

Proving All Things

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Morning, Oct. 2, 1859

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." 1 Thess. 5:21

In this business scene in which our earthly lot is cast—in this buying, selling, toiling, trafficking every-day world, where many a stout swimmer is struggling hard for life, how little are men of business, generally speaking, liable to be imposed upon by plausible pretexts, or to be deceived by specious pretences. Knowing the vast amount of trickery practised in every trade, and what fraudulent, dishonest conduct men can be guilty of to obtain credit or secure profit, how the man of business is armed at all points to detect the attempted fraud, and how alive he is to every appearance calculated to arouse suspicion; so that no smooth words, no apparent show of honesty, can impose upon him, if he have reason to suspect that a person has designs upon his purse, or to take advantage of his simplicity. How carefully does the buyer examine the goods of the seller, that he may not be deceived by a smooth face either of the manufacture or of the manufacturer; and how the seller scrutinizes with as keen a glance the bills and cheques of the buyer that he may not give credit to a bankrupt speculator. Nor is this confined to the higher walks of business, to the sellers by the ton and the buyers by the six months' bill: it runs through every transaction where money may be gained or lost; so that the poor old woman who receives her half-crown a week from the relieving officer is as careful to examine her money, if the coin be suspicious, as a banker's clerk scrutinizes a doubtful cheque, or as the careful tradesman chinks a dull-looking sovereign on the counter. But why all this suspicion? Why all this close and constant watchfulness against deception? Why

are persons so keenly alive to imposition in money matters except for these two reasons? First, they know how fraud everywhere abounds, that there is scarcely a trade or profession in which there are not dishonest men and dishonest practices; and secondly, because they know that if they are deceived by them, they are deceived to their own injury—that the trader will soon be in the Gazette, or at least incur serious loss, unless he be as much on his guard against the customer by day as he is against the thief by night.

But how comes it to pass that men who are so keenly alive to fraud and trickery in the every-day business of life, are so easily imposed upon in the solemn matters of religion? How is it that men who could not be deceived by any pretext, and who even suspect deception where none was intended, almost assuming as an axiom that every man was dishonest till clearly proved to be the contrary, yet can believe every lie of Satan and of their own heart, can think well of their own state for eternity without one spiritual evidence in their favour, and even persuade themselves that they shall go to heaven when their whole life manifestly proves that they are on the broad road that leads to destruction! Is not this willingness to be deceived a fatal mark? And does it not evidently show that the things of time and sense are with such men of far deeper importance than the solemn matters of eternity; and that the consideration of a few pounds or a few pence is in their eyes a weightier question than whether their soul be saved or damned—whether heaven or hell is to be their everlasting portion?

I admire very much what I may call the manly nobility of our divine religion: I call it a divine religion, for no less than God himself is its Source and Fountain. He has revealed it as with a ray of light in the inspired page, and he himself works it with a divine power in the heart. Sprung, then, of such a

heavenly birth, when it shows its lovely face among the children of men, it courts inquiry; nor is it afraid of being examined by friend or foe, for it bears stamped upon it the very image of God himself. The word of truth both as we have it in our hands and as we have it in our hearts, comes before the eyes of men and says, if not in so many words, yet by the very aspect it wears—"Examine me for yourselves: I can bear the light. I want no shroud, no concealment. Look at me fairly in the face, and say whether I be not the truth of God." Nor does it want witnesses that it can speak with this authority both among sinners and saints; for such an impress of divine power is stamped upon the word of truth, that it plants even in men's consciences who do not fear God the conviction that it is the very language of Jehovah himself. Nor need I say that every saint has a witness in his own bosom to the truth and power of God's word as made spirit and life to his own soul. And so, in my feeble and faint way, I trust I may say to all whose ears my voice may reach, of the doctrines I preach, the experience I contend for, and the practice I enforce, Examine them for yourselves; see whether they be agreeable to the truth as it is in Jesus—in harmony with the oracles of God and the experience of the saints. I hold no novel doctrines, I entertain no secret or mysterious views. I preach what I am taught in my own heart out of the Scriptures, and advance nothing but what is commended to my conscience as the truth of God. And in saying so, I do but adopt the language of the text, where the apostle enjoins upon the church of God at Thessalonica and upon all into whose hands this epistle may come—"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

In opening up these words, as there must be some means of examination, for we cannot prove all things unless we know how to set about it, I shall, with God's blessing:

I.—Show, *First*, how we are to "prove all things."

