

Going On to Perfection

“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”
—Hebrews 6:1,2

THIS ADMONITION OF THE

apostle to “go on to perfection,” like many other passages in the Bible, has been greatly misunderstood and oftentimes misused. Such misinterpretation is due largely to the very same thing that leads many sincere students of God’s Word to misconstrue other passages—namely, a failure to take into consideration the context. The great doctrinal and practical truths of the Bible usually are set forth in

a narrative of logical order or sequence, rather than appearing as a collection of unrelated verses. If we fail to take this fact into consideration we are almost certain to form wrong conclusions as to the meaning of isolated texts, not read in connection with the divine revelation. This is particularly true

with respect to the passage now under consideration.

When we truly discern what the apostle is talking about in this passage, we will find that he is emphasizing the importance of being established in the faith, rather than encouraging us to restlessly seek after new theories or new experiences. Additionally, the “perfection” to which he refers is that desirable quality of Christian character which enables us to resist the influences of the devil, the world, and even our own flesh—which have the tendency of unsettling our mind and put us in an attitude in which we are easily “carried about with every wind of doctrine.”—Eph. 4:14

“HOLD THE BEGINNING OF OUR CONFIDENCE”

Apparently these Christian Hebrews, for some reason, were showing a tendency to be unstable, to vacillate between being faithful to God and to his truth on the one hand, and yielding to the influences of the world, the flesh, and the devil on the other. Early in the epistle the apostle urges, “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.” (Heb. 2:1) Surely Paul would not thus urge us to give heed to the glorious doctrines of Christ, and a little later in the same epistle advise—as some seem to think he did—that we stop talking about these doctrines, and “go on to perfection” by some other route.

In Hebrews 3:13,14, the Apostle Paul continues: “Exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if

we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end.” Surely Paul would not here urge the importance of that first confidence or enthusiasm which we had for the Truth originally, setting it forth as the actual basis upon which we may hope to be made partakers of Christ, and then, three chapters further on imply that we should leave or abandon that condition and go on to some unknown, visionary, or mystical state of heart and mind, mis-called “perfection.”

Then, in chapter 10:23,24 we read, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised.)” Here again we have the admonition to be steadfast, not to waver, not to be discontent and dissatisfied because we are not continually having new and thrilling experiences and finding “new light.” It is the very opposite to the theories that are so often erroneously based on the apostle’s words in the 6th chapter, relative to going on to perfection.

“CALL TO REMEMBRANCE THE FORMER DAYS”

In Hebrews 10:32, Paul holds up an ideal example of Christian experience to these unsettled Hebrew brethren, saying, “Call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions.” Compare this text with chapter 6, verses 10 and 11, which read, “God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.” There is no mistaking the meaning of these words.

It is evident that these Hebrews had been enthusiastic in the beginning of their Christian experience, but for some reason they had become slack. If they could get back to that “first love,” and continue steadfastly in it, that would be the ideal thing—it would be the “perfection” of Christian experience which the apostle was advocating. For this reason he urges them, in the 10th chapter, to “call to remembrance the former days.” This was a very practical way of impressing upon them the importance of the “first love” in their Christian life.

The entire 11th chapter of this remarkable epistle to the Hebrews is devoted to a consideration of faith. Paul discusses the kind of faith that enables its possessor to hold steadfastly and unwaveringly to the promises of God—the Messianic promises—and to be enthusiastic about the glorious Gospel of Christ to the very end of his life. The patriarchs and prophets of old are held up by the apostle as wonderful examples of faith in God’s promises. Then, in the beginning of the 12th chapter, Jesus, the crowning example of faith, is lifted up before us. This is done, not to encourage us to pursue an illusive bubble of speculative human philosophy—a chase which leads nowhere, and which usually leaves one in a labyrinth of confusion and doubt—but to help us see the importance of taking greater heed to the things which we have heard, and to encourage us to greater faithfulness in laying down our lives in God’s service, even as did our beloved Redeemer.

PLIGHT OF THOSE WHO “FALL AWAY”

Having thus traced, briefly, this theme as detailed in Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews—steadfastness in

Christian faith, hope, and service—let us now note how clearly this thought is set forth in the very chapter from which our text is taken. After urging us to go on to perfection, the apostle continues, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 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.” Compare the latter part of this passage with the expression in verse 1: “not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works.”

There can be no misunderstanding the meaning of the apostle’s general argument here set forth, which is that of the importance of being established in the faith and in the service of God. So strongly does he present his argument, he indicates that if we are not thus established it would imply the “foundation of repentance from dead works” previously laid and designed to be a permanent, not temporary, part of our life, cannot be “renewed again.” Indeed, that foundation was designed to remain with us for our entire consecrated walk, and is the continual and unchanging basis of our service to God.

