

THE
ALMOST CHRISTIAN DISCOVERED.

ACTS XXVI. 28.

“ Then Agrippa said unto Paul, almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.”

IN this chapter we have St. Paul, in his fetters, pleading before that honourable sessions of Festus and Agrippa. His plea we have largely set down, from the first to the twenty-fourth verse ; in which he opens his commission, that he had received in an extraordinary manner from heaven, for preaching that doctrine which was every where spoken against, and for worshipping God in that way which was called heresy.

I shall not at all enter into the consideration of the apology : but let us only look at the different effects, that it wrought upon the hearers. Festus and Agrippa were both of them unbelievers : the one, an unbelieving heathen : the other, an unbelieving Jew : and thus they both continue.

Yet St. Paul's speech works very differently upon them. In the twenty-fourth verse you have Festus raving. He said with a loud voice, “ Paul, thou art beside thyself ? much learning hath made thee mad ; thy thoughts of a vision and an apparition, of a man dead and buried, lying safe under ground, that he should rise again and appear from heaven to thee, being the Saviour of the world, is a mere fancy, proceeding from a strong frenzy : ” thus he scoffs and raves. But this very sermon, which seemed

madness and an idle tale to unbelieving Festus, carries a strong conviction in it to Agrippa, who was an unbeliever too. "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

Hence observe, that the word of God hath a far different effect, even upon those, upon whom it hath no saving effect. One raves and rages against it, and is seared and stupified by it; another is convinced and terrified by it. Festus scoffs and mocks, and goes away laughing at the doctrine and reviling the preacher: but Agrippa is convinced, and half persuaded to believe and practise that very doctrine, and highly to esteem the preacher of it.

And is it not so even among us? Are there not many, who may come to the ordinances in a natural and sinful estate and condition? The same word of God is cast among them all: yea, but what is the success? When the sword of the Spirit is brandished amongst a great crowd of consciences, it is not likely, that it should miss all, and strike none of them: one, perhaps, goes away slighting and contemning; another goes away scoffing and railing against it; and another half-persuaded by it to become a Christian, to be almost a Christian. If every man's breast had a casement in it, by which we might see the inward estuations and boilings of their hearts, how they work after a powerful and terrifying sermon; should we not behold and see some, shifting and shuffling their sins out of the way? some, holding up the bucklers of prejudicate opinions to ward and fence off the stroke of the Spirit? some, fretting and storming at the lancing of their consciences? some, scoffing and scorning, with Festus, that it is no better than folly and madness? some, trembling, with Felix? some, convinced and wrought upon, as Agrippa, to faint resolutions and half-purposes? And, yet, all these remain under the power of unbelief and unregeneracy. It is, indeed, a wonder, that, among such diversity of operations which the word hath upon the souls and consciences of men, it could be possible that such a multitude should go away without any saving operation by it; some, blinded and hardened; some, terrified; some, stupified; some, exasperated and enraged; some, convinced and half-persuaded, and such are those that we now speak of: such as are, as it were, half of one

complexion and half of another, that stick in the new birth, whose hearts have been warmed with good motions, who have entertained approving and admiring thoughts concerning the ways of holiness, who have taken up some resolutions of doing better and of being better; and, yet, do not come off roundly and speedily from their sins, nor close fully with Christ. These are the half Christians which the text speaks of.

The words are plain in themselves: and, therefore, do not require much explication. Only the word translated "*almost* thou persuadest me," &c. if accurately rendered, according to the original, is "*a little* thou persuadest me," &c. So in the reply, which St. Paul makes, with a holy kind of gallantry, in the ensuing verse, you find it is opposed to much, which we render altogether: but the grammatical construction is, "Would to God they were both all, and in much, such as I am, except these bonds!" So then "in a little, thou persuadest me;" that is, 'I could, methinks, be contented to be a Christian in a little, in some few things: some part of the way I could willingly go,' saith Agrippa: but St. Paul concludes, it must not be only in a little, but in much, in all.

If we follow this sense and interpretation of the words; then observe,

Doct. 1. There goes much to the making of a true Christian; a little will not serve.

It is not a little will serve: for many precious ingredients go to the making of a true Christian; and much of each ingredient goes to the making of a strong Christian. There must be profession, faith, obedience, self-denial, patience, humility, outward preparation and inward graces, outward embellishments and inward ornaments; and a little of it is but little worth. There are many, that are persuaded to be Christians in name and profession, to be Christians in outward participation of ordinances and communion with saints, and the like: yea, but this is to be a Christian but only in a little. Are you persuaded to obey Christ in all, to take up his cross and deny yourselves, to oppose and mortify your lusts, and to perform the harshest and severest part of religion? this is indeed

to be a Christian, not only in a little, but in much; yea, in all, to be such as St. Paul himself was.

But, then, if you take the words according to our translation, which the original also will very well bear; so it is, "Within a little or almost thou persuadest me;" for king Agrippa was fully convinced of the truth of those things, which Paul related; as you may see, v. 26. He knew these things, and was ignorant of none of them: they were not hidden from him; for these things were not done in a corner. He could not be ignorant of the miraculous conversion of him, who had been so furious and notorious a persecutor of Christians. He, who was expert in all the customs that were among the Jews, v. 3, could not be ignorant of what the apostle affirms, v. 22, 23. This, that Moses and the prophets foretold, that Christ should suffer and be raised from the dead, and should give life to the Gentiles, of all this king Agrippa was fully convinced: and, yet, when Paul so insinuatingly presseth upon him, "Believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest," the result of all is this, that he was but almost persuaded, not fully persuaded of the truth of what St. Paul speaks concerning Christ, concerning himself, and concerning Christians: yet, for all that, he was but almost persuaded to be a Christian.

Hence, likewise, observe,

Doct. 2. That persons, who are fully and truly convinced, are many times but almost and half persuaded.

There may be a powerful persuasion in the judgment and the conscience concerning Christ and his ways, when there is but half a persuasion in the will and affections to close with them.

These observations I gather up, as they lie strewed in my passage. I shall not insist upon them, but only as they are subservient to the fuller prosecution of the general doctrine, which you may take thus:

Doct. 3. That those, who never were in Christ, yet may be almost Christians.

I need not here stand to tell you, that Christianity may be taken either, first, for an outward profession of Christ, as it is opposed to all other religions in the world, whether

heathenish idolatry, Mahometan stupidity, or Jewish ceremony ; or, secondly, for an inward and cordial embracing of Jesus Christ, thus professed, as it stands opposed, either to the profaneness or hypocrisy of carnal gospellers.

Evident it is, that the Christianity, that Agrippa was almost persuaded into, was of the first sort ; not excluding the second.

Nay, it was seldom seen, that, in those primitive times, wherein no carnal respect or outward advantage could commend the gospel to the interests of men, when the reward of professing Christ was persecution and martyrdom ; then, I say, it was seldom seen, that any would take Christ by profession, who would not also take him by faith and adherence : few there were, that would take up religion, even upon this condition, to lay down their lives for Christ ; who yet, through their own profaneness or hypocrisy, were to receive no benefit from the death of Christ : so that, to persuade men then to be Christians in profession, was the same with persuading them to be Christians in reality. But now, when the name of Christ is so much courted, when the denying of Christ would be repaid with the same punishment that formerly the owning of Christ underwent, you need not so much persuasion to take upon you the outward profession of Christianity : for you are not only almost, but altogether Christians, in the external garb ; but our persuasion to you must be, that, as you own Christ in an outward profession of him, so you would cleave to him by a true faith in him and obedience to him.

We are not, then, to speak to pagans, to convert them to a new religion ; but, if I may so say, we are to speak to Christian Infidels, to convert them to a new life and conversation. Nor yet, among these, doth my subject lead me to the profane and looser sort ; whose being called Christians doth not more honour them, than they disgrace and reproach that holy name : but to those, who are more elevated and more refined ; who go far in Christianity, so as to be near the kingdom of God ; in a word, such as are almost Christian ; and yet are strangers to Christ, and remain in their sinful state and unregenerate condition.

In the prosecution of this point, I shall inquire into these following particulars, in this method :

I. What progress men may make towards Christianity, and yet fall short of it.

II. Whence they are enabled to proceed so far ; and what it is, that carries them out to all their attainments.

III. What it is, that hinders them from proceeding further ; and, when they are almost Christians, what keeps them from being such altogether.

IV. To show you the folly and misery of those, who proceed thus far only, as to be almost Christians, and no farther.

I. Let us see *what progress a natural man may make towards grace and christianity, and yet remain in a sinful state.*

i. Before I can come, in particular, to determine this, I must premise these three particulars.

1. That when we inquire what progress an unregenerate man may make towards grace, this *supposes, that there is a tendency in what such a man doth or may do, towards the obtaining of grace* : or how else can he make any progress towards it, if that, which he doth, hath no tendency to it ? Let us, therefore, inquire what kind of tendency this is.

There may be a two-fold tendency supposed in the actions of an unregenerate man, towards the acquisition of grace,—effective, subjective.

(1.) Actions may be said to have an effective tendency, when they do, by their own efficiency and causality, produce that, which they tend to.

And, in this sense, it must be denied that the actions of an unregenerate man have any tendency towards grace : be their progress what it will, thereby he cannot efficiently produce or cause grace in himself : and, therefore, grace is called the new creature, as being the effect only of creating power, which is the sole prerogative of God ; and it is as utterly impossible, for a man to create grace in the soul, as to create the soul itself.

Take but this one demonstration to evince it. If an unregenerate man, by his own power and efficiency, can

produce grace in himself, then one of these two gross absurdities must needs follow, either, that there are still left holy habits and principles in the will, which were never lost by the fall of man : or, that a man may make himself truly holy, by a will that is totally corrupt and sinful. But either of these is very gross.

[1.] There are no holy nor divine habits left in the will of a carnal man, whereby he should be able to regenerate and convert himself. For what holy habit can there be in the will of one, that is wholly corrupted? If any such be supposed, it may also be supposed that it is true grace : and, to affirm that a man, in a state of nature, hath true grace inherent in him, whereby he is able to convert and regenerate himself, is double nonsense and a flat contradiction ; for it is to affirm, that he hath grace before he hath it.

[2.] A will, totally corrupted, cannot make a holy man, cannot produce grace, nor make a man holy. Grace is beyond and above its sphere. The motions of the will in its fallen estate, what through defect of a right principle from whence they flow and a right end to which they tend, are all evil and sinful : and it is very strange to affirm, that a gracious habit may be wrought in us by sinful actions. And, besides, the will of man, by the fall, is a fleshly will ; but, in regeneration, it is made spiritual : now it were a strange kind of production, if fleshly could beget spiritual : nor would it any longer hold true, that our Saviour saith in John iii. 6. "That, which is born of the flesh, is flesh." So that I think it is very evident, that all that a man can do by the power of nature cannot tend efficiently to produce grace in him.

(2.) There is a subjective tendency towards grace. And this lies in those moral preparations, and those dispositions of the heart, which fit it for the receiving of grace, though it be wrought there only by the Holy Ghost. And thus we affirm, that, while men are in an unregenerate state, they may have and do somewhat that hath a tendency in it to grace : that is, one unregenerate man may have more of these previous dispositions, and of these preparations for the receiving of grace, than another hath : for, though it be not in itself singly necessary that such previous dis-

positions should be wrought in the soul before the implantation of divine grace; since such a subject, as the soul is in respect of grace, doth not, as the schoolmen determine, require its previous dispositions for the production of its form; yet this is the usual common way of the Spirit's work, first to prepare the heart by some common works of conviction, legal terrors and remorse of conscience, before it works any saving and real work of grace in it. And, therefore, when any unregenerate man hath much of these previous preparations, we say that he goes very far towards grace, and he may be said to be almost a Christian. And this is all that tendency, that an unregenerate man hath, or can possibly do towards it: viz. a preparatory, and not an effective operative tendency unto saving grace and regeneration.

2. Another thing premised is this; that, *what through wilful sloth and wretched negligence, no unregenerate man doth make so great a progress towards grace as he is able and can possibly do.*

None go so far as they can do, in those previous preparations and dispositions towards it. When they find difficulty in opposing temptation, in crucifying their lusts, in performing duties, in denying their sinful delights and pleasures, having nothing supernatural within them to naturalize and facilitate these things and carry them on resolutely through all, they never keep up to the utmost of that power which they have: but, as they yield to those temptations that they might resist, and commit those sins that they might reject, and neglect those duties which for matter and substance of them they might perform; so, none of them go so far as they have a natural power to do. No man goes so far in the work of grace as he might, if he would improve that power which he hath by nature.

