

# ***WHAT ARE THE TRUE EVIDENCES OF GROWTH IN CHRIST***

**Phillip Doddridge**

*"To him be glory, both now and for ever"*

(2 Pet. 3:18)

If by divine grace you have "been born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible," (1 Pet. 1:2,3) even "by that word of God which liveth and abideth for ever," not only in the world and the church, but in particular souls in which it is sown; you will, "as new born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." (1 Pet. 2:2) And though in the most advanced state of religion on earth, we are but infants in comparison to what we hope to be, when, in the heavenly world, we arrive "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," (Eph. 4:13) yet, as we have some exercise of a sanctified reason, we shall be solicitous that we may be growing and thriving. And you, my reader, "if so be you have tasted that the Lord is gracious," (1 Pet. 2:3) will, I doubt not, feel this solicitude. I would, therefore, endeavor to assist you in making the inquiry, whether religion be on the advance in your soul. And here I shall warn you against some false marks of growth, and then shall endeavor to lay down others on which you may depend as more solid. In this view I would observe, that you are not to measure your growth in grace only or chiefly by your advances in knowledge, or in zeal, or any other passionate impression of the mind, no, nor by the fervor of devotion alone; but by the habitual determination of the will for God, and by your pre-

vailing disposition to obey his commands, submit to his disposal, and promote the highest welfare of his cause in the earth.

It must be allowed that knowledge and affection in religion are indeed desirable. Without some degree of the former, religion cannot be rational and it is very reasonable to believe, that without some degree of the latter it cannot be sincere, in creatures whose natures are constituted like ours. Yet there may be a great deal of speculative knowledge, and a great deal of rapturous affection, where there is no true religion at all; and still more, where religion exists, though there be no advanced state of it. The exercise of our rational faculties, upon the evidences of divine revelation, and upon the declaration of it as contained in Scripture, may furnish a very wicked man with a well-digested body of orthodox divinity in his head, when not one single doctrine of it has ever reached his heart. An eloquent description of the sufferings of Christ, of the solemnities of judgment, of the joys of the blessed, and the miseries of the damned, might move the breast even of a man who did not firmly believe them; as we often find ourselves strongly moved by well-wrought narrations or discourses, which at the same time we know to have their foundation in fiction. Natural constitution, or such accidental causes as are (some of them) too low to be here mentioned, may supply the eyes with a flood of tears, which may discharge itself plenteously upon almost any occasion that shall first arise. And a proud impatience of contradiction directly opposite as it is to the gentle spirit of Christianity, may make a man's blood boil when he hears the notions he has entertained,

and especially those which he has openly and vigorously espoused, disputed and opposed. This may possibly lead him, in terms of strong indignation, to pour out his zeal and his rage before God!, in a fond conceit, that, as the God of truth, he is the pattern of those favorite doctrines by whose fair appearances perhaps he himself is misled. And if these speculative refinements, or these affectionate sallies of the mind, be consistent with a total absence of true religion, they are much more apparently consistent with a very low state of it. I would desire to lead you, my friend, into sublimer notions and juster marks, and refer you to other practical writers, and, above all, to the book of God, to prove how material they are. I would therefore entreat you to bring your own heart to answer, as in the presence of God, such inquiries as these:

Do you find "divine love, on the whole, advancing in your soul?" Do you feel yourself more and more sensible of the presence of God? and does that sense grow more delightful to you than it formerly was? Can you, even when your natural spirits are weak and low, and you are not in any frame for the ardors and ecstasies of devotion, nevertheless find a pleasing rest, a calm repose of heart, in the thought that God is near you, and that he sees the secret sentiments of your soul, while you are, as it were, toward those whom an unsanctified heart might be ready to imagine it had some just excuse for excepting out of the list of those it loves, and from whom you are ready to feel some secret alienation or aversion. How does your mind stand affected toward those who differ from you in their religious sentiments and practices? I do not say that Christian char-

ity will require you to think every error harmless. It argues no want of love to a friend, in some cases, to fear lest his disorder should prove more fatal than he seems to imagine: nay, sometimes the very tenderness of friendship may increase that apprehension. But to hate persons because we think they are mistaken, and to aggravate every difference in judgment or practice into a fatal and damnable error that destroys all Christian communion and love, is a symptom generally much worse than the evil it condemns. Do you love the image of Christ in a person who thinks himself obliged in conscience to profess and worship in a manner different from yourself? Nay, farther, can you love and honor that which is truly amiable and excellent in those in whom much is defective; in those in whom there is a mixture of bigotry and narrowness of spirit, which may lead them perhaps to slight, or even to censure you? Can you love them as the disciples and servants of Christ, who, through a mistaken zeal, may be ready to "cast out your name as evil," (Luke 6:22) and to warn others against you as a dangerous person? This is none of the least triumphs of charity, nor any despicable evidence of an advance in religion.

