

A Visit to Christ's Hospital

A sermon

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Delivered by

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"Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death. Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses. He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing."-Psa.107:17-22

It is a very profitable thing to visit a hospital. The sight of others' sickness tends to make us grateful for our own health, and it is a great thing to be kept in a thankful frame of mind, for ingratitude is a spiritual disease, injurious to every power of the soul. A hospital inspection will also teach us compassion, and that is of great service. Anything that softens the heart is valuable. Above all things, in these days, we should strive against the petrifying influences which surround us. It is not easy for a man, who has constantly enjoyed good health and prosperity, to sympathize with the poor and the suffering. Even our great High Priest, who is full of compassion, learned it by carrying our sorrows in his own person. To see the sufferings of the afflicted, in many cases, would be enough to move a stone; and if we go to the hospital, and come back with a tenderer heart, we shall have found it a sanatorium to ourselves.

I purpose, at this time, to take you to a hospital. It shall not be one of those noble institutions so pleasingly plentiful around the Tabernacle; but we will take you to Christ's Hospital, or, as the French would call it, the *Hotel Dieu*: and we shall conduct you through the wards for a few minutes, trusting that while you view them, if you are yourself healed, you may feel gratitude that you have been delivered from spiritual sicknesses, and an intense compassion for those who still pine and languish. May we become like our Saviour, who wept over Jerusalem with eyes which were no strangers to compassion's floods: may we view the most guilty and impenitent with yearning hearts, and grieve with mingled hope and anxiety over those who are under the sound of the gospel, and so are more especially patients in the Hospital of God.

We will go at once with the psalmist to the wards of spiritual sickness.

I. And, first, we have set out before us THE NAMES AND CHARACTERS OF THE PATIENTS.

You see, in this hospital, written up over the head of every couch, the name of the patient and his disease, and you are amazed to find that all the inmates belong to one family, and, singularly enough, are all called by one name, and that name is very far from being a reputable one. It is a title that nobody covets, and that many persons would be very indignant to have applied to them,— "*Fool*." All who are sick in God's Hospital are fools, without exception, for this reason, that all sinners are fools. Often, in Scripture, when David means the wicked, he says, "the foolish"; and, in saying this, he makes no mistake, for sin is folly.

Sin is foolish, clearly, because it is a setting-up of our weakness in opposition to Omnipotence. Every wise man, if he must fight, will choose a combatant against whom he may have a chance of success; but he who wars with the Most High commits as gross a folly as when the moth contends with the flame, or the dry grass of the prairie challenges the fire. There is no hope for thee, O sinful man, of becoming a victor in the struggle. How unwise thou art to take up the weapons of rebellion! And the folly is aggravated, because the One who is opposed is so infinitely good that opposition to him is violence to everything that is just, beneficial, and commendable. God is love; shall I resist the infinitely loving One? He scatters blessings; wherefore should I be his foe? If his commandments were grievous, if his ways were ways of misery, and his paths were paths of woe, I might have some pretence of an excuse for resisting his will. But O my God, so good, so kind, so boundless in grace, 'tis folly, as well as wickedness, to be thine enemy!

"To all that's good, averse and blind,
But prone to all that's ill,
What dreadful darkness veils our mind!
How obstinate our will!"

Besides this, the laws of God are so supremely beneficial to ourselves, that we are our own enemies when we rebel. God's laws are danger signals. As sometimes, on the ice, those who care for human life put up the warning word "*Danger*" here and there, and leave the part that is safe for all who choose to traverse it, so God has left us free to enjoy everything that is safe for us, and has only forbidden us that which is to our own hurt. If there be a law which forbids me to put my hand into the fire, it is a pity that I should need such a law, but a thousand pities more if I think that law a hardship. The commands of God do but forbid us to injure ourselves. To keep them is to keep ourselves in holy happiness; to break them is to bring evil of all kinds upon ourselves in soul and body. Why should I violate a law, which, if I were perfect, I should myself have made, or myself have kept finding it in force? Why need I rebel against that which is never exacting, never oppressive, but always conducive to my own highest welfare? The sinner is a fool, because he is told, in God's Word, that the path of evil will lead to destruction, and yet he pursues it with the secret hope that, in his case, the damage will not be very great. He has been warned that sin is like a cup frothing with a foam of sweetness, but concealing death and hell in its dregs; yet each sinner, as he takes the cup, fascinated by the first drop, believes that, to him, the poisonous draught will not be fatal. How many have fondly hoped that God would lie unto men, and would not fulfil his threatenings! Yet, be assured, every sin shall have its recompense and reward; God is just, and will by no means spare the guilty. Even in this life many are feeling in their bones the consequences of their youthful lusts; they will carry to their graves the scars of their transgressions. In hell, alas! there are millions who will for ever prove that sin is an awful and an undying evil, an infinite curse which has destroyed them for