3. *Did they make as great a progress towards grace as they might, they would not fall so far short of grace as they do.*

I say, if wicked unregenerate men did but as much as they are able by the power of nature to do, without the special assistance of the Holy Ghost, they would not fall so far short of grace as they do. I would not enter into that dispute, whether God be engaged to bestow grace

upon the right improvement of their natural power; yet, it is certain, and agreed on by all, that he doth certainly do so. God usually bestows true and saving grace upon those, who do rightly and to their utmost improve their natural power and ability for the acquiring of it. If God be not obliged, by promise, to assist them: yet, through his goodness and mercy, he is not wont to desert them. Let them but labour to improve their natural ability to the utmost strain and pitch, that their own capacity can elevate, God will, according to his usual method and wonted goodness, come in by supernatural grace; and enable them to do that, which by nature they are not able to do: for no instance can be given to the contrary.

So, then, we may conclude, that wicked men never go so far as they can; and did they, yet they could not efficiently work grace in themselves: but, nevertheless, they would be disposed and prepared for the receipt of grace; which God, upon such preparations, would undoubtedly bestow upon them. For, although he be not obliged to give it them: yet, usually, he is wont to work it in them merely through his own natural goodness, free grace and mercy to them, pitying the weakness of their lapsed and fallen nature.

ii. I shall proceed to the answer of the first question, *in the general.*

Unregenerate men may make a great progress, and may go very far towards grace, and yet fall short of it: that, in general, is to be almost a Christian. This I laid down in the method propounded to you. Although I say not that they go so far as they can by the power of nature, and yet fall short of grace; for that can never be instanced in any; yet the sad and wretched apostacy of those, who have been eminent professors, shining yea and glaring lights, exceeding and also despising common attainments of others, hath too evidently confirmed it to us, that men may go very far towards grace, and yet fall short of it. See what Christ saith, Mark xii. 34. of that young man, that forward young man, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God;" that is, thou art not far from grace; for so the kingdom of God is oftentimes taken in scripture for the kingdom of grace: so that we may say of

such men, they were not far from the kingdom of God, not far from grace, not far from heaven; climbing up almost thither, within view and ken of it, having one foot, as it were, upon the threshold of the heavenly gate; and, yet, even these tumble headlong, and never rest until they have plunged themselves to the bottom of hell. It is with such men, as it is with the vapours, that are drawn up into the air: they shine with the same light, with the same apparent magnitude as the fixed stars themselves do; and we may think them moving in the very same sphere with them: but, when we see them dart down to the earth, and spill all that light and glory which they glistened with by the way, and fall into a filthy jelly, a thicker and more loathsome substance than when they were first exhaled, we then conclude that all that elevation of those false and blazing lights was vastly short of that heaven, in which they seemed sometime to be fixed. So it is with many unregenerate men: you cannot tell with what they are fraught, till you see them shipwrecked: then it is a sign, that, though they were never right and true treasure, yet they are something very like it: when we see them tumbling down off a glorious profession through fatal precipices of great, gross, and desperate sins, we may sadly conclude that that man was not far from the kingdom of God, though he was never yet there.

Indeed, every unregenerate man, when he winds up himself to the highest pitch and strain, may be said to be far from the kingdom of God, in respect of his total deprivation of grace: though his actions be never so fair and specious, yet they are very far from being gracious; as far as darkness is from light.

Yet he may be said not to be far from the kingdom of God, likewise, in a four-fold respect.

1. In that *he is far from that, which is furthest from grace*: and that is gross, flagitious, and notorious sins, which are farthest off from grace of all others; and these a natural man may be very far and free from, and therefore not far from grace.

2. *He may have that, which very much resembles and counterfeits grace*: so that, as to outward appearance, there is but very little dissimilitude discernible between

them : now that, which is like another, may be said not to be far from that, which it is like.

3. He may be said not to be far from grace, because, as I told you before, in the ordinary works of the Spirit upon his soul, *he may have those preparations and dispositions laid in them, which usually are previous and antecedent to grace*, because these are wrought usually before grace ; and therefore the person, that hath these wrought upon him, may be said not to be far from grace.

4. He may be said not to be far from grace, because, *if he did proceed but a little farther, he would possibly attain to true grace*. Had such but improved their natural power to such a degree farther, God would have come in with power supernatural ; and have wrought that true and saving principle in their lives, which would have been sure to have brought them to eternal life. Grace, indeed, hath such a kind of dependance upon that which is natural : and that dependance is not so much of causality, as of order and consequence ; which, though it be not necessary, yet is commonly granted on all hands.

Thus then, in the general, I have shown you that unregenerate men may go far, yea very far towards grace. A man may be almost a Christian, and yet be out of Christ ; be near the kingdom of heaven, and yet not in it : and, possibly, be for ever excluded and shut out of it.

iii. I shall proceed to the next thing propounded. As we have seen, in the general ; so now let us consider, *in particular*, what progress a natural man may make towards grace.

And that I shall do, by considering the several steps and degrees by which they may arise up to a great height and glory of outward profession.

And this we cannot better do, than by showing what grace is ;—what resemblance that, which is wrought by a mere carnal man, may carry in it like true grace.

By comparing these together, we may see how near an unregenerate, carnal man may come to true and saving grace.

1. *What grace is,*

I need not tell you, that I speak not now of an objective grace, inherent in God ; but terminated on us, whereby a

change is wrought in our relation to him : and this objective grace is nothing else, but the divine love, favour, and good will of God expressed in us. But I speak of a subjective grace, inherent in us ; whereby a real change is made in our lives and natures. And, in brief, you may take this description of subjective or inherent grace : It is a supernatural habit, immediately infused into the soul by the Holy Ghost, residing in every power and faculty of the soul as a principle of holy and spiritual operation. And there is a five-fold change wrought by it ;—upon the judgment, or the direct understanding, by informing and enlightening it ;—upon the conscience, in the reflex understanding, by awakening and pacifying it ;—upon the affections, by spiritualizing them ;—upon the will, by converting it ;—upon the life and conversation, by reforming it.

This five-fold change is wrought upon the whole soul by the true and sanctifying grace.

2. Now, in the next place, I shall show *how far a natural man may attain to these, so as to be almost a Christian.*

(1.) As for his mind or understanding, he may be irradiated with a clear and sparkling knowledge of divine and spiritual objects, when yet the soul is not truly converted to God.

It is true, as, in the creation of the world, the light is numbered and reckoned amongst the first of God's works : so likewise, in this new creation, the first work of the Spirit of God is to shed abroad his heavenly light in the understanding : and, therefore, we have this first in order, in that commission, which our Saviour Jesus Christ gives to St. Paul, Acts xxvi. 18. He sent him to the Gentiles, "to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light ;" and then it follows, "from the power of Satan unto God." But, yet, notwithstanding, there is an illumination about spiritual things, which may gild and beautify the understanding of a natural man ; who, like a toad, may be full of poison, though he hath a precious stone in his head. The apostle lays down this as one of those attainments that an unregenerate man may have, and yet be an apostate ; Heb. vi. 4. He may not only have a deep knowledge of gospel mysteries, so as to see the whole

compages and concatenation of the doctrine of Christ, and to unfold them to others; but may have also particular discoveries of the glory and beauty that there is in these things. We may see it clearly by Balaam's ecstasy, Numb. xxiv. 5. Such discoveries carnal hearts may have made to them, and see their lustre and beauty. Nay, further, a carnal man may be convinced, that there is no other way of recovery but by the grace of God through the merits of Christ, of the suitableness of Christ to his soul, of the freeness of God's love, of the riches of his grace, of the readiness of his heart to receive him, of the desirableness of happiness, and of the beauty of holiness; and yet, for all this, remain in a natural state.

But now, not to leave you under doubts and perplexities, such an illumination of a carnal man falls far short of true grace in these two particulars.

[1.] In that it is but "lumen sterile," a barren light.

Illumination, that is saving, is not only light, but influence too. As the light of the sun doth not serve only to paint the world, and varnish over the beauty and variety of the several creatures that are in it; but carries in it a grateful heat and cherishing influence, which operates into them and refreshes them; and, as the light discovers their beauty, so these influences increase it: so, saving illumination not only illustrates the soul by its light; but, likewise, by the congenialness of its influences, nourishes the soul, draws sap into it and fruit from it. Such is not the illumination of an unregenerate man: it is but a barren light, and only serves to paint his understanding; and hath no influence on it, to make the soul grow in grace, and bring forth the fruits of holiness, to the praise of God.

[2.] It is an ineffectual, idle light.

That illumination, that is saving, is transforming: 2 Cor. iii. 18. "We all, as in a glass, behold the glory of the Lord, and are changed into the same image," &c. If a beam of the sun fall upon a looking-glass, it not only makes it glitter with a glorious light, but it represents the very image of the sun in the glass; but, let it beat never so clearly and strongly upon a mud wall, though it enlighten it, yet it doth not thereby leave its image upon it: so, truly, illumination, that is saving, doth not only irradiate, but

transform. If you look upon the sun when shiain in its strength, the light whereof will imprint the very shape and image of the sun upon your eye; and, look where you will, still you retain the appearance of the sun before you: so, every sight, that a true Christian hath of the Sun of righteousness, will make as it were another sun in his soul. But the illumination of wicked men doth only enlighten, not change them: their understandings may be irradiated with glorious discoveries of God, and of Christ, and the things of heaven; but this doth not transform them into the image and likeness of those things. The illumination of godly men and true Christians is like the light, which breaks through the air, and turns every vast body throughout the world all into light. It is with wicked, unregenerate men, as with those that lie long in the sun-shine; which, though it enlightens them, yet doth but afterwards make them more black and swarthy: so, thou mayest have as much notional knowledge of God, and Christ, and the mysteries of the gospel, as any child of God hath, and possibly much more: yet this is no true sign of grace; for this knowledge is not therefore saving because it is clear and comprehensive, but because it is influential and transforming. And, usually, we perceive, that where the light of knowledge shines into a wicked heart, it doth but tan and make the person more black and swarthy; more sinful, than before.

Thus, as to the direct understanding of the judgment, a natural man may have a bright, clear, and glittering light concerning heavenly and spiritual objects.

(2.) As for the reflex understanding of the conscience: neither yet the peace nor the trouble of conscience, is such an attainment as a natural man cannot reach.

[1.] A natural man may have a quiet and peaceable conscience.

Indeed, when this peace is true, it is always an effect of grace; and therefore we thus find them coupled together, Rom. i. 7. 1 Cor. i. 3; yet there is that, which looks very like peace of conscience, though it be not such; and that is a supine presumption and a carnal stupidity and ossitancy: their consciences are never troubled at the sight of sin or the sense of wrath; but they are like

those presumptuous sinners spoken of Deut. xxix. 19. "And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart," &c. Now this peace is founded only upon bold and confident persuasions of God's infinite mercy and gracious disposition: and, because God will exalt his mercy above his name, therefore they conclude, that, as God hath exalted his power in creating and sustaining them, so he will much more exalt his mercy in saving them. Thus, as madmen often fancy themselves kings or some great personages, when indeed they are but wretched and miserable spectacles; so do these spiritual madmen: and, as the devil appropriates to himself all the glory of the earth, so these look upon heaven, and all the glory of it, and boldly call it all their own; yea, and, through their wretched security, are bold to cry out with Thomas, "My Lord, and my God." To such I may say, with our Saviour in another case, "God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living:" God is not the God of such, as love and live in their sins and lusts; and that call him Father, whom yet they dishonour by a lewd and dissolute life. This is but to father one of the devil's offspring upon the holy God. Indeed men, by enormous and flagitious crimes, have so wounded and wasted their consciences, that now they retain not strength enough to accuse, molest, and trouble them; and this they call peace of conscience: such a peace, as Gallicus (in Tacitus) exprobrates the Romans with: when they have laid all waste, this they call peace: but this peace is rather deadness of conscience; and is far from that, which ariseth from the true grace of God. The Holy Ghost, in conviction, destroys this ill-grounded peace; and works in the soul horrors and terrors, and affrights the secure soul, when it shows it how it slept upon the top of the mast, and lay on the very brink of the infernal pit. As, therefore, we must not discourage a broken spirit, but embolden it to appropriate Christ and all the promises of the gospel to itself in particular: so we must let wicked men know, that, when they presume to call God their God and their Father, and yet continue in their sins and wickedness,

they will find, that instead of being their Father, he will only be their Judge. Now it will appear that this peace of a carnal man is only from deep security, and the spirit of slumber that hath seized upon them : because, when we come to examine the grounds of it, they plead only the goodness of their hearts, and there is nothing more familiar and frequent than this they boast of ; and, though they live in a constant neglect of holy duties, and wallow in the filth of customary sins, yet still they boast of this, that they have very good hearts, upright intentions. This is a mere delusion ; for it is as utterly impossible, that the heart should be good when the life is wicked and profane, as for a good root to bring forth evil and corrupt fruit.

[2.] As peace of conscience may be attained by natural men ; so, many times, such may lie under the regrets and troubles of conscience.

