



ABS. 1. 80. 255(1-10)

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ALMOST PERSUADED.

WHEN the apostle Paul spake for himself before the Roman Governor Festus and King Agrippa, the former interrupted him by exclaiming with a loud voice, " Paul, thou art beside thyself ; much learning doth make thee mad." Acts xxvi. 28.

How easy is it for proud men of the world to say this to men speaking the truths of religion, and denouncing the judgments of God ! They think it a very simple thing to meet the displays of the divine authority ; they do not think it worth while to weigh the force of evidence brought forward ; even though the men upon whom they bring the charge of madness are endowed with power from heaven. A man will not be able to go far into society, remonstrating against sundry vices and vanities, before the defenders of them call him mad. How many things of this kind could you trust yourself to go through society and animadvert upon, without reckoning on such treatment ? But it belongs to apostolic spirits to disregard all this ; to possess a sublime and dignified indifference to the opinions of men. Teachers of religion

should not be concerned for the effect that accompanies their doctrine, merely as it regards themselves, but to follow Jesus Christ; not to care in the slightest degree, provided they can gain attention to the cause they advocate, and of which they should be the examples.

Probably Paul never felt more triumph, more elevation of spirit, than when avowing his religion before these powerful men. It is a happy thing to have such a feeling; to exult in the avowal of our sentiments in any possible situations; to be able to say, "My object is worth it; I cannot be too decided; there are no lengths that I can go, to which my cause does not deserve that I should go!" It is a very happy state, to feel one has a cause worth every degree of courage. This is a very important rule by which to try a system of life—how far one can feel reasonable, and remain stedfast in avowing it. Let every man put the case honestly to himself, and ask, Is my cause worth dying for? Have I that interest in it, for which no boldness would be too great? This would give a dignity to character. Now, how many causes are there, in which men's pursuits would not bear such a test? In many cases, a man would feel confounded and dishonoured by the cause he loved. Why do not men think of their state? We may observe, that every Christian should seek this kind of courage—to avow his Master and his cause everywhere, among every class of men. A good man should seek for courage to declare for God's cause before the most thoughtless, or gay, or unbelieving, or the most powerful and unjust, remembering what Jesus Christ said, "Whosoever is ashamed of me, of him will the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory, and in his Father's, and of the holy angels," Luke ix. 26. The Christian cause is superlatively excellent in keeping its advocates' spirits high. Christianity gives a man the assurance that he may venture any thing, and never fear the treacherous nature of the ground. Infinite firmness bears him up; nothing can make a revelation to discover fraud or weakness. The more that is demanded of it, the more it gives; the stronger the trial, the greater the power it sets forth. Here was Paul; he en-

dured almost every sort of vexation and grievance, at every moment of his existence. See the consequences: What did all this effect? It was impossible to persecute, to scourge him out of his religion; and history tells us, that crucifixion could not dissolve the union—nothing could separate him from the love of Christ. Though he suffered every thing that malice could inflict, still this hated religion clung to him whole and complete. It is barely possible that a bad cause may infuse a degree of affection for it, but this is very rare among the children of men; they must have something to reward them for it. We may apply to the Apostle, in an opposite sense, what was said of the incorrigibly wicked, “The Ethiopian might change his skin, and the leopard his spots, sooner than he could learn to do evil.” There was a kind of absolute impotency in the Apostle to renounce, or not to defend Christianity. This distinguished heroism much affected King Agrippa; and it was no small testimony from an heathen high magistrate, when he said, “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” You may be assured, this King and Judge was not easily surprised into words of which he would afterwards be ashamed. The impression on his mind must have been great, to make him utter these words; and this too, just after another noble Roman had accused Paul of insanity. It is striking to see how much powerful effect may be produced on a man, who does not feel the final constraining power of Christianity. Nothing can occasion, to a serious mind, deeper melancholy, than to mark what a divine impulse, what a strong radiance and sunshine of truth, can pass through the mind, and then vanish for ever. It is as if heaven’s gate had been opened, and the man consents that it should be shut again. It is very grievous, that men should irresistibly bear testimony to what Christ testifies, and that this testimony of conviction should not go into the practical convictions of life. The minds of young persons are sometimes affected by the clear convictions of truth, and nothing is more affecting than to see them, in a little time, given up to vanity as before. The proud Agrippa came near conversion and happiness, but then