Later in this chapter, Paul proceeds to remind them of the sure foundation for faith and hope which the Heavenly Father has provided. He says that this glorious hope is centered in that all-comprehensive promise made to Abraham—the promise which was bound both by God’s Word and his oath. “Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his

counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil.”—Heb. 6:17-19

How evident it is that what Paul is setting forth as the ideal state for the Christian is that of being “anchored” to the sure promises of God—even those promises that have to do with his oath-bound covenant to bless all the families of the earth through the seed of Abraham. This fact becomes even more apparent when we trace the apostle’s argument in connection with his use of the word “perfection,” as used in our theme text. To fully appreciate this, however, it is necessary to remember that this epistle was written to and for the special benefit of Hebrew converts to Christianity. This is not to say that Jews and Gentiles, as Christians, have any different standing before God, nor that they constitute different companies or classes as New Creatures. However, the apostle shows how the Gospel message can be applied to meet the peculiar problems of Jews, as well as all other groups who come under its sacred influence.

SHADOW VERSUS SUBSTANCE

While Gentile Christians can and should apply all the helpful admonitions of this epistle to themselves also, and be spiritually strengthened thereby, yet we can see that the wise apostle addressed these Hebrew Christians in particular, and applied the promises of the Gospel to their own peculiar

problems. These Jews had been accustomed to serving God upon the basis of the Law Covenant, but Paul would have them realize that those arrangements were merely typical—a “shadow” of something better to come later. He says, “The law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year.”—Heb. 10:1-3

Many Hebrew Christians had not yet fully grasped the fact that the Law Covenant was now of no effect, and that it was no longer necessary for them to continue “laying the foundation of repentance from dead works” of the Law over and over again, as they had done in the past. They had not fully grasped—had perhaps forgotten, or else lacked faith to believe—that while “every priest [of the Law Covenant arrangement] standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins,” yet now Christ, by his one offering, “hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”—vss. 11,14

As a further confirmation of this same fact, Paul adds, “How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (chap. 9:14) The doctrinal difficulties of these Hebrew Christians are apparent. While evidently they had laid hold

upon the Gospel of Christ with enthusiasm at the beginning, yet through lack of an abiding faith, or perhaps of a full understanding of the real efficacy of the shed blood of Christ, they had begun to slip back into their old habits of Jewish thought and formalism, relying again on yearly ceremonies. They were trying to mingle the typical ceremonies of the Mosaic Law with their faith and service toward God through Christ—not realizing that Jesus, as the antitype, had put an end to the type, “nailing it to his cross.”—Col. 2:14

ONLY ONE FOUNDATION OF REPENTANCE

For this reason, Paul argues the matter out for them in detail, pointing out the fact that all the wonderful lessons taught typically by the Law and by the services of the Tabernacle—going back even to the time of Melchisedec—are fulfilled in and through Christ, and in those who are invited to be “partakers” with him in the “heavenly calling.” (Heb. 3:1) Even the New Covenant arrangements of the next age, Paul shows, are dependent upon the one sacrifice of this antitypical High Priest. Now if these Hebrews could but exercise full faith in Christ and in his shed blood, and could lay hold properly upon the promises of joint-heirship with him in the kingdom, they would not be continuing to lay again the foundation of repentance from dead works as had been their custom under the Mosaic Law.

Paul does not say that it is not necessary to lay a proper foundation of repentance in the first place, nor that it is unnecessary to remain on that foundation. Rather, inasmuch as the true foundation of repentance on the part of the Christian, whether

he be Jew or Gentile, is based upon the abiding efficacy of the blood of Christ, it remains secure and dependable as the only proper basis upon which we can draw nigh unto God and serve him acceptably.

As Christians, are we going on to perfection within the true meaning of the apostle's words? Are we becoming more and more rooted and grounded in the faith, in the great truths of God's plan, the Gospel of Christ? Are we becoming more deeply conscious of the fact that the blood of Christ actually cleanses us from all sin, and that because of this we can, at all times, come boldly to the throne of heavenly grace, there to obtain mercy, and find grace to help in every time of need?

Is the Truth, every precious feature of it, becoming daily a greater reality to us? Is our faith firmly fastened to the anchor which is our heavenly hope? Will that faith continue to hold, enabling us ever to remain enthusiastic about God and his promises? Are we just as enthusiastic—just as zealous, and even more so—as when we were first enlightened? If so, then we can rejoice that this admonition of the apostle is being realized more and more in our daily Christian lives—that we are actually going on to perfection in God's appointed way. ■