It is not trouble of conscience, that is the attainment wherein true grace doth consist. A dull and lethargic conscience, that hath long lain under the customary commission of gross sins, may at length by strong convictions be startled and awakened to a sense of sin, and be afraid at the sight of it ; but yet may remain an impure and defiled conscience. God may, even in this life, kindle in their breasts some sparks of the unquenchable fire, and may give them some foretastes of that cup of trembling that they must for ever drink of : as he hath made himself a devil incarnate by his sin, so God may make his conscience a hell incarnate. By his conscience, you hear Cain, that primitive reprobate, crying out, " My punishment is greater than I can bear : " nor could Judas find any other way to check his conscience, but with a halter. These regrets of conscience may proceed from a preparatory work of conviction, which, because of men's wilful deserting them, often vanish away without any saving effect ; and fall as far short of true grace, as the region of the air, where storms, tempests, thunderings, and lightnings are engendered, falls short of the heaven of the blessed, and that eternal calmness and serenity. And, as worms usually are the offspring of corruption and putrefaction ; so this never dying worm, that must ever sting

them, oftentimes in this life, is bred out of a rotten and corrupted conscience. The conscience, therefore, may be defiled, when it is not seared : it may be awakened, when it is not sanctified : a filthy puddle may be stirred, as well as a clear running stream : the conscience may work terrors and horrors, where the Spirit of God never wrought true saving grace.

(3.) As to the affections : there may be affections and sweet motions of the heart, which are oftentimes relied on as certain evidences of true grace, yet also may be in a carnal and natural man.

Matt. xiii. 20. Some received "the word with joy," &c. so, John v. 35. Christ tells the Jews, that they did for a season rejoice in the doctrine and preaching of John the Baptist : thus Herod is said to hear John gladly. So that you see the affections in holy duties and ordinances may be with joy, even in those, that have no true grace at all in them. As there may be these affections of joy and delight, so likewise of sorrow for sin : so we have it, Matt. xxvii. 3. it is said of Judas, "he repented himself;" and Ahab's humiliation was so great, that God took special notice of him, 1 Kings xxi. 29. "Behold, how Ahab humbleth himself," &c.

Now all these affections are but temporary and vanishing ; and may be excited, even in carnal men, from several advantages, that things have to commend themselves, to their judgments and to their hearts.

[1.] Sometimes, the very novelty and strangeness of them may affect us.

Novelty usually breeds delight, which longer custom and acquaintance doth abate. And this may be given as a reason, why, soon after conversion, the new converts' affections are drawn forth more strongly in the ways of God, than, afterwards, when they grow settled and stable Christians : the reason is, because of the very novelty of that course and way into which they have now entered, which affects them with delight : besides the real desirableness, which is in those ways themselves, the very novelty doth affect them. And this too may satisfy us, that, though many are turned aside from the truth as it is in Jesus Christ and from the way of worship which God

hath appointed us, who have boasted, that they have found more comfort and more sweet affections than ever, in those new ways after which they have gone; yet it is not because those ways have any thing in them that might yield them more comfort and delight, but only because they are new ways, and all new things will for the present stir up the affections: but, after some continuance in those ways, they find their joy and delight to flag: then they seek out other new ways, and commend them as much: and no wonder; for new ways will stir up new affections. That may be one reason, why affections may be stirred up, even in unregenerate and mere carnal men, as to the things of God, even from the mere novelty of them.

[2.] Good affections may be stirred up in men, from the very affecting nature of spiritual objects themselves. For spiritual objects may affect us in this natural way. Who can read the history of Christ's passion, without being affected with sorrow for all the sorrow that he underwent? He hath a heart harder than rocks, that can hear of the agonies, and scourges, and cruel indignities offered to so innocent and excellent a person as Christ was, that suffered even for sinners, and not be moved thereby to grief and compassion. And yet, possibly, these affections may be no other than such as would be excited from us, at the reading of some tragedy in a romance or feigned story.

[3.] Affections may be moved by the artificial rhetoric of others: by the great abilities of the ministers, whom we hear.

God tells the prophet Ezekiel, chap. xxxiii. 32. "Thou art unto them as a very lovely song." They may sometimes have their judgments pleased with the learning shown in a sermon; and their affections excited by the oratory and powerful utterance of it: but these, though they are very good helps to excite our affections, yet are not true tests of spiritual affections in us.

[4.] Pride and self-seeking may, in the performance of duties, excite our affections.

Men may be much deceived in this particular. For instance, in prayer, they may think they are affected with the things they pray for: when possibly, their affections may be

moved only with the words themselves spoken; with the copious, free, and admirable inventive way that they pray in : whereas the contrite broken spirit, who is only moved with truly spiritual affections, may not be so large and so copious in his expressions of them : a true Christian may groan out a prayer, who cannot compose and make a prayer, that hath a sententious coherence one part with another. As the ground, that is fullest of precious mines, hath less grass growing upon it; so, sometimes, in holy duties, when the heart is most full of grace, there may be least flourishing of expressions.

You cannot gather the truth of saving grace from strong workings of the affections : which may, sometimes, upon these accounts, be deceitful. And wicked and unregenerate men may have affections stirred up in them, upon these grounds : but, then, they are always vanishing and fleeting : and are only permanent, while the violence of some external cause doth excite them. And they are always unfruitful : though their affections may stir within them, yet they are not efficacious to put them upon a holy life and conversation.

(4.) Every change, that is wrought upon the will, is no certain evidence of the truth of grace.

A man may fall short of true saving grace, when there is yet a great change wrought upon the will. It is true, it is the thorough change of the will, wherein grace doth principally consist. This is the first principal act from the Spirit of life; without which whatsoever other change is wrought upon us, is no more than to set the hand of the watch to the right hour when the spring is broken. The philosophers call the will, the commanding, swaying faculty of the soul : that controls all the inferior faculties, and makes them obey its inclinations : so that, such as the will is, such is the whole man. And, therefore, the scripture, in setting forth the twofold state of men, doth it by showing the temper of their wills. Unregenerate men are described by their wilfulness : "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life:" John v. 40. The people of God are described by their willingness : Ps. cx. 3. "They shall be a willing people in the day of thy power."

And here I shall endeavour two things :—to show you

after what manner the Spirit of God doth work this renewing change upon the will ;—to show you what other change is wrought upon it, which falls short of true grace, though oftentimes it is taken for it.

[1.] For the first, we must know that there are two ways, whereby God doth effectually change the heart and will of a sinner : and these are moral suasions ; and physical determinations, which are nothing else but God's all-powerful grace, whereby he doth immediately turn the bent and inclination of the will towards himself.

And both these do always concur and agree to this great change. He doth first convince a sinner and persuade him of the rationality of the ways of God ; and of the vileness and emptiness of those vain things, which his desires so eagerly pursue : and, on the other hand, he clearly represents the glory and excellency of himself and his ways ; that he is the greatest good that we can enjoy ; and yet there is no other way to enjoy him, but by loving and serving him. To do this, he makes use of moral suasions ; and works upon our reason, by cogent and prevailing arguments : which, at last, diffuseth such heavenly sweetness through the heart of a Christian, as makes him disrelish those fulsome delights of sin, that separate from that infinite good, with which it holds comparison : so that he finds more true delight in God and his ways, and more alluring and charming joy in them, than ever he did before in sensual pleasure :—we are thereby carried forth unto them by an infallible, yet altogether free, voluntary, and amorous motion. And this is done by the real efficiency likewise of the Spirit of God upon the will : and this efficiency is so sweetly attuned to the native liberty of the will, that it would be a pain and torment to the soul to be separated from that God, whom now his understanding doth apprehend, and whom his will doth clasp about, as the real and chief good. Here, you see, are both moral suasions and physical determinations of the will to the work of grace. God doth really determine it, by the efficacious touch of his grace : whereby he powerfully turns the bent and inclination of it to himself, which before stood towards sin and vanity. And, that this might not infringe the will's prerogative of acting freely, he doth

at the same time morally persuade it, by representing himself as the best and most satisfying object of it. Notwithstanding, then, the irresistibleness of God's working upon the will; yet, still, man's will is free in God's working of grace, which some have thought to be an irreconcilable difference. For the freedom of the will doth not consist in redoubled pure acts; for, otherwise, the saints and angels themselves, who are under that blessed necessity that they cannot but love and serve God, would not love him and serve him freely. The liberty of the will consists in an acting upon rational grounds and motives; which, by how much stronger they are, by so much more they turn the necessity of the will to him, and yet by so much the more the will is free in acting: so that here, that the liberty of the will may not violate the causality of God's purpose, he changeth it by the power of his irresistible grace; and, yet, that this irresistible grace may not violate the liberty of the will, which is its natural privilege, he persuades it by such natural arguments that it could not act freely if it should dissent from them. Though God useth infinite power, yet he useth no violence: he subdues the will, but doth not compel it. This is that victorious grace, that doth not more overcome a sinner's resistance, than it doth his prejudice; it overcomes all oppositions, by its own irresistible power; and it overcomes all prejudices, by its attractive sweetness: and, whenever it brings him to submit to God, it makes him to apprehend that his chief happiness and joy is to do so. And it is the same, that doth afterwards preserve Christians from total apostasy: for, though there be such a constant supply of grace to keep them, that they shall never draw back to perdition; yet, withal, their own freedom is such, that they may if they will: but, when the will ceaseth its freedom, it never inclines but to that, which is most pleasing; and nothing is pleasing to a renewed and sanctified will, so much as that sovereign good, which comprehends in it all other good.

Thus you see how God disposeth of the will of man; changing it, without constraining it; turning it, not forcibly, but infallibly to himself; when he draws it by the sweet and efficacious operation of his grace.

Thus I have dispatched the first thing, and showed how God works the renewing change upon the will of a sinner.

[2.] The second particular is to show you, what other change may be wrought upon the will ; which yet falls short of true grace ; and may bring a man almost to Christianity, and yet leave him in a natural state and condition.

1st. An unregenerate man may have many faint velleities, and wishings, and wouldings after grace.

When he hears so much spoken of the beauty and excellency of holiness, he is convinced, in his judgment, that those things are true : that without holiness no man shall see the Lord : that though, while he is carnal, spiritual duties are tedious and a burden to him ; yet, were he spiritual, they would become more delightful to him, than those very pleasures of sin, which keep him from closing with grace : and that, were he renewed, those very pleasures of sin would become unsavoury to him ; and that, which now he is afraid to lose if he would turn to conscience, he would not value the loss of. When an unregenerate man, I say, is thus convinced of this, it will make him to break out into pangs of affectionate wishing for grace. ‘ O that I were holy and gracious ! I wish my heart were changed and renewed. I wish I were better, and could do better.’ I appeal to every man’s conscience, when he hath been convinced of the excellency and desirableness of holiness, whether he hath not breathed forth such wishes as these. When you have seen a Christian, that is eminent and exemplary for piety, have you not wished yourself in his condition ; not only in respect of his future reward and glory, but also in respect of his present grace ? have you not wished, that such had been your comeliness and beauty ? have you not wished, not only with Balaam, “ to die the death of the righteous,” and that your “ last end might be like his ;” but also your life by living righteously ? And yet still you continue in the same course and sinful state as formerly ! Now such empty velleities and idle wishes, an unregenerate man may possibly have : he may wish he were a saint ; even as a fond foolish man, according to his idle fancy, may wish that he were an angel. But such wishes do not put him

upon a constant attempt and use of the means, whereby he might become such. His wishes and his sighs vanish away together: the one retaining no longer an impression upon his heart, than the other in the air: he runs into the commission of that sin, which with his mouth he wishes he might not commit; and lives in the neglect of holy duties; and yet can wish that he had performed them. Such contradictory wishes have unregenerate men! they wish themselves holy; and yet are wilfully sinful: they wish that they were better; and yet will not endeavour their own amendment.

2dly. An unregenerate man may not rest in these wishes, but he may rise to a resolution.

I say, to some degree of resolution: they resolve many things; that their lusts shall no longer enslave them, that the pleasures of the world shall no longer bewitch them, that the difficulties of religion shall no longer affright them; but that they will break through all, and act like men. And with such generous and ingenuous resolutions as these, men, in their natural estate, may fortify themselves. Grace they know they must have, else they are eternally undone: they know that God hath not been wanting to their endeavours; and they peremptorily resolve, that they will not be wanting to themselves. We may see the same strong resolutions, of those, that came to inquire of Jeremiah, chap. xlii. 5, 6. "They said, The Lord be a true and faithful witness between us, if we do not even according to all things for the which the Lord thy God shall send thee to us:" and, yet, none more rebellious and disobedient against God, than these men, that make this remonstrance.

3dly. And, now, notwithstanding these wishes and these resolutions, the will of a natural man falls short of a saving change; and that, usually, in these particulars.

(1st.) In that it is a fickle and unconstant will.

