's own Son, the Saviour of men,
Once wandered on earth as the poorest of them;
But now He is reigning forever on high,
And will give me a home in heaven by and by.*

*I once was an outcast stranger on earth,
A sinner by choice, and an alien by birth;
But I've been adopted, my name's written down,
An heir to a mansion, a robe, and a crown.*

*A tent or a cottage, why should I care?
They're building a palace for me over there;
Tho' exiled from home, yet still I may sing:
All glory to God, I'm a child of the King!*

*I'm a child of the King, a child of the King:
With Jesus my Saviour, I'm a child of the King.
Harriet E. Buell*

Dear God,

Right this minute there is a large, black cricket chirping in my reference room. He has been inside the house, roaming from room to room, for several days now. Last night I heard him in a corner of the library, wedged behind a bookcase; this morning he was in the bathroom.

The cricket's voice is loud, clear. He usually sings more loudly when the lights are off and no one else is around. But right now, with me at my desk and the lights ablaze, he is singing his heart out.

Father, I think I know why he sings. I think I know why he roams from room to room, chirping and singing, chirping and singing. One day he mistakenly got into the house; maybe he was chasing his tiny dinner through a crack in an outside wall, and suddenly found himself in a strange place, with no clear way back. Suddenly he was alone, and adrift in an alien land, cut off from his home.

So, in his longing, he sings. The black cricket sings for his home, wishing he could be there instead of in the alien land of our house. Through the door and the windows he hears evidence that the land of his home still exists, but he hasn't yet found his way back. So he sings.

My Father, I know You are out there. From time to time I hear Your voice, and the voices of Your presence. I have evidence from Your creation that You exist, and I have the evidence of my heart.

But right now I am adrift in an alien land, cut off from my home. I roam from place to place longing for the one place of eternal peace and inexhaustible joy—longing for the place where You dwell.

Someday I, too, will dwell there with You, and that promise and hope sustains me as I trudge the path of this momentary dwelling. Someday my singing will no longer be the plaintive cry of the dispossessed, but the joy-filled song of the redeemed gathered round the throne.



Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.
If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness;
therefore you are feared.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord...
Psalm 130:1-6a

Aspects

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