ever and ever.

The sinner is a fool, because, while he doubts the truthfulness of God as to the punishment of sin, he has the conceit to imagine that transgression will even yield him pleasure. God saith it shall be bitterness; the sinner denies the bitterness, and affirms that it shall be sweetness. O fool, to seek pleasure in sin! Go rake the charnel-house to find an immortal soul; go walk into the secret springs of the sea to find the source of flame. It is not there, and thou canst never find bliss in rebellion. Hundreds of thousands before thee have gone upon this search, and have all been disappointed; he is indeed a fool who must needs rush headlong in this useless chase, and perish as the result. The sinner is a fool—a great fool—to remain as he is in danger of the wrath of God. To abide at ease in imminent peril, and scorn the way of escape; to love the world, and loathe the Saviour; to set the present fleeting life above the eternal future; to choose the sand of the desert, and forego the jewels of heaven;—all this is folly, in the highest conceivable degree.

Though all sinners are fools, yet there are fools of all sorts. Some are learned fools. Unconverted men, whatever they know, are only educated fools. Between the ignorant man who cannot read a letter, and the learned man who is apt in all knowledge, there is a small difference if they are both ignorant of Christ; indeed, the scholar's folly is in this case the greater of the two. The learned fool generally proves himself the worst of fools, for he invents theories which would be ridiculed if they could be understood, and he brings forth speculations which, if they were judged by common sense, and men were not turned into idiotic worshippers of imaginary authority, would be scouted from the universe with a hiss of derision. There are fools in colleges and fools in cottages.

There are also reckless fools and reckoning fools. Some sin with both hands greedily. "A short life, and a merry one," is their motto; while the so-called "prudent" fools live more slowly, but still live not for God. These last, with hungry greed for wealth, will often hoard up gold as if it were true treasure, and as if anything worth the retaining were to be found beneath the moon. Your "prudent" "respectable" sinner will find himself just as much lost as your reckless prodigal. They must all alike seek and find the Saviour, or be guilty of gross folly. So, alas! there are old fools as well as young ones. There are those who, after an experience of sin, burn their fingers at it still. The burnt child dreads the fire, but the burnt sinner lovingly plays with his sin again. Hoar hairs ought to be a crown of glory, but too often they are fool's caps. There are young sinners who waste the prime of life when the dew is on their spirit, and neglect to give their strength to God, and so miss the early joy of religion, which is the sweetest, and makes all the rest of life the sweeter: these are fools. But what is he who hath one foot hanging over the mouth of hell, and yet continues without God and without Christ, a trifler with eternity?

I have spoken thus upon the name of those who enter God's Hospital; permit me to add that all who go there, and are cured, agree that this name is correct. Saved souls are made to feel that they are naturally fools; and, indeed, it is one stage in the cure when men are able to spell their own name, and when they are willing to write it in capital letters, and say, "That is mine! If there is no other man in this world who is a fool, I am. I have played the fool before the living God." This confession is true, for what madness it is to play the fool before the Eternal One, with your own soul as the subject of the foolery! When men make sport, they generally do it with trifling things. A man who plays the fool, and puts on a cap and bells, is wise in comparison with him who sports with his God, his soul, heaven, and eternity. This is folly beyond all folly. Yet the sinner, when he is taken into God's Hospital, will be made to feel that he has been such a fool, and that his folly is folly with emphasis. He will confess that Christ must be

made unto him wisdom, for he himself by nature was born a fool, has lived a fool, and will die a fool, unless the infinite mercy of God shall interpose.

