

LETTERS

FROM AN

ANCIENT

MIND







## Unstable Molecules

So my father takes a long, measured sip of his iced tea, looks at me over the rims of his glasses and says, "I need you to write something for me."

It's about the last thing I'd expect him to say. Normally that over-the-glasses look is the prelude to something more along the lines of, "Your principal called this morning," or "I'd like to know a little more about this young man," or worst of all, "It's time we had a little talk." I find myself wondering if he's been replaced by a pod person or something. Still, I take my good fortune where I can get it and, quite admirably managing not to dribble lemonade out of my mouth, I come back with a snappy, "Okay."

Now he gets technical on me. The "I need you to write something" part I understood. Beyond that, he might as well be speaking fluent Urdu. There's something about a correspondence between a guy in the fifth or so century and a guy around now. I don't think I want to know what they have to talk about, let alone how they got the letters back and forth. I understand that Mr. Fifth Century buries his letters in a pot in the ground. Dad says he buried them in Turkey, where he lived. I seem to remember they're always digging stuff up there, so it sounds all right to me. Now, Mr. 21st (or 20th, I guess) Century sends his to Mr. Fifth Century by means of a complicated set of quantum mechani-

cal equations. I get a brain itch just figuring up from down in these things. And it's my job, since these equations can't be printed properly by the publishing guy, to explain them to all of you, the readers. And he's telling me this over a Balboa Burger and lemonade in an airport café. Is this family great or what?

So here's my explanation. After a careful examination of the facts I have concluded—unstable molecules. Gotta be. Just like in the comic books, right? How does the Human Torch's® costume keep from burning up when he bursts into flames? Unstable molecules. How does the Invisible Woman's® costume turn invisible when she does (and only when she does)? Unstable molecules. How come the Incredible Hulk's® shirt rips and falls off when he turns into the Hulk, but the 98-pound secret identity and the 500-pound Hulk have the same pants size? Unstable molecules. So you want me to explain how Joe Blow from Kokomo sends his letters 1500 years back in time? Two words: unstable molecules. And that's all you're getting for a Balboa Burger. I'm holding out for the Frisco Burger.

R. M. Hendershot

## Translator's Preface

In translating a correspondence in which one has only half the letters—in this instance, the ones from the older time—certain difficulties must be borne. Evidently the choice of Latin as the language of communication between these two was a matter of mutual convenience, not native language. I say this for a number of reasons:

- It is unlikely that the modern correspondent speaks Latin with any fluency—or for that matter, any language other than English. As you will see, Isaac sometimes has difficulty with some of the words provided to him.
- From the context, and from some of the vocabulary used, it is most likely that Isaac's native language is Greek. Latin, to him, would be a commercial language. He handles it somewhat roughly.
- Some of the letters suggest that Isaac lived in the Roman Empire. If so, it is likely that he lived in the Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, as opposed to Rome. He is evidently familiar with the Imperial Court, but his Latin is poor—hence the conclusion.

It should be noted that Isaac also bears the characteristic writing style of a man who has lost all fear of being impolite in his text. This is common to the period of Empire, hence the dating of the documents.

Isaac's Latin did need some correction, and there are a number of points (some noted in the marginalia) in which a precise translation would be offensive to the modern Christian. Put bluntly, Isaac can be quite crude at times. But it is a naïve crudity; that of a man familiar with the farm animal side of life. As he did not intend (generally) to offend, I have taken the liberty of making the translation somewhat more fit for modern eyes.

George Spelvin, translator.



*My dear young friend,*

*Concerning the troubles of Mr. Clinton  
with Ms. Lewinski.*

*Your description of the  
amours of your prince – I mean, your president –  
seems humorous beyond words. Have men become  
so pious that an amorous prince is now a rarity?  
I cannot believe it. Then why did you impeach  
him?*

*No doubt the fault lies with your method of gov-  
ernance. That you should allow your princes to  
be selected by the mob – and by women! – beg-  
gars my imagination. Is it not the case that  
your palaces are haunted by knaves, fools and  
idiots loving the sound of their own words? There  
are men who will blather on regarding their pet  
idea, and your democracy is no doubt filled with  
them. Have they become so numerous that a*

prince is beheaded for his paramour? No doubt this will encourage marital fidelity in the others – which is a good thing – but is not the method a bit extreme? Surely the man's wife would be sufficient punishment!

Of course, had you beheaded him for idiocy I could understand it. The man seems to have forgotten which end of the woman is for use. We have any number of elderly peasants who still know what to do with a wench; a pity we cannot send one to you. It would instruct the president and amuse the peasant.

I remain,

As ever,

Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*Concerning Mr. Clinton's word under oath,  
and the use of oaths in general.*

*My apologies about impeachment. Your word confused me. I thought you had beheaded the man. Your explanation makes it much clearer.*

*Indeed, I now see the point – and wonder that you do not. That a prince should have his paramour is common; that the old women should gossip about it more common. The common use is not an excuse, however. What is indeed disturbing is the matter of the oath.*

*You seem to treat the oath as if it were but a formality. If you but knew the peril!*

*What is an oath? Is it not an appeal to Almighty God to stand as surety for your words? Would you so lightly invoke the name of God if*

you were perjuring yourself? No prince would fear a mere magistrate – but God rules over all. To take an oath knowing your words to be a lie is a deliberate offense against the Almighty, and He will not leave it unavenged. If your prince lies on oath so lightly, he has much to fear – and soon.

Indeed, the matter is so serious – in my time, at least – that men hire lawyers to put words in their mouths upon oath. These words are carefully crafted to say one thing and mean its opposite. God no doubt will deal with the lawyers in the next world; would God we could do without them in this.

Perhaps more telling is this: what kind of man would so perjure himself? It is not a matter for the lawyers but for the priest. To break an oath

so casually tells of a conscience so seared as to be completely dead. Such a man should not be selected prince or president.

Were our prince to be caught in such a lie – upon his oath, I mean – his vassals would desert him quickly. For if his sworn word will not stand, who then would trust his fortune or future to the man? Better robbed by a brigand than an oath-breaker. A brigand has your purse; an oath-breaker your soul.

I remain,  
With tongue of acid,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On marriage as an oath, and marital  
fidelity.*

*Since you ask an old man's opinion of the matter, I shall give it. You are wrong.*

*The demand of the Church is that a man have relations with none but his wedded wife. I will not pretend to you that all men are so pious in my day, but at least the sinner pays tribute to the virtuous by means of hypocrisy. You ask why.*

*You may recall my words about the matter of an oath. Consider, if you will, that nuptials are largely centered upon the exchange of vows – which are naught but an oath by another name. Bride and groom speak to each other such oaths, binding each to the other in this life. Did*

they not take particular trouble to do this in front of kin and many friends? And in a holy place, with a priest of God to sanctify the occasion? Should a man then treat the Almighty so lightly as to break such a vow? Will he not visit him with swift punishment indeed? The matter, sir, is not one of passion but of honesty. If you will not keep your marriage oath, with what oath will you be trusted?

I grant you that – of all oaths – this is the species most frequently defiled. There are no excuses for that. But the guilty in my time know that they are just that: guilty. Your view, it appears, is that no sin has been committed – as long as there is passion. If the breaking of a solemn oath is not a sin, then what is?

Consider this matter of passion as excuse in an-

other light. Peradventure I am a brigand – but a brigand of passion. With all my heart I desire your purse. Being so passionate, then, you would argue no doubt that my lightening of your fortune was no sin, but virtue. Indeed, I would consider it so; for is not virtue profitable? It is absurd.

Your argument does come with a proviso: “as long as no one gets hurt.” This is beneath contempt. Look about you. In your time there surely are many women whose husbands have

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“Wench” is the politest expression available in English which still conveys Isaac’s meaning.

abandoned them for a younger wench. It is the nature of men to desire beauty; it is the nature of women to seek men of accomplishment. Thus a beautiful woman may snare an older man – but in her turn will give way to a

younger. Have you not seen it often?  
You argue the matter as being one of happiness.  
Indeed, you think you are given happiness as a  
right. I cannot see how. If your fortune is good,  
it is just that: good fortune. If a man seeks  
happiness in his marriage, he will need to put  
forth effort. One does not drink the wine if one  
does not tend the vine.

As ever,  
Puzzled at your ways,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Selecting a Wife*

*It is most kind of you to ask the advice of an old man. I presume from the invitation that you are an orphan, for which you have my condolences. But as you ask, I will give you this old Christian's advice on the selection of a wife. All depends upon one rule, and one principle. The rule is simply this: for the Christian, there is no divorce. One cannot change wives as one changes one's garments. The principle is likewise simple: your marriage is a portrayal of how Christ loves the church. If you will remember these in all your thinking, you will not go far astray.*

*As a primary example, ask yourself this: "Am I willing to deal with her faults, as Christ dealt*

with the faults of the church?" It is a grave mistake to believe that you can produce a change of character by the methods of this world. If you beat her, does not this harden her faults into pride? Can you by force make her gentle? Will threats bring about willing hands? It is absurd even to think it.

No, you must be willing to deal with her faults by the methods of Jesus. Are you prepared to sacrifice for her sake, knowing that she is the offender? Jesus did so for us. Will you grant her forgiveness, no matter how often she offends you? Jesus will. Will you treat her from a heart of pure love, as Jesus does?

You may think, "These are questions she might ask of me – but what have they to do with selecting her?" The matter is simple: if you can-

not endure her faults and correct them as Jesus does, then should you bind yourself to those faults? Consider your own strength of character. You must always seek her restoration and purity, striving ever for harmony in your home. If the task is beyond your strength, why would you attempt it?

I must give you some words of warning, as an old Christian to a new one. You may think this foolishness, but bear with an old soul. You must learn what factors should not be considered in choosing a wife.

First, there is the matter of her appearance. Nothing so bedazzles the male mind as a beautiful wench. But consider: there is no divorce. Beauty soon fades. If the matter is important to

you, how will you treat her when it does? Will you rail against her for her faded beauty? She has no recourse in the matter, for God causes all mankind to age. If you are not willing to love her in old age, do not marry her.

It may be that you have learned that lesson. If so, then I must caution you about another great abyss: money. Often a young man finds a rich wife – and a new master. Money is an excellent servant, but a poor master. He who marries money marries that master. Would you have your life ruled by your wife's ambition and pride?

What then should a man look for? Many things; but here are four that seem most important to me.

First, there is gentleness. Has the woman a younger brother? Does she cuff him about as if he were a dog? Then she will soon cuff you. Look rather for a woman of gentle spirit, with kindness in her heart.

The phrase "bed partner" is to be taken in the most physical sense (translator's note).

Then there is the matter of chastity. By this I mean two things. First, that she have no bed partner but you, and that after the wedding. For if she will have relations with you outside of marriage, you will know that she does not honor marriage – and you will ever suspect her virtue. More than this, she should be one who is modest, especially in dress. This betokens a woman who knows herself to be worthy in God's sight, and therefore in yours.

Third, ask this: is she willing to aid one and all? Is her life one of Christian charity? If so, you will be housed in a generous heart. There is no finer accommodation.

Last – in sequence, not in importance – is she pious? Does she honor God in her conduct? Then she will have no trouble in honoring the one whom God has set over her, especially as you will take pains to rule over her as God commands.

Do remember that this woman shall be flesh of your flesh, your own flesh in another body.

There is no closer bond. Are you willing to sit by her sick bed and watch her die slowly? Knowing that she is your very own body, that your own flesh is going down to the grave? Or, should God be so gracious as to grant you many years, will

you watch her gray with age and love her?  
Love her in her old age even more than in her  
youth?

These are tests by which you might measure  
your intended bride. They are also measures of  
yourself. Take an old man's warning. If you  
are not prepared for these things, then remain as  
you are. If you are to be roped together for the  
rest of your lives, it is best to know what is on  
the other end of the rope.

Trusting this to be of assistance,  
I remain,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*What a shock your letter has been! I am indeed glad to hear you are not orphan – it is a miserable condition – but it beggars belief that your parents have failed you so. What is truly astonishing is that this is the custom of your times. You are all mad.*

*Permit me to explain it to you in your own words. Without the advice of wiser heads, a young man sets out into the world and encounters a female. Should that form of madness you call “being in love” strike, he then proposes marriage, in the hopes of “living happily ever after.” Tell me – what evidence do you have that this actually works? In our time a man’s friends would restrain him from so rash an act,*

on the simple grounds that "being in love" can be put simpler, "insane." I have no doubt divorce is as common in your time as fleas are in mine. It could hardly be otherwise.

No doubt there are some select fools upon whom God has mercy. But consider please what you are doing to the women of your time! Do you not know that a woman finds her hope in the man she marries? If that man sees naught but beauty in her, how long before she becomes as nothing in his sight? His eyes will soon rest on a younger one. Whether he breaks his marriage vow or not, she will know that she is no longer esteemed by him. For what cause? Is it for any action of her own? No, God grants that women grow old – and do you not consider it a fault in her? By what right?

