

ORIGINAL LETTER FROM DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON.

(Not published in his Works.)

MARCH 17, 1752; O. S.

DEAR SIR,

Notwithstanding the warnings of philosophers, and the daily examples of losses and misfortunes, which life forces upon us, such is the absorption of our thoughts in the business of the present day—such the resignation of our reason to empty hopes of future felicity, or such our unwillingness to foresee what we dread, that every calamity comes suddenly upon us, and not only presses as a burden, but crushes as a blow.

There are evils which happen out of the common course of nature, against which it is no reproach not to be provided. A flash of lightning intercepts the traveller in his way. The concussion of an earthquake heaps the ruins of cities upon their inhabitants. But other miseries time brings, though silently, yet visibly forward; by its own lapse, which yet approaches unseen, because we turn our eyes away, and they seize us unresisted, because we would not arm ourselves against them, by setting them before us.

That it is in vain to shrink from what cannot be avoided, and to hide that from ourselves which must sometimes be found, is a truth which we all know, but which all neglect, and perhaps none more than the speculative reasoner, whose thoughts are always from home, whose eye wanders over life, whose fancy dances after meteors of happiness kindled by itself, and who examines every thing rather than his own state.

Nothing is more evident, than that the decays of age must terminate in death. Yet there is no man (says Tully) who does not believe that he may yet live another year, and there is none who does not, upon the same principle, hope another year for his parent or his friend; but the fallacy will be in time detected; the last year, the last day, will come: it has come, and is past.—The life which made my own life pleasant is at an end, and the gates of death are shut upon my prospects.

The loss of a friend, on whom the heart was fixed, and to whom every wish and endeavour tended, is a state of desolation in which the mind looks abroad impatient of itself; and finds nothing but emptiness and horror. The blameless life, the artless tenderness, the native simplicity, the modest resignation—the patient sickness and the quiet death, are remembered only to add value to the loss—to aggravate regret for what cannot be amended—to deepen sorrow for what cannot be recalled.

These are the calamities by which Providence gradually disengages us from the love of life. Other evils fortitude may repel, or hope may mitigate; but irreparable privation leaves nothing to exercise resolution, or flatter expectation. The dead cannot return, and nothing is left us here but languishment and grief.

Yet such is the course of nature, that whoever lives long must outlive those whom he loves and honours. Such is the condition of our