II. Now, for a minute or two, let us notice THE CAUSE OF THEIR PAINS AND AFFLICTIONS. "Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted."

The physician usually tries to find out the root and cause of the disease he has to deal with. Now, those souls that are brought into grief for sin, those who are smarting through the providential dealings of God, through the strikings of conscience, or the smitings of the Holy Spirit, are here taught that *the source of their sorrow is their sin*. These sins are mentioned in the text in the plural: "Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities." How many have our sins been? Who shall count them? Let him tell the hairs of his head first. Sins are various, and are therefore called "transgressions and iniquities." We do not all sin alike, nor does any one man sin alike at all times. We commit sins of word, thought, deed, against God, against men, against our bodies, against our souls, against the gospel, against the law, against the week-day duties, against the Sabbath privileges—sins of all sorts, and these all lie at the root of our sorrows. Our sins also are aggravated; not content with transgression, we have added iniquities to it. No one is more greedy than a sinner, but he is greedy after his own destruction. He is never content with revolting; he must needs rebel yet more and more. As when a stone is rolled downhill, its pace is accelerated the further it goes, so is it with the sinner, he goes from bad to worse.

Perhaps I speak to some who have lately come into God's Hospital. I will suppose a case. You are poor, very poor, but your poverty is the fruit of your profligate habits. Poverty is often directly traceable to drunkenness, laziness, or dishonesty. All poverty does not come from these sources. Blessed be God, there are thousands of the poor who are the excellent of the earth, and a great many of them are serving God right nobly; but I am now speaking of certain cases, and probably you know of such yourselves, where, because of their transgression and iniquities, men are brought to want. There will come to me, sometimes, a person who was in good circumstances a few years ago, who is now without anything but the clothes he tries to stand upright in, and his wretchedness is entirely owing to his playing the prodigal. He is one of those whom I trust God may yet take into his Hospital.

At times, the disease breaks out in another sort of misery. Some sins bring into the flesh itself pains which are anticipatory of hell; yet even these persons may be taken into the Hospital of God, though they are afflicted, to their shame, through gross transgression. Oh, how many there are, in this great City of London, of men and women who dare not tell their condition, but whose story is a terrible one indeed, as God reads it! Oh, that he may have pity upon them, and take them into his lazaret-house, and heal them through his abundant grace!

In more numerous cases, the misery brought by sin is mental. Many are brought by sin very low, even to despair. Conscience pricks them; fears of death and hell haunt them. I do remember well when I was in this way myself; when I, poor fool, because of my transgression and my iniquities, was sorely bowed in spirit. By day, I thought of the punishment of my sin; by night, I dreamed of it. I woke in the morning with a burden on my heart,—a burden which I could neither carry nor shake off, and sin was at the bottom of my sorrow. My sin, my sin, my sin,—this was my constant plague. I was in my youth, and in the heyday of my spirit; I had all earthly comforts, and I had friends to cheer me, but they were all as nothing. I would seek solitary places to search the Scriptures, and to read such books as "Baxter's Call to the Unconverted" and "Alleine's

Alarm," feeling my soul ploughed more and more, as though the law, with its ten great black horses, was dragging the plough up and down my soul, breaking, crushing, furrowing my heart, and all for sin. Let me tell you, though we read of the cruelties of the Inquisition, and the sufferings which the martyrs have borne from cruel men, no racks, nor firepans, nor other instruments of torture can make a man so wretched as his own conscience when he is stretched upon its rack.

Here, then, we see both the fools and the cause of their disease.

III. Now let us notice THE PROGRESS OF THE DISEASE. It is said that "their soul abhorreth all manner of meat," like persons who have lost their appetite, and can eat nothing; "and they draw near unto the gates of death," they are given over, and nearly dead.