And, on this head, reflect farther, "How can you bear injuries?" There is a certain hardness of soul in this respect, which argues a confirmed state in piety and virtue. Does every thing of this kind hurry and ruffle you, so as to put you on contrivances how you may recompense, or, at least, how you may disgrace and expose him who has done you the wrong? Or can you stand the shock calmly, and easily divert your mind to other objects, only (when you

recollect these things) pitying and praying for those who with the worst tempers and views are assaulting you? This is a Christ-like temper indeed, and he will own it as such; will own you as one of his soldiers, as one of his heroes; especially if it rises so far, as, instead of being "overcome of evil, to overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:21) Watch over your spirit and over your tongue, when injuries are offered, and see whether you be ready to meditate upon them, to aggravate them in your own view, to complain of them to others, and to lay on all the load of blame that you in justice can; or, whether you be ready to put the kindest construction upon the offence, to excuse it as far as reason will allow, and (where, after all, it will wear a black and odious aspect) to forgive it, heartily to forgive it, and that even before any submission is made, or pardon asked; and in token of the sincerity of that forgiveness, to be contriving what can be done, by some benefit or other, toward the injurious person, to teach him a better temper.

Examine farther, "with regard to other evils and calamities of life, and even with regard to its uncertainties, how you can bear them." Do you find your soul is in this respect gathering strength? Have you fewer foreboding fears and disquieting alarms than you once had, as to what may happen in life? Can you trust the wisdom and goodness of God to order your affairs for you, with more complacency and cheerfulness than formerly? Do you find yourself able to unite your thoughts more in surveying present circumstances, that you may collect immediate duty from them, though you know not what God will next appoint or call you to? And when you feel the smart of affliction, do you make

a less matter of it? Can you transfer your heart more easily to heavenly and divine objects, without an anxious solicitude whether this or that burden be removed, so it may but be sanctified to promote your communion with God and your ripeness for glory?

Examine also, "whether you advance in humility." This is a silent but most excellent grace; and they who are most eminent in it, are dearest to God, and most fit for the communications of his presence to them. Do you then feel your mind more emptied of proud and haughty imaginations, not prone so much to look back upon past services which it has performed, as forward to those which are yet before you, and inward upon the remaining imperfections of your heart? Do you more tenderly observe your daily failures and miscarriages, and find yourself disposed to mourn over those things before the Lord, that once passed with you as slight matters, though, when you come to survey them as in the presence of God, you find they were not wholly involuntary or free from guilt? Do you feel in your breast a deeper apprehension of the infinite majesty of the blessed God, and of the glory of his natural and moral perfections, so as, in consequence of these views, to perceive yourself as it were annihilated in his presence, and to shrink into "less than nothing, and vanity?" (Isa. 40:17) If this be your temper, God will look upon you with peculiar favor, and will visit you more and more with the distinguishing blessings of his grace.

But there is another great branch and effect of Christian humility, which it would be an unpardonable negligence to omit. Let me therefore farther inquire, are you more fre-

quently renewing your application, your sincere, steady, determined application, to the righteousness and blood of Christ, as being sensible how unworthy you are to appear before God otherwise than in him? And do the remaining corruptions of your heart humble you before him, though the disorders of your life are in a great measure cured? Are you more earnest to obtain the quickening influences of the Holy Spirit? And have you such a sense of your own weakness as to engage you to depend, in all the duties you perform, upon the communications of his grace to "help your infirmities?" (Rom. 8:26) Can you, at the close of your most religious, exemplary, and useful days, blush before God for the deficiencies of them, while others perhaps may be ready to admire and extol your conduct? And while you give the glory of all that has been right to him from whom the strength and grace has been derived, are you coming to the blood of sprinkling, to free you from the guilt which mingles itself even with the best of your services? Do you learn to receive the bounties of Providence, not only with thankfulness, as coming from God, but with a mixture of shame and confusion too, under a consciousness that you do not deserve them, and are continually forfeiting them? And do you justify Providence in your afflictions and disappointments, even while many are flourishing around you full in the bloom of prosperity, whose offences have been more visible at least, and more notorious than yours?

Do you also advance "in zeal and activity" for the service of God and the happiness of mankind? Does your love show itself solid and sincere, by a continual flow of good works from it? Can you view the sorrows of others with

tender compassion, and with projects and contrivances what you may do to relieve them? Do you feel in your breast that you are more frequently "devising liberal things," (Isa. 32:8) and ready to waive your own advantage or pleasure that you may accomplish them? Do you find your imagination teeming, as it were, with conceptions and schemes for the advancement of the cause and interest of Christ in the world, for the propagation of his Gospel, and for the happiness of your fellow-creatures? And do you not only pray, but act for it act in such a manner as to show that you pray in earnest, and feel a readiness to do what little you can in this cause, even though others, who might, if they pleased, very conveniently do a vast deal more, will do nothing?