*It seems to me that this method of yours is thoroughly unjust to the women of your time. Yet are they not God's children too? Is there justice in this? I think not.*

*If you marry for beauty alone, I tell you this: you will soon have a wife who lives in quiet despair. For her there can be no hope. She will age, and watch your affection grow cold and distant. Would you condemn a woman to that? Would you have such a woman as the mother of your children?*

*Consider it well; I think you do greatly err.*

*In wonderment I remain,  
Isaac the Alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*On the subject of nervous parents*

*What a grand moment! I offer you my heartiest congratulations; it is written that "he who finds a wife finds a good thing."*

*It is certain to me that you do not comprehend the gravity of the decision taken. Indeed, you could not, for you have not been where I have been. I bring it to your mind only so that you might understand the reaction of the young lady's parents – and your own, I suspect.*

*"You are too young," they say. Were my noble father still with us he would say the same to me. Your father sees as one looking back over the road; you see as one looking ahead. The ruts, holes and rocks are clearer to him. Bear with his anxiety, my friend. He is simply*

thinking of all the things he wants to teach you – and does not know how.

You are young and strong. How did you gain such strength? Was it not in testing yourself against the one who taught you how to be both man and husband? If by nothing but example, he is your teacher. Now he sees his student departing the academy – and thinks of all the lessons he would still deliver. Be patient with him; let him know that you have not finished heeding his good advice.

By all means, however, you must bring your bride into the closest harmony with your mother. If for no other reason than the kitchen, do this quickly. Your belly will thank you for it later. Most girls have mastered the

art of managing the kitchen by her age – but spice in the meal is a matter of taste, and she had best know yours.

Do not trespass upon the two of them in the kitchen. Consider it thus: you are the son of your father, and who has more knowledge of your father? Your mother has no doubt mastered the art of pleasing your father. Give her the time to teach your bride the art of pleasing you.

There is more. The time will come when she becomes upset with you. She will need a confidant. She will need one who understands you. To whom would you entrust her tears? Your mother knows you well and loves you. Her advice will be the most fruitful.

Indeed, your bride is now to be a part of your

family. It is the greatest change in her life, save death itself. She leaves her own father and mother and comes to you. Give your parents time to learn to love her; then she will be sure of a fine welcome.

With my heartiest congratulations,  
I remain,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

On Abortion

*You need not presume my ignorance in sexual matters. I am quite acquainted with the practice of abortion. What does surprise me is your ability to look into the womb and see the child not yet born. That is indeed a marvel. Your doctors are to be congratulated for that.*

*"Doctors" - literally, "leeches"*

*All the same, I am not so certain as you that we have not encountered much the same problem in our time. It is not so many years ago that our people worshiped pagan gods. They considered it no great thing to discard an infant. The prime difference is that in our time the father decided the infant's fate, not the mother. The custom was that the midwife would present the infant*

to the father. If he picked up the child, he acknowledged it as his own. If he turned his back, the midwife was to take the child into the wilderness and abandon it.

At a guess, most of your abortions concern infant girls, do they not? So it was with us. Most often when the child was spurned it was for being a girl. Often the tender heart of the midwife would not allow her to abandon the child to death. She would take it to the market and leave it there – to be picked up by the priestesses of Aphrodite, who would raise the girl to be a temple prostitute. We, too, worshiped the animal nature.

Abortion is largely the art of the prostitute, for she cannot ply her trade when pregnant. They learn early how to use the instrument of abor-

tion.

You consider this murder. I must confess we do not see it in that light, for we consider the baby alive only when the signs of quickening are felt. Your knowledge is disturbing to me. But may I point out what you have missed?

There is grave damage to any society that allows such. For is it not the mark of civilization that the strong care for the weak? Tell me, who is weaker than a babe not yet born? If you will so callously approve of abortion, will it not harden all hearts? Who among you will become the next to fall from favor? All of us become weak with age. The barbarians send their aged to die in the forest in time of famine. No doubt your methods will be swifter – but equally fatal. Does this not teach their young that the

value of a man's life is found only in his sword  
or his purse?

Do you not see it? By such actions you sear your  
consciences so that all manner of evil becomes  
palatable – as long as some may benefit. Soon  
you will have nothing but the tyranny of the  
strong. The barbarians have such. What stands  
between your people and such a horror, if not  
your consciences? Destroy them, and destroy  
yourselves.

With apprehension I remain,  
Isaac the Alchemist

My dear young friend,

On anesthetics, and pain

Your question reminds me of a child in the market place. All things are lovely; many are sweet – and when asked which he would have, the answer is, “all.” So I am with the achievements of your time.

But of all the wonders you have described to me, the greatest temptation is anesthetics. The thought that one might live without pain is indeed a temptress like no woman who ever lived. I wonder if you have considered what this must do to your people in your time.

We are quite capable of being without pain – enough wine will achieve the same effect. But one cannot go about one’s daily tasks while drunk. That one could do the work and not feel

*the pain – what a marvel!*

*Is it wise, I wonder, that you use such things? With naught but wine we have drunkards in abundance. Is it not the case that you have many more whose lives now center upon these remedies? The drunkard abuses God's gift of wine; you have so much more to abuse, I fear the abuse must be much greater.*

*This is of great peril to the Christian. Pain is the Christian's friend, like it or not. Did not our Lord himself suffer greatly? How then should we begin to deny pain to ourselves? The servant is not greater than the Master.*

*Indeed, is it not so that pain is the alarm of the body? When pain strikes, do you not go immediately to the physician? Now if this is so with your body, how much more with your spirit?*

*When your spirit is in pain, should you not go immediately to our Lord for healing?*

*If you remedy your bodily pain with these anesthetics, you postpone the cure. So it is with the spiritual pain as well. If these wonders do all that you say, then there must be many who postpone the cure of their spiritual ills as well.*

*Death happens to all. If a man takes no thought for his spiritual ills because of your anesthetics, he may postpone the cure beyond hope. I called your anesthetics a temptress. The smile of a maid may lead to honorable marriage or sin. So it is with this as well.*

*In wonderment,*

*Isaac the Alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

On Homosexuality

*Yes, I believe I do comprehend the argument. You needn't patronize me about genetics; we know how to breed an ass, and that would seem sufficient.*

*Permit me to rephrase your argument in somewhat different terms. Suppose that I am a brigand, descended – bred, to use your argument – from a long line of same. It is my unfortunate nature that I am born to be a brigand. Alas for me, I cannot help myself. My breeding determines what I am, and that is brigand.*

*Therefore, say you, righteous and civilized folk should look upon me with special favor. For indeed, instead of denying my breeding, taking upon myself the discipline common to ordinary*

mortals, I “liberate” myself. I go about the town cutting purses. When caught, I justify my actions by my breeding. Are your magistrates so easily fooled?

Is it not rather that my breeding is that which I must overcome? Give a child honey, he will crave more – to the point of sickness. Discipline must be applied. So it is with

your born and bred brigand.

And so it is with your effeminate men. They are every bit as much an abomination as the

brigand. They should be treated

accordingly. How you have suddenly discovered to the contrary exceeds my imagination. It is as if every prodding of nature must now be exalted, rather than tamed. If you persist in this, you

*Translator's note:*

*“effeminate” is, in the Latin, the word which we would now translate as “homosexual.” It is likely that Isaac would not have made a distinction between the two. This is likely due to his thinking in Greek.*

will become a race of barbarians. The barbarian is one who cannot control himself – and therefore must control others by force. For it is the chief character of the barbarian that others are to blame for his troubles, and from them he will extort recompense.

I ask you: for all the blather, is it not the case that the effeminate seek to make you agree that they are righteous? That you are at fault for their troubles, not they themselves? That they will not rest until you admit that you are wrong and they are righteous? It is the surest test of the barbarian.

You distress me most of all with your tale that some of the church think as this. As I told you, we know how to breed an

*Translator's note: this is as polite a translation as I can provide. Please forgive any unintended offense.*

*ass. We also know from which end comes the  
manure. Be sure you know likewise.*

*Appalled, I remain,  
Isaac the Alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*The genuine poor*

*My, you are full of difficulties, are you not? Indeed, I suspect a ration of mean-spiritedness about you.*

*How indeed are you to tell who of the poor are genuine! First, have you thanked God that you live in a time when such a thing could even be conceived to be a problem? A time when a man might willingly become a beggar because he thinks it a profitable occupation is cause for rejoicing, not complaint. If such is truly the case, go to your knees and bless God for his mercy on you and your people. He has indeed been generous to you.*

*But let me condescend to your fancy, and take*

your problem with all seriousness – though I still have difficulty in crediting it. First, is this your task? Has God called you to seek out which of the poor are indeed genuine, and which are frauds? Where is such a command given? Search the Scriptures as you please, you will not find it.

Very well, let us suppose that the number is sufficient to cause you doubt that you are giving to one who is genuine. Of what concern is that to you? The money is as gone when given to a fraud as to the true. You did not give it as a sign of truth, but rather at your Lord's command. It is his reward you seek. Be diligent to avoid the obvious fraud, but commit the rest to your Lord. Did you think him completely impotent, that

he will not punish the frauds who steal from his children? Perhaps it is your God whom you do not know!

If our Lord were to command you to examine the poor most carefully, and give to none but the worthy, what would you find? Many of the poor came to that estate by their own follies. It makes them much less worthy, but no less poor. It was not to the worthy but to the poor he commanded you to give.

Indeed, if he were to make you the warden of worthiness for the poor, would you not complain of the work? How difficult it would be to determine which were worthy and which were not! The task is so difficult that our Lord himself never attempted it. We are all poor sinners, you are aware. Did he attempt to determine the

worthy sinners from the unworthy? Certainly not. It is a mark of his love – and no small simplification of the problem. I suggest you imitate your Lord in this. The time saved will, no doubt, increase your fortune sufficiently to afford it.

With amazement,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Visiting the Sick*

*It is of some comfort to know that your government is as fond of paper and regulations as is ours. Even so, need your church be so swift to cooperate? Visiting the sick is a duty commanded of our Lord.*

*My own mind was awakened to this many years ago. There was a man, Hermanus. By all accounts a greedy and evil man through most of his life, he rose in wealth through his greed. As he became older, his wives became younger. But by the grace of God he came to know the Lord, and was baptized.*

*As with all flesh, he met his end. In his instance it was a most painful death of a lingering waste. I well remember his young wife. In fear*

that he might alter his will, she forbade the church entry into the home. By God's mercy our bishop was an exceedingly humble man, and so gained entry. Soon he had set a death watch, two each for four hours. I took one of those watches, and I can tell you what joy it brought old Hermanus that he need not go to his reward alone.

Consider it: by your test, this man would have died alone. Is that good? I need scarcely mention that the death bed is often the garden of salvation. Is it not also the case that many would go to their graves unforgiving – and thus unforgiven – were it not for the comfort of the church? Even if a man's heart is at peace with all, the comfort of his fellow saints is welcome in the dying hour. Hermanus would have turned

his face to the wall and died alone had he lived  
in your church. Is this reproach to you or us?

His widow yet lives. She enjoys his money and  
cares nothing for the church. But there is yet  
time; even she must have a death bed. For such  
sinners Christ died.

As always,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

Wedding Guests

*I received with great amusement your letter detailing the plans of your wedding. How often you have told me that things are different in your time, and how often I remind you that they remain the same.*

*As with us, you divide the wedding into two parts. First you repair to the church, there to receive the blessing of God upon the holiest of earthly sacraments. Then you depart - in grand ceremony - to another place, there to revel. We do the same, alas, for the same reasons. We bear the same fault, I fear. We begin the wedding in holiness, and end it in debauchery. You meet your bride at the altar of God, there to unite by the most solemn of vows. Then you*

leave that sacred place quickly, lest you be reminded of those vows. Your revels are conducted at a safe distance from the church. There you bring to your bride all the base humor and debauchery you and your friends can devise. This, you say, is customary. It is a long standing custom, I fear – you received it from us. I suspect it has not improved with age.

Consider the folly of our ways. You begin with solemn oaths; then eat and drink to the accompaniment of the foulest of jests in which fidelity in marriage is mocked. One minute the vows; the next the sneers. What is your new wife to think of your fidelity? Should she begin her marriage with a parade of innuendo which makes clear that no one expects you to be faithful to her? Even if you did not intend such, does

*this humor befit the beginning of a marriage? Does it not more likely plant the seeds of doubt in her mind – and yours?*

*No marriage can be happy without trust. If she cannot trust you – rightly or wrongly – she will be miserable. Is any revelry worth that? It saddens me to see it in my time, and it saddens me to hear of it in yours. Please, do reconsider.*

*May I suggest that your guest list contains an omission? You have invited all of the important people you know. It is pleasing to be born into a family which is known to the rich and the powerful, is it not? It is even more pleasing when both bride and groom have that privilege. But all this is a matter of your birth, not your choice.*

*You have forgotten to invite Jesus Christ.*

*Whom of your acquaintance is richer than the one who created all things? Who is higher than the one to whom all authority is given? Who is more powerful than God himself? Surely this is a most serious omission.*

*"But," you will ask, "how can I do that?" He has instructed you in this matter. Do you not recall his parable in which the king sent out his servants to bring in those for the wedding feast? He sought the poor. You have invited the rich; in due course they will invite you in return. Invite the poor, so that their Lord and protector may invite you to His banquet.*

*How you are to do this I know not, for so much is changed in your time. But surely not that; surely the poor are always with us. There are*

those of your acquaintance for whom a meal such as you plan would be a grand feast indeed. Have you ever known hunger? Those whose bellies gnaw them in the night will bless your name for this.