Their desires may be sometimes violent and passionate, as if they would take heaven by force, and wrest mercy out of the hands of God: their prayers may be importunate and earnest, as if they would take no denial: but this violent spirit is soon spent, and this full bent of their souls soon flags, and returns again, as formerly, ever and

anon into the commission of some foul and gross sins. Such a will as this, though at first it hurries them apace, yet is soon tired, and leaves them short of grace and heaven. The Christian race is not to be run by so many fits, but by a constant course and progress; still getting ground upon our lusts; still approaching nearer to the kingdom of heaven. But it is with such men, as it is with the sea, when a spring-tide covers all the shore: when it ebbs, it discovers nothing but sands, where before was nothing but deep water. So, these affected and flowing Christians discover, that there is nothing but barren sands at the bottom; and that they are as unstable as water. A Christian is not made in a fit: neither is the work of grace wrought in a passion; but it is a settled, solemn, and constant frame of heart, that brings a man to Christ and salvation.

(2dly.) The will of an unregenerate man is never universally changed: still he reserves to himself some lust or other, that he will not part withal.

Their resolutions, concerning their sins, are such as the resolution of Naaman the Assyrian: 2 Kings v. 18. "In this thing, the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, &c. the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing." So, men may be peremptory in their resolutions to forsake their sins; yet still there may be some one dear lust or other, that makes them cry, with Naaman, "Lord, pardon thy servant in this thing:" they will be willing to receive Christ, if they may be allowed in one darling sin. Now the partition, that any one sin makes between Christ and the soul, must needs hinder the soul from closing with Christ: as, if you throw but any little thing between the branch and the stock that it is engrafted into, the sap will never be communicated to it, and so it will never grow up to be a plant.

(3dly.) The will of an unregenerate man is usually irrational.

It would obtain the end; and yet not use the means. Grace, possibly, they would have; but they cannot bring their averse wills to close with the performance of those

unpleasing and irksome duties, wherein God usually bestows grace, and by which he conveys grace to the soul. Could they be holy with a wish, and a sudden fancy that enflames them, then none should be better Christians than themselves : could they enter into heaven by being willing, none then should shine above them in glory : but, when there is so much hard and unpleasing work, first that they must be born of God ; and, after they are true Christians, that they must exercise every grace and perform every duty that may fit and prepare them for glory ; they look upon these things as too difficult, which makes them sit down with idle wishes short both of grace and glory. Their wills are very irrational : they would have heaven ; but they slight grace, the way to it : and, possibly, they would have grace ; but they cannot bring themselves to the performance of those irksome and unpleasing duties, in and by which grace is usually bestowed and conveyed.

(4thly.) The will of an unregenerate man is usually a general, not a particular will.

If God should ask them, "Sinners, what would you do to be saved ?" They would answer, "Any thing, every thing." But, let God bid them leave such and such a sin, perform such and such a duty, they answer with Naaman, "Any sin, but that ; any duty, but that." So it is with these men : "O any thing," in the general : but, when God brings them down to particulars, to do this or that, then they are willing to do just nothing.

I have showed you how far the will itself may be changed in unregenerate persons : they may wish after grace, and resolve to be better, and to do better, and yet fall short of saving grace. And, also, what it is that hinders this change from being a thorough work of grace ; what it is that obstructs them, when they are almost, that they are not altogether Christians.

(5.) As for the life and conversation.

There may be a great change wrought in the lives of unregenerate persons, who yet fall short of Christianity.

The apostle, 2 Pet. ii. 20. speaks of such who having "escaped the pollutions of the world, through lust were again entangled therein and overcome," &c. It seems, to escape the pollutions of the world is no argument of

true grace, unless they be also cleansed from the pollutions of the heart : for sin may be left merely from external and forced principles ; such as terrors of conscience, for the heavy judgments of God ; when God sets up a flaming sword, between a sinner and those sins, which he accounts his paradise here. Now to leave sin upon such a strait as this, is to leave it with a great deal of reluctance : as when a mariner, in a storm, casts his goods overboard into the sea : it is with his will, indeed ; but it is with an unwilling willingness : he is frightened and terrified to it. So, when the soul is tossed with the tempest of divine wrath ; and when ready to be split upon the rock of ages, and be sunk and swallowed up in a sea of fire and brimstone ; he is forced to light himself, and to cast this and that dear lust overboard ; this he doth from his will : but it is such a forced will, as that of mariners, who throw their treasure overboard ; and, as soon as the tempest is over, the one gathers up his floating wrecks, and the other his sins. These men leave their sin, as Lot's wife left Sodom : they dare no longer continue in it, lest fire and brimstone rain upon them ; and, yet, when they do leave it, they give many a wishly look back again, and have strong and vehement desires after it. That reformation of life, that only frees us from debauchedness, falls far short of true Christianity, and of making us altogether Christians : this is that, with which many soothe up themselves, when they reflect back upon the wild extravagances of their former time : how outrageously wicked they have been, riotous, drunkards, unclean, blasphemers ; and, now that they find themselves deadened to these sins, and grown men of staid and sober lives, they straightway conclude, that, certainly, this great change could never be made on them otherwise than by the renewing work of the Holy Ghost : and, yet, in this amendment there may be no work of regeneration ; for men may gather up their loose and dissolute lives within some compass of civility and morality, and yet be utterly strangers to this work. Much of this may be ascribed, partly to convictions of God's Spirit, awakening natural conscience to see the horror and danger of such daring and outrageous sins ; and, partly too, to prudence, gotten from frequent experience of manifold

inconveniences that they brought upon themselves by such sins ; and both these convictions and moral prudence are principles, that fall very short of true Christianity. Usually, all the specious reformation and amendment of these men's lives, is, in effect, either a changing of the sin, or a tiring out of the sinner.

[1.] The life may seem to be reformed, when men exchange their rude and boisterous sins, for such as are more demure and sober.

From riotous, they grow worldly : from profane and irreligious, they grow superstitious and hypocritical : from atheists, they grow heretics : from sins of practice, to sins of contemplation. They are, then, apt to think, that certainly, this change must needs be the change of their nature, when indeed it is but the change of their sins ; and usually it is such a change too, that though it render the life more inoffensive, yet it makes the soul more incurable. St Austin, in his twenty-ninth epistle, tells us, that vices may give place, when virtue or grace does not take it.

[2.] The life may seem to be reformed, when men are only tired out ; when they have outgrown their sins.

There are sins, which are proper and peculiar to such a state and season of a man's life, upon the alteration of which they vanish and disappear. Sins of youth drop off from declining age, as misbecoming them. Now this deceives men : when they look back to the vanities which they have forsaken, how deadened they are to those sinful ways which before they much delighted in, they conclude, certainly, this great change must needs proceed from true grace ; when they do not leave their sins, so much as their sins leave them, and drop off from them as rotten fruit from a tree : the faculties of their minds and the members of their bodies, which before were instruments of sin and unrighteousness, are now become instruments of morality and seeming virtues : this sets them not free from the service of sin ; but only restrains them from breaking out into notorious and scandalous vices.

[3.] A civil and harmless demeanour doth not render a man altogether a Christian.

There be many ingenuous spirits, who live blamelessly in the world; their good natures nearly resembling grace. And such was St. Paul's, before his conversion: for he tells us, as "touching the law, he was blameless." So, the young man, that came to Christ to know what lesson he had further to take out. This only argues a sweet disposition, but not a gracious heart. Thus you see how dissolute men may mistake themselves in this work, upon which their eternal happiness depends. It is to be feared, that many may rest upon these; and think the great discriminating change to be wrought, only because they are morally honest, or gained over to a profession of truth, or to such a party or sect of professors; when, indeed, true Christianity consists not in these things.

This shall suffice for the first general propounded—what change may be wrought upon a man, so as to bring him almost to Christianity, and yet leave him short of being a Christian.

iv. I shall close up this branch with some *practical considerations*.

1. What then shall become of such, as fall short of those that fall short of grace, that are not so much as almost Christians? What will become of carnal, loose, and profane sinners?

If those, that have been gazed at and admired for burning and shining lights, yet have fallen into the blackness of darkness, even into the dungeon of eternal darkness, were we but serious in this reflection, it would make all our faces gather blackness, and fill all our hearts with astonishment, to consider that we are not gone so far in Christianity as those may go, who yet fall short of heaven. Have we all been "enlightened?" Have we all "tasted of the heavenly gift, and of the powers of the world to come?" Have we all been made partakers of the Holy Ghost? Are there not many among us, possibly, whose hearts have never yet been touched with the sense of sin, never affected with any of the ways of God? that give themselves up to all wickedness with greediness? who never have given so much as one serious wish towards holiness? When those, that seemed to shine as stars in

heaven, shall be at last burning in hell, O, in what a dismal case shall these firebrands be!

2. Hence, likewise, *see what a difficult thing it is to be a true Christian.*

May a natural man attain to all this, that I have spoken of before? We may then take up that same question, which the disciples asked Christ, (when he had told them, that it was as easy "for a camel to go through a needle's eye, as for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven") "Lord, who then shall be saved?" "What! may those, whose profession hath been eminent, who have been sainted in every man's calendar, may they at last miscarry and perish? Who then shall be saved? If such be not Christians, Christianity seems to be rather some fancied notion, than any thing real and attainable." To this we may make the same answer, that Christ gave to the disciples: "With men, indeed, these things are impossible, but with God all things are possible:" it is impossible for men, by their own strength and natural ability, to become Christians; but it is possible for God to make them Christians: it is possible, as miracles themselves are possible, only possible to the almighty power of God. Not any soul can be persuaded to be a Christian; but he hath a miracle wrought upon him: and he himself must do that, which is little less than a miracle; he must act beyond the power of nature, and do more than a mere man can do: therefore, well may you suspect your Christianity, who find it so easy a matter to be a Christian. Even natural men find it a difficult task to attain to that height and pitch, where they shine in moral virtue, though far short of heaven; and is it easy for you to mount far higher than they, far beyond them? Indeed it is an easy matter for any to make a slight formal profession, to run in a round of hypocritical duties, and live a moral civil life: this is easy: there is nothing miraculous in this. But is it easy to pluck out the right-eye, and to cut off the right-hand? It is not easy, to crucify a darling lust; to cut off the right-hand, when it lifts up itself to plead for mercy, and to be spared a little longer; to pluck out the right-eye, when it drops tears to beg compassion, and a little favour to be granted to it. Is it easy, to combat

with principalities and powers, to baffle devils, and despise the scorns and affronts of the whole world? Is it easy, to live like an angel? nay, to live like Christ, to live like God himself? Is it easy, when we see so many tottering professors aspiring towards Christianity, some mounting till they are giddy and brain-sick with their most damnable errors, others tumbling down from the precipices of great and dangerous sins? We may well wonder that any are saved, when such as these miscarry. To consider, then, what it is that is wrought upon you, even that which the omnipotent God hath wrought; and what it is that is wrought by you, that which is beyond the power of nature: we may well conclude, what a difficult matter it is to become a true and serious Christian altogether.

3. May natural men go thus far in Christianity? O be you then persuaded to go much further.

Do not rest in any attainment, short of heaven and glory. Rest not in any present attainment. And this, indeed, is the most natural use, that can be made of this subject, when you hear how great a progress wicked men may make. I know that the hearts of the best Christians are ready to suggest to them, and they will be apt to conclude against themselves, that all, that is wrought upon them, is but the common work of the Spirit: therefore, their graces are but counterfeit, and themselves yet short of Christianity: I know that this subject may cause such jealousies and suspicions to arise in the hearts of some: but the genuine use of this doctrine, is, not so much to pore upon our present condition, as to stir you up to make a future progress. May a natural man make so great a progress, as to be almost a Christian? Then, certainly, I must never rest any where short of heaven. Well, therefore, the apostle, in Heb. vi. 11, 12. after he had shown them at large what a height a natural man may arrive to, presseth them to be earnest in their endeavours after perfection. This will be the best evidence to you, that you are indeed Christians; that you have the truth of Christianity. Though natural men may possibly glisten in a glorious profession, and shine like the sun in its radiant splendour: yet, like it, they have their zenith, their highest degree; which when they have climbed to, they fall

down again. But a true Christian's course hath not any declension: he may proceed infinitely, from one degree of grace to another: he may ascend and reach higher and higher, till he hath reached heaven; where all his infirmities shall be swallowed up, and abolished in consummated glory. And, indeed, this is the greatest evidence of the truth of grace. A natural man's motion to heaven is violent and unnatural: it is forced from him by some external impressions upon the conscience, illumination, and common works of the Holy Ghost; and, as soon as this external force is spent, he falls naturally back again to his former course of sin: as a stone may be carried a great height towards heaven, by an outward violent impression upon it; but, when that force is worn off, it falls naturally back again to the earth. Now a Christian mounts naturally to heaven; while, by reason of that dull mixture of earth that is in him, his course tends to the earth again: but the true Christian still mounts upward, from the principle that carries him up, which indeed never totally spends itself. Therefore, if thou wouldst prove thyself to be not almost, but altogether a Christian, continue thy progress: still gain ground towards heaven: rest not satisfied with any present attainments; but be still rising and soaring, until thou hast gotten the world and them too under thy feet.

