No. 163.

The progressive character of religion.
At the event, it will take but a few more efforts of the sun to bring us to that time when we must join the vast thing of the generations that have been before us to darkness.

And they are gone as one
Like flower we wither as one.
The progressive character of religion.
At Hallowell (Mr. Everett!) Oct. 16, 1825—afternoon.
At Nashua Village (Mr. T.) June 26, 1826—forenoon.
At Baltimore, Sept. 17, 1826—forenoon.
At E. Port (Mrs. Garnett!) April 22, 1827—forenoon.
At Dr. Channing’s, Jan. 13, 1828, afternoon.
At home, Aug. 7, 1836—forenoon.
At Gravesen, Aug. 14, 1836—forenoon.
Philippians III: 13, 14. "Brothers, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before. I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus Co. J and Lord."

The modesty of St. Paul appears in this passage to great advantage. As devout and faithful as he was in the cause of his religion, as upright as his character with the light of divine virtues, as gentle, as he yet makes no pretensions to superiority, much less to perfection, he yet professes to be a beginner in the school of Christ. We have been students of some modern saints, he imagines not, that he is already possessed of all goodness; he boasts not of what he has done or become, but looks solely to what he ought to become, and remembers only what remains to be done. The language of the
text is figurative. Paul compares the course of all he is engaged in, the "run" or race, to a race to be run for a prize. As the only object of the race is the prize or press on, regardless of the ground that has already passed over, in order that he may reach the goal as rapidly as possible, so St. Paul affirms that he forgets the things that are behind, and sets his face forward to the things that are before, as the racer is animated to surge on to the end of the course by the consideration of the prize held out to be awarded by the judges of the contest, so he represents himself as being stimulated to strain every nerve by the hope of that glorious reward, to God, the Judge of men, through J. C. holds out from on high, to excite and sustain the contest of the strain, for this it is, that he presses on to ever onward to the mark. Such is the stirring, animating cry of the Old Testament, as St. Paul gives us of the "still life," of this representation, the main truth we are to deduce is this, that religion is in its nature progressive, that there are...
successive parts to be gone over. The plan, course, not that the whole may be dispatched at once, that there are degrees of the virtues & graces, though we must pass before we can arrive at that mark, where the prize with God unfurs will be awarded.