These words may reach some whose disease of sin has developed itself in fearful sorrow, so that they are now unable to find comfort in anything. You used to enjoy the theatre; you went lately, but you were wretched there. You used to be a wit in society, and set the table on a roar with your jokes; but you cannot joke now. They say you are melancholy, but you know what they do not know, for a secret arrow rankles in your bosom. You go to a place of worship, but you find no comfort even there. The manner of meat that is served to God's saints is not suitable to you. You cry, "Alas, I am not worthy of it!" Whenever you hear a sermon thundering against the ungodly, you feel, "Ah, that is for me!" but when it comes to "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people," you conclude, "Ah, that is not for me!" Even if it be an invitation to the sinner, you say, "But I do not feel myself a sinner. I am not such an one as may come to Christ. Surely I am a castaway." Your soul abhorreth all manner of meat, even that out of God's kitchen. Not only are you dissatisfied with the world's dainties, but the marrow and fatness of Christ himself you cannot relish. Many of us have been in this way before you.

The text adds, "They draw near unto the gates of death." The soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death, and feels that it cannot bear up much longer. I remember once, in the bitterness of my spirit, using those words of Job, "My soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life," for the wretchedness of a sin-burdened soul is intolerable. All do not suffer like strong convictions; but, in some, it bows the spirit almost to the grave. Perhaps, my friend, you see no hope whatever; you are ready to say, "There cannot be any hope for me. I have made a covenant with death, and a league with hell; I am past hope. There were, years ago, opportunities for me, and I was near the kingdom; but like the man who put his hand to the plough, and then looked back, I have proved myself unworthy of eternal life." Troubled heart, I am sent with a message for you: "Thus saith the Lord, your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your league with hell shall not stand. The prey shall be taken from the mighty, and the lawful captive shall be delivered." You may abhor the very meat that would restore you to strength, but he who understands the human heart knows how to give you better tastes and cure these evil whims; he knows how to bring you up from the gates of death to the gates of heaven. Thus we see how terribly the mischief progresses.

"Our beauty and our strength are fled,
And we draw near to death,
But Christ the Lord recalls the dead
With his almighty breath."

IV. And now the disease takes a turn. Our fourth point is THE INTERPOSITION OF THE PHYSICIAN: "Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses. He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from

their destructions."

The good Physician is the true Healer. *Observe when the Physician comes in*,—when "they cry unto the Lord in their trouble." When they cry, the Physician has come. I will not say that he has come because they cry, though that would be true; but there is deeper truth still,—they cried because he came. For, whenever a soul truly cries unto God, God has already blessed it by enabling it to cry. Thou wouldst never have begun to pray if the Lord had not taught thee. God is visiting a soul, and healing it, when it has enough faith in God to cast itself, with a cry, upon his mercy. I cannot hope that there is a work of grace in thee until I know that thou prayest. Ananias would not have believed that Paul was converted had it not been said, "Behold he prayeth!"

Note the kind of prayer here; it was not taken out of a book, and it was not a fine prayer in language, whether extempore or pre-composed; it was *a cry*. You do not need to teach your children how to cry; it is the first thing a new-born child does. It wants no schoolmaster to teach it that art. Our School Boards have a great deal to teach the children of London, but they need never have a department for instruction in crying. A spiritual cry is the call of the new-born nature expressing conscious need. "How shall I pray?" says one. Pour thy heart out, brother. Turn the vessel upside down, and let the contents run out to the last dreg, as best they can. "But I cannot pray," says one. Tell the Lord you cannot pray, and ask him to help you to pray, and you have prayed already. "Oh, but I don't feel as I should!" Then confess to the Lord your sinful insensibility, and ask him to make your heart tender, and you are already in a measure softened. Those who say, "We don't feel as we should," are very often those who feel the most. Whether it be so or no, cry. If thou art a sin-sick soul, thou canst do nothing towards thine own healing but this,—thou canst cry. He who hears thy cries will know what they mean. When the surgeon goes to the battlefield, after a conflict, he is guided to his compassionate work by the groans of the wounded. When he hears a soldier's cry, he does not enquire, "Was that a Frenchman or a German, and what does he mean?" A cry is good French, and excellent German too; it is part of the universal tongue. The surgeon understands it, and looks for the sick man. And, whatever language thou usest, O sinner, uncouth or refined, if it be the language of thy heart, God understands thee without an interpreter.