Wishing I could attend, I remain,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*The Daily Beggar*

*How easily you become annoyed in your city! Surely this is a man whose infirmities are obvious. He is blind – that is easy enough to test. Whether or not he has this fell disease you name AIDS may be hidden, but surely blindness should be sufficient.*

*Why, indeed, has God made this man to stand in your path each day as you go to your work? As the Scripture says, the poor are always with us. If his blind eyes seem to be upon you most particularly, should you not take it as a sign from the Lord? For who else directs the eyes – and steps – of the blind?*

*There is a simple enough purpose in all this. Like all Christians, you must be taught to give*

alms. The lesson may be hard or easy, but it does require one thing. It requires someone to receive those alms with thanksgiving and blessing for your name. Thus will you learn charity in this world and be blessed in the next.

You would pass the man by. You turn your eyes away from his unseeing orbs and walk swiftly. Is this wise? Does this not indeed harden your heart? Had God placed an army of beggars before you it might be different. You are correct; you cannot cure the hunger of the world. But our Lord has not placed an army in your path; only one beggar. When you turn away from him, do you not harden your heart? Do you not sear your conscience?

Indeed, I think you have much to learn of this beggar. Day by day he stands, bearing his sup-

plication on silent paper. Surely you can see

By "silent paper" I believe that Isaac would mean a cardboard sign, such as is common with beggars today.

that by this method he is fed – and thus learn that persistence is a virtue. For if he is fed in his quiet persistence by the sinners

who pass by, how much more will we be fed if we persist in beseeching the Lord of Heaven?

Your beggar dispenses yet another lesson to you.

Does not his poverty test your wealth? At the least you should examine yourself and be grateful to God that you are not the one standing alone and blind. Do more than that. Consider

that our heavenly Father provides for this man as he provides for you. No doubt you prefer your provision, but do ask yourself: of what true value is my wealth? Is it simply for my pleasure, or is some greater purpose to be achieved?

You tell me that AIDS is fatal. My young friend, life is fatal. This beggar gives you yet another lesson. He teaches you that your end will come too, and who knows which of you shall die first? Consider well the manner of your end, and commit your ways to God.

Taken in all, I think you are highly indebted to this beggar. He teaches you charity and persistence, breaks the hardness of your heart, tears you from the snares of wealth and helps bring you to a good end. Surely, for such services as he has rendered to you, you could spare the man a coin or two?

With my kindest regards,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*The Chains of Greed*

*I quite agree. It is the petty injustice that has the bitter sting, and you have been done a petty injustice.*

*All the same, one should expect it. It is no different in our time. When the rich man approaches the palace his welcome is sure. The minor clerks of the government are swift to see that his every desire is met. So you see, you inherited all this from us. I do apologize.*

*The rich man always has a friend at court. I gather from your letter that these few changes to your modest dwelling take an enormous toll in paper and taxes. The taxes I understand; the paper I have never understood. But the nature of the clerks has not changed either. That his*

vast plans meet with swift approval while your small one idles from one clerk to the next—I can but say our clerks are of the same breed. Their bloodline does not bear close examination.

Consider, however, if you really wish to strive to be rich: Is this man truly rich, or merely attached to great possessions? There is quite a difference. A man may have little and yet be rich. How? Simply thus: a man is rich when his possessions exceed his desires. He is poor when they do not.

So you see that possessions are a mask! They conceal poverty often enough. If the desire of a man's heart is always for greater wealth, could he ever be satisfied? Could he ever be rich? It cannot be done.

How strong are the chains of greed! They bind a

man in this life to his possessions, and in the life to come they bind him in hell itself. Flee from them; there is nothing good to be gained by such a desire.

You might well ask, "are you not a rich man?" Indeed by the world's test I am. My estate is fruitful. But I am a rich man because my desire for more has been tamed. Over many years I have discovered God's truth in this. If you will consider the little or much you have to be a trust from God, and use it as best your wisdom and prayer direct, he will always provide whatever you lack.

The human heart causes poverty—not lack of money. Tame your desires, bring them into God's holy will, and you will soon see them satisfied.

*I wish I could tell you that this will also remove the petty injustice in the clerk's office. It will not. But God's mercy extends to all who will come to him. Perhaps some day it will extend to your rich man—or even unto your clerk.*

*As pleased with clerks as you are, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

Bureaucrats

*I see have been guilty of leading you astray. In my commiseration on the nature of the city clerk I did not intend to bring you trouble. But it seems I have.*

*The problem is the lure of gossip. How often have I walked away from a conversation wishing that I had held my tongue! One says things in the moment of discussion which often prove less than pleasant when repeated. Even if they are not repeated, the worry that they might be is enough.*

*Indeed, it is worse. Often I have left such a session with a troubled conscience, wondering if I said more than I know. How often I have said, "that's true!" of something about which I was*

completely ignorant. In such whirlwinds is the art of slander practiced. It is a great regret. Why do we do such things? I think it comes from our desire to be in agreement. All men naturally desire the approval of others. One way to obtain that approval is to agree with their opinions. They, thinking themselves wise and virtuous, should then think the same of you. Such agreement eases the mind - when spoken. Later, it troubles the mind.

The solution is simple. From whom do you seek approval? If you seek it only from your Lord, and care nothing for what men think, your conscience will allow you to sleep far better.

This is not easy to accomplish, for much that is good is approved of. It is not the approval of others which is our folly; it is the seeking of it.

*Look only to your Lord Jesus, and all other approval will mean nothing. Trust first and always in Him.*

*As ever,*

*Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*The Double Standard*

*You do me too great an honor in your assumption – and you greatly mistake my era. Our men have as much a wandering eye for a wench as have yours. I do, however, greatly appreciate your phrase for it: double standard. It is most appropriate. Your time, like mine, has two sets of weights in the bag. One measures the virtue of the husband, the other the virtue of the wife. As the Scripture says, the Lord abhors this.*

*What perturbs me is your assumption that there can be no logical argument against this. Did you really think this some caprice of the Lord God Almighty? The matter is one subject to logic. Hear me out. You need not even appeal to the Scriptures to expose this misery and fraud.*

First, is it not evident to one and all that justice is a virtue? Is it not also evident that such a double standard is an affront to justice? So if a man has the nobility of soul to value virtue for its own sake, the matter is self evident. But of course such a man is most unlikely to have such a double standard.

The injustice, however, is clear. Your society, as mine, is unjust to all women in this regard. Women attract men by their beauty. That beauty fades with the years. This is God's doing, not their own. Do they not apply themselves diligently in this? But a man becomes more desirable with age – as he becomes a man of stature. If we tolerate our double standard, is it not clear that it is the women who suffer? There is no justice in that.

Indeed, it is worse. Such a standard causes the integrity of the family to decay. Surely even the village dunce can see that fact. But is not the family the very brick of the city? If the bricks fail, how can the wall hold? If the wall fails, will not the barbarians of the mind soon be within the gate?

Worst of all is this: the double standard destroys the integrity of the man. Man is meant to be one – as God is one – and this

*"Integrity" is a difficult word to translate; it also can be translated "one-ness" or "singularity" - which is the original meaning of the word in English as well*

standard makes him two. To his wife and children he must appear godly; to his mistress he must appear loving and generous; to the world he must reconcile both. The only way this can be is a permanent hypocrisy. Such a life destroys a man.

Now you can see why God abhors it – it destroys those whom he loves, and offends his justice.

I submit to you, however, that you are not helpless in this matter. I am old, the years of my pilgrimage are many, and my wealth sufficient that my opinions are tolerated with amusement by those too young to understand. It is most annoying. You, however, have a better place. Do you exchange winks with the unfaithful, or is it known that your views and conduct oppose such? As you are about to enter upon marriage, you might give some thought as to your bride's view. How much more will she love a man whom she knows to be faithful?

Grave matters are at stake. Give your whole mind to the problem. Think about it with care. You cannot be both faithful and unfaithful –

*and now would seem a good time to decide your policy.*

*I am an old man. My advice is cheap. But I may tell you this: my wife knew me to be faithful to the day of her death – and both of us were happier for it.*

*As ever,*

*Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

Wedding

*It flatters me to have you ask. Yes, I was married for a goodly number of years – 62, to be exact. My wife was a sweet thing, Mary Ann. She made my life a joy.*

*Well I remember our wedding day. As I told you, in our time the bride often meets her husband for the first time at the altar. It was not so with us. But we had no such a thing as you describe with your bride. My father, may God give him peace, arranged all.*

*How I remember her approaching the altar! A mouse in a cat's mouth – that is how I felt. I think it God's own grace that the priest says most of the words at a wedding.*

*Your question on our virginity does not embar-*

rass me. We were both such. It is much preferable, for then one knows that trust is possible. We take such matters with great sobriety.

What puzzles me is this: you plan to take your bride to an inn on your wedding night! Surely your parents have a home of suitable size? But perhaps the inns of your time have grown in stature. Ours are little better than sewers and whorehouses. No man would stay at an inn if he had a friend or family near.

As to training in the manner of sexual relations, there is little need for that for a boy who has lived on a manor. The animals there are school enough. The difficulties of marriage usually lie outside the bedchamber. I suppose there is some art to this – but I never bothered my head with it. Mary Ann saw to that.

To answer your final question: I suppose our greatest hours of difficulty came when I was absent from the home. She was greatly tested then, and none too pleased with the experience. My duty lay elsewhere. Though all of us who fought still consider it a glorious adventure, there can be no denying it. I was lonely then too.

She has been in the grave some years now. I miss her greatly. Life is very lonely. By God's grace I have many grandchildren, and they fill my life with laughter. But there is a void in my heart.

Wishing you many years of joy, I remain  
Isaac, the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

On Sexuality

*The matter is only complicated by your desires. The right way is quite simple to determine, and you know that.*

*Let us take it from first principles. You agree that she is “flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone” – for that is what our Lord intended. Put more simply, her body is yours to do with as you please. She is to grant you your marital pleasures on every occasion.*

*Do consider, however, that with possession comes responsibility. You would not abuse your own body; why hers, which is yours? Indeed, the matter is more severe than this. If her body is yours, then likewise yours is hers. For this reason*

alone you are to have no other partner in sexual relations. But do you not see that by the very claim you make on her body she has an equal claim on your own?

So then, how do you propose to use "her" body – if not for her benefit, pleasure and indeed delight? If she has an obligation to provide for your sexual desires (and she does) then you are to provide for hers – sexual and otherwise. Therefore you are not permitted to abuse the body in any way. Indeed, you are the steward of her body – the one you are walking in. As steward, you may not do as you please with it – you must do as she pleases with it.

It seems difficult to you, I know. It is easy for you to say that she should not deprive you of sexual relations without your consent, and this

is so. Our Lord is quite specific on this point. But do recall the reason for this – your desires. She is not to be used as a dog would worry a bone; it is your weakness which places this obligation upon her. Have the humility and respect, therefore, to refrain from abusing the privilege.

She has equal power over your body, for you are one flesh. Make every effort to woo her to the marriage bed; never command it. Grant her the respect which is her due. Never presume upon her favor, but in all circumstances seek to know her desires. Then gently fulfill them. Your body is hers.

Do you not know that your insistence will breed her resistance, reluctance and even revenge?

You are not to be a tyrant; rather, a noble lord in your own house. A man of noble bearing is

never harsh, but kind and caring. Seek always what is best for her. You will soon find that she delights in giving you pleasure.

May an old man share one other grace, learned of long experience? It is easy to be gentle before entering the marriage bed, but after the moment of passion your character is shown. Grant her full honor; speak kind words to her; cling to her in affection. No woman wishes to think of herself as a man's toy; all desire to be his great love. When your passion has exhausted you, then be careful that your words are tender – for then will they be most remembered.

One last: remember that the bedchamber has a door. When you are on the outside, be as gentle and courteous as on the other side of that door.

Women mark such things. Happy is the woman whose husband respects her, and shows it in his courtesy.

I am an old fool now. You may think my advice less likely to satisfy your lusts than would the word of command. But consider: when those in authority over you command what is their due, in what manner do you prefer to hear the command? Is it not with courtesy and respect? If this is so, how much more should you grant courtesy and respect to your wife? Do as you would be done by.