4. *When you see any, who have been forward in a profession and gone far in Christianity, to forsake their station, and fall back to their former course of profaneness, take heed that you do not reproach, that you do not scandalize religion with their apostacy.*

This is that, which opens the mouths and hardens the hearts of wicked men; when they see such glorious, but yet temporary professors, to return with the dog to the vomit. They, indeed, first, bless themselves in their own ways, as being better than the ways of God, as being better than the profession of religion: otherwise why should those, that so long have forsaken them, and, with a great deal of pomp, made such a glorious show and ostentation of religion and of conscientiousness; why should such return back again to their old ways? Secondly;

it makes them think, that all professors are but hypocrites, that it is but a solemn cheat put upon the world, since such forward professors of it are found forsakers of it: 'Some men please themselves with a few idle conceits of grace, and the new birth communion with God, and the like unintelligible notions, when there is no other difference between them and others, but what only their fancies make.' Oh, take heed, therefore, that you do not blaspheme the ways of God, when you see the apostacy of professors. No, these men were never in those ways. Had they been Christians indeed, they would never have deserted those holy ways: their natures were never changed; and, it is no wonder, that they are relapsed and fallen back again into their old customs: to see the swine that is cleansed return back again to the mire, is nothing strange: had Christ changed the nature of these swine, and made them his sheep; then, as they had first "escaped the pollutions of the world," so they would have kept themselves from ever being entangled by them. But this makes highly for the honour of Christianity; and proves it to be a thing so excellent, that it cannot be long counterfeited: hypocrisy shall certainly betray itself by its apostacy, that it had never any thing of true and saving grace, although it carried fair in a show and pretence of it.

Thus much for the first thing propounded, how far a man may attain towards Christianity, and yet be in a natural sinful state.

II. The next thing is to show you, *whence it is that natural men are enabled to make so great a progress towards christianity.*

I shall give you a brief resolution to this question: and that shall be drawn, from the consideration of the subject; and that is a natural man himself;—from the consideration of the object; and that is holiness or christianity, to which it tends.

i. If you look into the *subject*, the natural man himself, so you shall find that man, and that which is wrought upon him; which may carry him out possibly to a very great progress in religion, and that may be twofold;—the power of nature;—the elevation and recruit, which that

power may receive from a common work of the Holy Ghost, much helping nature, quickening conscience, and reforming the life.

1. The carnal man may be carried very far towards Christianity, *from the mere strength and power of nature.*

For the mere power of corrupt nature is, of itself, sufficient to raise a man to any attainment, that is short of true saving grace. A natural man may so prepare and dispose his heart, as that the very next thing to be wrought upon him should be grace : it may carry him out to the externals of Christianity ; and, it may be, with more pomp and grandeur, than sometimes the power of grace doth carry out a child of God : when the power of nature takes on it the form of godliness, it will make bright and glittering professors. Now these externals of Christianity lie in two things, the performance of duties, and the avoiding of sin.

As for duties, they may so far outstrip and outshine a child of God, in the pomp and gaudiness of them, as to be their emulation and example : and, for sin, there is not any one particular sin, setting aside those common and unavoidable infirmities which are inseparable from the frailty of human nature, but a carnal man may keep himself from the commission of it, by the mere power of nature ; and there is scarce any sin, that is branded remarkably in the world, but some wicked man or other doth abstain from it, and that merely from the power of nature : one, by this power, abstains from this sin ; another, from that ; and a third, from another sin : and each of these has power to abstain likewise from all these sins ; because what power the one hath may, possibly, be found in the other, since, in nature, there is nothing partial, for a man naturally is not so. Again, the devil, when he tempts, doth not force and constrain them : he doth not forcibly move the black tongue of the swearer to curse and blaspheme ; nor doth he screw open the drunkard's mouth by force, to pour down intemperate cups ; nor force the murderer's hand to sheath his sword in his brother's bowels, whether he will or no : but he solicits the wills, and insinuates into the affections by his temptations, and makes these freely move the engine to that to which his design

tends ; and therefore all his triumphs are but for beggarly victories : he could not prevail over us, did not we prove traitors to our own souls ; did not we surrender up ourselves, by the consent of our own wills ; else, we could never be distressed, much less taken by the violence of the tempter.

2. As men may proceed far toward Christianity by the power of nature, so *they may have common and ordinary works of the Holy Ghost upon them, that may carry them out to a very great progress.*

They may be made, saith the apostle, "partakers of the Holy Ghost : " Heb. vi. 4. and that is, of its common gifts and operations. It is the Spirit of God, that enlightens their understandings, that awakens their consciences, that excites their affections. It is the Spirit, that works conviction, that works reformation : yea, and sanctification in wicked and unregenerate men : for we have that expression concerning them.

There is a two-fold sanctification.

(1.) Of the flesh, consisting in the removal of all carnal and external filthiness ; called by the apostle an escaping of "the pollutions of the world" through lust : 2 Pet. ii. 20. and that consists in a separation from all those gross and vile sins, wherein the flagitious and debauched world do wallow.

(2.) There is likewise a sanctification of the Spirit, consisting in a separation from a state of nature to a state of grace.

The one is external, by reformation : the other is internal, by renovation.

The former sanctification a natural man may be made partaker of by the Holy Ghost ; so as to have his life and actions stand at a greater distance from and a greater opposition to those carnal gross sins, which the world is generally defiled with : but this is no more than a common and ordinary work of the Holy Ghost : they may account the blood, whereby they are sanctified, an unholy thing. There is a far different force and energy, that the Holy Spirit puts forth, when it works conversion, and when it works only outward sanctification : in both it may work upon the heart ; but in conversion it works upon

the heart so as to change it and renew it, while in the reformation of a natural man he works upon the heart indeed, but it is only to change and amend the life: the Spirit may persuade the one to change his heart, but then he changeth the heart of the other: he may persuade the will of the one to submit to Christ, but then he subdues the will of the other: he persuades the one to become a Christian, but he makes the other a Christian. Now there is a very wide difference between these two ways of working: by the one he only excites men to use somewhat of the power they have, but by the other he gives them the power they want.

And thus you see, what there is in man, considered both in nature and with the help of the common work of the Holy Ghost, that may carry him so far towards Christianity.

ii. There is also something considerable in the *object*, viz. religion and Christianity itself, whence it is natural men may make so great a progress towards it: and that is two-fold,—the attractiveness of religion;—the subserviency of religion to itself.

1. *The attractiveness of religion.*

And this consists not only in the inward and spiritual beauty of holiness, which these men have not eyes to discern; but also in that happiness, which is annexed to religion and Christianity. This is that, which draws out natural men to all their attainments. Happiness is the great bait of men's desires; and that, which sweetens the means tending to it: though they be in themselves very difficult and burdensome, yet, leading to happiness, they close with it: and, therefore, as the apprehensions of heaven and hell work upon a natural man more or less forcibly than the thoughts of the difficulty or tediousness of holy duties; so is his progress more or less strong and vigorous towards Christianity.

2. Another thing in Christianity or religion, that advanceth some to so great a progress, is the *subserviency of religion to itself*.

Religion doth mightily promote and advance itself, in that the performance of one part and of one duty of religion, obligeth and engageth to the performance of ano-

ther. As one sin draws on another, by consequence likewise doth one duty draw on another. There is a connexion and dependence between them : hearing engageth to meditation, and meditation to prayer, and prayer for grace to endeavour after it : a glorious profession obligeth to something, at least that may be answerable to that profession. Thus, one duty of religion hands a man over to another : and, when he is passed through one, another stands ready to receive him.—A little progress in religion doth facilitate. It is harder, at first, to begin ; than, having begun, to continue : because use and custom in any thing make it easy.

Now it is this subserviency of religion to itself, that may carry men very far in it. When they have begun a profession, and entered upon one duty, that duty delivers them over to another, and makes it more facile and easy to them ; because the precedent duty, as it doth engage them to, so it prepares them for, the subsequent duty, as well as engage them to the present duty. One duty doth, as it were, perform half the task and bear half the burden of the other.

Thus then you see, whence it is that natural men may make so great a progress towards Christianity, so as to be almost Christians, from the power of nature, and from the attractiveness of religion.

Now, here, if you ask me, ‘ How shall I know, whether it be the power of nature helped by the common workings of the Spirit, or the power of supernatural grace, that carries men out to all their profession ? ’ I shall give you but this one discriminating character of it ; —see whether your abilities be greater in the things that belong to grace and holiness, than they are to natural things. A child of God, who is but of weak parts as to the things of the world, that can scarce give you a rational account of such affairs when propounded to him, bring him but to the things of God, and how admirably will he be able to unfold, even the very mysteries that are hid from the wise and prudent of the world ! Put him upon any common discourse, how broken and incoherent is he ! but engage him in prayer, how doth he expatiate and enlarge, and what a torrent of divine rhetoric will he then pour into the bosom of God ! Is this from nature,

that he is able to exceed and go beyond himself? No, certainly. It is very observable concerning the ways of God, what the prophet speaks, Isa. xxxv. 8. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called, The way of holiness: the unclean shall not pass over it:" Though they wander and err in every other way; though they do not take the right way to be rich, and great, and honourable in the world; yet these, that are fools in every thing else, shall not err from the way of holiness: and, therein, lies the only wisdom. But, take a mere carnal man, that hath eminent abilities in earthly things; usually, he is never weaker than when he is engaged in that which is holy and spiritual: at least his chief excellency doth not lie there: though he doth perform the duty well, yet he doth not do it beyond what he doth in ordinary and natural things. Now how is it with you? do you find yourselves carried much beyond the rate and size of your natural abilities? that you never so much exceed yourselves, nor do so well, as when you are about some holy and spiritual employment? that you are not so artificial in any thing, as in holy performances? This is a good sign, that it is the power of grace, and not only the power of nature, that carries you forth to the profession of religion which you make. I take the extraordinary gifts, bestowed upon unregenerate men in a vast disproportion from their natural abilities, to be long ago ceased.

Thus you see what enables a natural man to go so far towards Christianity.

III. The third general propounded, was to show *what it is that hinders these proficients from making further progress: that, when they are almost, what keeps them from being altogether Christians.*

I answer to this, in general;—it is only through a wilful and wretched neglect of what they might do, that any of them do fall short of grace here and glory hereafter. It is not our want of power, but our want of will, or rather indeed our willingness, that makes us miscarry to our eternal perdition.

I shall illustrate this by a plain and obvious similitude. Suppose that God should promise to bestow heaven upon

us, if we would but reach forth and touch it with our hands. Now, although we can never reach so high : yet if we do not stretch forth our hands and reach as high as we are able to do, the fault of losing heaven will not lie upon the inability and impossibility, that were in us to touch it ; but upon our wilful neglect of striving to our utmost to do what we are able to do : the reason why we fall short, would not be because our arm is not long enough ; but because we do not stretch it forth to the utmost length.

The instance is somewhat plain and familiar ; but yet it holds an exact proportion to the case in hand. God promiseth heaven to us, if we will but touch it ; that is, if we will lay hold on Christ by faith : which faith we can no more work in ourselves by our own proper efficiency, than touch heaven with our finger ; yet, howsoever, if we do not do our utmost, our falling short of heaven and faith cannot be imputed to the impossibility that we lie under, but to our wilful sloth and neglect. It is not men's ' cannots ' but their ' will nots,' not their impotency but their obstinacy, that destroys them : " Ye will not come to me, that ye may have life : " John v. 40. " Ye will not ! " Doth not Christ himself tell us, that no man can come to him, except the Father draw him ? True, but the fault lies in the stubbornness of your wills. Though you could come, you would not : therefore, it is not your weakness, but your wilfulness, that keeps you from coming to Christ.