Note well that, as we have seen when the Physician interposed, we shall see next *what he did*. He saved them out of their distresses, healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh, the infinite mercy of God! He reveals to the heart pardon for all sin; and, by his Spirit's power, removes all our weaknesses. I tell thee, soul, though thou art at death's door this moment, God can even now gloriously deliver thee. It would be a wonder if your poor burdened spirit should, within this hour, leap for joy; and yet, if the Lord shall visit thee in mercy, thou wilt do so. I fall back upon my own recollection; my escape from despondency was instantaneous. I did but believe Jesus Christ's word, and rest upon his sacrifice, and the night of my heart was over; the darkness had passed, and the true light had shone. In some parts of the world there are not long twilights before the break of day, but the sun leaps up in a moment; the darkness flies, and the light reigns; so it is with many of the Lord's redeemed. As in a moment, their ashes are exchanged for beauty, and their spirit of heaviness for the garment of praise. Faith is the great transformer. Wilt thou cast thyself now, whether thou shalt live or die, upon the precious blood and merits of Jesus Christ the Saviour? Wilt thou come and rest thy soul upon the Son of God? As thou dost so, thou art saved; thy sins, which are many, are now forgiven thee. As of old the Egyptians were drowned in a moment in the Red Sea, and the depths had covered them so that there was not one of them left; so, the moment thou believest, that hast lifted a mightier rod than that of Moses, and the sea of the atoning blood, in the fulness of its strength, has gone

over the heads of all thine enemies; thy sins are drowned in Jesu's blood. Oh, what joy is this when, in answer to a cry, God delivers us from our present distress and our threatened future destructions!

But how is this effected? The psalmist saith, "He sent his word, and healed them." "His Word." How God ennobles language when he uses it! That word "*word*" is uplifted in Scripture into the foremost place, and put on a level with the Godhead. "THE WORD." It indicates a God-like personage, for, "in the beginning was the Word;" nay, it denotes God himself, for "the Word was God." Our hope is in the Word,—the incarnate *Logos*, the eternal Word. In some respects, our salvation comes to us entirely through the sending of that Word to be made flesh, and to dwell among us. He is our saving health, by his stripes we are healed. But here the expression is best understood of the gospel, which is the Word of God. Often, the reading of the Scriptures proves the means of healing troubled souls; or, else, that same Word is made effectual when spoken from a loving heart with a living lip. What might there is in the plain preaching of the gospel! No power in all the world can match it. They tell us, nowadays, that the nation will go over to Rome, and the gospel candle will be blown out. I am not a believer in these alarming prophecies; I neither believe in the battle of Dorking, nor in the victory of Pius the Ninth. Leave us our Bibles, our pulpits, and our God, and we shall win the victory yet. Oh, if all ministers preached the gospel plainly, without aiming at rhetoric and high flights of oratory, what great triumphs would follow! How sharp would the gospel sword prove itself to be if men would but pull it out of those fine ornamental, but useless scabbards! When the Lord enables his servants to put plain gospel truth into language that will strike and stick, be understood and retained, it heals sick souls, that else might have lain fainting long.

Still, the Word of God in the Bible and the Word of God preached cannot heal the soul unless God shall *send it* in the most emphatic sense; "*He sent* his Word." When the eternal Spirit brings home the Word with power, what a Word it is! Then the miracles of grace wrought within us are such as to astonish friends and confound foes. May the Lord, even now, send his Word to each sinner, and it will be his salvation. "Hear, and your soul shall live." "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God," and faith brings with it all that the soul requires. When we have faith, we are linked with Christ; and so our salvation is ensured.

V. That brings us to the last point,—THE CONSEQUENT CONDUCT OF THOSE WHO WERE HEALED.

First, they praised God for his goodness. What rare praise a soul offers when it is brought out of prison! The sweetest music ever heard on earth is found in those new songs which celebrate our recent deliverance from the horrible pit and the miry clay. Did you ever keep a linnet in a cage, and then bethink yourself that it was cruel to rob it of its liberty? Did you take it out into the garden, and open the cage door? Oh! but if you could have heard it sing when it had fairly escaped from the cage where it had been so long, you would have heard the best linnet music in all the wood. When a poor soul breaks forth from the dungeon of despair, set free by God, what songs it pours forth! God loves to hear such music. Remember that ancient word of his, "I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness." God loves the warm-hearted praises of newly-emancipated souls; and he will get some out of you, dear friend, if you are set free at this hour.