I remain,  
With a modicum of tact,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

On Submission

*No, I do not advise you to take a stick to her. It would be fruitless or worse; not being a prince, you would no doubt be put up to the magistrates in due course.*

*It is rather a surprise that your wife rejects submission. Your description of her ideal of a "liberated woman" resembles nothing so much as our description of a whore. I trust that is not the problem?*

*Perhaps you do not understand the nature of submission. You seem to think it a disgrace. It is not. Indeed, our Lord Jesus himself is in submission to God the Father; I can give you no greater example. Each of us is in submission; I am in submission to my prince, for example. Submis-*

sion is a matter of right response to authority. Mayhap it is not submission but authority you do not understand. Please distinguish authority from tyranny. Tyranny is power exercised for the benefit of the tyrant. Authority is power exercised for the benefit of those in submission to it.

You think not? Consider this: do you pay your magistrates to perform their task? Of course you do. If the task was for their benefit, would they require such pay? Now consider: who benefits from the magistrates? It is not the brigand! No, it is the subject who is in proper submission to that authority. You pay them to keep the brigand at bay – and they are given authority to do exactly that. So then, right authority knows its purpose, and from its purpose, its limits and

its duties.

Right submission is the proper obedience to right authority. Thus, should your wife wish to know her own happiness, she should inquire as to your authority. To do that, she must know the purpose of that authority.

Know again that such authority is not for your benefit, but hers.

But to what purpose? It is given by example, for Christ is Lord of the church, his bride. He has the authority to command her in any way; so you have the same authority over her. But see to what purpose Christ uses that authority – to present that bride to himself “spotless and radiant.” So then, your every command must be for her benefit. Even when she dissents from your method, she will honor your motive.

Indeed, you must treat her with the utmost kindness. For she is your body; you are one flesh. Therefore a kindness to her is a kindness to yourself, redoubled. If your every command is to bring her nearer to her perfection, will you not have her heart as well as her submission?

The matter is not as simple as I have made it. Indeed, I betook myself of much foolishness before I uncovered this – for I placed my wants above her needs. This is most unwise. But by God's grace (and her patience) matters improved. Do not worry overmuch whether or not she thinks your every step is correct. Consider only your motives and her benefit. She will soon be graciously pleased to be in submission to you – and the envy of all other women. For she will be married to a prince among men, not a petty ty-

*rant. If the nobility of your person is evident,  
her obedience will be sure.*

*As ever,  
Quick with advice,  
Isaac the Alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

Argument Mistaken

*It appears I did not make myself clear. You are lord and master of your house; why are you arguing with the woman?*

*An argument must be between peers. You are her lord and master. There can be no argument. There will be no argument unless you conduct it. Cease, therefore, conducting the argument. Patience is a virtue. No doubt your wife thinks it fitting to conduct herself in so shrill a manner. But what example do you set before her? If you are at peace with yourself, your example will be clear. She will soon discover that reason produces and rage reduces. Be master of yourself; you will soon master her.*

How easy that sounds – to a man of my age. It is not easy, but it is required. Give it your whole heart, practice it, and soon it will come.

As ever,

Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

On Wrath

*My humble apologies; I grievously erred upon your difficulty. The matter is not with your wife; it is with you. You are caught in the sin of wrath, and miserable your life will be until you free yourself.*

*Only seven sins are said to be mortal; this is one. Consider your own example. You howl in rage at your beloved wife; afterwards you are the most miserable of men. By your own words you know that her provocation was small and your wrath far too great. So then, who is at fault in this matter? Is it not you?*

*Wrath carries with it a salty tang. Indeed, do you not rehearse your wrath in the middle watches of the night, thinking anew of what*

*you will say upon the next occasion? The mere thought of an argument delights your mind – and this is sure sign that matters are very grave.*

*It would be pleasant to tell you that I read your mind in this by weight of careful thought and observation. There is a simpler method; I have been a man of wrath myself. When younger, with me it was a word and a blow. But by God's grace my father was man enough to remonstrate with me. I did not enjoy the experience. Never before had I heard him admit to any lack of control over his passions, yet I found he had been a young fool such as myself. He begged me leave off my anger – he whose presence spoke of self command.*

*Indeed, it was that which convinced me. If the*

man I feared most could speak of it thusly, then important it must be. Many years of effort and much penitence were required, but eventually I mastered my wrath. By God's grace I did so before it killed me.

What a blessing that became! My wife no longer cowered before me in fright; rather, she admired me as one might admire a conquering hero. The golden chains of love replaced the black whip of wrath.

I have seen wrath; I have seen control of self. The former brings disgrace; the latter, blessing. Be wise, my young friend. Seek the counsel of those older, those who have triumphed in the struggle over themselves. Put forth your strength in this struggle, triumph over your own wrath. If the lady is the beauty you paint her

*to be, should she not have a prince for a husband?*

*Alive, despite my mistakes,  
Isaac, the Alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

On Forgiveness

*Well might you ask. You are right; I am quick with philosophy and slow with the more pragmatic advice. Very well, herewith find the first lesson of wrath: forgiveness.*

*Forgiveness is often difficult, if not for the injury suffered then for the injustice. When injured, the justice of our cause is often plain. The offender thus is often called or even compelled to repent. But if no visible injury is sustained (pride shows no scars) then no sympathy arises from others. So wounded pride is boiled in the midwatches of the night until it becomes a tasty dish of vengeance imagined. The only way to avoid this is to forgive, and to forgive quickly.*

You might well ask why forgiveness – why not vengeance? First, vengeance is not always within your power. Next, when it is within your power, it is not always wise – indeed, a reputation for mercy impels agreement. But the true reason is this: vengeance belongs to God. If you take it, you are stealing from him. He does not look upon this kindly. Indeed, he is so unkind as to let you suffer the consequences of your vengeance – for vengeance breeds more vengeance. It is the devil's own delight, and man's misery.

Therefore one must forgive. But why so quickly? Surely one could savor the thought of vengeance without the action? Hypocrite! Thought is the birth of action. When stung by a

bee, the poison is best removed quickly. So it is with forgiveness—best done quickly.

You will find this difficult. Indeed, you will find that oft you will need to forgive someone many times – for the same offense. As forgiveness is an act of divine love, it does not come easily. So it is well to practice it.

I find it best to make forgiveness public – or at least announce it to the forgiven. Thus all the powers of society will aid you in keeping forgiveness. Forgiveness unannounced is soon retracted; public forgiveness brings the aid of both friend and enemy.

Take heart, my young friend. The rewards of forgiveness are very great. You shall soon find it easier to do, and others find you easier to live

*with. Of far greater importance is this: God is  
most forgiving to those who forgive.*

*I remain,  
In old age garrulous,  
Isaac the Alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*The Faults of Others—even Others-in-law*

*I do quite understand your point of view. The woman is being unreasonable. Being that she is your wife's mother, I suspect this will continue for a long time. The real question is, what are you going to do about it?*

*There is no sense in applying to your wife's father. If he could have corrected this fault in his wife, he would have done so years ago. Therefore, you must either correct it or bear with it. I suspect the former is not within your power; therefore, you must bear this with patience. Consider it a trial from God, who permits such burdens. Therein lies the solution to your trouble. As God has committed the problem to you, it seems only*

fair you should return it to him. He, after all, has power to deal with it. But I should warn you. His method of dealing with it is often to strengthen you rather than cure her. You should be prepared for this.

Is it not the case that your anxiety is caused by your own unreasoning attitude? You expect her to be a paragon of civility, utterly reticent in giving advice – can the same be said of you? Especially to one much younger than yourself? I think not. You have – I love your phrase for it – a double standard! One measure for you, another for her. Our Lord tells us that we are not to do this. We are to love others as we love ourselves. Is it not the case that in your love for self you are quite forgiving of your

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Latin "regula dupla", literally a standard which is folded twice.

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own errors? Be charitable enough to extend the same standard to her.

Consider it: if all were perfect in our world, how could we suffer for Christ's sake? Surely that is a great virtue. This is such an opportunity. She is now kin to you, and you should take such suffering as being for His sake. In so doing your true character will be revealed. If that character does not please you, then pray to your Lord to amend it. You are yet young; there is time.

You may well ask how I dealt with my wife's mother. She never had a difficulty with me. From which you may conclude that I had all the difficulties. But time and her good heart washed this clean. We forgave; I grew wiser. It

*is sometimes God's way. I have seen this as a  
husband and as father; the coin has two faces.*

*Trusting this finds you at peace, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

On Temptation

*You do live in a difficult time. Can it really be that your friend is at all serious that the only possible reaction to temptation is to yield? I suspect he would not be so willing to proclaim this principle if the temptation were to cowardice. You might bring up that example. He fancies himself an athlete, you say; no athlete can do without courage. Every athlete faces the temptation of giving in to pain and exhaustion. Ask him what he would think of that.*

*Temptation is a very useful thing, though you may not know it. Did you know it as a prod of humility? Think of it thusly when next you give in to some minor temptation – and remember that you, too, are human. By temptation*

you are purified, too. When you resist the devil you become stronger in the faith. But most of all, temptation is highly instructive.

You may not think so. But consider: in temptation Satan points out each of your weaknesses in the order most vile. By his attack he lays out for you a map of your own soul and its weaknesses. Take this map and plan your campaign to defeat him.

Daily should you pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Indeed, if you will ask, our Lord will arrange matters such that there is no temptation too strong for your character. But you must ask – and be willing to receive the answer. It may be that he shields you from things you thought you could bear – and thus you know that you are weaker than

you believed.

When that occurs, do remember how temptation starts. It flows from a scant trust of God and a wavering mind. It is your faith that is being tested in temptation; do you really trust that God's ways are far better than your own? If you doubt that in your mind, temptation will grow quickly.

The greatest of fortresses are built block by block. So it is with the great saints. They are built temptation by temptation.

Hoping this eases your mind, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*Pray for your enemies*

*Just how many enemies do you think you need in life? Surely you have found by now that one is quite sufficient for your days. You are only making a greater enemy of a lesser one by your actions.*

*It is quite the case that the man is an ass. Indeed, as you point out – at far too great a length, you are much too verbose – the man*

*Look who's talking!*

*simply lacks any credible evidence of being a leader of men. I regret to inform you that those who are above him often find such men of great use, especially in performing unpleasant tasks they would not themselves touch. Some shovels are reserved for the manure pile.*

The true question is this: what shall you do about it? Have you tried Christ's method? It is recommended by the highest of authority.

First, you must begin by doing good to this man.

This does not seem natural. Indeed, it is not natural; it is divine. Our Lord did much the same for us at the Cross. I can assure you that he will suspect nothing, for your motives would never enter his mind. Seek the good you can do him, and do it.

But our Lord continues: bless those who curse you. This is more difficult. Doing good may be seen as currying favor; this will be seen as incomprehensible. Let it. It will baffle your enemy to a great degree. Speak kindly to him; speak kindly of him. He is well accustomed to

dealing with anger; his skill in dealing with peace is not nearly so polished. Thus you see that you transfer the battle from his ground to your own.

Then you must seek ultimate victory. Go to your Lord in prayer; lift up holy hands and ask for his blessing at the hands of Jesus. Surely you would not deny even this man his salvation? If you would pray for his salvation, which is the greatest of blessings, what smaller blessing is beneath your contempt?

Remember, my young friend, that in war you have but two choices – to destroy your enemy utterly or, after defeating him, to make him your friend. The first is beyond your power. You may defeat him again and again, only to find

his hatred and effort redoubled each time. Do not let the taste of victory deny you the joy of triumph. Make this man your friend, whatever the cost.

You might well ask how I know this. As I read your letter I could see the man's face, for I know him in my own life. We are now friends. He is still an ass, but a friendly one. And you know how well they bear our burdens.

Wishing you complete triumph, I continue,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Intercession*

*One does wish that you had the faith to see the foolishness of your objection. You are looking at matters through the eyes of the world. Of course things look distorted in that view. Look at them through the eyes of Christ.*

*Your complaint, in short words, is that your ass of a ruler should be looking af-*

*ter you, not you after him. If he knew the proper use of his*

*authority, he would. He does not. You know that. So you complain that you should not intercede in prayer for the man.*

*You are grievously mistaken. Intercession is the privilege of the mighty, not the weak. Consider, for example, that your Lord Jesus Christ makes*

*I believe the word would more likely be "boss."*

intercession for you, as does the Holy Spirit. In times of old, prophets, priests and kings made intercession. To put the matter as principle, it is the mighty who intercede for the weak.

So your complaint is reduced to this: you presume he is mighty and you are weak. This is utterly wrong. You are the child of God. He is not. Which of the two of you is now the mighty? Is it not you, the man with access to the throne of grace upon which sits the ruler of all creation? No emperor ever born has such power and authority. You are his child.

Therefore, he rightly commands you to make intercession. Indeed, I am to make intercession for the Emperor himself. Is that not a sign that those of the church are mighty? If for the ruler of my land, then surely also for those I meet.

