

Faith

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The first verse of the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

We all know very well that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is an essential condition of the salvation of those to whom the Gospel is preached. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. He that believeth not shall be condemned." It is important, then, that we know, without any uncertainty or obscurity about it, what faith is; otherwise, we may not know whether we have it or not. It is important, too, to know how we may obtain faith, if we have it not; and how to increase it, if we have it. It is also important for us to understand how faith contributes to our salvation, or we may misapply it. I propose, then, to discuss these three questions tonight, and to do it in the light of this masterly discussion of the subject of faith which I have read you in the first ten verses of this chapter. The whole chapter is devoted to the subject, but it is too long, contains too much matter, to be embraced in a single discourse.

The apostle begins by telling us what faith is, and then, just as if he were imitating some of our best lexicons of the modern times, he follows up the statement as to what faith is, by a long list of examples of it, so that if any one should fail to get the idea from the description or definition, he would get it from the examples; at any rate, by use of the two together, he could not fail, if he used proper industry, to understand the subject. Unfortunately, however, for you and me, this first verse, which I think is properly called a definition of faith, though that is doubted by many scholars, is translated to us in words that are very obscure. I read in the outset from the revised version, and I last read from the King James version. The latter reads thus: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." What idea do you get from that language? We know very well what substance is. The substance of this desk is wood. The substance of a speech is the chief thought, or the principal thoughts, that run through it. So of a book. Now can you conceive that faith, in this sense—in either of these senses of the word substance— is the substance of things we hope for? No thought expressed in that. The substance of our hope of pardon, our hope of God's blessing, our hope of the resurrection of the dead, our hope of heaven, are very different things from faith. Is faith the evidence of things not seen? Faith is the evidence of some cause that leads to faith, for it could not have existed without that cause; and that may be some unseen thing; but surely, the apostle can not mean that. The things that are unseen concerning which we have faith—such things as God, angels, heaven, hell, the wondrous things of the past, the unspeakable things of the present spiritual world, and the world to come—now faith is not evidence of these things, but faith is the result of evidence which convinced us of them.

The revised version does not make the matter much better. It says, "Faith is assurance of things hoped for." There is a clear idea in that, and I have no doubt it is true. And it says in addition, "It is a proving of things not seen." Now our faith does not prove anything about unseen matters. I do not see how it is

possible that that can be a correct rendering. I have been puzzled a good deal in former years over this verse, and the proper rendering of it, and in searching about through various learned works for something that would be clear and satisfactory, I fell upon a translation of it in Robinson's great Lexicon of the Greek New Testament. Edward Robinson was probably the most learned philologist that the Presbyterian Church of the United States has ever produced, and he translates the verse, "Faith is confidence as to things hoped for; conviction as to things not seen." Now that is as clear as a bell. Faith is thus defined as having relation to two classes of objects: things hoped for, and things unseen. But the latter class includes the former. All the things that we hope for are unseen. That which you see and have in your presence is not an object of hope, but, whilst the things not seen include the things hoped for, faith contains different elements with reference to these two different classes of objects.

"With reference to the things that are unseen—and that expression includes everything in the past, the present and the future, that is not an object of sight or knowledge—with reference to them, faith is conviction, and that means that when we have faith about them, we are convinced in regard to them. Now many of those things in the future that are unseen, are objects of hope; those in the past are not. We do not hope for what is past. And when this unseen thing on which faith rests is an object of hope, then that other element of faith comes in—confidence as to things hoped for. I think that is very clear. I have always felt very thankful to that distinguished scholar for the clearest and best translation I have met of this verse. With this statement of what faith is—and I think it includes all that there is in faith—I propose that we go on and look at the illustrations— a few of them—or the examples, and see how well they fit the definition, and thus get a clearer conception of it—one that will impress the memory more.

The first example that he presents is our faith in the fact that God created the worlds. " By faith we understand that the worlds were made by the word of God." Well, there is an unseen and wondrous event away back in the past. Our belief in that is a conviction as to an unseen thing. It suits the latter part of the definition.

But, as that unseen thing, the creation of the world by the word of God, is not an object of hope with us, the element of confidence as to things hoped for, does not enter into that example of faith.

The next example is the faith of Abel. " By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." In this the apostle does not say, as many seem to imagine, that Abel had a more excellent faith than Cain; he does not compare the two faiths at all; but that Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain did. What was the object on which Abel's faith rested, when he brought that sacrifice? He offered it to an invisible God, and there was conviction as to a being unseen. Then, he offered that victim with the hope of receiving a blessing from the hand of that invisible God, and his doing so shows that he had confidence in the object of his hope. And, don't you see, it was not the mere conviction that moved him to make the offering; but it was the confident expectation of the blessing that moved his heart and strengthened his hand.

