

Nature and Means of Growth in Grace

by Archibald Alexander

THE word 'grace' is of frequent occurrence, and high and interesting import, in the sacred Scriptures. In the great concern of man's salvation, no other word has a richer meaning. But while the general idea of the term is every where retained, there are several shades of difference in the signification, as it is used in different passages of the sacred text. Its primary and more usual sense is, the favour of God to sinners; or in other words, the love and mercy of God. In this acceptation, grace is the fountain of life, the source of salvation, to which all other blessings may be traced, as to their first cause. Thus Paul, who abounds in the use of this word, in his epistle to the Ephesians, says, 'Having predestinated us to the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved.' And again, 'By grace are ye saved,' that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus.'

But as the gospel is the channel through which this fountain pours forth its exuberant streams, it is called, not only 'the gospel of the grace of God,' but 'grace' itself. As where it is said, 'We then as workers together with him, beseech you, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.' And also in the following text, 'For the grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared unto all men :' in both which passages, the least attention to the context will show, that by the grace of God, is meant the gospel.

And as the gospel is rendered effectual to the salvation of sinners, only by the aid of the Holy Spirit, therefore, his influences on the heart have also received the name of grace: as, 'my grace is sufficient for thee:' 'By the grace of God I am what I am :' 'And his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain ; but I labored more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.'

But in our text, the word 'grace,' has a meaning somewhat different from what it has in any of the passages which have been cited. Christians are here exhorted to 'grow in grace;' which could not be a practicable thing, in any of the senses of the word already given. By 'grace,' here, we must understand, the principle of new life, implanted in regeneration; a sense of the word, much in use among us, but rather unusual in the Scriptures.

When the apostle exhorts Christians to 'grow in grace,' it is the same, as if he had said, increase in holiness, or advance in piety. And it would not be easy to select a subject of greater Importance to all professors of religion. If comfort and usefulness here, and the degree of our felicity and glory in heaven, will be proportioned to our growth in grace, then the subject possesses an intrinsic importance, which should command the attention, and deeply interest the feelings, of all who hear me. What I propose then is,

I. To explain the nature of growth in grace.

II. To inquire, by what means growth in grace may be promoted.

It is evidently implied in the exhortation, that the persons addressed, were the subjects of grace; for that which has no existence cannot increase. But grace is a plant which does not grow in nature's garden. It is of heavenly origin. By nature we are all 'children of wrath,' conceived in sin,

and totally destitute of holiness. None, therefore, but the truly regenerated soul is capable of growth in grace. We have, it is true, a rational nature and a moral constitution, and are accountable, free agents; but in relation to spiritual exercises, we are dead 'dead in trespasses and sins.' If there existed naturally, in man, any principle of spiritual life, it might, by assiduity and favorable circumstances, be enkindled; and by being cherished, might, by degree's, advance to maturity. A seed which possesses vitality, although it has lain dormant for a thousand years, yet when placed in a congenial soil, and subjected to the Influences of heat, air, and moisture, will readily sprout, and grow, until it arrives at maturity. But if the vital principle be lost, it will never give any indications of life; and all the skill and power of man can never cause it to vegetate. And yet, this seed, when subjected to the minutest scrutiny by the aid of the best optical glasses, may appear to have no defect in its internal structure. It may possess the perfect organization of seeds of the same species, but its vitality has fled, and no power on earth can restore it.

Analogous to this is the condition of the human soul. Possessed still of all the faculties with which it was created, it has lost the image of God, which consisted 'in righteousness and true holiness.' The principle of spiritual life with which it was animated, has become extinct. And as the communication of life of every kind is the prerogative of God, so the regeneration of the soul is ascribed to him in Scripture; and as this work requires the exertion of the same power, which at first caused light to shine out of darkness, it is denominated 'a new creation ;' and, as there is in it, some analogy to the raising a dead body from the grave, it is called 'a resurrection ;' but as this divine power is exerted in a free and sovereign manner, without any consideration of merit in the creature, it is called 'grace.'

Although grace does not exist in any man by nature', but as a communicated principle, yet it may be received at any period of our existence in this world, from infancy to old age ; and we read of some who were sanctified from the womb ; but as far as can be judged from experience, the number of such is very small. Piety is seldom observed to exist with the first dawning of reason and moral feeling. Most persons, therefore, who become the subjects of grace, can remember the time, when they were alienated from the life of God; and have some knowledge of the change which took place in their views and affections.