*So do as you are commanded. Jesus knows the weakness of your faith, but he longs to hear your prayers. You are his disciple; do as he did. He prayed for those who crucified him. The Father sends his rain on the just and the unjust. So should you intercede for your enemies, as one whose heavenly Father is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.*

*Seeking always your maturity, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

On Worry

*It astonishes me that you trouble yourself to visit this physician of the mind. From his advice, he well deserves the title we accord our physicians: leech. It seems he has extracted a great deal of money from you. His prize achievement thus far is this: he has made you feel guilty about feeling guilty. It is absurd.*

*All this because you "worry too much." There is certainly a good reason why you have received no help from your Lord and Savior in this. You worry about anything and everything that could possibly occur. Can you not see that, while any one of your worries could become reality, by no chance could all of them do so? So most of what you worry over will never be.*

Consider well: what are the things you worry about? First you worry about that which you have. You worry about your possessions, you worry about your family. But did not our Lord command you to commit such troubles to him? With good reason; he holds the future. If you will place him first, does he not have the power to secure all that needs be secured? And dispose of all that needs be disposed?

It may be also that you worry about that which you do not have. This divides in two: those things you want, and those you fear. But is not the Father of Lights the source of every good and perfect gift? Does he not know you need these things? As for those things you fear, who better than the omnipotent would you have deal with them?

The matter is one of faith. Look back at your worries; how many of them have become reality? Of those, how many were beyond the strength of God? You see the foolishness of it all, if only looking to the past. When you become old enough to value each day as one more precious gift, you will see that each day has enough worry in it. Borrow nothing from the morrow. Better to be in the hands of the money-lenders than the grip of worry.

An older, wiser man once gave me good advice on this. "Trust your troubles to the Lord – he will be awake all night anyway." As long as he is up and about, you can sleep soundly.

I calmly remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

Godly and worldly sorrow

*Perhaps it is opportune to explain to you the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Your letter seems to confuse the two. If you will keep these two ideas in separate paths you will know in which way to walk.*

*Worldly sorrow is common enough. It regards sin as folly, which is true, and is primarily regret for the consequences. Should you go to the blacksmith and enter into combat, your face will soon show the results. Your regret will be for the pain you suffer. You will say, "I was a fool to do that." This is true. But it is not godly sorrow. Many such mistakes would be required to gather even a small portion of wisdom.*

Godly sorrow views the matter quite differently. It regards sin not only as folly but much more as an offense against God. "Against thee, thee only have I sinned," as King David wrote. Godly sorrow seeks restoration of fellowship with God. Worldly sorrow seeks this world's wisdom that we might not repeat the mistake.

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Psalm 51

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How, then, does godly sorrow work this restoration? By confession – as you see in David's example. If you confess, then God will forgive. You might well ask, "Does not God already know my offense?" Indeed He does. He is waiting for you to admit that it is an offense, a sin. You do this by asking for his forgiveness. Asking forgiveness carries the necessary predecessor of ad-

mitting sin. No one asks forgiveness for that which is not sin.

In so doing you gain the strength and insight of the Holy Spirit, and thus you gain great wisdom. So you see that worldly sorrow is of but little profit; godly sorrow is great gain. By such you may be wise beyond your years.

Stumbling in such paths myself, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

Knowledge vs. Truth

*Thank you very much for your new style in letters. I must admit that your thinking machine produces fine penmanship, and the larger letters are most pleasant to my aging eyes. As my honored father put it, "It is no disgrace to grow old. But it is not particularly convenient either."*

*You greatly esteem the learning of your time. Indeed, from your description, it is of great concern to you that you acquire some specific type of this learning, so that you may be well thought of by your friends. No doubt some of this is necessary. But would you permit an old man four questions about your learning? By which you might distinguish knowledge from truth?*

First, is it profitable for the soul? My knowledge of things agricultural is most necessary for the feeding of my belly. One must know the seasons and the times.

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*Isaac is probably referring to the Day of Judgment*

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But on the day this will all turn to nothing. So therefore it is of little profit eternally. But if I take the fruits of my labors and share them with the poor, I will hear, "Well done," from my Master. One is knowledge; the other, truth.

Next, does it tend towards peace or faction? Those of great learning in our time take much pleasure in what is termed learned debate. If one did not know the language, one would think two children were squabbling over a toy. If the learning divides people, then it is knowledge. If it brings them together in peace,

it is truth.

Third, does it tend to mastery of self, or of others?

Many seek that which will make them rich.

Thus they can purchase slaves and hire work-

men. A good slave learns flattery at a tender

age, my friend. One who seeks such knowledge

will see no reason to master himself. One who

seeks to master himself will see no reason to seek

such knowledge.

Finally, does it encourage pride or humility? It

distresses me greatly to hear that you think

pride a great virtue; it is not. It is the deadliest

of sins, for it is the sin of Satan himself. I think

it is for this reason that God allows those under

the care of our leeches to die; otherwise their

great learning would make them insufferably

pompous. See now that you call those of great

learning "doctor." Do they have the corrective of dead patients? If not, then what keeps their pride from growing? Is it not the case that those with the greatest knowledge are those who are most proud? But truth encourages humility – if only because in knowing so much one sees how much is yet to be known.

Knowledge is not truth. It is not even a good substitute. Consider well what you strive for, as you may get it.

Yours in truth,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On long winded preaching*

*So your bishop is of long wind and of little sense. It amuses me to hear you complain of his repetition; did you not know that he repeats because you do not hear?*

*The man must repeat himself; most of what we need to hear is reminder, not new wisdom. Consider it this way: do you not partake of the Lord's Supper each week? You do not complain of the repetition of that, and with good reason. It is of first importance. Therefore it needs repetition to be placed firmly between your ears. The center of the worship is Christ; the center of the memory is the Cross; the two combine in Communion.*

*Now if this be repeated, can you fault your bish-*

op for his repetition of the faith? It too is of first importance. You think him over long in his speech. In most men this is a sign that they have more breath than sense. But in the matter of the bishop, it may be that he is holding the gem to the light, twisting it round so that you may see its full glory.

*It is unlikely that Isaac ever experienced a preacher who was not a bishop. As such, this word could be translated "preacher" as well. Bishop is the literal translation, however.*

Consider that your task is not to be one who finds fault with the homily as one might find fault with fruit in the market. Your task is to hear and understand. He would be a poor bishop indeed if the entire sermon passed without something which you needed to hear. Indeed, it is the major cause of sleep during the sermon: the fear of something which will rouse

the conscience.

If he is truly as poor in speech as you think, then do not complain. Rather, lift him up in prayer. Is he not the voice of the church?

Would you have such a voice be silent before the world? Then ask God to give him a voice with which to be heard indeed.

Prayer, however, has its effects unintended. As you pray for his eloquence and knowledge, remain aware. Prayer will change your heart. You may find that his words are worthy even now.

I cannot forbear to add this. If you pray that his words might be heard by the world, then pray also for his protection. If his speech is ignored, Satan will pay him no mind. But if his words

*bring salvation, Satan will surely attack. Go  
to God for his protection; the more it is needed,  
the greater the bishop will be.*

*As ever,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*On the Sense of Shame*

*It does not matter how learned is your doctor of the mind. He is wrong. Worse, he has no concept of the terrible damage he delivers to the soul. I see that I did not make this clear; please, for your own sake, read carefully.*

*Is it not obvious to you that a sense of shame is a prerequisite to true repentance? Let me give you an example.*

*Suppose, on the first part, that you enter an unfamiliar city. Further suppose that the city has a law which requires all who enter to wear a turban. You are unaware of that law until the magistrates stop you. What is your reaction? You apologize; you promise to wear a turban from then on; you purchase one immediate-*

ly. But in no sense can you claim that you have repented. You have simply remedied a mistake and assured the keepers of the law that you intended no harm. Your fault was ignorance. As long as it is not willful ignorance, there is no shame in it – though there may be penalties.

For the second part, consider that your anger rises and you strike an elderly man in your wrath. Your fault is then well known to you; your apology deep and humble. Indeed, repentance is the right reaction to such a deed.

Now, you must see that shame is that which gives rise to hypocrisy. If a man is ashamed of his deeds, he can either repent – or pretend that he is innocent. In that sense, hypocrisy pays tribute to virtue.

Your doctor of the mind is quite correct in disapproving of hypocrisy. But to insist that the real issue is that one should not have a sense of shame is indeed a horror. He concludes that shame is a disease of the mind. It is not. It is the right reaction to sin. If you have done something wrong you should be ashamed of yourself. You should not trot down to this leech and obtain his herbs to relieve that sense of shame.

Do you not see where this leads? If shame be a malady of the mind, then you have eliminated hypocrisy by eliminating the righteousness it pretends to. To eliminate the fraud you have destroyed the truth. You call this a great advance in science. In so doing you exalt the barbarian

The phrase "doctor of the mind" probably would be better translated "psychologist" or "psychiatrist" - but there is no way to distinguish which would be the correct word.

as if he were a hero. The destruction of your civilization cannot be far off.

I put it to you: if this be your thought, then is it not true that your heroes are not noble men, but men of violence and anger? Men of no self control, but only of physical strength? Barbarians! It is bad enough to have the barbarian at the gate. It is far worse to become one inside.

Greatly grieved at your thought, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*Bearing the Cross—the honesty of  
others*

*Ah, now the message hits home! There is nothing like being cheated to bring out one's sense of honesty.*

*You see the point now, I suspect. It's not so much that you have been deceived, swindled and robbed – that happens to most of us. It's the fact that your swindler is crowing about it. He is so proud of the way he deceived you, and the cleverness with which he has prevented you from correcting his misdeeds. When what is vile is honored among men, how the wicked strut! When you meet it in person, evil is so banal. You may not think so, for Satan tells us that evil is enlightening. When you see it in person, it enlightens you not at all. It looks so drab and*

ordinary. Evil, you see, is often the result of a choice between what is right and what is convenient. That which is convenient hardly ever leaves the impression of virtue.

But what will you have? If you will live the life of virtue, your convenience will be sacrificed often. As my father said, if a man's virtue costs him nothing, it is worth the same.

For the Christian, the command is simple. Take up the Cross, says our Lord, and follow me. To take up the Cross is to deny your self. Self-affirmation is the opposite of being a Christian. It means that there is no sacrifice unless it results in pure benefit to oneself. That is your swindler's choice. He chose between that which put coin in his purse and the life of sacrifice which would mean being honest with you. He

would not sacrifice. You see the result in him; know that it is the same in you.

This is a sad thing for Christians. It is often the case that they say they are willing to take up the Cross – but they cannot seem to find a cross that is convenient. They deceive themselves into thinking themselves sacrificial Christians.

They are willing to give of their abundance, but sacrifice nothing. It is still the truth: the worst cross to bear is no cross.

But take heart! Your God has presented to you a cross to bear for his sake. It has come in the form of honesty. You know what you should do. Do not expect others to be honest; never cease to be honest yourself. Is this a sacrifice? Of course. It will be very inconvenient, as it now is to you. But I am glad to see that you know that it is

*the only choice of a true Christian. You could return his dishonesty by cheating him in return. It is much better to overcome evil with good. You have chosen well in this.*

*Rejoicing with you in your sufferings, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

On Fishing

*It is good of you to ask. My health, in general, is quite good. There is a goodly amount of pain in my bones, however, which does seem to get worse in time of foul weather. Pain is now my companion in this life. I will not drink enough wine to remove it, for that would be drunkenness. I must confess, however, that a draft of wine now and then does ease the matter. I am fond of it at the end of the day. It aids my sleep, I find, and adds to warmth. Since the passing of my dear Mary Ann my body is not so warm as it once was. Particularly in the late hours of the night, cold and pain are often my companions. Many a morning my son's wife finds me by the fire, especially in winter.*

It is summer now, and I have a different remedy. The early hours are the best for fishing, as all know. I do not fish as those who must live by it, but rather use the pole than the net. It is a most enjoyable thing.

My eyes see none too well at distance. But close up they are still working, and so I can still find the hook to put it on the line. My grandson has given me many hooks with the lure in place. It has taken much time to master which lure works best in which place, and with what fish. But that is the way of old men. When I was a young man I would insert the hook in some pork. Only the greediest of fish would take such bait. As I grew older I learned to net some small fish and use them to snare the large ones. Now I have mastered the art. I tease the fish with a

bit of horsehair which only looks as if it could be eaten. I rather enjoy the thought that I have snared them and given them nothing in return. What a wicked fellow I am – to the fish! This is the way Satan deals with us all. When I was young he dangled dead meat in my face. Only the young fool would play the drunkard without thinking. Only the young fool would chase the wench and expect more than a night's pleasure. So it is with the fish; only the young fools will eat dead meat.

When I grew older, Satan used live bait on me. No longer the pleasures of the flesh, but the companionship of the world. How great is the desire to be accounted one of the fellows! It is a small fish; I am a big fish; surely all is well. At least the big fish got a last meal.

But now there is no last meal. I am Satan to these fish! As Satan wants to give me pride and nothing of value, so I snare these fish with nothing but horsehair and a hook. I float it on the water and pull on it erratically. It appears to be a delicacy; an insect on the surface of the water. The poor fish must decide; shall I make the great leap and devour the unsuspecting insect? It is the fish who is unsuspecting!