Let me here appeal to yourselves. Doth not he deserve eternal death, who had a power in his hand to make himself a Christian, and yet would not ? Certainly you will all conclude, this man is very equally and justly dealt with, if sentenced to eternal misery ; since he had a power to avoid that misery, and to lay hold on eternal life and happiness : his condemnation lies on his own head for his wilful contempt of salvation, which he had a power to work out ; and, by a diligent improvement of the means tendered to him, to make sure of. Every carnal man, if he had power to convert himself, yet, through his wilful neglect and obstinacy, would not do it : and this appears, because there is not one of us, that doth as much as he

might do. There is not one natural man, that doth as much as he might do : will he not now do what he can, to prepare and dispose his heart for grace ? then much less would he work grace in his heart, though he had a power to do it ; and therefore the whole default of men's falling short of grace, lies in their wilful neglects. Men indulge themselves in carnal sloth : and, if they can but maintain the pace and rate of common ordinary professors in a formal course of duty, or abstain from gross sins, then they are contented, and will be drawn on no further. Cannot they command their thoughts to dwell more fixedly and more abidingly upon spiritual objects ? Cannot they be oftener in meditation ; and meditate more fervently, and with more affection ? In both, have they not power to refuse temptations and sinful motions ? doth the devil use any force or violence upon them ? Did they ever find, when they threw themselves upon their knees in prayer, that he stiffened them that they could not bend ? or that he stopped their mouths from speaking, or their hearts from thinking ? Had he a power to strike men lame, when they should come to the ordinances ; or deaf, when they should hear ; or dumb, when they should speak ; then there were some show and colour of reason, why men attended no more frequently, why they heard no more attentively, why they did not ponder more considerably, why they prayed so seldom and heartlessly. Did but the devil compel them to this, the sinner might have some excuse ; but, when he must woo their consent and allowance, and wait their pleasure and leisure, it is merely a wretched neglect or wilfulness, that they yield to the commission of any sin. Can you do all this, and more ; and yet will you not ? know, that, if you perish, it is only your own fault : you your own selves are the bloody murderers of your own souls. It will be in vain for you to plead, that you had no power to make yourselves Christians : you never went so far as to make a trial, whether you had a power or no : for a man not to do the utmost that he might do towards Christianity, though he hath no power to make himself a Christian, is the same as if he had a power, and yet will not make use of it. O, let this that I have said prevail with you, to be

not only almost, but altogether {Christians; and to put forth all the power and might and ability, that you have, in the working out of your own salvation. Is there not infinite reason, why you should speedily set about this important work, while you have time and opportunity for the doing of it? Is it not a matter of the greatest moment in the world, and not to be delayed one moment? Be persuaded, then, to the speedy practice of it.

Objection I. Some desperate wretches may think, indeed, that 'arguments to persuade men to work out their salvation, may be of weighty import to enforce the duty, upon those that do expect salvation; but, for my part, I pretend not so high: let me but enjoy now the sins which I serve and the pleasures which I pursue; and, for the state of my soul hereafter, I commend that to the mercy of God: and if I must perish, I will perish with as much ease and content as I may. It is hard to alter an irreversible doom; and, if it be to perdition, it is but folly to hang down the head, and blubber the eyes, and break the heart for that which cannot be altered. If I must go to hell, I may as soon be carried down thither in a flood of tears, as in doing ungodly actions. Why should I conspire with God's decree to make myself miserable. If he hath sentenced me to hell hereafter, I may as well sentence myself to a heaven here. My future torments are in his hands, but my present delights are in my own. Therefore, if salvation and happiness be such nice points, I forego them; and will embrace more easy and more obvious pleasures.'

I know that there is no pious heart here, but shivers with horror at such language, though it be but personated. Methinks rather it represents the speech of a devil, who is without all possibility of happiness, than of men who are in the way to it. Indeed, it is the speech of the devil; but it is likewise in the hearts of men: when they storm and bluster at the difficulties of salvation, and narrowness of the way, and straitness of the gate, the devil interposeth this suggestion, 'It is as good to perish with ease, as to be saved with so much labour and pains.' But, what! shall we leave men to such desperate resolutions, and suffer them to go dreaming to hell and destruction? Cer-

tainly, religion hath arguments enough to prevail, even with these ; if they would but show themselves to be men, and but ponder how much reason can speak.

For, consider thou, that wilt rather perish, than make thy life a trouble to thee by obedience ; God may, under thy disobedience, make thy life a trouble, yea a hell to thee, by his terrors. Thou thinkest that thy garments of sin and pollution will sit more loose and easy about thee, than the garments of holiness, that are too straitlaced and troublesome : yea, but what if God should roll these thy filthy garments in brimstone, and fire them about thee ? How dreadfully wouldst thou be disappointed, when, instead of that ease which thou seekest in the service of sin, God should make thee thine own tormentor, and make thy conscience a hell incarnate ! Believe it, the wrath of God can fry the marrow in thy bones, and reduce thy soul to ashes. Read Psalm lxxxviii. and you will think it a doleful and sad description of the state of the damned. " While I suffer thy terrors I am distracted : " and, if the wrath of the Almighty lay thus sore upon a holy man, how fretting and corroding will it be upon the leprous soul, and upon an ulcerated conscience ! If it burns up the green tree, what will become of the dry tree, which is but as prepared fuel for it to prey upon ? No man hath his present delights and contentments in his own power, because no man hath his own conscience in his own power : it will speak, yea, and that terrible things ; even then, when a sinner hath done all he can to sear and stupify it.

Consider, again : how is it with you, after the rage of your sinning is over ? are you not haunted with fearful reflections and ghastly thoughts of despair and horror ? Could we but unbowel a sinner, we should find those conscience-worms, gnawing and knotting about him, and devouring his heart. And are these wont to dissolve into trouble, for fear religion and holiness should trouble them ? are they content to buy ease and quiet at such a rate, as the loss of heaven and eternal torments amount to ? and is this the ease and quiet, that they purchase with it ? The devil puts a gross cheat upon these men : he changeth not the trouble, but the time of it : they shun the work of God, only because it is troublesome in doing, though it

doth leave behind it the blessed fruits of peace, joy, and satisfaction; and they engage in the work of the devil, which, as soon as the heat and fury of it is a little over, leaves, in their sober thoughts, nothing but anguish, stings, and torments. And, therefore, be not deceived: suffer not the devil any longer to abuse you; and to impose his drudgery upon you, under the notion of ease and quiet. If your consciences were once awakened, I know the work of the devil must needs bring you more vexation, besides the shame, than ever you would have from the work of God: yea, the very omission and neglect of God's work is a far greater trouble, than the performance of it would be. Therefore, if you look no farther than your present content and satisfaction, if you would go to your final estate the easiest way, whatever it be, think not to attain this by giving up yourselves to a way of sin, nor by wounding your own consciences, which with trouble afterwards will be sure to be avenged upon you; but, in a way of duty and laborious working, you only can find present content, and shall certainly find future happiness.

Objection 2. 'True,' may some say, 'possibly the work of God might be more pleasing and satisfactory to us than the work of the devil, if we could work it. But, to what end is it, that God requires from us to work? to what purpose doth he command us? Doth not he himself know, that we have no power? Doth not he himself say, that we are "dead in trespasses and sins?" Is it rational, is it just, to bid a dead man work? or, doth it become that God, who would be thought by us to be infinitely gracious and merciful, to mock and deride human misery, when he commands those things from us which he knows to be impossible? Had he bid us blend light and darkness together, or bend the axle-tree of the world till both poles met; had he bid us fling the stars out of their orbs, or with our hands stop the sun in the midst of his course; all these great impossibilities are as easily achieved, as by our own power to work any part of divine and acceptable obedience without gracious assistance from God. We can as soon glorify, as sanctify ourselves. What should we then do, but only sit still and expect, till efficacious grace should move and act us, and we not able to gainsay and

resist it? till God so draw us, as that we must run; and so call us, as that we must answer? Till then, our obedience is an impossibility, and all our attempts are vain and fruitless.'

This now is a slothful sinner's pretence, why he will not work: and no doubt but that too often it doth flash into the thoughts of most men; whereby their hearts are discouraged and their hands weakened, in the service of God.

In answering this, I shall not enter into that great debate of the power of nature to do what is good and acceptable to God: but proceed in a plain way, and accommodated to practice; and that, which will be most convictive to the conscience.

First. Men will not plead thus in matters of far less concernment, than the salvation of their souls. Would a master, when he commands his servant to work, take this, think you, for a sufficient excuse, that he hath no power to work till God act and move him? It may as well be objected by your servants to you, as by you to God. Tell me, what power have I to speak, or you to hear one word, unless God do concur to it? Nay, we are not sufficient to think one good thought: 2 Cor. iii. 5. And do we make this an excuse to forbear those actions, that are necessary and convenient? Do we therefore resolve to do nothing, because it is impossible for us to do any thing unless God concur with it? What stupid, dull folly were this! We put it daily and hourly to trial: and produce me that man, that can say God was wanting to him in his concurrence. What a miserable and ridiculous task would it be, if, in every action of our lives that we cannot do without God, yet we should sit still, and question God's concurrence! Do you sit down to try whether God will enable you to rise when you are down? or, do you question whether God will concur to another step, though it is impossible you should stir and move, unless God act and move you? Yet this hinders not men's endeavours: "In him we live, and move, and have our being." Why do not you do so in spiritual matters? We can do nothing without God. True: yet put it to the trial, whether or no God will concur with you. Certainly, that man must be nameless, that can say "I was truly willing, and endea-

voured to do some spiritual good, but God was wanting to me in his concurrence."

Secondly. Those men, who thus make impotence a pretence for their sloth, do not indeed believe what they themselves pretend. No: it is the inward and secret thought of them all, that they have a power to work out their own salvation: and, therefore, whether they have or no, still they are inexcusable: while they think they have this power, yet they sit still. Although a man be chained fast down that he cannot go; yet, if he thinks himself at liberty, and notwithstanding sits still, you may soon tell where the fault lies: it may be imputed to want of will, and not to want of power. So, here: wicked men think they have power to work, however they speak otherwise: therefore, they are utterly inexcusable if they do not work. It is as clear as the light, that their sloth proceeds not from their impotence, but from their own wilfulness.

I shall endeavour, by a few arguments, to convince you, that you do indeed think that you have power to work out your own salvation: therefore, if you do it not, you are altogether inexcusable, whether you have that power or no.

First. Did you never, when God hath shaken his rod and whip over you, seriously promise and resolve to work; his rod, I mean, either of conviction or affliction?

Have not these made you enter into an engagement with God, that you would serve and obey him for the future? Did you not really thus resolve? There are few here, but sometimes, at least, in a fit and pang of conscience have so done. And why did you resolve all this, and yet at the same time think and believe you could do nothing? Did you only mock God, and play with your own consciences? Certainly, your consciences then were too much provoked, and too much awakened to be thus jested and dallied with. We find this temper in the Israelites, when they were frightened at the terrible glory from mount Sinai: *Exod. xxiv. 3*: see how confidently they promise and resolve: "And all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said, will we do." So the Jews, in their great distress, *Jer. xlii. 6*. "Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God, that it

may be well with us." Alas! how many pious purposes and holy resolutions have your dangers, your fears, and your sick-beds been witness to! Have they not heard you breathe out, "Spare, O Lord, spare a little longer: give some space: try us yet once more: and, O Lord, we will reform, we will amend our sinful lives, we will perform neglected duties, and never more again return to folly?" Are not these resolutions an evident conviction? Certainly, you thought you had a power so to do; and, therefore, if you do not endeavour to perform, you are altogether inexcusable.

Secondly. Did you never, in your whole lives, perform a duty unto God? Did you never pray?

Is there any here so desperately profane, so lost to all show of goodness, that hath not done this? And to what end have you prayed? For what did you perform your duty? Was it not for salvation? And did you work for salvation, and yet think you had no power to work for it? It is impossible: men's very works do plainly show, that they do think that they have a power: something still must be done, though it be but formally, slightly, and coldly: a mere "Lord, have mercy upon me," a customary "Lord, forgive me;" yet something conscience will require, which men reckon upon, and make account to be working out their salvation.

Thirdly. Wherefore is it that you trust unto and rely upon your good works, if you think you have no power to work out your salvation?

Would it be so hard and difficult a matter to take men off from leaning so much upon their works, if they did not think that they had power to work out their own salvation? Men do apprehend a worth and sufficiency in what themselves do, in order to eternity. Bid them forego their works, and renounce their own righteousness, and this is a hard saying: you may almost persuade them as soon to renounce all their hopes of heaven. This is an evident conviction, whatever notions men may entertain to stop the mouth of a clamorous conscience, when it calls on them for working and labouring, that yet they do not believe what they themselves speak concerning their impotence.

Fourthly. When the Spirit of God was dealing with your hearts, persuading you to enter upon a course of duty and obedience, did you never procrastinate and use delays? Did you never stifle the breathings, nor quench the motions of the Holy Spirit, by thinking it was time enough to do it hereafter?

‘What need I begin so soon, or vex my flesh, or deny myself the joys and pleasures of this life, even as soon as I am come to relish them? When sickness or grey hairs admonish me, and tell me I am near unto eternity; when old age promiseth me, that the severities of religion shall be no long trouble; then, will I look after the concerns of my soul; then, it will be time enough; then, I will repent, believe, obey, and work out that salvation, that will be then hastening upon me.’ Tell me truly, have not these been the foolish reasonings of your hearts? have you not thus often promised God and your own consciences? and doth not this plainly imply, that you thought you had power to do it? “Therefore thou are inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art.” It is in vain to plead want of power, God will confute thee by thy very thoughts. Hadst thou no power? Although thou hadst not, yet thou thoughtest thou hadst, yet wouldst not endeavour to work: therefore, thy ruin is as wilful, and thy condemnation as just, as if thou hadst a power, and wouldst not work; for thou perishest merely through the default of thine own will.

Thirdly. Whether wicked men have this power of no to work out their own salvation, I shall not now stand to inquire: but, if they had it, yet they would not work with it; and, therefore, it is a most vain and insufficient plea, to pretend they-wanted power.