The next example is that of Enoch. "By faith Enoch was translated, so that he was not found," when they hunted for him. Here our author, seeing that nothing is said in the history of Enoch in the Old Testament about his having any faith, feels the necessity of proving that he had; so he proceeds to say that "before his translation he had testimony that he was well pleasing to God; but without faith it is impossible to please God, seeing that if a man comes to God, he must believe that He is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." In these words the apostle brings out the two elements of Enoch's faith. He believed that God is —the conviction of an unseen thing. He believed that God is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him — confidence as to a hoped for reward. And, under that confidence, he walked with God and pleased Him.

Noah's faith is the next example. "By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet" (here he brings in the very terms of his definition, referring to the unseen flood yet in the future), "moved with godly fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his family." Here was conviction as to an unseen disaster that was to sweep over the earth, threatening the life of every human being, and here was confidence in the hoped for deliverance of his own family under the promise that God had made; and this confidence nerves him to the tremendous undertaking of building the greatest vessel that ever floated on water. I do not know how they could build ships in those early days with such immense capacity. This one went on a voyage of twelve months without coming in sight of land, then stranded on the top of a mountain where it lay till all the water sank away, and still it did not break up. In building it, Noah was moved by faith.

The next example is that of Abraham. Two incidents of his life are brought out to illustrate his faith. First, "By faith, Abraham, when he was called to go out into a country that he should afterward receive for an inheritance, obeyed and went out, not knowing whither he went." Was not that a strange journey? He left his native land and kindred, and went off on a journey, he did not know how long, did not know how far, to receive a land for an inheritance ; and he did not know where the land was. There was conviction as to an unseen and an unknown country, and a confident hope of possessing it. Moved by that confident expectation of having the land for an inheritance, he made the long journey of 1,300 miles from his native land, before he reached the spot where God said, "This is the land; it shall be thine for an inheritance for thy seed after thee." Another example is given in the fact that Abraham, by faith, lived in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promises, because he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. The Sodomites had built a city.

Melchizedek, the high priest of God, was living in the city of Salem, close by. The Shechemites and others round about, had cities; and His friends, the Hittites, were living in the City of Hebron. He was a man of great wealth, and he could have built a palace in which to live, but he chose to live in a tent all his life. He was seventy-five years old when he left his native land, and one-hundred and seventy-five when he died; and through a round hundred years, he lived in a tent, by faith, because yonder was the city he was looking for, that had foundations sure enough, whose builder and maker is God, and he was so well pleased and satisfied with that, that he did not want anything better than a tent to live in here on earth. Sometimes I have thought that this was a greater evidence of Abraham's faith than offering Isaac on the altar. It was a long strain, that one hundred years living in a tent and looking for that distant city. Conviction as to that unseen city which God hath built; confident expectation that after a long,

wearied journey, his life over, he would live in it with his children after him —this was his faith. How clearly and beautifully then, the examples that the apostle gives, come up to and fill out every point in his definition, conviction as to things not seen, confidence as to things hoped for.

TRUE OBJECT OF FAITH

Now, what is the true object of faith? I endeavored to set that before the audience this morning. To mention it is enough for an audience like this. That great doctrine or fact on which the Church of Jesus Christ is built, the solid rock underlying it is this: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." To you and me here is expressed an unseen fact; for Jesus is now up yonder in Heaven sitting on the right hand of God, the head of the Church, and head over all things for the Church, ruling all things in heaven and earth and under the earth, for the benefit of the Church, unseen, but glorious ! Our faith is conviction in regard to that unseen being, and that wondrous sacrifice he made for us, and the past of his wondrous history. All unseen. At the same time, on Him rest all our hopes. Our confidence in Him, in the things that He has promised, the things we hope for, is the animating power of our life. Faith in Jesus Christ then, is conviction as to things not seen, confidence as to things hoped for.

HOW IS FAITH BEGOTTEN WITHIN MAN?

It would be useless for me to go on further in trying to show what faith is. How is this faith begotten within a man? and then, after it is once begotten, how is it strengthened and deepened and enjoyed, until it becomes an absorbing and controlling power? These same examples give us the answer to these questions.

First, our faith that the worlds were created by the word of God: whence did we obtain it ? Not by reasoning about it ; not by dreaming ; not in answer to prayer: but we read, when we were little boys and girls, in chapter 1, verse 1, of God's holy word, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." We obtained it from God's word.

Whence did Abel obtain his conviction and confidence that led him to offer that lamb at the altar? We have very little information about that, but we know from the very nature of the case that he did not get it from any human source. It did not spring up from his own reasoning. No mortal man could have conceived from the results of his own ratiocination, that to slay a little innocent lamb and burn its flesh and sprinkle its blood, would procure a blessing upon him from the God of heaven. He must have obtained it from revelation. From some word that the Almighty had communicated in some way to his father, or his mother, or himself, or his brother, or the whole family together, which is left out of the short records of Genesis. He obtained it from the word of God, communicated to him in some way. Pass on to the next, and how did Enoch obtain his conviction in regard to the unseen God, and his confident expectation that God would reward him if he served him? It must have come in the same way. The brief records in the first chapters of Genesis fail to tell us the details.