II.—*Secondly*, what the things are which we are thus to prove.

III.—*Thirdly*, that as in examining such a variety of matters we shall no doubt find much to reject, what we are to cast *aside*.

IV.—*Fourthly*, as there will be some to be retained, what we are to hold fast: "*Hold fast that which is good.*"

I.—Before then we can prove all things, we must know how to set about it. A figure or two may help us to see this more clearly. A mathematician, for instance, might put before you a mathematical problem, and say "Prove this." Most of you would probably answer, "I cannot do it: I don't even know how to begin: it is a subject beyond my power." Or take a simpler figure: a schoolmaster might set a boy, who had no knowledge of arithmetic beyond the first four simple rules, a sum in the rule of three. The boy would say at once, "I cannot do it: I have not got so far." So if we are to act upon the apostolic exhortation, "Prove all things," we must know *how* these things are to be proved, or else we shall be in the position of the person ignorant of mathematics before whom a problem is set, or of the boy at school who has a sum put before him beyond his present reach.

Having thus shown you the *necessity* of knowing how to set about proving all things, I shall now, with God's blessing, show you its *nature*; in other words, how we are to accomplish this prescribed task, and what is requisite to do it wisely and well, scripturally and experimentally, that we may neither ignorantly or wilfully be deceived ourselves, nor deceive others.

1. The first requisite is an *unerring standard* to prove all things by. Take an illustration from an object before your eyes. Before this building was erected, there was a certain plan conceived in the mind of the architect. This plan he drew out upon paper according to scale; and the builder who worked upon the plan in due time set it out. Now if, in setting out the foundation, the builder had worked by a two-foot rule which was by some accident two inches too short, or had used a tape measure which, through some error, had been wrongly marked, it would be found, when the building was measured after its completion, that it did not agree with the plan; that a mistake somehow had been made, which, being investigated, would bring out the fact that the builder had worked by a measure not of the standard length. The same necessity for an unerring standard runs through every weight and every measure, every coin and calculation, is enforced by rigorous laws and heavy penalties, and lies at the foundation of every mercantile transaction, and, in fact, the whole business of every-day life. In divine matters, if we are to prove all things, it is no less imperative at the very outset to have an unerring standard, by which everything in religion may be tested and weighed. This unerring standard we have *in the word of God*. God the Holy Ghost has inspired every part of the Scriptures of truth which we hold in our hands. The Bible, therefore, is our standard: we have no other. Here it lies open upon my pulpit before all your eyes as a witness for me or against me, whether I make it my standard or not. Every doctrine, every branch of experience, and every precept that I enforce upon your conscience are contained in the Book of God. By this unerring, infallible standard, all my preaching, all other men's preaching, is to be measured, weighed, and proved—so that no doctrine advanced by me or by any other man is to be received as a doctrine according to godliness which is not found in the word of truth; no experience is to be admitted as genuine which is not in

accordance with the experience of God's saints as revealed in scripture; nor is any precept or practice to be enforced which is not in the pages of the inspired record, as written there by the finger of him who cannot lie.

2. But we want something further still before we can prove all things. All unerring standard is not sufficient, unless we possess *skill* to use it. Let me illustrate this by a figure or two. You might go into an astronomical observatory and there see a great variety of beautiful instruments, constructed with the greatest skill to measure the angular distances of the heavenly bodies, and determine the time to the tenth of a second; and you might be asked to observe a transit, or measure the distance of a particular star from the moon. You would answer, "I cannot do it; I do not know even the names or uses of these curious contrivances." Here, then, are beautiful instruments, but you cannot use them for want of knowledge and skill. Or take another case. You might be going to Australia and suffer shipwreck on the voyage; but you might escape in the ship's boat, with compass, sextant, chart, almanac, and chronometer. Now the first question would be which course to steer to reach land. This may be ascertained by the instruments, and the boat's crew might say to you, "Take the sextant and chronometer, and tell us our exact latitude and longitude;" but you would reply, "I have not the skill to do it. I have never taken an observation with the sextant in my life." Then you might all be cast away with the means of safety in your hands for want of skill to use them. So in grace. Here is the word of truth, the Bible, in itself compass, chart, sextant, and every means of escaping the shipwreck of the fall and reaching the heavenly harbour. But being a divine book, you must have *divine skill* to understand and make use of it; in other words, you must have the *teaching of the Holy Ghost* in your heart that you may understand the Scriptures, and use the