Now this appears evidently, because there is no wicked man, that ever did so much as he was able to do by the mere strength of nature, without the assistance of supernatural grace: and, therefore, it is not their inability; but their wilful sloth, that doth destroy them. Do but answer your own consciences: was there not one duty more, which you could have performed; not one temptation, not one corruption more, which you could have resisted? Could not you have prayed, read, or meditated

upon heavenly things; then, when your hearts and thoughts have been vain, worldly, and sinful, and devilish? Might not that time have been spent in holy converse, which you trifled away in idle, impertinent discourse, or in doing nothing, or that which was much worse than nothing? What force, what constraint is laid upon you? Can you not think? and, if you can, cannot you think of God as well as of the world? as well concerning fulfilling God's will, and working out your salvation, as fulfilling your lusts? Can you not speak? and, if you can, can you not speak to God in holy prayer, and of the things of God in holy discourse, as well as of your trades and bargains; those low and trivial matters, that are not worthy of men, much less of Christians? What force is there upon you? doth the devil skrew open the drunkard's mouth, and pour down his excessive and intemperate cups whether he will or no? doth the devil violently move the tongue of the swearer and blasphemer, to revile the holy and reverend name of God? doth he strike men dumb, when they should pray; or deaf, when they should hear; or senseless, when they should understand? Is there any such force or constraint laid upon you? May you not avoid the one, and do the other, if you yourselves please? You can: but you will not: therefore, neither would you work out your own salvation, if you could. Is there any hope, that you, who will not do the less that God requires from you, should ever be induced to perform the greater? Let your weakness and impotence be what it will, yet your condemnation will lie upon you, so long as your wilfulness is much greater than your weakness. No, sinners, your precious and immortal souls will eternally perish now for want of will to save them. Pity yourselves: will you lose yourselves for ever, only out of sloth? Will you sleep yourselves into hell, and go drowsily into destruction? Is it more painful to work the works of God, than it is to perish for ever under insupportable torments? Therefore, do you what you possibly can: labour and sweat at salvation, rather than fail of it. Let this never grate nor fret your consciences in hell, that you lie there burning for ever, merely for your wilful neglects.

When a man is gone far towards Christianity, there are

several things, that make him neglect a further progress. As,

i. *His groundless fancying of difficulties and hard encounters in the ways of God.*

O were it but as easy to be holy as sinful, he were wretched that would refuse to be a Christian; or, were Christianity but one hard pull or difficult pang, that would soon be over, there were some encouragement for them: but, when they have already struggled, and wrestled, and waded against the stream, thus far: and yet see no end, duty to be performed upon duty, and temptation upon temptation to be resisted, still to be combating with devils, still to be crossing and vexing of themselves, no respite, no breathing-time allowed them: this takes off their wheels; and, though they are able to do this, yet they will rather sit down quite short of grace, than run through such hardships to attain it: and so they come up in the mid-way, neither holy, nor profane; but please themselves with a mediocrity, and middle rank of religion, and dare not go further for fear of difficulties, nor yet dare fall further back for fear of conscience; and so they lie hovering between heaven and hell. Now this is merely from wilful sloth: Prov. xxvi. 13. "The slothful man saith, There is a lion in the way: a lion is in the streets. Here the wise man brings in a drowsy sluggard, dreaming of dangers and difficulties, to excuse his sloth: 'I dare not stir abroad, for there is a lion in the streets: ' a likely matter, that there should be a lion in the streets! but yet see how this fancy works with him! any thing is an excuse for the sluggard, In ver. 14. "As the door turneth upon the hinges, so doth the slothful upon his bed:" a door is often in motion, to and fro; but it gains no ground, makes no progress, still hangs where it did: so it is with slothful professors: that, which they have already attained to, is, that they move too and fro like a door upon the hinges, still the same motion over and over again, no new progress, no new attainment; and that, merely because they are sluggish and lazy, and fancy difficulties to themselves, and strange apparitions in the ways of God, that make them stand at a stay where they are, and not dare to take one step forward. As it was with the Israelites, who came to

the very borders of the land of Canaan, Numb. xiii. 27, 28, 33. when the searchers had brought reports to them, that the land indeed was good and fruitful, but the walls of the city were built up to heaven, and that there were many giants, and that they should be beaten and eaten; they were not so much allured with the goodness of the land, as they were deterred by the thoughts of the difficulties; and, though God himself bade them arise, and enter, and take possession, they would not venture upon so hazardous an exercise, and so difficult an enterprise: so, there are many forward professors, who are come to the very borders of the land of Canaan, to the very entrance into the kingdom of heaven, who, when they see what strong-holds of iniquity they must cast down, what principalities and powers they must fight with, and what lusts, gigantic as the sons of Anak, they must subdue and destroy, this frights them from attempting any further.

ii. *To be almost a Christian carries in it those advantages and accommodations, which, were they altogether such, they must lose:* and, therefore, this is one reason, why so many stick in the new birth.

Such an one is no saint; and, therefore; the men of the world embrace him: such an one is no profane and scandalous person; and, therefore, the children of God embrace him, and think well of him too: and thus he doth hold a correspondency with both of them, which, were he altogether either one or the other, he must break off; and, therefore, finding the conveniency of this neutral estate, he stops where he is, short of true grace. Were he a profane wretch, then those, that are truly godly, would avoid his company: or, were he truly godly, then the world would reject and scorn him: the godly esteem and love him, and from their ready charity they look upon him to be truly gracious: 'Those, that are true Christians,' thinks the almost christian, 'look upon me as such as themselves: and what need I begin, by a forward zeal, to disoblige the world? And the wicked and profane respect me too, because I go a little before them; though not quite cross and contrary to them: and so I enjoy the good opinion of both sorts; which, were I fully one or the other, I should hardly attain.' This man can, as it were, hold

heaven with one hand, and yet hold the world with the other; not lose his interest in the one, and yet retain his interest in the other: he can enjoy the delights and pleasures of the one, and then hope for the rewards and happiness of the other. Were we lodged in a star, then the earth would appear very small, and almost nothing, as the stars do now to us: so, were we more above, the earth would appear either as very small, or as nothing: thus it is with a child of God: he soars up by the wings of faith and love to the heavenly Jerusalem, and the earth appears very inconsiderable to him; but an unregenerate man, when he mounts highest, yet still will be sure to keep earth in his eye: he will not lose the sight of that; and, therefore, when he hath got to such a pitch, that he is able to discover something of heaven and yet not lose the sight of earth, there he hangs in 'æquilibrio,' and will be drawn no further: he keeps something of the earth in his eye: and will not lose nor diminish his sight or share of it, for the hopes and joys of heaven.

iii. *False opinions and conceits that they are already Christians, hinder these froward professors from being true Christians.*

It may be, they would be Christians indeed, did they not think they were already such. When men are gone far, then they are apt to think they are got home; and so they have taken up their rest, and will be driven on no further: they think that what they have already gotten, is enough to bear their charges to heaven; and so they grow careless of getting more: they are persuaded that they are Christians; and that keeps them from being persuaded to be such. I do not intend to forbid eminent professors to think they are indeed Christians; but let them look how this persuasion works with them: doth it tend to make them more careless, negligent, and remiss? when they have been under troubles of conscience for their sins, then they saw themselves in a lost and undone condition, and had hot and scalding apprehensions of the wrath of God; then they were laborious to frequent duties, conscientious in their walking, and fearful lest they should sin: but, since their troubles have been worne off, they have entertained better hopes and better opinions of their

state : are they not grown more loose, and more regardless ? they do not take so much pains with their hearts : nor are they so strict, and holy, and severe in their lives : I must tell such, what the apostle tells the Galatians, ch. v. 7, 8. "Ye did run well : who hindered you ? This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you : " this persuasion that you are Christians, cometh not of him that calleth you : possibly it would be well with them, if they did not think they were so. Sirs, if the thoughts of your being Christians and in a state of grace, do encourage you to walk worthy of that holy calling ; if the hopes of your good and holy estate, do engage you to purify yourselves as God is pure, as they will work if they be right and genuine ; then still entertain and cherish them : but, if they turn to looseness, remissness, or presumption, here suspect them to be the overweening conceits and elevations of a carnal heart ; and such, as will certainly hinder you of what you thus fondly imagine yourselves to be, hinder you from making further progress in the ways of Christianity, in regard you take up false conceits that you are Christians already.

iv. Another ground, whence it is that forward professors many times fall short of true Christianity, is, that, *when they are already gotten far, then especially the devil doth all he can to hinder them.* When they have gone far towards grace and Christianity, then he unites all his force and subtlety to stop them from proceeding further, lest they get from under his power and jurisdiction.

He knows that if they once become Christians, they are then almost out of his reach ; and, therefore, whatever lust be in the soul, he will then especially stir it up ; whatsoever reserve of temptations there be, he will then send them upon the soul : for none are more assaulted with horrors and multiplied temptations, than those, who make a great progress towards the ways of God, and are near to the borders of true Christianity ; because then the devil suspects that he shall lose them, and that they are even revolting from him. When they begin to move towards heaven, and labour after true grace and holiness, the devil sees that ordinary temptations are not then sufficient to secure them ; that those lusts, which before hampered and

captivated them at his pleasure, will not now so easily prevail : for he finds them too resolute, too rough, and untractable to deal with. He begins then to fear to what a rebellion this may grow ; and, therefore, he sets upon them with all his power, way-lays them with all ambushments, circumvents them with all his wiles and stratagems : and, though these be only armies and musters of shadows, which a man might break through without any danger, would he but arm himself with noble and undaunted resolutions ; yet, with these, the devil assaults and undermines them, and that incessantly, and doth at last stop them in their course towards grace, if not beat them back again to their former course of profaneness. Luke xi. 24, 25, 26. " When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest ; and, finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house, whence I came out : And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh seven other spirits more wicked than himself ; and they enter in, and dwell there : and the last state of that man is worse than the first : " that is, when men have cast out unclean, gross lusts by an external sanctification, so that the devil seems to be dislodged ; when he seeks to return again to his ancient seat and possession, he finds the heart swept and garnished : swept from the filth of common sins, and garnished with common graces, as its ornaments ; so that there seems no re-admission or re-entrance to this unclean spirit : and then he goes and takes to himself seven other spirits worse than himself ; that is, as I conceive, stronger temptations and more prevailing lusts ; and, by them, he enters, and dwells there, and defiles that clean swept house, and not only keeps the sinner from being better, but makes his latter end worse than his beginning.

v. When men have gone far towards Christianity, *natural conscience then leaves them, and ceases to excite and provoke them to a further proficiency.*

Conscience is the spur, that quickens wicked men to make that progress which they do make : now when it hath brought them past common sins to known and common duties, then it leaves them, and urges them no further ; and so they sit down far short of true grace and

Christianity, which they endeavoured after. Let me say to such men, as St. Paul to the Galatians, chap. v. 7. "Ye did run well: who hindered you?" Was it the difficulty of religion, or the strength of temptation, or the flatteries and allurements of the world, or the violence and rage of your own lusts? But might you not, nevertheless, have armed yourselves with peremptory resolutions? might you not undauntedly and victoriously have broke through all these? were you not able, when you stood still, or when you gave back as frightened and terrified at these things, to make one step, and another step still forwards? could you not proceed still further, and press onwards through all these? Yes: you might have gone much further, if you would: you might have made a further progress, though all hell had armed itself against you: therefore, if you perish, there will be cause and reason to blame yourselves: you can only charge your damnation on your own wilful sloth and negligence.

This may suffice for an answer to the third general—Whence it is, that professors, that have gone far towards Christianity, yet fall short of grace, and of being true Christians. They were too nice to encounter difficulties: they were apt and forward to think well of themselves: they were too faint-hearted to cope with temptations, loth to disoblige the world, and would not proceed further than spurred on by natural conscience; and, therefore, wilfully fell short, through their own sloth and negligence, of grace here, and of glory hereafter.

IV. The last general propounded, was to show you *the folly and extreme misery of those, who proceed thus far as to be almost Christians, and yet will not be persuaded to be such altogether.*

The apostle seems to be very passionate, Gal. iii. 1, 3. "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" What! are you mad? are you besotted? are you bewitched out of your common reason and understanding; that, having begun in the

Spirit, and made so far, progress in the ways and knowledge of Christ, after all this, you should fall back again to carnal, fleshly rudiments? Why, the same may I say to many; You, that are professors, who hath bewitched you? why are you so foolish, as, when you have not only begun, but proceeded far towards holiness and true grace, that yet you should give over, and sit down in a state of nature and unregeneracy short of it?