This is the principle, to be enforced to illustrate its importance cannot be questioned. It is analogous to the other operations of God's providence. Forlook where you will, you find all things proceeding to maturity by a gradual progress. God has established laws of processes, by which things may reach the perfection of their natures; but he has not made them perfect at once. The tree, as it stands in lofty majesty casts abroad its huge branches, did not start forth at once in all this grandeur of beauty. The small seed was sown in the earth, passed through the gradual process of nature in order to form and send forth the young & tender plant. This plant raised itself to the air; the sun & the rain gave their influence to form & strengthen its parts; it lifted itself daily.
in which it became vigorous, firm, rooted. You might have watched it from day to day, from month to month, you would perhaps scarcely perceive from one time to another any sensible addition to its size or beauty. Still it was going on silently, surely, and thus it reached towards heaven & spread out its arms for shade & for fruit... It is so with the plants that load your fields with grain. Their heavy produce does not appear at once, but the stalks in which to bear it must be slowly evolved from the seed; culture & genial influences will gradually bring forth the golden harvest. — Observe the broad song of the ocean as it rolls its full & strong tribute to the ocean, trace its course upward toward the fountain, you will find it was not at first thus wide & grand; it was a small brooklet, who wound its way along in obscurity, but it received into its course tributary streams, as it flowed on, it widened & deepened its waters, till it swelled into that broad expanse, as pours fertility along the shores, bears proudly up the lowest vessels, impressing beauty to the scenery through which it flows. — The same is true with regard to animal life. A strong & athletic man is the son
growth of years, is built up gradually from the
feebleness and helplessness of infancy... The tender tissues of the child harden and grow firm. His muscles expand and
gather strength; his nerves acquire more vigorous
power of endurance... all this however is very gradual.
4 years must pass before he is fit for those toils and
strenuous efforts, which well-established may undertake
and perform... The same is true with regard to the develop-
ment of reason and the intellectual powers in general. It is
some time before children can be brought to understand
the plainest truths; grasp even the elements of knowl-
dge. From these they succeed by degrees to other truths
more abstract, to other principles more difficult;
the field of knowledge is continually enlarging, year
new discovery becomes a starting point from which to pro-
cede to other discoveries; till all weakness and difficulty
disappear; the mind goes on in its onward course shew-
ing how truly it bears the image of its Maker, God.
This sublime height is gained very gradually, it is
by one step after another, that the mountain is ascend-
ed... These examples serve to show it to be one of the
laws of God's government, that excellence or perfection
is the result only of progressive acquirement. This
principle appears to pervade the world of mind equally
as in the case of whose of us we see at once the appearance
of the utility. Nor my point is, to impress it on your
minds, that it is equally applicable to religion as
to other subjects, of that we have no reason to suppose
that man, the moment he enters on this subject, is
under different laws from those by which he is guided
in other subjects. Religion is as progressive as the course
of the seasons, as the growth of a tree or plant, as the
increase of a stream, as the formation of the body to strengthen
of the mind to great exertions for reaching disces
sires. In all these alike, the things that are behind
are forgotten, there is a pressing forward to the things
that are before. There is here a beautiful harmony out of tribute paid to one principle. Success de
grees must be passed through in order to reach the high
est degree. The true plant, like the rigorous growing tree
every year thrusts forth more toward heaven and casts
around larger better influences, like the grain of
the fields, he ripens gradually one more corn in good time
till he becomes white with the harvest of virtues, the increasing stream, the widening of deepens his opinion of opportunities of doing good, till he makes all around, present with happiness and vice, as the human body goes stronger and harder, more fit for exposure to the mind, doing of heaven, so does his virtue continually increase in firmness and grace of resistance to the temptations that are around it, as the human mind passes from elementary truths of narrow views, gradually to the most difficult abstracted topics, most wonderful discoveries, so does his moral power of conceiving truths of feeling obligations by degrees become more refined and enlarged, till his heart becomes thoroughly skilled in the most difficult ways of doing good. Thus from the moral of physical world, from reason, from experience, is because from these, therefore from God, there issues an harmonious voice in accordance with language of the Apostle: "Forgetting the things that are behind, reach forward to the things which are before, press on toward the mark, for the prize of glory that is before us." Such then is the principle, considering this as well established, it may suggest to us our two reflections
We should admire the wisdom of God in making the nature of true religion progressive. In no other could man have so usefully & happily obtained religion, as in this way. Gradual advancement, continual growth in goodness are much better for us, than to have been created good at once, if indeed such a thing was possible. This system of progressive improvement affords the best remedy against idleness & satiety. It keeps the mind better than anything else. Suppose it were possible for us to acquire the firm character by one effort or by some single expedient, or by some act of sudden human favour, & then to consider the whole business finished, is nothing left then for us to do? What would be the consequence of such a system of things? What, but that men in the confidence of possession would grow indolent, & resign themselves to sloth, once they could lose nothing by inactivity, if gain anything by action? What, but that all the good effects of toil, effort, caution, & watchfulness would be unknown, in their place would come that bitter persecution, feeling into which the mind is thrown, when effort...
can possess, is achieved, if all its desires are accomplished. The very process by which virtue is acquired, makes it strong, steadfast, and supporting, - a never-ending character so likely to be permanent, as when it is won amidst difficulties, dangers, and opposition. The means by which the discipline is valuable, not only for attaining the end, but for making the end itself more valuable, if we could have the object without the means, it would not be worth so much. Besides, the proof of the wisdom of this law of God's government is, that the habits of virtue acquired in this progressive manner are richer sources of pleasure than they could otherwise be. This is the best plan of things for the promotion of more enjoyment, without reference to any thing else. It is so with regard to other subjects.