all passed by. Sometimes we see the commencement and say—such is the right feeling—there is the homage to the Gospel—there is a confession of the glory of Christianity—that is how the mind should be—why may it not go on to a confirmed state? But, if you watch it, you see it passing away, and the world and sin coming forward again. We must feel great regret at this state of the human mind. Sometimes you may hear persons make very strange affirmations. They will very calmly confess they once felt very powerful impressions of divine objects; but it is so no longer. There are very few visages of men you should look upon with more sadness, than upon these; to think that such and such a man has been touched, but the divine element has passed away, the celestial agency gone by. Now he heeds not the divine judgments, though they must needs be coming nearer and nearer; and though he is still exposed to every thing in the train of destruction, and seems willing to suffer the consequences.

“Almost thou *persuadest* me to be a Christian,” said Agrippa. And Paul replied, “I would to God that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except these bonds,” Verse 29. Now Paul’s reply was perhaps the best that could be given. But we may imagine several replies, not impertinent. “Indeed! almost *persuaded*! What! so soon shaken in mind with regard to the great object of religion? What hast thou been thinking of so long, that all thou hast heard before has lost its power? Hast thou not had a religion? Hast thou passed so many days, and not made a choice? Can all the arguments thou hast heard be of no avail? Is there a power here which reverses all other statements? How couldst thou be content in such a condition,—satisfied to go on without any weighty and solid proof, in a state that thus admits of being shaken in a moment? Is this the first time thou hast conceived any thing like suspicion of thy religion? What hast thou been doing, without serious reflections on religion and duty? What solemn sounds hast thou now heard, coming from death and judgment?” People will go on in this way twenty or thirty years, though

the ground has often been proved unsound and hollow ; and they will go on till that very truth comes with greater force,—and not a new truth, but only one with more effective energy.

“ *Almost* thou persuadest me.” “ What ! not *quite* convinced ? Have I not told thee in a most absolute and decided form ? Have not the revelations of eternity and heaven had full effect ? What can truth do more if it fails to persuade ? What is there besides ? I have but truth to tell. There is no other resource within the compass of human power. I can now only surrender you to the divine mercy.” Yet it is a grievous and sad thing for a friend of man to make this surrender. If a man will not chuse to comply, what will persuade ? Here are the statements of sacred truth ; carrying so much weight, that not God himself can make any addition, and yet all will only *almost* persuade. This very representation should produce a great emotion in the mind. “ How is it ” (a man may ask himself) “ that every particle of my soul has not been reached ? How far am I affected by what has come to me ? and *that* has come which should convince a whole world. What shall I pronounce of that part of my mind which holds out against all the force and eloquence of heaven ? All the radiance of the divine throne, coming down in the glory of Christ, and in the terrors of the law, has not persuaded me.” If we could induce men to think of the state of their minds, it would lead to melancholy and useful reflections. But they cannot be induced to mark the consequences of being thus imperfectly persuaded. Let us still press the enquiry. “ Why have you not gone the length of an apostle ? *When* do you think complete conviction will take place ? What will induce you at a future time ? ” Let us be thankful that there is conscience in the human breast. We hope that many minds will be totally persuaded. How many things have a tendency to this persuasion ! Who can number all the thoughts that will come, upon this total conviction ? Not more vanities before, than serious reflections now, will come to admonish and remind. Think of the sparing mercy of God ;—of the Re-

deemer, in how many lights ;—of the gospel, in how many displays ;—of all the facts and arguments brought forward by Jesus Christ and his apostles. How wretched, not to be affected by these thoughts ! Shall we pass through the whole length of life, and not think about them ? There is need of all the multitude of serious thoughts that can be drawn around our minds. If they begin to come, they will not soon be exhausted ; they cannot, through the whole course of our existence ; they will multiply round a mind properly disposed ; come, in infinite numbers, and bring upon our minds, otherwise the victims of vanity, the whole weight and force of truth.