Now you see why Satan hates fishermen – they know too much of his ways! Perhaps this is why our Lord chose so many of them to become his Apostles. I know not. I know that I shall bury this letter for you – and then I will go fishing.

Hoping you enjoy the same, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*How strength is shown in gentleness*

*It was a modest day's catch, to be sure. But as I said, I do not fish as those who fish for their livelihood. The fish provided dinner; my son's wife and their family enjoyed the meal with me.*

*It is good to have grandchildren. I suspect this is because my grandchildren and I have a common enemy: their parents. But upon examination, there is much more to the matter. I find myself teaching my grandchildren things which I would never have taught my children – but which my grandfather taught me. There are some virtues which only an old man can impart.*

*I have very little time left in this world, I suppose. So it may seem foolish that I live as if I*

had all of time. But consider: should I not have mastered life by now? And if I have, what difference is there in another day?

So I teach my grandchildren. Their parents teach them to do things; I teach them to have patience. More than that, I teach them gentleness. It is a virtue which ornaments a woman and strengthens a man.

Consider the matter in your own time. Is it not the case that the truly strong are the only ones who can deal with others in gentleness? Those who hope they are strong; those who want to be strong; those who know they are not strong but wish to deceive you – all these must act with harshness. But the man who is truly strong has the liberty of being gentle. No father would be accounted strong because he struck his infant.

Being sure in his strength, he can be gentle. So it is with the truly strong; they are the gentle ones. So it is with those who are at peace with God; they are protected by the omnipotent one. Gentleness is indeed a fruit of the Holy Spirit. For women this is also true. Women are weaker than men, or so we believe. But there is strength in going, and there is strength in enduring. I think that women are stronger in enduring. Such strength is often best shown in gentleness. Many women are greatly tried. A woman who is greatly tried and responds to all with gentleness is accounted noble. Such a woman was my Mary Ann. She endured all, and returned a sweet word for the sour. How often I would enter our bedchamber grousing, only to hear her words of sweet counsel. Much of my wisdom came from

her strength.

I hope your wife can indeed do the same for you, my friend. Do not mistake her gentleness for weakness. Rather, give her the opportunity to bless you with her wisdom. If she is thoughtful enough to hold her tongue until she is in the bed-chamber, close the doors and open your ears.

It is late and my bones ache again. There is a summer storm on the way, I feel it. A draft of wine and to bed for this old man.

Hoping this finds you in health and wisdom,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Being an Old Man*

*How surprising that you would ask such a question! "What is old age like?" My Latin would be eloquent indeed if I could answer that question well. But I shall make the attempt.*

*You must understand that I have only lately reached that position. You become old in your own mind only when most of your friends have died. You realize that you are among the last of your generation. So in a sense old age brings with it loneliness. It also brings with it a sense that only my body is old. My mind is still young and sharp. This is why God gives us grandchildren, I think. My sons think that I am no longer capable; my grandchildren know better.*

The reason they think I am not capable is simple. The flame of my life burns steadily now. When I was young my life was one of passion and upheaval. A few words could bring me joy; others could bring me to rage. Since I no longer go about as a man blown in every wind, they assume I no longer care. They are wrong. I am old, and I refuse to be a windblown leaf. The leaves think the old oak dead because he moves so little.

Indeed, I have little reason to move, either. The sea of life is much calmer now. No longer do I need to see every word as a challenge, every action as a threat. As a young man I depended upon my strength. An old man depends upon the Lord. He calms the seas at his command, and he has calmed mine.

Am I afraid of death? I think not. I have seen many die, and the process is not pleasant. I suspect I will not enjoy it. But death itself holds no terrors for an old Christian. My Lord has gone on before me – and returned from the grave. My guide is sure. Indeed, he tells me that he has prepared a place for me and assured me of my welcome. Have you ever been on a long trip with a warm home at the end? Take heart, young friend, in this: death is not the end. For our Lord has promised his return, and with it our resurrection. I shall inquire as to your whereabouts on that day; see to it that you are there to meet me.

In faith eternal,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*A New Father—and Grandparents*

*So, your bride is to present you with child! My heartiest congratulations; welcome to manhood. You will permit me, I am sure, to indulge you with some advice from an old man. I shall not tell you how to raise your child, as you know not if it be boy or girl. But may I place in your mind the value of your parents, and your wife's parents?*

*A child's life is not a secure one. Think what it must be, surrounded by people much larger than yourself, all with strong opinions and some with the quite evident desire to enforce them upon you. In such a time a child must crave a sense of position. The sense that one belongs to an orderly society, fitting in one's proper place, is of*

great worth.

The child's grandparents help provide that, for in them the child can see the continuing of the generations. If my father knows his place, then I can be sure of mine.

Now, I will grant you it is my privilege to go somewhat beyond the bounds of parental restriction in dealing with my grandchildren.

This keeps my sons ever aware that I am still their father – and delights me no end too. But I think I have not utterly ruined the little ones. What a joy such children are! To be free from the responsibility of their daily bread and yet privileged to enjoy their company is indeed pleasant. One grandson – he is but four – takes great pleasure in grasping my hand and dragging me down by the brook. There he carefully

points out the various fishes and frogs and insects, with an air that would credit a philosopher. Having instructed his ignorant grandfather in the ways of the world, he races home. There he proudly informs his mother of his adventure. The smile alone is worth the journey. So I encourage you; share your child with your parents. No doubt they endured you as well. Ponder your own childhood and recall such pleasures yourself, and do not deny them to your child.

Again, my congratulations,  
Isaac the Alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

On Raising Children

*A son! My heartiest of congratulations!*

*It is, perhaps, a bit early to speak to you of such things. But as one never knows the day of one's death, I shall venture a bit of instruction on the art of raising children.*

*The first thing is this: children must be brought under authority. You are under the authority of the Lord; your wife is under your authority, and she must then rule the children. Never accept from your children the slightest lack of respect for their mother! She is the woman you love as well as the one who bore the pain of their birth. She has earned their respect; it is her due.*

*If you will treat her with constant courtesy and respect, if you will always uphold her authority over the children, you will have little difficulty in disciplining them.*

*There is one obedience above all which you must observe. You cannot deceive your children. You must be under the authority of Christ. Your wife under your authority, your children under hers – all depend upon your obedience to Christ. It is the foundation of your family discipline. Your children are quick to learn by example, you see. Indeed, much quicker than you will realize. So if they see you in obedience to Christ; your wife in obedience to you, and both of you insisting upon their obedience and respect, they will soon see their place.*

*How I remember my father, God rest his soul, up-*

holding that! No offense could be greater than to fail to respect to my mother. I never recall her disciplining us as children for such a thing; my father took it as personal offense. He defended her honor, her dignity and her authority on every occasion. Knowing no better, I did likewise. The results have been most satisfactory in both cases, and I believe my sons are of the same opinion.

In all this you must remember the Apostle's command: do not provoke your children to wrath. In my later years of childhood I often (it is the way of wisdom for those of thirteen summers) disagreed with my parents. My father permitted this – as long as all the forms of respect were observed. He, of course, had the final decision. Often enough, though, my whim and

foolishness were desire enough for him to allow me to try my own follies. Anything could be said – with respect and honor. In this there is great wisdom.

It is great wisdom for this: some day the child shall become a father as well. It is good that he then has walked on his own two legs for some time. Kindly remember that you are not raising a slave for service but a princeling in his own right. If you will turn your mind to raising a noble man, your son will have cause to thank you.

Trusting my words to be of service, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On National Calamity*

*If you wish the right answers you must first ask the right questions. I submit to you that your question should not be, "Why did this happen to us?" It rather should be, "How is it that God held his hand so long?"*

*You seem to regard God as some sort of divine shield against all injury, and the source of all blessing. He is – to the righteous. But can your nation really claim to be righteous? You are servile in assuring the effeminate of your approval; you conduct abortion on a scale which exceeds that of any persecution in the history of the church; your leaders lie under oath. Should God bless such a nation as that? You look to him for love and protection. You should remem-*

ber that he is righteousness itself. What fellowship can righteousness have with evil?

To my complete amazement, however, you also ask how God could use the heretics to perform his justice. Have you never read the history of Israel? Who were those whom God used to punish that holy nation? Did he not ordain the Babylonians, the Assyrians, and many more who worshiped idols? It is God's method; he unleashes those who do not fear him to correct those who should. He will destroy them in their turn.

You must remember: God is righteous. If he were not also merciful, who among us would live? This is the lesson of the cross. Were God merciful but not righteous, why would our sins need atonement? Were he righteous but not merciful, why would he provide atonement? But he

is both, and by the power of the cross we have both mercy and righteousness.

Do listen to an old man's fears, my friend. My fear is that your nation will rise up in anger, but not righteousness. If you will not confess your sins, you must trust in your own strength to save you. If you do that, then how will you stand against the Almighty? Your power, you say, is great. But what power can prevail against the One who created all things? Do you not see that this is a hardening of your hearts? Whom God would destroy he first makes proud. Seek Him while He may be found. The time, I fear, is short.

As ever,

Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Innocent Suffering*

*You now ask a different question, and one which is more difficult to answer. Indeed, I see the justice of your complaint. It is one thing for your nation to confess its national sins. It is entirely another to ask why a particular person died in such an attack.*

*Please remember that God does not see death as we do. Indeed, his ways are higher than ours; his thought is higher than ours. Is it not likely that he sees death simply as the entrance into his presence for his children? We grieve; he welcomes the departed home. For this reason I look forward to the day of my death. Most of those whom I love are gone from me; I anticipate the reunion with pleasure.*

It often seems to me that God is arbitrary in these matters. The Scripture tells us the story of the man born blind, healed by our Lord. He was blind from birth. He was thirty-seven when healed. All assumed that he had sinned, or his parents. But our Lord revealed that he had another purpose: the very glory of God. It seems less than just that a man suffer so long so that others might see the majesty of the Lord. But what are thirty-seven years compared to eternity? Remember, too, that God permits no evil unless a greater good can be brought from it. Surely the omnipotent one could have kept Judas from betraying him – but he did not. For out of that betrayal came the Cross; out of the Cross came the resurrection; out of the resurrection came our salvation.

*As to the result of this matter, I think it too early to judge. Who knows? Perhaps it may bring about a great awakening of your people. Surely by now you know you need it.*

*I remain,*

*Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*A Good Conscience, or No Conscience?*

*I do indeed see your point about the conscience. But as you yourself admit, the theory of your age is that the conscience should be denied existence. Surely a Christian can see that the problem is not the existence of the conscience but its guidance. One may be free of the feeling of guilt in several ways; the right way is to cease to be guilty and know it. Therefore, it is the task of the Christian to cultivate his own conscience. You cannot suppress it totally; if you do you are worse than a barbarian. Consider that! Even the barbarian has a conscience. God provides this by nature so that we might know we are sinners. To lose the conscience is deadly. The virtues of a good conscience are many. One*

in particular is that you sleep well of nights. He whose conscience is clear has no fear of retribution, for example. So it seems to me that your view deprives you of something which is both morally good and beneficial to the body.

But the conscience must be instructed. If you will not instruct it, the mob will. The world will press on you until your conscience becomes nothing more than an alarm for good manners. What does it matter what other people think? Even if they praise you, beware.

The true measuring rod for the conscience is the Holy Spirit. Train your conscience to Him, and all will be well.

It is somewhat like the tuning of the harp; it cannot be done without ears. You must listen to God if you are to tune your conscience. This is

done in prayer and meditation. It is done by instruction in the Scripture. It is also done by conversing with your elders in the faith, for often they see your trials as their history.

*The word translated "elders" here does not mean bishop, but rather "older Christians".*

Your time thinks a good conscience to be no conscience at all. We see a good conscience as one in harmony with God. So I must ask you: which of the two of us will sleep better of nights?

*Sleeping soundly, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*On Fasting*

*Your question sounds as if you think these things to be of no use. Yes, the Christian of my time is acquainted with fasting; the vigil is largely the part of the priest and particularly the monk. If I may presume upon your ignorance, I shall attempt to enlighten you.*

*It is not, as you surmise, that we consider the body to be evil. It is simply of this world, and must be transformed to be eternal. Indeed, as God made the body and pronounced it good, we should not see fit to disagree. But surely you will also agree it can be a source of difficulty.*

*As such, it must be subdued. There are various methods for this; the fast is one. Our general practice is to fast from sunrise to sunset. As we*

seldom eat after sunset, this would become a complete day. For someone such as myself, living on a manor where food is abundant, this is an exercise in discipline. But my view is that life is to be lived, the body to be tamed, and all subject to Christ.

The monk holds to a different view. In that view the body must be denied. Not all are called to be monk or priest, though the occupation is held in high honor. One reason is this: those who fast but once or twice a year know the difficulty. We can imagine the trials of those who fast twice a week.