We find more satisfaction of delight in that which has cost us pains, exertion, and labour, than in the same thing when it has come to us without any effort of our own, or we sat down in the safe possession of it in indolent thoughtlessness. The man, who has spent his days in the acquisition of property, who has
by personal industry amassed a fortune, finds some satisfaction in engaging in it, than he can, who has dropped into the possession of the same fortune with the least personal exertion. It is the constant addition, the ceaseless accumulation, that gives the pleasure, not the mere possession. And thus it is, my friend, with virtue and religion. Suppose two men to have an equal degree of goodness, and the one to have acquired his goodness gradually, by the diligent use of means, by watchfulness, by sacrifices of self-denial, while the other, if such a thing may be imagined, obtained it all at once without pains or effort. Now as to all the happiness and felicity directly from pure virtuous dispositions, these two persons may be equal, but there is one respect, in which they are far from being equal. The former, at each successive step of his progress in the true character, enjoyed a high satisfaction; as he went on, each new acquisition of virtue became a new source of delight. Pleasure rose in proportion as improvement rose. Now from the whole of this incessant series of enjoyments, the other man must be entirely cut off, for he has overlooked the intermediate steps, and come to the end of
the journey without enjoying the delights of heaven.

This whether we regard the value of the permanency of
our virtue, or our own happiness, we have equal rea
on to be grateful to God that the true happiness curac
ter is progressive & gradual. Successive periods of ma
cessive acquisitions are at once the defence of the fer
licity of man. And we may extend this principle
yet further, suppose with every appearance of proba
bility, that it is the principle of the happiness of
heaven. Unless man receives a baw nature, there as
well as here, his felicity must consist in new ac
quisitions & continual improvements. I believe the
distinguished saint, who uttered the words of mystics
even in his present state of glory, where he has gain
ed a share of the high calling of God through
life, is still pressing on to other heights. I would
still say, that forgetting the things behind, he
reaches forward to the things before. Every spirit
that leaves this world in a state of purity, no matter
how mighty may have been the powers of intellect
it wielded, no matter how well formed, or strong the
true character with which it was invested, will find
in a future state yet higher objects, yet higher
scenes, spoken time shall be no longer, if the sun himself self be blotted from the heavens, the soul will still ascend on her upward course of improvement, altho' as long as life itself has no limits but what is imposed by folly or to her exertions of acquisitions. In heaven or on earth, man must advance, improve, or he cannot be happy.

2. Another reflection, suggested to us by this passage, is that every man, however large his attainments, however far he may have proceeded in the true cause, has still abundant reason to be humble. If man, I suppose will easily be brought to boast of having made greater acquisitions in the true life than St. Paul. Yet this eminent Apostle speaks of his own progress with all the humility of a child. He rates his actual attainments at nothing, compared with what may be attained. He counts not himself to have apprehended; he thinks not that what he has already gained, is worthy of mention; he forgets it, as if it had never been pressed on to the higher conquests of virtue and religion, which remain yet to be achieved. May, if this eminent servant of x., whose zeal, fidelity, & purity, stand
almost unrivalled, could I make this truly estimable of his virtues or graces, in comparison with the virtues of graces that were still before him. What shall common strains, with common attainments, think of themselves? If we have commenced, proceeded far in the right course, if we have made real improvements of the means as they passed off, have done a good memorial for us to the bar of heaven, the moment we begin to look with selfish complacency on our characters, to take secret pride in our progress like the Pharisee, thank God, that we are better than other men, that moment we must regard as the signal of our downfall, or the beginning of a retrograde course; at least, it is an indication that we are standing still to admire ourselves, instead of pressing on, towards the marks set forth the Apostles.

The man, who is busy with making progress, has no time to be proud. It is here, as in the case of intellectual improvement. He, who knows the most, who has reached forth far and wide, who is within the compass of its comprehension, the most sublime truths, discoveries, who has enriched his mind with...
all the treasures science has to offer; is it, may one always humble, modest? if you see one man of his knowledge, by making a parade of his acquirements, you may be almost sure that he is superficial. Thus it is in religion. He, who has learned most longest in the school of life, has made an reality the highest advancements in purity of heart and life, is always the humblest and most regardless of self; but when a man talks much of his own good feelings, or makes an ambitious display of what he may possess, (when he thus brings out the flag of goodness,) you have every reason to suspect that his virtues and religion are nothing better than an outside show, mere decorations for the world to gaze on. You have an image of these characters in the natural world. The young ear shoots up bolt upright erect with confidence, but it is empty; while the full corn in the ear inclines itself toward the earth, not because it is feeble, but because it is matured, full of grain. In proportion as we are full of the real ripe fruits of religion, we shall bend ourselves down in the spirit of an
neighed humility, root in the disingenuousvirtue of some, who call themselves saints, affect to have an assurance, a boast, that are are too good to fall from grace.