Notice that these healed ones praised God especially *for his goodness*. It was great goodness that such as they were should be saved. So near death's door, and yet saved! They wondered at his mercy, and sang of "his wonderful works to the children of men."

It is wonderful that such as we were should be redeemed from our iniquities; but our Redeemer's name is called Wonderful, and he delights in showing forth the riches of his grace.

Observe that, in their praises, they ascribe all to God; *they praise him for his wonderful work*. Salvation is God's work, from beginning to end. Their song is, moreover, comprehensive, and they adore the Lord for his love to others as well as to themselves; they praise him "for his wonderful works to the children of men."

Forget not that *they added to this praise sacrifice*: "Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving. "What shall be the sacrifices of a sinner delivered from going down into the pit? Shall he bring a bullock that hath horns and hoofs? Nay, let him bring his heart; let him offer himself, his time, his talents, his body, his soul, his substance. Let him exclaim, "Let my Lord take all, seeing that he hath saved my soul." Will you not lay yourselves out for him who laid himself out for you? If he has bought you with such a price, confess that you are altogether his. Of your substance give to his cause as he prospers you; prove that you are really his by your generosity towards his Church and his poor.

In addition to sacrifice, the healed ones began to offer songs, for it was to be a "*sacrifice of thanksgiving*." May those of you who are pardoned sing more than is customary nowadays. May we, each one of us, who have been delivered from going down to the pit, enter into the choir of God's praising ones, vocally singing as often as we can, and in our hearts always chanting his praise!

Once more, the grateful ones were to add to their gifts and psalms *a declaration of joy* at what God had done for them: "Let them declare his works with rejoicing." Ye who are pardoned should tell the Church of the Lord's mercy to you. Let his people know that God is discovering his hidden ones. Come and tell the minister. Nothing gladdens him so much as to know that souls are brought to Jesus by his means. This is our reward. Ye are our crown of rejoicing, ye saved ones. I can truly say that I never have such joy as when I receive letters from persons, or hear from them personally the good news, "I heard you on such-and- such a night, and found peace;" or, "I read your sermon, and God blessed it to my soul." There is not a true minister of Christ but would willingly lay himself down to die if he could thereby see multitudes saved from eternal wrath. We live for this. If we miss this, our life is a failure. What is the use of a minister unless he brings souls to God? For this we would yearn over you, and draw near unto God in secret, that he would be pleased in mercy to deliver you.

But, surely, if you are converted, you should not conceal the fact. It is an unkind action for any person, who has received life from the dead, through any instrumentality, to deny the worker the consolation of hearing that he has been made useful; for the servant of God has many discouragements, and he is himself readily cast down, and the gratitude of those who are saved is one of the appointed cordials for his heavy heart. There is no refreshment like it. May God grant you grace to declare his love, for our sake, for the Church's sake, and, indeed, for the world's sake. Let the sinner know that you have found mercy; perhaps it will induce him also to seek salvation. Many a physician has gained his practice by one patient telling others of his cure. Tell your neighbors that you have been to the Hospital of Jesus, and been restored, though you hated all manner of meat, and drew near to the gates of death; and, may be, a poor soul, just in the same condition as yourself, will say, "This is a message from God to me."

Above all, publish abroad the Lord's goodness, for Jesus' sake. He deserves your honour. Will you receive his blessing, and then, like the nine lepers, give him no

praise? Will you be like the woman in the crowd, who was healed by touching the hem of his garment, and then would fain have slipped away? If so, I pray that the Master may say, "Somebody hath touched me," and may you be compelled to tell us all the truth, and say, "I was sore sick in soul, but I touched thee, O my blessed Lord, and I am saved, and to the praise of the glory of thy grace I will tell it! I will tell it, though devils should hear me; I will tell it, and make the world ring with it, according to my ability, to the praise and glory of thy saving grace."