“ Almost thou art persuaded to be a *Christian*.” But what is it to be a Christian ? Paul’s reply shows it is to be like him. In wishing Agrippa, and the other persons present, to be like himself, he did not wish more or less than that they should be Christians. What is essential ? The same seriousness ; the same devotion to his Master, the Messiah of the world ; to know not the *truths doctrinally*, but the *facts practically*. To be a christian, is, to let in the entire truth ; to say, All this relates to *me*. We must open the mind to receive all ; offer the mind to receive the force of all ; let the truth come home. If we feel it imperfectly, let us, at the next turn, feel it emphatically—let us apply for salvation to Jesus Christ. This involves repentance—a conviction of our lost state without a Redeemer. A complete surrender must be made of pride and self-righteousness, and of the soul to Jesus Christ, to be sanctified and governed by him. There must be a practical devotion of the soul to God. All these are just the elements merely of the Christian character ; with less than this, a man cannot deem himself a Christian. If he has not such an earnest concern for Christianity, he cannot consider himself in a progress towards that happy state to which Christianity is leading its true disciples. Enquire what state we are pursuing. Are we the servants of that great Lord, who has so few on earth, and who ought to have all ?

Still, there have been many but partially persuaded. If we could see into the state of their minds—what striking

thoughts sometimes enter; but, the next moment, vanity succeeds, and takes all away! Men, in trying circumstances—in sickness, on the death of relations, &c. sometimes feel very powerful impressions of religion, have found an insufficiency in the thing they loved and were pursuing. Religion—that is the great, the only thing! When disappointed in worldly hopes, some have thought for a moment, I will turn to religion; but they never will turn effectually till God changes the heart. It is very melancholy to see men go back again; have recourse to what has again and again disappointed them, and this too, when the world tells the same thing that religion does. What does religion say about the world? That it is all vanity and vexation of spirit. Does not the world say the same? Can the lovers of pleasure come forward, and say they are happy? No. Whatever religion teaches concerning the world, the world by experience sooner or later says the same.

How many griefs of conscience occur to men that idolize the world! There would be some ground of hesitation, if the testimony of divine revelation differed from that of the world. If the world should say, "My ways are ways of pleasantness, and my paths are peace," then you would have to settle the fact. But since all make the same assertion, you may derive additional proofs of the excellence and truth of religion. The result of all experience makes it more strange that men can accept as a God, what they have found out to be a devil; forget the reality, to embrace a vain shadow. It is a very sad thing to reflect, that there is a more mighty influence than God's. To find out how it is so, we have only to examine the human mind. There is a strange schism in the soul—that the judgment can be so completely detached from the active powers, as if a man were governed by one sense, contrary to the evidence of another; as if a man should be influenced by sweet music, and drawn along a path to a place where he *sees* death before him. What infinite madness would that be! But, *such is* the state of *man*. There is the judgment—the power that sees; but his other powers controul and persuade him directly contrary to the judging power. The wise man

says, "In vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird;" but not so with respect to the human mind. There is often no concealment—but manifest evil; and yet there is a power to influence the passions, when clear light shines upon the judgment. This shows the necessity of a power, pure and irresistible, which shall not conform to human reason, but comes with a force directly divine. Nothing is more clear, than that the passions may persuade against conviction. This proves the lost condition of intelligent beings on this earth. But then, what cause have we to intreat the Divine Power for ourselves, and our fellow-mortals, that this mighty power may come upon us all! It might have been enough to be almost Christians, if Christ had only *almost* effected the atonement—*almost* opened the gates of heaven; then such a state of mind would have corresponded with the imperfect work of the great Leader of Christianity.

But shall we leave this great concern to the casualties of futurity? Can you make up your minds to this state? Can you sink into any kind or condition of tranquillity, when ruin irretrievable will surely follow? It should impel you to a throne of mercy. It is quite time to intreat God to break the fascination; to perform a miracle of grace. And it is necessary that those who endeavour to persuade others, should have recourse to infinite power. It is a very gratifying thing to think, that we have so many assurances of mercy; that God is ready to bestow his Holy Spirit to operate upon our minds, and, in a certain extent, to attend all our endeavours.—*This* must mingle with all our exertions. We shall surely find, in all our efforts, some interference of a superior power. This is high consolation—a most animating consideration. Let us entreat God to give that influence to us, to attend our efforts, and to make the voice of truth more powerful than it has ever been, since the times of the apostles and of Jesus Christ.

EDINBURGH :

Published by the EDINBURGH RELIGIOUS TRACT SOCIETY,
1821, and Sold at their Depository.

Hay, Gall, & Co. Printers, Niddry Street.



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