Another thing implied in the exhortation of our text is, that grace in its commencement is imperfect, and that its progress to maturity is gradual ; for if it were perfect, there could be no room for growth. Although in different individuals, the vigour of spiritual life is different in degree, yet in most cases, grace is, in its infancy, feeble. The indications of its existence may be very clear, and its actings lively; but still, this is nothing more than the vivacity and strength of a healthy babe in Christ. For in young converts the knowledge of spiritual things, generally, is indistinct and confined, and their faith wavering. When their feelings are joyful, they can exercise confidence in God; but when a dark cloud overshadows them, they are cast down with discouragement, and sometimes driven to distrust the mercy and faithfulness of the Redeemer, to whom they have committed their souls. Their pious affections also are unsteady, and though apparently strong, are nevertheless mingled with gross animal feelings, and alloyed with selfishness. As grace is progressive in its nature, it may be inferred, that where there is no growth there is no life. The degree and rapidity of advancement in all, however, is not the same, nor does it bear an exact proportion, in every case, to the vigour of the principle of spiritual life, at the time of the new birth. As it is an observable fact, that some infants at first are so feeble, that they can barely be said to be alive, and yet after a while, by assiduous nursing, become much more robust than others, that commenced life with greater strength; so, in the divine life some Christians, who in the beginning gave but obscure indications of grace, afterwards become vigorous in piety, and far outstrip many whose commencement promised more eminent advancement. It should be remarked

I here also, that the life of piety in the soul is subject to such diseases and decays as often greatly retard its progress, and cause it, for a season, to decline. These declensions are so common, that some have supposed, that all Christians do, in some part of their course, make a retrograde motion and instead of advancing, lose something of the ground already gained. But there seems to be no just foundation for this opinion. In some saints, both of those whose lives are recorded in Scripture, and of those who fall under our own observation, there is no evidence of backsliding; but still it is a lamentable fact, that there are very few, who have lived long in the profession of piety, who have not reason to confess with shame, that they have at some time 'left their first love,' and become remiss in their vigilance, and, of course, unfruitful in their lives. And not unfrequently, while in this feeble state, they are overcome by some temptation, so as not only to contract a painful sense of guilt, but also to bring reproach on the holy profession they have made. This frequency of spiritual decays, is one of the chief causes that so few Christians rise to eminence in piety. A fall may, indeed, make a man more cautious ever afterwards: but he purchases experience at a dear rate, who pays for it with a broken bone, or a joint out of place. And here it may be observed, that nothing is more insidious and dangerous to the back-sliding Christian, than a certain leaven of antinomianism, which too often diffuses its deadening influence over the soul. The soldier of Christ sleeps in the midst of enemies, and dreams of victory without conflict -he falls under the influence of some temptation, and excuses himself by referring to the example of other saints. But every professor ought to know, that every degree of backsliding is, so far as it goes, an evidence against the reality of his piety. Many, alas who once appeared well, go back by a perpetual declension, and thus prove that the 'root of the matter' was never in them. Every step in this backward course, should be viewed as an alarming circumstance; and it may be safely affirmed, that all confidence of security indulged by any, while in a backsliding state, is delusive. A man may, indeed, be in a safe state, as to his ultimate salvation, when under a spiritual decay but he cannot in such a state, possess any satisfactory evidence of safety.

The strong tendency of the heart, even in the best, to depart from God, furnishes powerful reason for the exhortation, to 'grow in grace;' for, in religion, it has often been observed that there is no such thing as standing still. If the Christian makes no advancement, he is pretty certainly going backward. The only course of safety, therefore, as well as comfort, is, to make vigorous efforts to 'grow in grace.'

The nature of growth in grace, after what has been said, will require little explanation. It is a gradual increase in the vigour and purity of all those affections in which holiness consists; and is necessarily accompanied with a decrease of the power of sin. A real growth in grace includes also an advancement in spiritual knowledge, especially in the knowledge of our own depravity and helplessness, and of the Lord Jesus Christ as our Mediator. The apostle, therefore, joins these two things together, in his exhortation, and says, 'Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ'

An increase of faith is an essential part of growth in grace. The belief of the reality and excellence of divine things becomes more firm and constant; a more implicit reliance is placed on the promises of God; and the soul, in the exercise of humble confidence, is enabled to commit all its concerns, for time and eternity, to the care of a covenant-keeping God.