Pass on to the next one, when revelation is getting a little fuller, and how did Noah obtain his conviction that a flood was coming upon the world, and his hope of escape from it for himself and his family? If he had reached that conviction by his own reason, it would have been a very daring and presumptuous

thing for him to have said, "Oh, well, all the world will perish, but I and my family will be saved." He could not have reached this hope from the workings of his own mind. God said to him, "The end of all flesh is before me. I repent that I have made man; it grieves my heart. I will bring a flood upon the world, and destroy every living thing that hath the breath of life. But build thou an ark, put into it thyself and thy family, and two of every kind of the animals that have the breath of life, and save them." From the word of God he obtained the conviction and the confidence.

How did Abraham obtain his conviction about the land when he did not know where it was? God said to him, "Come into a land which I shall show thee, and I will make of thee a great nation, I will give it to thee for an inheritance." From the word of God. And how did he obtain that idea, that conviction, that strong, life-controlling confidence about the city in the eternal world, whose builder and maker is God, in which he should live when he was done with this? Here again the records are silent as to who told him. But we know very well that no human being ever had this clear conception of the eternal world, except by revelation. So it must have come to Abraham by some revelation of God's word which is omitted in the hasty and brief record of the Book of Genesis. But then you say, can it be possible that our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is begotten in the same way? Well, just look into the workings of your own mind, and ask yourself how did it originate in your mind—the conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? And every one of you must answer, I obtained it from God's word. But for that word, I would not have it.

Go into the heathen nations of the earth, and no man has ever been found, or ever will be, who has this conviction in him, except from the word of God. But then, how did we obtain our confidence in Him? That confident expectation of His blessing that brings us to Him in simple service and gratitude and love? How did we obtain that? Is the word of God able to create this feeling in the human soul? Well, it is very strange to me that such a question should ever be asked—whether the word of the Great God, the loving Father of heaven and earth, whose very nature is truth, can inspire us with confidence in His promises. Why, my friends, if God's word will not do it, what power is there in heaven or earth that you can conceive of, that could? We obtain it all, from the word of the Lord; and let me tell you, that the more you study that word, the more you know of it, the more of it you get laid away in your memory and embalmed in your heart, the stronger your faith will become—the better men of faith and women of faith you will be, to stand up against the storms of unbelief that rage around us in this wicked world. That is plain enough. Now in conclusion, how does faith bring us these blessings, the salvation of our souls in deliverance from sin, and life everlasting?

FAITH LEADS US TO DO AND FEEL

It looks a little strange, perhaps, to ask this question; but it is a practical one. Does faith bring us all those great blessings by simply existing within us, or by what it leads us to do and feel? The examples answer this question also. Was it by faith alone that Abel received the blessing which his sacrifice brought to him? Would he have received that blessing, if he had believed with all his heart everything he did believe, and never offered his lamb? You must see, it was because by faith Able offered a sacrifice, and an excellent sacrifice, that he had testimony borne to him that he was righteous.

How did Enoch receive the blessing of translation through faith ? By faith only existing in his soul ? Why, the language is that Enoch " walked with God. He was well pleasing" to God. It is the way his faith made him walk, that resulted in his translation. Passing on to Noah, how is it that by faith he built the ark ? By faith only? No, he had to go and cut the trees down, let the wood season, and hire a great many carpenters and ship builders at great expense. He must have been a very rich man to be able to build that ark.

There was a long period of years of constant labor and toil. It is by what his faith made him do, in the way of sacrifice of his money and of his time, his labor and his energy, that he saved his house.

And so with Abraham : not by believing God and sitting down at home and remaining there among his friends, and thinking that in some distant day God would work it out that the promised land would be an inheritance for his children. No; but when he was called, he obeyed and went, not knowing whither he was going, and traveled thirteen hundred miles to find out where the land was. It was by what it made him do. And so it was in regard to the blessing that came upon him for living in tents a hundred years, looking for the city whose builder and maker is God. That blessing came from the one hundred years of living with his wife Sarah, and his children, and his grandchildren, and all the three hundred and eighteen men servants, besides their women and children, in tents, in the rainy weather, in the hot weather, in the cold weather ; in tents over one hundred years. His faith secured the blessing by what it made him do, and if he had not done what it prompted him to do, he would have failed.