Consider but your folly and misery in these particulars.

i. Is it not extreme folly, madness, and misery, *wilfully to fall short of that, which you have already taken so much pains to attain?*

What! after all the labour, and hardships, and difficulties that you have already gone through to obtain grace, now to sit down short of it, and lose all! Will you wilfully lose all your prayers, and all your tears? all your convictions, and all your conflicts? Shall all these be so much labour in vain? Is not this much below the ingenuousness of your resolutions in inferior matters? Do you not use to quicken your endeavours by such arguments as these: 'I have spent so much upon it, I have taken so much pains about it, therefore I will see the end of it, and go through with it?' Do you think much to lose your labour in any thing but salvation; but in working out the salvation of your precious immortal souls? What though it be hard and difficult to go further: consider, was it not hard and difficult to arrive at that, which you have already attained unto? and are you so foolish, as to be willing to lose the fruit and benefit of the difficulties, which you have already passed, only for fear of difficulties that are yet to come? If Christianity be not worthy your pains, why did you ever engage in it? and if it be, why do you sit still? You will be guilty of extreme folly, either in this or that: for you enter upon Christianity, without sitting down, and reckoning what it will cost you. Christ himself brands you for fools: Luke xiv. 28—30. "For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? lest, haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not

able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish."

If it was not worth your pains, what a folly was it to attempt it! If you thought it worth all and more, what a folly then was it to flag! And could you, before you came so nigh to grace and so nigh to glory, could you see such beauty and such desirableness in it at so great a distance, as to persuade you to come thus far: and, now, when you are much nearer, and can see much more of its excellency and comeliness, dare you now despise and contemn it, when you have not only the promise of God to be your encouragement, but you have also given earnest too? for that profession, and those endeavours, and those duties, which you have already passed through, are all, as it were, the earnest of your further progress: this earnest you lose: profession, endeavours, and duty, all come to nothing, if, after all, you rest any where short of grace: you lose your earnest which you give, if you be but almost Christians, and rest any where short of true Christianity. What extreme folly is this, for men to disquiet themselves in vain, and take so much pains to pray and hear, and to keep themselves from many sins, and perform many duties; and, yet, because they will do no more, lose the benefit of all this! What is it, that you do all this for? is it not to obtain grace and glory? And will you do so much for such an excellent end, and yet wilfully fall short of it? You may remain graceless, without all this labour: if you are fully resolved for hell, why do you do any thing? to hell you may go, without praying or hearing; without striving, or conflicting, or performing one duty, or resisting one sin as you do: if you are resolved for heaven, why do you not do more? all your praying, hearing, striving, and wrestling will be lost and in vain, if you do not hold on, if you do not continue. What a folly is it, for you to have gone so far, and to have won every step of ground by clear force; to have toiled in the ways of religion, with sweat and anguish, and disquieting to your soul; and yet, at last, to lose and frustrate all this pains, through your

cursed and wilful sloth and negligence ! to give all away, and fall wilfully short of grace and salvation !

ii. Is it not gross and inexcusable folly *to desist after so far progress* ; whereas, for ought we know, had we but proceeded a little further, we might have obtained that grace which we fall short of ?

And how know you, but that, upon your further endeavours, God might have bestowed that grace you strive for ? God is not wanting in this kind : to those, who improve the power of nature which they have, he gives the power of grace which they have not. Yet, when men arrive thus far, and come as it were to the very porch of heaven, what thick and dull folly is it, when there is as it were but a step or two between them and glory, to break off their progress and sit down short ! What ! is it more labour, to go those few steps more, than those which you have already gone ? Were you willing and contented, to do all that you have already done, for that, which is but like grace ; and will you not be persuaded to do a little more, for that, which is true grace ? It may be God may convert you, by the very next prayer you make : he may convert you, by the next sermon you hear : he may give you true grace, when you next of all oppose any temptation ; or when you next of all struggle against any lust : the very next step, which you take in his way, may carry you to heaven, for ought you know. Now the great probability of this, nay were it only a bare possibility, makes a man guilty of the greatest folly, who hath gone thus far towards holiness, if he neglect a further progress towards it.

iii. *What a dangerous and dreadful thing is it for men to climb so high, and yet to have no holdfast to depend upon, no foundation to support them !*

Yet thus it is with every elevated carnal professor, that falls short of grace. He is like a man, that stands upon the sharp top of a towering pinnacle, where he hath no other holdfast but a handful of air. But the standing of a child of God is firm : his feet are fixed upon an immovable rock, even the Rock of ages ; and God reacheth out his hand from heaven to support him. It is dis-

puted by some nice inquisitors, whether a man, if he were lifted up above the magnetic and attractive virtue of the earth, may not stand as safely and walk in the air as he doth now upon the earth. It is true of a child of God, when he hath got beyond the reach of earthly attractions, he may walk safely in that sublime way which leads to heaven ; but, for wicked men, that have not got beyond the malignity of the earth, it is exceeding dangerous : their earthly minds and affections, and their earthly conversations, will in the end bear them down headlong ; unless they climb still higher, until they have got beyond these terrene attractions. Now would it not make you tremble, to see a man borne up in the air, as the poets feign of Icarus, with waxen wings, that are subject to melt and fall off, and betray their charge to certain ruin and perdition ? thus it is with every carnal professor, that has gone far in Christianity. And is it not you, that fly only with waxen wings, I mean the power of nature and the common works of the Holy Ghost, which may fall off and leave you in eternal ruin ?

iv. And hence it follows, in the fourth place, that these mountainous professors, who have attained to a high pitch, yet fall short of grace, *because they want firm footing to assure their standing.*

They usually either desperately tumble headlong into the commission of some foul gross sins ; or else they grow brain-sick, and turn aside to the maintaining of some prodigious error. This is usually the issue of such lofty professors. As we see a cloud, that hath been sucked up by the sun, how it hovers a while in the air, but anon is wrapped and whirled about with every wind, and so is utterly lost and dissipated ; or else it falls down again to the earth in storms, and is turned only into mire and dirt : even so fares it with many a professor : he is drawn up out of the earth, and above the pollutions of the world, by a common influence of the Holy Spirit, and for a while he hangs and hovers in a lofty profession ; but, having no firm basis to sustain him, he is either blown up as an empty cloud, and driven away by every wind of doctrine, and lost amongst various sects and opinions ; or else, after a while, he falls back again into the

filthy conversation and worldly pollutions that he had escaped, and ends only in mire and dirt, and this because he hath not that incorruptible seed within him that shall never die. Indeed, true grace is of itself immortal; but it is from that engagement, that God hath laid upon himself to preserve it in those, who are diligent in the use of those means, by which it may be maintained. But an unregenerate man is left wholly to his own power, to preserve him in that station, in which he shines: and, if the angels themselves and Adam fell from their first estate, merely through the mutability of their own will, who had power to continue in it, how much more certainly then will these carnal professors fall from their high pitch, who have less power to enable them to stand, and greater power against them to cast them down!

To aggravate the exceeding great folly and apostacy of these elevated break-neck professors, see that most dreadful place, 2 Pet. ii. 21. "For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them." Is not the wrath of God certainly to be revealed against all those, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of the Lord Jesus? It is better never to have known the gospel, and never to have gone a step in the ways of God, than afterwards wilfully to desert them and apostatize from them.

1. *The fall and apostacy of those, who are great and eminent professors, carries much of malice and wilfulness in it, which is the highest rank that can be in any sin.*

If there be any in the world, that commit the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, it must be these men. There is, indeed, a great difference between sinning willingly and sinning wilfully: profane, carnal men sin willingly: but none, but those who have been forward professors in the ways of God, and have utterly deserted those ways, can sin maliciously, and merely because they will provoke and offend God by their sins. See what the apostle saith of such, Heb. x. 26, 27. "For if we sin wilfully, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins: but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indigna-

tion," Heb. vi. 4, 5, 6. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance." This is the first aggravation of their sin and misery.

2. But then, *when elevated and eminent professors fall away, they usually fall lower than they were before, when they took their first rise towards Christianity and true religion.*

Falling away from a profession, is like the falling down from a steep precipice; where they can have nothing to stop them till they come to the very bottom. And it is observed, that none prove more notoriously wicked, and more desperate haters and revilers of the ways of God, than apostate professors.

(1.) God doth judicially give them up to commit all manner of sin with greediness. See that black catalogue of the foulest sins that can be imagined, Rom. i. from 21 to 30. The apostle speaks there concerning the heathen; but the case is parallel with our carnal professors, who do not like to retain God in their knowledge: therefore "God gives them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient."

(2.) The devil takes possession of such men, with stronger power and force than ever; (as the unclean spirit re-entered with seven spirits worse than himself, Luke xi. 26.) to secure that soul, that hath been so likely to revolt from him; and therefore no wonder Christ saith, "the last state of that man is worse than the first." So that these eminent professors, when they fall away, usually fall lower than they ever were, before their first rise and motion towards religion.

(3.) Unregenerate persons not only fall lower, but they seldom return to make a profession of their deserted religion: it is impossible to renew such a one to repentance again.

Now how should these sad and dreadful considerations make every one of us to do our utmost that we are able, to get true and saving grace, if we rest any where short

of it! When the winds of temptation tempestuously beat, and the floods of trial, affliction, or persecution rush in upon us, we shall fall, because we have no foundation, but have built merely upon the sands. If you stand not built upon the corner-stone, you will fall of yourselves; yea, that stone will fall upon you, and crush and grind you to powder. Nay, you fall off from a steep and slippery precipice, where there is nothing at all to stop, nothing to receive you but sin after sin; and thus you rebound from one wickedness to another, till at last you be plunged irrecoverably into that lake, which burns with fire and brimstone.

And this is the fourth consideration; discovering the folly and misery of those, that go far towards Christianity, and yet fall short.

v. Though these professors may hover between heaven and earth in their lives, yet they shall not hover between heaven and hell in their deaths.

No: the half Christian shall be as infallibly and as certainly cast into hell, as those who were altogether wicked. Here, it may be, thou art neither godly nor profane; but, hereafter, thou must be either saved or damned. There is none, as the papists picture Erasmus, that hang between heaven and hell. Whoever thou art, thou must be either in a state of nature or of grace; and, accordingly, shall thy estate then be for ever, either a state of salvation among the saints, or else a state of damnation with the unregenerate. Though thou art never so lofty and sublime a professor, yet the same hell, that holds the profane, must eternally hereafter hold thee too, if, through thine own wilful negligence, thou stop any where short of true grace. If the almost Christians could, by their glittering profession, gain a cooler hell; if they could get, I say, but a cooler place in hell: if their profession could gain you this; if it could procure you purgatory for venial sins, or the moderate punishment which the papists call 'limbus patrum,' then you had some show of reason to rest where you are: but when the same hell and the same everlasting fire must be the portion of those, who have proceeded so far, and yet fall short; as well as the portion of the vilest wretch, whom they have now as far exceeded in goodness,

as the holiest saint alive exceeds them; it is the very height of folly and madness, to sit down any where short of true grace, unless they are fully resolved to sit down no where short of hell.

vi. It will be the insupportable aggravation of these men's just and everlasting condemnation, for them to lie grating upon this sad reflection in hell, *that once they were near to heaven, but lost it through their own wilful default.*

It will be the aggravation, I say, of these men's just and everlasting condemnation, to make this doleful and furious reflection upon themselves in hell, that once they were in a very hopeful state, that they were once near to heaven, but lost it through their own wilful default. When they shall lie in hell, and from thence give a sad and ghastly look up to the glory of the saints in heaven, O how will it pierce their souls to think, that they were once near to that blessed estate, though now there be an infinite and unpassable gulf between them and that blessed inheritance, which the saints enjoy in heaven! Thus will they reflect upon themselves: 'Though now there be an unpassable gulf between me and heaven; yet, once, there was but a step or two that parted us. Had I mortified but one lust more, had I opposed one temptation more, had I put up but one fervent prayer more; possibly, I might now have been in heaven. But, O my cursed, cursed folly, when I was at the very gate and threshold of heaven, that even then I should stop; and, after the relinquishment of my lusts, and after all my progress in the ways of holiness, to return again to the commission of those sins, in which I had formerly lived; when I had already gone through the hardest and most difficult part of religion, then to break off my course! what is this, but procuring for myself this damnation, which I now suffer, and must suffer for ever! O that light, that once I enjoyed, how it thickens this everlasting darkness! O those tastes that I once had of the powers of the world to come, and relished so much sweetness in, how do they now embitter this cup of fury and trembling, that I must for ever drink of! O those heavenly gifts, that once I had, do now but increase these hellish torments; and the sight of heaven, which I have had, now discovers to me what I have lost; nay, what I

have wilfully thrown away through mine own sloth and negligence. O how strange is mine apostacy! after I had gone so great a way towards Christianity, rather than I would move one step further, I chose to lie here in this hell for ever burning and consuming! O what sad and tormenting thoughts will these be! how will they fret and gnaw the souls of those wretches, with eternal anguish and insupportable torments!

Thus you have seen, in these particulars, somewhat discovered to you of the desperate folly and madness, and misery also, that men are guilty of, that do proceed so far as to be almost, and yet will not be persuaded to be altogether Christians.

A
DISCOURSE
ON THE
NATURE, CORRUPTION, AND RENEWING,
OF THE
CONSCIENCE.