standard of truth with skilful eye and hand. The apostle speaks of those who are "unskilful in the word of righteousness" (Heb. 4:13); and tells his beloved Timothy that the Scriptures are able to make him wise unto salvation if rightly used, that is, through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:15.) The Holy Spirit, then, must enlighten our understanding, or else we are in the same position as the man who goes into the observatory and sees instruments which he cannot use, or as the shipwrecked voyager in the boat who cannot avail himself of the appliances within his reach. So the Bible is in well-nigh every house and every hand; it is read in every church and chapel, and in almost every family; but without the inward teaching of the Holy Spirit it is no more use towards salvation than a sextant in the hand of a landsman to ascertain the position of the ship.

3. Then there is a third thing necessary still, and that is, *honesty of purpose*. See how this stands in human matters. A nobleman might visit his estate to be surveyed, and might employ a surveyor who thoroughly understood his business, but who was dishonest. He might have with him the best instruments—the Gunter's chain, the theodolite, the spirit-level, the field-book, and every other requisite for a first-class survey; but if he purposely measure every field wrong, of what avail are his unerring instruments, or his practical skill in their use? Or, to take a more familiar figure, a tradesman may have the very best scales and weights on his counter that money can buy; but of what advantage is this to the customer if he puts his thumb upon the scale which holds the article to be weighed? So with the word of God; it is an unerring standard, but it may be used dishonestly as well as unskilfully. There are those who, "wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16), and there are those who "handle the word deceitfully." (2 Cor. 4:2.) The third requisite, therefore, is that "good and honest heart" which

the Lord speaks of in the parable of the sower, and by which the fruitful hearer is specially distinguished. This is produced by *the implanting of godly fear*, which makes the heart honest, the conscience tender, and the soul sincere.

Let me, for the sake of clearness, recapitulate the three necessary requisites before you can "prove all things:"—First, you must have an *unerring standard*, or you are like a man measuring with a faulty measure, or weighing with uneven scales. This unerring standard we have in the word of truth. Secondly, you must have *skill to use it*; in other words, you must have the light of God in your understanding, and the life of God in your heart. And thirdly, you must have *an honest purpose*; in other words, the fear of God in a tender conscience, that you may make a right use of God's word, whether that word be for your condemnation or for your justification.

II. Now I come to my second point, which is—*what the things* are thus to be proved. A Christian has to prove everything as he goes along. Every step of the way, first and last, has to be tried over and over again, backwards and forwards, up and down, inside and out. For as judgment begins at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17), and the Lord judges and acquits the righteous before he judges and condemns the ungodly, so all true spiritual judgment begins at home. A man must be a criminal before he can be a judge, be condemned and acquitted himself before he can sit in judgment on others. But many now assume the crime and put on the black cap, whose right place would be the criminal's bar; and lift up the sword of judgment, when they ought to have the handcuffs on their own wrists. But a Christian has first to prove the genuineness of *his own* religion, "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves." (2 Cor. 13:5.) He has to weigh it according to the word of truth, by

the light of divine teaching in his heart, and by the working of godly fear in his conscience. Thus he who would walk before God in truth with an upright heart, in the very light of his countenance, has much to do—yea, he has everything to do. When we look at what is to be done, how vast the precept, how wide the exhortation, that he has to prove all things, well may we say, "Thy commandment is exceeding broad." To carry out a precept like this gives a Christian a daily, I may go further, an hourly task. As "all things" come before his eyes, rise up from time to time, without or within, in the church or in the world, in providence or in grace, if he is to act upon the apostolic exhortation, "Prove all things," and is to do it as I have pointed out, it will give him not only a sum to be done every day, but almost every hour of his life.