But there is no one thing more essentially involved in this progress of religion, than the growing fervor and constancy of love to God. This holy principle continues to strike its roots deeper in the heart, and becomes more and more purified from the alloy with which it was at first mingled. Growth in divine love manifests itself in a reverential esteem for the moral attributes of God, in a

greater delight in meditating on his holiness and goodness; and in a livelier exercise of gratitude for His love and mercy towards ourselves and others. It is accompanied also with a more ardent desire to please God, to enjoy communion with him, and to advance his glory in the world.

Progress in real piety includes also an increase of humility. The more true knowledge the believer acquires, the more penetrating is his view of the sin that secretly works within him; and the more holy he becomes, the more abominable does all sin appear. No evidence of growth in grace is less suspicious than this. Hypocrites, may, indeed, affect humility, and abound in the language of self-abasement; but it is difficult to wear this disguise without betraying on his true state of heart. The growth of grace is as much downward at the root, as upward in the towering and spreading branches; and he who supposes that he is making a near approximation to perfection, and yet is not abased before God, under a sense of his own vileness, does but deceive himself.

Resignation to the will of God, is another criterion by which growth in grace is ascertained ; or rather, it is an important part of that grace in the heart, of which growth is predicated. The more uniformly and cordially we can say, under all circumstances, even the most afflictive, 'Thy will be done,' the more strength has the principle of grace acquired. And as genuine progress in piety, is the growth of the whole spiritual man, so our love to the children of God, and our sincere good will to all men, will bear a just proportion to our piety to God.

Moreover, if piety flourish in the inner man of the heart, it will manifest itself by the abundance of its fruits in the life. Holy, active, universal obedience to the commandments of God, will flow from a heart warm with love to God and love to man; and will evince to others, as well as to ourselves, that we are thriving Christian. Our light will so shine, that others seeing our good works will be induced to glorify our Father who is in heaven. The conversation of a growing Christian will be edifying to all around: his speech will be always with grace, seasoned with salt. Out of the good treasure of his heart, he will be continually bringing forth something good. His example will be a model for the imitation of others; and in proportion as grace prevails in his heart, there will be exhibited a beautiful consistency in his life. His attention to all the duties of the worship of God, in public and private, will be constant and conscientious; and with alacrity and energy, he will exert himself to advance the cause and kingdom of Christ, in the world; counting no service too hard, and no sacrifice too costly, which will aid in promoting the glory of God, by the propagation of the gospel throughout the world.

Several stages, in the progress of the spiritual life, may be particularly noticed. The first is the state of the Christian immediately after his conversion; when both novelty and contrast are combined with the excellence of the objects presented to his view, in the new world into which grace has translated him, to make a more sensible impression on his mind than will be produced by the same truths afterwards. A new creation has, indeed, risen up before him; 'old things are passed away, and behold all things are become new.' His wonder is excited, his joy overflows, his hopes are buoyant, and his heart melts with tender compassion for those who are yet out of Christ. His frames are often delightful, but they are transient: and from the mount of vision, he quickly descends into the dark valley of doubt and sorrow. He lives rather by sensible feelings than by faith. His eyes often overflow both with joy and grief. In the exercises of religion, he is full of ardour, nor does he suspect a reverse, nor foresee the dangers which beset his path. In fervency of spirit, and alacrity in the service of God, he seems greatly to outstrip older disciples, who have been long engaged in the Christian race and is sometimes disposed to chide them, because they do not manifest that quick susceptibility of feeling, and that glowing zeal, with which he feels his own bosom penetrated and warmed.

This period of the Christian's life bears a strong resemblance to infancy and childhood, when a

succession of lively emotions fills up our days; when vivacity and activity are predominant traits in our Character when our transitions from one state of feeling to the opposite, are sudden and frequent; and when our happiness depends very much upon our ignorance of the evils which surround us. The clip of joy would be embittered to the young convert, if he had a clear view of the depth of iniquity which still remains in his heart, and of the dangers and conflicts which await him in his future pilgrimage.