Can you not see that the difference is the calling of God? Some are called to be priests and bishops, others monks. The others are called to be as I am. You should therefore know that God,

having called, will bless in accordance with his call. Neither monk nor manor has the advantage, for there is no favoritism with God. Indeed, I would argue the matter makes no difference. For if you are a monk and despise this life, considering it all vanity, then you set your eyes on the things to come. But if you love this life, then what could please you more than to have it continue forever? Either way, your eyes should be upon the prize: eternal life. All else is insignificant.

So then, be you monk or merry, Christ is the goal. Some will share his joys; some will share his afflictions some little way; others will share them to the fullest. He is faithful and just; he will reward us all accordingly. In his hands are the keys of hell and death. If you wish entrance

*into the holy city, you must know the doorkeeper.*

*Regarding you in joy and sorrow, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*Satan, the ruler of hell?*

*What a curious notion you have – that Satan is ruler of hell. He most certainly is not! Satan, should it have escaped your notice, is the ruler of this world, not hell to come. I should think your president and his colleagues would have convinced you of that. This is his arena, fallen as he is.*

*The Scripture is quite clear on this; I wonder how you have come to such a mistake. Satan was a cherub of God, fallen from grace and dispelled from God's presence. His descent to this world is clearly proclaimed as Jesus sent out the seventy; at the coming of the kingdom Satan fell like lightning. By your time he should be in stride.*

It amuses me to hear that Satan and his demons do not exist for most of your world. Let me assure you, they are everywhere evident here. We see the effects of these demons daily; we see those of the church who are given the gift of casting them out. I can see how it would be difficult to understand in your time; evidently Satan has settled upon a policy of sinister silence. But we know him well, be assured. There is little profit to those who inquire of his nature. Two things, and two things only, you need know. First, that he is the father of lies. Second, that he is very powerful. Indeed, were not your heavenly Father protecting you, he would certainly overwhelm you. But by God's grace greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world.

If you think not, consider this. Paul tells us explicitly that the worship of idols is the worship of demons. Such worship arose before the coming of Christ. But by your own testimony no such worship exists in your land today. How is this? Only that people are not long deceived unless there is power in the deception. No longer do the demons have such power to deceive; they have been bound by our Lord Jesus Christ. But to say they do not exist is to ignore all evidence of times prior.

Satan is the ruler of hell? If so, look to your prisons – the prisoners have taken charge of them.

As ever,

Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On True Wealth*

*Perhaps I misunderstand your meaning, but I gather that the vagaries of the market place have reduced your fortune somewhat. This seems a bitter thing to you; perhaps your hope was misplaced. Such things happen often in this world. If you wish to be truly rich, you must understand true wealth.*

*Permit me an example. Suppose you set out to purchase a horse. You find a horse trader. He displays one to you in fine harness, decked with gold and jewels. He talks on and on about the greatness of this horse. If you are a fool, you will buy the horse without riding it. What you have really purchased is the gold in the harness. The true virtue of the horse is not in the harness.*

It is in the running. Is the horse swift? Can it run great distances? If you put it to cart, can it pull a heavy load? These are the true virtues of the horse. So let us suppose that your horse has such virtue. Now, further imagine with me that someone comes and steals the finery from the horse. Are you really any the less in your fortune? I submit not; you did not buy the horse for a show. You bought it to ride. Your loss is in the trivial and the gaudy.

But if the horse should turn lame, then your loss is great – even though the finery be still attached. So then, consider the principle thusly: that which mars the primary virtue of a thing harms the thing indeed.

So then, if you wish to know that which truly harms a man, you must know the virtue of

man. Is man made for money? Is man made for pleasure? Is man made for pomp? None of these things! Man is made to serve God and enjoy Him forever. That which injures his service to God or his enjoyment of God is that which truly injures a man.

In that light, consider: has not God increased your wealth? By this decline in your fortune you have begun to question all things. This can but lead you to the Almighty as the source of all things. He has reduced your purse and increased your virtue. Only a fool or a scoundrel would have the reverse.

Counting your blessings, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*The Pain of Hearing a Chance Remark*

*Yes, it is very discouraging. The remark you hear when you were not supposed to be listening is often a well of sadness. So you have found It is very disappointing to hear one you thought a friend making such a remark*

*However, take consolation in one fact: this is the way of men. All of us are weak. We seek the approval of others. I do not doubt that your friend thought you at a far distance, and was merely being agreeable to the tenor of the conversation. In your heart of hearts you know that you have done the same; at least I know I have.*

*Indeed, often we are not merely agreeable; we embellish. It is the nature of man to add a leaf*

to the branch of rumor. Can you honestly say you have never added to your own achievements, for example? My children know by now who won the war when I was young. By the time you become an old man, your military accomplishments are such that your grandchildren do indeed wonder what the rest of the army did. We are wont to do this for our accomplishments; likewise for the sins of others.

It is a rare thing to find a friend who is pure in heart. Your friend is not really an enemy, just weak in spirit. Only those who are pure in heart keep themselves from such things. Such virtue is exceedingly rare in the young. Perhaps this is why those of my children's age smile at me when I refuse to be agreeable. They attribute it to old age and simplicity of mind; I think it the result

of an old man working to please his Lord with  
purity of heart.

Take heart. Does your virtue really depend upon the chance remark of a friend? If so, your life will be miserable. To value yourself upon the opinions of others is a grave error. But we each need something by which to measure ourselves. The only sure measure is Christ himself. If you will seek your Master's approval alone, you will need no other.

Still a friend,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Success and Failure*

*From what I can gather from your last letter, I should render you my heartiest congratulations. I am not sure what manner of elevation this is, but it is evident that you have longed for it. It is also evident that you consider it the result of your own hard work, and that is always to be commended.*

*It is probable that the word intended here is "promotion", not elevation.*

*May an old man put in a word here? You have worked through failure; now you must learn to deal with success. It brings its own difficulties, often the worse because we are not prepared for them.*

*First, you must know that success, like failure, is fleeting. Today's grand news is tomorrow's*

empty wind. Success, by its very nature, demands more of you. You will soon be working hard again, thinking of the next elevation. Success and failure are imposters – both. They are things of this world; temporary. What does it matter if you are a beggar, when you understand divine mysteries? What profit is it to be a king, if you are a pagan? So these things must be taken in hand. Success, like money, is a good servant but a cruel master.

Indeed, success is more dangerous to the soul than is failure. For it breeds the confidence that says, "I know how to deal with this." Indeed, perhaps your method worked this once. But your right method now may be the wrong method later. If your success blinds you to new ways of accomplishment, have you really succeeded?

There is also the danger of the closed mind. Having triumphed, you may conclude you have no more to learn. No scholar would make that mistake, but a man of the affairs of this world might. To cease to learn is to wither from the neck up. (When you get older, this is cured by having grandchildren.)

Worst of all is the danger of pride. Your success may cause you to look down upon those about you. You may conclude, like the gladiator, that the vanquished do not deserve to live. Thus does pride corrupt the heart; I have seen this with my own eyes.

This is why the church teaches the virtue of humility. Humility teaches that only God knows the way which is perfect. Humility teaches that one always has something of profit to

learn. Humility is the great defense against pride.

If you would master yourself, young friend, master this success. Such mastery will be a greater success, for in your elevation you have mastered the world. In humility you master yourself.

Having achieved my altitude, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*Reconciliation in Marriage*

*Why I trouble myself over your domestic difficulties, I do not know. You are exceedingly stubborn. In my time that is a privilege reserved for those of us of sufficient age to know how to use it.*

*The short of the matter is this. You have brought upon yourself this argument, and you have done so most unjustly to your wife. Is it not the case that you have read the greatest of meanings into her every action? Have you not found four ways to interpret her every word? And all the while you insist that your words are to be taken just as you spoke them. This is unjust.*

*It is worse. It is discourteous. If ever there were*

words for a young man's education in marriage, here they are: You cannot be too courteous to your wife. At every turn in the argument you should be as polite as you know. She will thus be assured of your good intentions. I believe by now she has discovered your lack of sense. If your head is vacant, at minimum let your heart overflow.

Do you not realize that she is flesh of your flesh? She is in submission to you. Therefore you must put her needs before your own. It is your responsibility to end this matter. You must end it with all graciousness.

The matter is one of reconciliation. In this you must understand how reconciliation is accomplished. It is the one who reconciles who pays the price, not the reconciled. You think not? Con-

sider Christ, who reconciled us to God. Did He not pay the price? You must now do likewise.

Marriage is intended by God to be life long. You therefore must reconcile. Who is to be the author of reconciliation? You are head of the marriage, as Christ is head of the church. As he reconciled us, so you must be the author of reconciliation in your marriage.

There is one consolation, my young friend. She longs for that reconciliation. However long the journey, you must begin some time; be assured of a good welcome at the end.

Trusting you will act promptly, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On Reading the Scripture*

*It would seem to me that you have been taught how to read without having been taught how to read.*

*That is not a contradiction.*

*You have been taught the steps of reading a manuscript, but not the steps of how to read a manuscript. These are two entirely different things. So when you complain that reading the Scripture is a boredom to you, it tells me instantly that you are not properly taught. Any fool can be taught to read. It is a child's skill. But reading in which one truly perceives – that is much more difficult. Each work must be approached in the proper way if you are truly*

*The word for "manuscript" may also be interpreted as any written material; at this time the codex, or bound book of manuscripts, was also available. Printing, however, occurs much later than this date.*

to understand it. For example, should you desire to cook a boar by recipe, you must know your spices before you read the recipe.

So it is with the Holy Writ. There are three most necessary conditions to reading the Scripture.

The first of these is humility. As God has permitted his own words to be captured for your benefit, you may not survey them with a lordly air.

Understand first that the author is above you; he condescends to you as your Lord. If you will not approach his words with humility, how shall you learn? Indeed, will not your pride prevent your wisdom?

The next of these is simplicity. So many seek some hidden meaning in the Scripture! But is it not the case that the Scriptures are full of plain

speech? Are these not the words intended for the race of man, not the race of angels? Only the divine author could write so deeply yet so simply. Therefore, we must read with simplicity, not seeking to upset its meaning but to comprehend it.

Finally, we must read with faith. All things written are for our profit. God is economical with words. Therefore we must see all things written through the eyes of faith. If we will not, then the hardened heart of the cynic will soon grow within us.

You read but you do not understand; you listen but you do not hear. Did not Isaiah the Prophet speak of this? Let go of your desire for hidden meaning and read with humility, simplicity and faith. Then your understanding will grow,

*and your heart will be nourished with true food.*

*As ever,*

*Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*God has been too good to me*

*It is kind of you to enquire. Yes, my sight of late has declined; my letters are getting larger, I suppose. Things at a distance have long been a fog; now I find that things at hand require more study too. I do not think it blindness, just my age.*

*You are mistaken, however, about my reaction to it. There is no thought in me that God has been harsh or unjust to me. Indeed, my thought is quite the opposite. But behind that there is a tale to tell. My children have heard it too many times, but I now have a new audience. As a young lad I was a clumsy lout. I took it into my head that there was nothing I touched that I would not break. My father, God give*

him peace, often lost patience with his son in this matter. It became so bad that I sought the aid of a priest, thinking to enter a monastery. My thought was that I was doomed to punishment, but that perhaps God would accept me if I took up the cowl.

Of course, I would have been miserable as a monk, too. I thought that the difficulty was with God when it was with myself. I need not tell you how we talked, or how God spoke to me in dreams. You need merely know that I was soon convinced that it was not my lot to suffer greatly for God. God gives his spiritual gifts as He sees fit, and a tolerance for suffering is not one He gave me. Can you imagine me as a monk? As our priest pointed out, even the Apostles did not choose their own place of service. I

had visions of doing great things for Christ. It seems Christ had visions of me doing plain things for Him. The Divine Carpenter knows the tools of his hand. I am a dull chisel.

The result has been almost embarrassing. God has been too good to me. I have received long life, a loving wife, fine sons and beautiful daughters, the wealth of this world in good measure and many other things beside. Should I then complain of my trivial sufferings? The decay of my sight is nothing compared to my blessings. Indeed, it is a lesson in humility as well.

To all this you may add the blessing of peace. For I know my Lord is faithful, and at the last day I shall see him face to face—with clear eyes. In this life we see things as in a play, not knowing what ending the Author intends. But He

sees it as the playwright, knowing every line.  
In the last act all shall be renewed and we shall  
see Him.

On that day we shall meet. It will be a large  
crowd, but do not fear. We will have all of eter-  
nity to meet. I shall enjoy hearing of the mar-  
vels of your time from your own lips.

Until then, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

Giving Anonymously

*You must maintain quite a correspondence. I would rather have thought one or two letters in a day would be sufficient for you. That you receive so many is indeed a surprise to me. Indeed, it is a surprise to me that there exist so many who clamor for your charity. This is not good. You must be very well known to receive so many demands.*

*It is rather different with us. All these matters are regulated by the church. I exclude, of course, those acts of charity a man should perform in his own household.*

*The great surprise to me is this – that in a time of plenty such as yours there should be so many agents pressing you to provide. I would have*

thought that our time would have been the more needful, as yours appears to be one of abundance. But perhaps I take too simple a view. The central thought in charity must always be this: God values the heart, not the gift. I am a man of property; a small gift from me may be a large one to someone else. But God knows the giver. He who lacks nothing measures everything.