3. One other reflection to be deduced from this subject is the danger of putting off from time the formation of the true character of habits. If religion in the soul be a progressive work, then the longer we procrastinate the work, the less progress shall we make. There, who believe that goodness may be suddenly attained, & the whole man become renovated in a few hours, may have some excuse for flattering any effects of the acquisition of the virtues of the soul, may wait in idle expectation for the arrival of the happy movement of grace. But if we believe that it requires a long time to plant the seeds of good principles, to watch over their growth, & bring them to maturity, we cannot with the shadow of a pretence defer for a single day the great work from which we are placed in this world. The traveller, who delays the commencement of his journey till evening, when his path lies through the tangled forest, or over the rug-
good mountain, or mind, along by the side of grief and pain, and, where there is not so much folly and temper as, he who
comes into a course of life, that task, that requires the full employment of life's whole extent, as if it were
for the resources of this moral strength a good affection to become weaker or depraved, when their most
tongerous exercise will not be more than sufficient to fulfill the conditions in which the enjoyment of
heaven is suspended. Every moment that we delay the great work, we are wasting the golden sands of
life, trusting to a poor remnant of life, which is all may not be granted to the interests of eternity.
We are apt to imagine that it is time enough to think of being good when sickness removes us from common enjoyment, death comes with his
stern message. But, my friend, we must remember that the happiness, we have expected in another world,
depends on characters, habits well formed. We shall have there - of characters, habits are not to be attained
on the death bed. So the chamber of sickness and death were doing the taste of characters we have already formed in health. - of these we must expect to receive
the recumbence, he they good or bad? Do you think
it was on the bed of death, St Paul says, forgetting
the things of earth. Oh no! That would have been too
late and cruel to have used such language, too
feebly and slow to have pressed on towards the mark
for the prize of the high calling. At the close of life,
you may, it is true, have religious thoughts and
feelings: but do you think, to atone for years of
neglect, for the want of vigilance and perseverance, by
the sudden flush of guilty shame, as the fever of a
few hours of agitated feelings and alarming apprehen-
sions? No... God has determined that the thin charac-
ter only shall have the stated reward; if by the laws
of His providence too, that character must be gradual
progressive. It is wise then to begin in season. We
are standing on a little eminence of sand, where the
next wave of time that rolls in may wash us away.
Let us not then wait, till we feel the foundation
crumbling away under us; before we begin to turn
our hearts to the enduring treasures of virtue, religi-
On my life I have endeavored to suggest to you a few
thoughts derived from the humble, wise, strenuous de-
at the text. The race, in which
press forward eagerly for the glorious prize, is open
to us all. It is the true course, the course that from
every spot on earth conducts to heaven. Denying
free, that the season of debility or old age is but the
time enough to begin this course. If you do resign
will see the prize of the high calling of God, beauti-
ful glorious, in the remotest distance; but you will
not reach it, for you will faint by the way. God
save us from all delusions. Grant that you may
divine strength and cheerfulness with divine hope, and
go on our way rejoicing.

Oct. 1822.

At home, Oct. 13th, 1822, afternoon.
At Salem, Mr. Brace's, April 21st, 1823, forenoon.
At Weston, June 12th, 1823, afternoon.
At Mr. Walker's (Charlestown) Feb. 22nd, 1824, afternoon.
At Dr. Lowell's, April 18th, 1824, forenoon.
At Mr. Gray's, (Dorchester) May 25th, 1824, afternoon.
At Brooklyn (Con.) June 20th, 1824, afternoon.
At Medford, Aug. 29th, 1824, afternoon.
At Lynn, Sept. 26th, 1824, forenoon.
At Hingham (Mr. Brooks) April 21st, 1825, afternoon.