And, not to enlarge upon this copious head, reflect once more, "how your affections stand with regard to this world and another." Are you more deeply and practically convinced of the vanity of these "things which are seen, and are temporal?" (2 Cor. 4:18) Do you perceive your expectations from them, and your attachments to them to diminish? You are willing to stay in this world as long as your Father pleases; and it is right and well; but do you find your bonds so loosened to it; that you are willing, heartily willing, to leave it at the shortest warning; so that if God should see fit to summon you away on a sudden, though it should be in the midst of your enjoyments, pursuits, expectations, and hopes, you would cordially consent to that remove without saying, "Lord, let me stay a little while longer, to enjoy this or that agreeable entertainment, to finish this or that scheme?" Can you think, with an habitual calmness and

heartily approbation, if such be the divine pleasure, of waking no more when you lie down on your bed, of returning home no more when you go out of your house? And yet on the other hand, how great soever the burdens of life are, do you find a willingness to bear them, in submission to the will of your heavenly Father, though it should be to many future years, and though they should be years of far greater affliction than you have ever yet seen? Can you say calmly and steadily, if not with such overflowings of tender affection as you could desire, "Behold, `thy servant,' thy child is `in thine hand, do with me as seemeth good in thy sight!' (2 Sam. 15:26) My will is melted into thine; to be lifted up or laid down, to be carried out or brought in, to be here or there, in this or that circumstance, just as thou pleasest, and as shall best suit with thy great extensive plan, which it is impossible that I, or all the angels in heaven, should mend."

These, if I understand matters aright, are some of the most substantial evidences of growth and establishment in religion. Search after them: bless God for them, so for as you discover them in yourself, and study to advance in them daily, under the influences of divine grace; to which I heartily recommend you, and to which I entreat you frequently to recommend yourself.

*The Christian breathing earnestly after growth in Grace.*

"O thou ever-blessed Fountain of natural and spiritual life! I thank thee that I live, and know the exercises and pleasures of a religious life. I bless thee that thou hast infused into me thine own vital breath, though I was once

`dead in trespasses and sins,' (Eph. 2:1) so that I am become, in a sense peculiar to thine own children, `a living soul.' (Gen. 2:7) But it is my earnest desire that I may not only live but grow, `grow in grace, and in the knowledge of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,' (2 Pet. 3:18) upon an acquaintance with whom my progress in it so evidently depends. In this view, I humbly entreat thee that thou wilt form my mind to right notions in religion, that I may not judge of grace by any wrong conceptions of it, nor measure my advances in it by those things which are merely the effects of nature, and possibly its corrupt effects!

"May I be seeking after an increase of divine love to thee, my God and Father in Christ, of unreserved resignation to thy wise and holy will, and of extensive benevolence to my fellow-creatures! May I grow in patience and fortitude of soul, in humility and zeal, in spirituality and a heavenly disposition of mind, and in a concern, `that, whether present or absent, I may be accepted of the Lord,' (2 Cor. 5:9) that whether I live or die, it may be for thy glory. In a word, as thou knowest I hunger and thirst after righteousness, make me whatever thou wouldst delight to see me! Draw on my soul, by the gentle influences of thy gracious Spirit, every trace, and every feature, which thine eye, O Heavenly Father, may survey with pleasure, and which thou mayest acknowledge as thine own image.

"I am sensible, O Lord, I have not as yet attained, yea, my soul is utterly confounded to think how far I am from being already perfect; but this one thing (after thy great example of thine apostle) I would endeavor to do: `forgetting the things which are behind, I would press forward to those

which are before.' (Phil. 3:12,13) O that thou wouldst feed my soul by thy word and Spirit! Having been, as I humbly hope and trust, regenerated by it, `being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, even by thy word, which liveth and abideth for ever;' (1 Pet. 1:23) `as a new-born babe, I desire the sincere milk of the word, that I may grow thereby.' (1 Pet. 2:2) And may `my profiting appear unto all men,' (1 Tim. 4:15) till at length `I come unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,' (Eph. 4:13) and after having enjoyed the pleasure of those that flourish eminently in thy courts below, be fixed in the paradise above! I ask and hope it through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; `to him be glory, both now and for ever' (2 Pet. 3:18) Amen"

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**Phillip Doddridge** (1702- 1751) From "On the Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul"  
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