This you must keep in mind. Often we give from a mixture of motives. We may feel many eyes looking on us as we give; or it may simply be an emotion of warmth in giving. Often enough the gift is in our own interest, or we have some hope of reward. It is hard to keep a pure heart in this. God gives us his example in this. If we give from a pure heart, expecting nothing in return, then

*we shall receive our recompense from Him.*

*My advice to you in this is simple. First, always give out of view of the eye. Surely those who handle money for the church can be trusted in this. By doing this you remove all hope of man's reward and place the matter in God's hands.*

*Second, give with wisdom. Place no gift in the hands of the idle; it does them no service. In all such things give the matter over first to God and let him direct the gold.*

*It has been my privilege to give much in my life. But I am mindful of the widow's mite. I hope that my Lord will find that I have done my best, both in what I gave and how I gave it.*

*In generosity and wisdom, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*Slaves—wage and otherwise*

*I confess that you have presented me with a problem which has no parallel in my experience. How is it that you do not pay your laborers by the day? Do they not starve waiting for the end of the month? Should that be done here, it would be seen as a sin to deprive the worker of his wages. What will he eat if you will not pay him each day? I give it up.*

*Your plight, however, is rather common with slaves. It seems you have been robbed and your thinking machine damaged by one you trusted. Robbery can be amended but trust cannot. I fear I have no remedy for that.*

*What I can give you, I will. I will tell you how to treat slaves so that you do not have this prob-*

lem – at least, not frequently. You may pluck from this advice whatever seems reasonable to you.

First, you must remember that your Lord is no respecter of persons. That you are master and the other a slave means nothing to Him. Therefore you must treat your slaves as brothers in Christ. You are doing this not so much for their sake as for your own, so it is to your profit. I would commend to you two thoughts:

You must above all treat them with kindness.

It is a sore temptation to beat upon the innocent slave to cool your own anger. This you must not do. Rather, remember it is only God's grace which keeps you from being one of them. Indeed, this brings great benefit. A kindness shown to one is remarked by all.

You must also be consistent. A slave ever looks to your hands and eyes to know if he has found favor. How is he to know what pleases with you if this changes like the wind? By doing this you mold the mind and lighten the anxiety of your slave. If he cannot have freedom, surely he can be free of worry as it concerns you.

Then you must always remember that as you are given authority you are given responsibility. A slave must eat; he must be clothed; he must have shelter from the weather and the night. These things are yours to perform, and your own luxury must give way to them. A slave who is confident of these things is a loyal worker.

Second, you must be just. It is no kindness to your slaves to allow one to become lazy. The

others must then do his work, and the fault will fall to you. If the slave sees the justice in the beating, there will be no complaints. Be sure that it is both just and seen to be just. Likewise, be just in rewarding those whose labors have profited you greatly. Apportion the tasks according to ability; do not expect the aged to work the field, nor the young.

All this my father taught to me when I was young. Often I have seen slaves running away; we have had but two such in my lifetime – neither worth running after. Most slaves run because their masters are cruel or think only of themselves.

I would end with a caution. Our Lord shall return. On that day there will be neither slave nor free, but each shall be rewarded in accord-

*ance with his deeds. As master, remember that  
you too have a Master.*

*Puzzled, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*Working for Christ*

*From your point of view I can see the discouragement. You have worked hard to please this man, and nothing has come of it. But of this comes a lesson: you were working for the wrong man.*

*By that I do not mean you selected your labors poorly. Rather, you selected your lord poorly. You worked for a mortal man. One might as well work for a jackass. Consider: had you done the same labors, but presented them to Christ as your Lord, how much greater your reward would be! If your service is to Him, then your reward is from Him, is it not? All of us take a master of one sort another; the wise choose Christ. If you will do this, you will cease to work to*

please others around you. You may think that foolish, but consider: can you offer Christ anything but the finest of service? It would be foolish to try. Therefore you will give your best to Him. He will reward you; do not be surprised if those about you favor you as well. Hard work softens a hard master.

As to your discouragement, turn to prayer and to praise. If you will go to Him in prayer you must acknowledge your needs to Him. Cast your burdens upon Him! But do not neglect the power of praise. If you are to converse with the Almighty, you must know Him. If you know Him, you will praise Him.

Thus you will pray in confidence. How can you not? If you have just praised Him as Lord and King, Creator and Ruler, how can you then say

that you do not believe He can be of assistance?  
Do you not see how praise gives confidence,  
which gives life to prayer?  
The cardinal point is this: you must trust Him.  
You must trust Him to do as He promises. Deliv-  
er your life's work to Him, trust in His reward,  
and you will soon see His gracious hand at work.

Confident of your success, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

Wandering Mind in Prayer

*You do me too great an honor. To say that my mind never wanders in prayer is certainly false. Particularly in the church, in time of priestly prayer, my mind wanders in many paths. The explanation, for you as for me, is simply this: a man whose mind is constantly on God does not wander during prayer. A man whose mind is on the world, wanders.*

*The remedy for this fault is common enough. You must confess this weakness to God, and humble yourself before Him. In your prayers use the simplest of words. Do not think that God is blessed by your wisdom! Rather, in simple words and phrases – the mark of the humble man – bring your praises and petitions.*

When I was younger I gave much thought to this. I would fret over my wandering mind – which, naturally, caused it to wander even more from my prayers. Satan was no doubt delighted. But the trick cannot be played forever. At length I realized that my wandering was affecting my confession – so I gave it up. Put the matter plainly to God; He is swift to forgive. He knows we are but flesh.

As you grow older, think of God more often. Discipline your mind to stay on Him. Then at prayer your mind will not wander.

Do you have any sense of how long it takes me to reply to your letters? I know not; but this one has taken some time. I have been quite ill; indeed, the doctors began to smile at me. They do

that when they think you are about to die. It is assumed to cheer the patient, you know. It cheered me not at all; these doctors lie with their teeth bared in silence. But by God's grace I am mending. One of my grandchildren has been reading from the Psalms, a great comfort. So if I caused worry, I render my apologies. I shall try to stay out of the sickbed.

Weak, but returning, I remain  
Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*Title Deeds of Civilization*

*You ask a question worthy of some time. I trust my answer will meet your thought.*

*What indeed are the tests of civilization? Do recall that the word means "to live in a city."*

*Any collection of fools can exist together farm by farm. The test is in the city. I give you no answers, but only questions.*

*First, how are the weak treated? Are children treated well, or beaten? I am old. In a barbarian tribe I would be left in the woods to die of starvation. My sons care for my needs now. You tell me that in your time the governors are charged with this. I ask you: would you receive your daily bread with cold impartiality or the warmth of love? I think it better that the fam-*

ily provide for the weak; failing that, the church.

Next, how are the young taught? Are they made to understand that they are the heirs of wisdom and greatness, or are they taught only the latest whims of the philosophers? Heirs of greatness become great. Those who know only what is new, know little and learn less.

Again, is there justice in the land? Is that justice swift? Do all acknowledge that it is fair? Even the thief on the cross knew he deserved his punishment.

If the wall is to be strong, the bricks must be sound. Consider the bricks of civilization. Are men trustworthy, or is there great need of the courts? Is marriage honored or mocked? Is the home a strength or a trial? Do those who live in

*the city uphold it or feed off it?*

*Finally, are the rulers held to the standard of high honor, or is corruption a common thing?*

*It seems to me that these questions need asking in any age. Upon them depends your civilization. The strongest weapon will fail in weak hands.*

*As ever,*

*Isaac the alchemist*

*My dear young friend,*

*Does virtue come in compartments?*

*upon the matter of your leader's infidelity I can perhaps give you more comment. He makes the argument, as I understand you, that his infidelity has nothing to do with his leadership. Therefore you can safely ignore it, treating him with all respect.*

*I think not. If a man cannot govern himself, how can he govern others? Of all people in this world over whom you have control, surely you have the most control over yourself! If you do not even have that control, how then can you claim to govern others? You may have experience at writing out orders, but you have no experience as a leader.*

*You forget the power of example. All soldiers*

will follow a known leader – if they believe he asks of them no more than he asks of himself. A leader who is first in every advance and last in every retreat will see men tracing his footsteps in battle. But if your leader is at the rear, the troops will soon be with him – and the battle lost. Courage is best commanded by example. So it is with all virtue.

Your argument that his failure in marital virtue does not affect any other virtue is absurd. Virtue is not fruit in the market place to be selected at a whim. The essence of virtue is integrity – that you are a man of one-ness. You cannot be a coward today and brave tomorrow. Those whom you lead will quickly see the lack of integrity.

This leads to hypocrisy. If they see in you one

point in which you have not mastered yourself, they will soon suspect all points. You then begin to hear flattering words from servants who wish as little contact with you as they can arrange. They will praise your courage to your face, and condemn you over their wine. Of greater import is this: they will follow your orders only so long as they think them profitable. At the moment of trial, all will crumble.

So then, do not imitate this fool you have for a leader. Rather, be a man of integrity. Those about you will not take long in discovering it.

As ever,

Isaac the alchemist

*My dear young friend,*

*On dying and death*

*How wonderful the news! Your leeches must indeed be skillful to know that the baby will be a boy. Another son! I am honored to know that one of his names will be Isaac. It is a blessing in a time of trial.*

*I will not conceal it from you, my young friend. The doctors hold out little hope that I will run my course much longer. I cannot hear it – my hearing is not what it was – but they tell me that the sounds of my heart are those of a man who will not live long.*

*It does not pain me to know that I am dying. Most of my good friends have departed long ago; I am a relic of a bygone age. My grandchildren and my great-grandchildren are now my de-*

lights. They are young; they will mourn but go on, as they should.

Now I have the privilege of dying as a Christian. Before the advent of our Lord this would have been a misery. Even the holiest of men feared to die. Now that death is conquered by our Lord and Savior; it is no longer ours to fear, but to embrace. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord – how I long for release! It has pleased my Lord to give me a long life in which to train myself to this end. It is normal for man to fear death; but the Holy Spirit within and the church without agree: I have nothing to fear. Long have I anticipated this time; I am ready, at last. Perhaps this is why he allowed such long life; that I was not ready in my younger days.

Would that you were here with me! I fear for your time. Have you ever seen the glory of a Christian dying? It is a magnificent sight. I hope to present all my family with such glory, that they may know the firm confidence I have in my Lord and Savior.

It is likely I shall not be able to write again. I have instructed my servant to advise you of all things needful, but I feel in my body the weakness of my heart. I was young; I am old and soon will be with the Lord. Do not weep for me; I go to my reward, and gracious is He who gives that reward. May your end be as sweet, and your life be kept in His.

With the blessings of God, I remain,  
Isaac the alchemist

To his excellency the alchemist of the lights,  
friend of the great Isaac, writer from afar, mys-  
tic of strange places and utter terror to all who  
serve,

From your humble and obedient servant, Mar-  
mion, faithful attendant of Isaac, he who bur-  
ies the jars and sees the lights, greeting:

Your humble servant begs to present you with  
the dread news that Isaac has gone to be with his  
Lord and Savior. He was in the 93<sup>rd</sup> year of his  
pilgrimage, and his mind was not dimmed until  
the day he died. He bade me write to you of the  
manner of his death, that you might know all  
things. He charged me most strictly with these  
words.

upon his death bed, he called for paper and pen, and had me write. His last message was to you, and I record it for your eyes alone. He bade me destroy all copies but this, saying that you would understand the reason for this strange proceeding.

He counsels you by Almighty God to keep the faith! He fears lest the demons of your city overwhelm you by the cares of this world. He bids you be generous in charity, frequent in visiting the sick and those in prison, even those prisoner of their own sins. Most of all he bids you be instant in prayer and frequent in the reading of the Holy Scripture.

He begs you by the grace of Almighty God that you destroy your device with all haste and use it no more. If you do not, he fears that much evil

will come.

He bade me tell you that he met death with joy, as one returning to a home long lost. This is so; I, Marmion, attended his death bed.

He was a good man and a wise master. His powers of alchemy he used for the sick; many owe him much. He was generous to the poor and cared for those who served him, of whom I am the least. Those who knew him best mourn him most. He spoke of this, and bids you not grieve overlong. He commanded me to say this: he sits at the gate of heaven day by day, awaiting your coming. Do not fail him!

By the grace of the God he served I bid you farewell. I, Marmion, write this with my own hand, that you may know that all is true.



W

hat if.... You found a correspondence between an elderly Christian of the fifth century and a young Christian of the modern era? What would you find?

Here is such a correspondence. We have but one side of the letters, that of the elderly Christian.. As you would expect, some of the letters from this ancient mind bring out ideas which are very strange to our modern way of thinking. (I cannot imagine my children allowing me to pick a wife or husband for them). But it is just this point of view which makes them interesting to me. So I had them translated, and now present them to you.

John Hendershot  
Christmas, 2001