The second stage is that of temptation and severe conflict. Before, he resembled the young soldier just enlisted, and enjoying his bounty-money; but now his case is like that of the combatant on the field of battle. The same power which opened a passage for the children of Israel through the Red Sea, could have transported them to Canaan in a day or an hour, but it was the plan of their invisible Leader to conduct them through the wilderness, and subject them to numerous difficulties and temptations, that he might put their faith and obedience to a severe test. So, also, our Heavenly Father could translate his redeemed children at once to heaven, or could render their passage through the world uniformly pleasant; but, instead of pursuing either of these courses, he leaves them to learn, by bitter experience, the treachery and wickedness of their own hearts, and the malicious devices of the invisible enemy, who is ever ready to assault and vex them.

These trials, from causes which exist without and within, often come upon the people of God at the time when they have 'left their first love,' and have become remiss in watchfulness and prayer. A conscience goaded with inward stings, is a fit subject for Satan to operate upon with his fiery darts; and his usual method is, first to seduce the unwary souls by baits of worldly glory or sensual pleasure, and then to attack the debilitated believer with desperate suggestions, calculated to make the impression, that the favor of God is 'clean gone,' and that 'he will be merciful no more;' or, that his sins are unpardonable; or that the day of grace is gone by for ever. Now, also, the providence of God seems to combine with other causes to afflict Zion's pilgrim. Dark clouds of adversity gather over him. Earthly comforts decay. The sun of prosperity no longer shines. The fondest hopes are disappointed, and the brightest prospects of earthly bliss obscured. Malignant enemies arise from among those before considered friends; health is broken slander and reproach assail; dear friends and relatives are buried in the grave; children are disobedient and profligate, or die prematurely and, to complete the us' of troubles, the church, broken with schism, and overrun with heresy and hypocrisy, sits in sackcloth and mourns. Now the Christian pilgrim spends his days in trouble, and his nights in groans and tears. It, under these accumulated evils, the light of the Divine countenance was lifted upon him, he could still rejoice in the midst of tribulations; but, to add poignancy to all his other griefs, his Heavenly Father seems to frown upon him. To his most earnest prayers he receives no answer; or, if an answer comes, it is only this, 'My grace is sufficient for thee.' But no evils so grievously afflict the renewed soul, as the corruptions of the heart. Evils unsuspected to exist show themselves, and manifest a strength and obstinacy, which baffle all the resolutions and efforts directed against them. Pride, envy, unbelief, insensibility, impurity, sloth, and evil thoughts without number, pollute and harass the afflicted spirit.

These conflicts are not experienced in an equal degree by all Christians, but every one has his share, and every one knows the plague of his own heart, so much better than that of others, that his secret thought is, that his case is, of all others, the most deplorable and desperate. In his extremity he is often ready to exclaim, 'If I am a child of God, why am I thus? Surely no others are so beset with sinful entanglements, arid distracted with contending passions.'

There is, probably, in every case of Christian experience, something peculiar, something which distinguishes it from every other case; but there is, notwithstanding, so great a general

resemblance in the conflicts of the pious, that he who knows his own heart, sees, as in a glass, the condition of all his brethren. For 'as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.'

This may be termed the winter season of grace. The tree is now stripped of its foliage and its bloom, and very little fruit appears on the branches. But while it is shaken by the fierce blasts, so as to be almost overturned, it may be gaining strength by the concussion, and may be striking its roots more firmly in the earth. So the tempted and afflicted Christian, while he experiences a great loss of comfort and sensibility, may be, and often is, actually growing in grace. Much knowledge of the deceitfulness of the heart, and of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, is obtained; a deadly blow is struck at the root of self-confidence and self-righteousness; a broken and contrite spirit is produced; Christ and his grace are more highly appreciated; and the desire of total and universal purification from sin becomes more constant and intense.

The third and last stage in the progress of the divine life, is a state of settled peace, when the violence of the conflict is over, and the risings of sinful passions are greatly subdued by the power of divine grace. This is the sweet calm which succeeds the storm. Now there is, instead of doubts and darkness, a comfortable assurance of the favor of God. This period is characterized by a steady trust in the promises and providence of God, and a meek submission to his holy will. The mature Christian is not less sensible of the depth of remaining depravity than before; for the more holy he becomes, the more quick sighted he is to discern the minutest spots which defile the 'inner man : ' but he has now learned to 'live by faith on the Son of God,' and has formed the habit of continual application to the blood of sprinkling,' and to 'the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness' Many of his former besetting sins are indeed subdued and he has learned the necessity of vigilance in guarding against the occasions of sin, as well as against the first buddings of evil desire but his peace does not result from any views which he takes of an increase of sanctification in himself, but from keeping his eye steadily fixed on 'Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith.'