Now about our faith - How is it going to bring us to the forgiveness of our sins, to the salvation of our souls from all the sins of the past, and finally bring us through our journey to everlasting life? Not by causing us to offer a lamb as Abel did ; not by causing us to build an ark as Noah did ; not by causing us to go on a long distant journey to a far distant land, as did Abraham ; nor even by causing us to live in tents as he did. How then? By causing us to act on the same principles as they did. Every one of these acted in harmony with the object of his faith. Abel, in harmony with the object of his faith, offered a bloody victim on the altar. Enoch, in harmony with his, walked with God. Noah, in harmony with his, built an ark; Abraham, in harmony with his, went on a distant journey. So, if our faith is to save us, our faith in Christ, it will be by causing us to act in harmony with that faith. Well, what is that ? If He is Christ, the Son of the living God, ruling over heaven and earth, and we believe that, and act in harmony with it, we immediately surrender our souls and bodies and all that we have and are, to His divine guidance and control. Do we believe in Him as having laid down His life to redeem us from sin, and make it possible for God to forgive us? Do we believe that? Then, to act in harmony with that, is to love Him, and to show by every day's walk in life that we are grateful to our Redeemer. And thus our faith will cause us to live a life of love, of devotion, of service, to Him who is our Redeemer, our Savior, and our Friend. And if that faith dwells in any man's soul, and he is not living thus, he feels every day that there is an antagonism between his faith and his life. Every believer in this audience to-night, who has not commenced living such a life as that, feels that antagonism now; and it has given him great pain in days past. So then, not only are we to act in harmony with our faith, if we would receive God's blessing, but that faith moves us to act that way.

It impels us in that direction. When a man has to resist it and fight against it, he is not merely indifferent to his own best feelings, but he tramples them under his feet; and so he must continue to do, if he does not yield to the power of that faith and cast himself into the service of the Lord. I speak what you know by your inward experience.

I said awhile ago, that we do not have to do as the men of our text did, in carrying out our faith; and yet, we come very near it. We are not called upon to bring a lamb to the altar, and lay our hands upon its head, and shed its blood, and burn its flesh, but in the language of one of our beautiful hymns, if we would obtain the forgiveness of sins and the blessing of God, we are to come up and say: *"By faith I lay my hand On that dear head of thine; While like a penitent I stand And there confess my sin."*

And are we not to act, after having thus confessed that sin, as Enoch did—walk with God the remnant of our days? And, although God will not take us away in the body, for the body lies down in the grave, He sends angels to bear us into that strange land, and on that strange journey that we are to take. And are we not to act very much as Abraham did, when he was called? My brethren, you have started for a promised land. Do you know where it is? Can you point in the direction of it? You sometimes point up. But we all learn that this is a childish conception, when we have studied astronomy.

OUR FAITH IS FIXED ON THAT CITY

Do you know where that country is, to which you are going? Do you know how far it is away? Oh! How true it is that when we were called, we obeyed and started out, not knowing whither we were going—knowing only that God has said, "It is a goodly land, and I will give it to you." How much like Abraham. And then our faith is still fixed, as Abraham's was, on that city. We are told more about it than he was. He learned that it had foundations, and it is revealed to us as having foundations of precious stones—all the beautiful gems of this earth are built together in the foundations of that city, to give us an idea of its glory. It has gates of pearl, and inside of it everything that we can conceive of that is grand and glorious and beautiful; and not a man to enter it who tells a lie, or loves a lie or any mean thing. No sin; no sorrow; no tears; no grave-yards in it. We are living here as Abraham did, not exactly in tents, but oh, how frail our dwellings are! How quickly the fire makes them vanish, and the earthquake! In a little while strangers will dwell in the house where you live, strange children will be playing about the door where your children played. Everything is transient, like the Arab's tent that is moved every morning; but oh! We have our hearts fixed on the city which God has built, in the land that we know nothing of except what God has told us about it, and by faith in the unseen reality, and confidence as to the hoped for enjoyment of it, we are making our journey home. But, to be more specific in regard to the start, as we endeavored to show this morning, when a man has this faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is called upon to abandon a sinful life; to repudiate it out of the depth of his soul; to resolve that, by the strength of my will, helped by God to make it stronger, I will sin no more. That is repentance. Then, in imitation of that sad and gloomy and mournful hour, when He died, was buried and rose on the third morning, we are to be buried with the Lord in baptism. And as He rose out of that grave to have a new and different life, so we arise from that watery burial to live a new life, to walk with God, living in tents with Abraham.

Is there a penitent soul here to-night who has never started on this heavenly journey? Has it no attractions for you? Will you not flee from the darkness, the gloom and the horror, that have shrouded your soul whenever you have thought of God and death and eternity, and seize the precious hope, the strong confiding hope of the man of faith, and the woman of faith? If it is in your heart to do this, we give you the opportunity and beg you to come.