

ADVANCING TOWARD PERFECTION

"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection." Hebrews 6:1.

At this point in the epistle the rebuke grows into an exhortation to cease being spiritual babes, and to go on to a ripe experience. The exhortation, "Let us go on," is particularly appropriate and forcible at this point.

Dr. Alexander Smellie said: "There never was a finer instrument of expression than the Greek of the New Testament. It can pack so much into a single word. This "Pherometha" is an instance. The Authorized Version renders it, "Let us go on." The Revised Version renders it, "Let us press on." Bishop Westcott prefers to render it, "Let us be borne on." The truth is that it needs all three to disclose the verb's significance and wealth. Put them together, and they speak to us of three dangers which beset us as we look to the perfection in front. There is the danger of stopping too soon. There is the danger of sinking into discouragement. And there is the danger of supposing that we are left alone."

There is a very significant difference between the King James version, "Let us go on unto perfection," and the more literal translation, "Let us be borne on unto perfection." The one leaves us to our own efforts; the other introduces the friendly cooperative might of the eternal God. One leaves us faint in endeavor; the other inspires us with all-sufficient resources. The one emphasizes works; the other emphasizes grace.

1. Let us "go on" to more knowledge. Christian knowledge lies at the foundation of Christian character. "Desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby."
2. Let us "go on" to richer experiences. Know and you will feel. Feel and you will pray. Every day should be made to bring us richer experiences of every Christian delight.
3. Let us "go on" to higher attainments. Pray and you will aspire. First principles are important, but there are things still higher and nobler to attain — personal intimacy with Christ, the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, power in prayer, growing sensitiveness to sin. Into the mystery of things like these the Christian should be stirred with a noble discontent to enter.
4. Let us "go on" to a larger usefulness. Know and you will feel. Feel and you will pray. Pray and you will aspire. Aspire and you will work. Let us work for God as never before.

Our religious life too frequently dwells in the former, and it is lacking in serenity and inspiration. Our religion becomes an extra piece of baggage which we have to carry instead of being an extra power to make our burden light. It weights us with impedimenta instead of endowing us with wings.

The Hebrew Christians were not advancing. They were still in the rudiments and seemed content to remain there. The writer constrains them not to be content with a rudimentary Christian experience consisting simply of repentance and elementary faith. It is their moral duty to grow up. They must leave the rudiments, not in oblivion, but in progress, just as a building leaves the level of its foundation. He himself is going on to develop the higher teaching and wants to carry his readers along with him. It is as if he should say to them, if you want anyone to instruct you over again in rudimentary Christianity I am not the man. I propose to carry you forward to a higher course of learning. Come, let us advance, you and I together. We will enter into a larger appreciation of what Christ means to us. That is what we all need to do and that is what our text challenges us to do.

We have two things here alluded to -- progress and attainment. The progress is a walk, a journey, a contest. The attainment is a complete state of Christian character. This is to be our ideal at which we are to aim. The higher elements of Christian virtue are to be assiduously cultivated. We know that these are not natural to the human mind. Complete control over the evil desires of the heart, restrained temper, holiness of life, perfect love to man and God, are not easy to be acquired.

God never gives an exhortation without there is some special need for it. Every command points to some sacred end to be reached, and every divine warning has a solemn purpose to answer. The necessity for the exhortation of our text is clearly set forth in the latter part of chapter five. The Hebrew Christians had not made the progress in the spiritual life which it was to be expected that they should have made. They had been very anxious to secure their safety in Christ, but they had not been so zealous to conform themselves to the likeness of Christ.

We need to remember two things -- that Christian life must have a beginning, and that the beginning is not the end. The rudimentary principles of our calling, as set forth in the first two verses of this chapter are five-fold -- repentance which renounces, faith which embraces, resurrection which assures us that this life is not all, eternal judgment which assures us that this life determines all, and the doctrine of baptism and the laying on of hands. But the beginning is not the end. We must advance from these principles. They are but the alphabet which will enable us to form words, the railway which will make possible the journey, the blossom which may mature into fruit.

The acorn does not become an oak in a day. The ripened scholar was not made such by a single lesson. The well-trained soldier was not a raw recruit yesterday. It is not one touch of the artist's pencil that produces a finished painting. There are always months between seedtime and harvest.

When a man becomes a Christian, that is only the beginning of things, just the initial step. We have a long way to travel before Christ's work is perfected in us. But having accepted Christ by faith, we are in the way of becoming better men and women all the time as we follow Him. We are growing in faith, in thought, and in experience. We have not been giving room for our souls to grow as we ought. It is so easy to deceive ourselves in the matter of soul growth. We may think that we are going on when in reality we are only going round.

The noblest thing about man is his determination to develop the soul. Most of us are living below the level of our possibilities and very few of us are preaching to the height that we might attain. There are always higher peaks to climb. We only become better as we make the habitual effort to harness our wills to the will of God. That is the end for which we were made. No life can flower to maturity unless it is freely given to the control of the will of God.