This advanced state of piety is also characterized by an increasing deadness to the world and all selfish interests, and by an enlarged and sincere good will to all men; but especially by a tender solicitude for the prosperity of Zion, and an anxious desire for the salvation of men.

This has sometimes been denominated the state of contemplation because in it the meditations of the Christian are much occupied with heavenly things. The glory of the invisible world makes a deeper and more constant impression on his mind than formerly, and his thoughts are often elevated to delightful contemplations of the heavenly state. The aged saint, who has become mature in grace, and whose faith has grown strong, spends much of his time, by day and by night, in meditating on that 'rest which remains for the people of God.' In this exercise his soul is frequently absorbed, and he is fired with an intense desire 'to be absent from the body and present with the Lord;' yet his submission to the divine will, and his desire to promote the glory of Christ on earth, will not permit him to be impatient. He is willing to wait, even in the midst of suffering, until his change come. How beautiful, how lovely, how venerable, is old age, thus laden with the fruits of piety; and like a shock of corn fully ripe, waiting to be gathered into the garner of the Lord! When the veteran soldier of the cross is unable to perform any more active service for his Master, he still watches about the doors of the sanctuary; he still lifts up his withered and trembling hands in prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. He is ever waiting for the consolation of Israel; and when the Saviour appears by some remarkable manifestation of favour to his church, he can exclaim with Simeon of old, 'Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.' And often, when the vigour of the mental faculties begins to fail, the flame of piety continues to burn brightly and, on a dying bed, such Christians exhibit a spectacle, than which there is nothing more lovely and interesting on this side heaven. Calm submission,

humble confidence, holy aspirations, the kind emotions of benevolence, and the sublime joy of the Divine favour, often render the chamber of death like the vestibule of the temple above. Who, then, would not join in the prayer, 'Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his?'

A few brief reflections shall bring this discourse to a close.

1. It appears from what has been said, that in some stages of the Christian's progress, the growth of grace, when it actually takes place, is not easily ascertained. It is, therefore, reasonable to believe, that some pious persons fall into mistakes on this subject, and judge that they are losing ground, when in fact they are slowly advancing. Because their first fervours have abated, and because they are conscious of much more indwelling sin than when they first believed, they draw the conclusion that they have been, all the time, growing worse : whereas, true religion has been taking deeper root in their hearts, and their knowledge of themselves and of divine truth, is greatly enlarged, and has become much more distinct.
2. It is also evident, from what has been said, that there may be a great display of zeal, much attention to the externals of religion much liberality in contributing to the support and spread of the gospel, and much appearance of sanctity, when there has been no real advancement in piety. The reason is, because all these external acts, and all this show of piety, may be produced by other motives than the lively exercise of grace in the heart. Such persons ought to be esteemed pious by men, where no contrary evidences appear: but often, 'that which is highly esteemed among men, is an abomination in the sight of God; ' for man must judge according to the outward appearance, but the Lord searcheth the heart.'
3. Some Christians grow to much higher stature than others. In most, however, in our days, the advancement in piety seems to be small, compared with what we have reason to believe it was in the times of the apostles. No doubt there are some now who become eminent in piety; but the general standard of piety is apparently low. Few professors, in our churches, have attained to that state of settled peace, and calm submission to the will of God, which was described as the last stage in the Christian's progress towards perfection.
4. It is impossible to say how much the comfort and usefulness of most of the pious is diminished, by their failing to make greater progress in the divine life. The difference between a lively, growing Christian, and one who makes little or no advancement, is as great as between a healthy and a diseased body. The motives to growth in grace are, therefore, of the strongest possible kind.

Finally, upon a review of the past, every one of us must be sensible, that if we had improved our privileges, and exercised greater diligence and vigilance, our advancement would have been far greater than it now is. What Christian can look back without severely reproaching himself, on account of his slothfulness and carelessness ? All may not have backslidden, but in all there has been often a criminal remissness. Many have to lament most sad declensions, and, some, disgraceful falls, by which the conscience has been wounded and religion dishonoured. In view of this subject, therefore, all Christians are led upon to humble themselves before God, in deep penitence, on account of their unfruitfulness ; and to resolve that in time to come, they will more faithfully and vigorously strive to grow in grace.