But as the expression "all things" is so wide we shall lose ourselves in generals if I attempt to grasp the whole. We will then come to particulars; for unless I come to some stated points, we may lose ourselves in a labyrinth of confusion.

Let me then show some of the most marked of the "all things" which the saint of God has spiritually and experimentally to prove.

I. And, first, let us view them *as regards himself*;—

1. The first thing that he proves, is *the very being of God*; for though he may have by tradition, by the dictates of natural conscience, or by the external manifestations of God in creation, a faint glimmering light to see that there is a God, so as to cause a degree of fear and bondage towards that great and glorious Being of whom he has this dim trace, yet he has no real acquaintance with him such as dwells in a regenerate breast. Has not the Lord himself said, "This is life

eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent?" (John 17:3.) And how can we know the only true God, or come to him in prayer unless we first believe that he exists? And so the Apostle speaks, "He that cometh to God must believe that he is." We have then to prove by faith the very being of a God; that he searches and knows us; that he compasses our path and our lying down, and is acquainted with all our ways. (Psalm 139:1, 2, 3.) This is not a matter of reasoning, but a gracious feeling, a reverential conviction, an inward teaching, a divine persuasion communicated by the Spirit of God when he applies the word of truth to the conscience, and thus differs not so much in degree as in nature from any other knowledge of God's being, such as the unregenerate may possess.

2. But we have to prove, secondly, not only that God *is*, but that he is *what* the Scripture has declared him to be: unspeakably *holy*, intrinsically *just*, and *pure* beyond all thought and all expression; so holy that the very heavens are not clean in his sight, and he chargeth his angels with folly; so pure, that he cannot behold evil and cannot look on iniquity. (Hab. 1:13.) There is no line of truth that the Holy Spirit writes upon the conscience with a firmer hand, than this inward testimony to the holiness, purity, justice, and majesty of God. It enters into every gracious feeling concerning him; it forms the living breath of every warm petition, indeed, of all spiritual prayer and supplication; it bows down the saint upon his knees with holy reverence before the majesty of heaven, penetrating his soul with a godly fear and awe of the great and glorious, self-existent "I AM." Unless you were checked in drawing near to the mercy-seat by some believing apprehension of the greatness, glory, justice, holiness, and purity of God, you would rush into his presence in daring confidence and arrogant presumption. But

knowing and feeling that he is a consuming fire, you serve him acceptably with reverence and godly fear. (Heb. 12:28, 29.) And all this you daily prove by the word of God in your hands, the light of life in your heart, and the fear of God in your conscience.

3. The child of grace has also to prove that this great and glorious God has *revealed his justice and righteousness in a holy law*; that he has not left a knowledge of his justice and of his wrath against sin to mere impressions made upon the mind, to mere feelings that come and go, or to fluctuating sensations of guilt and fear that may spring up in the heart, for a measure of these the very heathen had; but that he has given a permanent record in the word of truth to his righteousness by revealing it in a holy law given with every accompaniment of terror from heaven. The justice of God dwelt in his eternal bosom before he gave it expression in a holy law. So in human legislature, justice exists in the bosom of Parliament before an act is passed to embody it. Some new crime, for instance, bursts forth which must be punished and suppressed. This is done by a law passed against it; but the justice which condemns the crime existed in the breast of Parliament before expression was given to it in a written statute. So it is with the law of God. The law is the expression of God's holiness—the declaration of God's justice; and as all laws must have penalties for disobedience, this also has its penalty, for the divine Law-giver declares as in a voice of thunder, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them." When then, the Spirit of God animates the law, puts breath into it, gives it a voice, and speaks through it to the conscience, then it becomes the living expression of the justice and holiness of God, and the soul falls before it: condemned by this terrible sentence, it puts its mouth in the dust, and becomes guilty before God. Thus it proves that God

is not only eternally and intrinsically just, but that he is just in a condemning law, as revealed in the Scriptures, that unerring standard, shown to the conscience in the light and life of the Spirit, and felt therein by the inward operation of the fear of God.

4. The Christian also proves that nothing *escapes the eyes* of this just and holy God; that he lays bare every secret thought, searches every hidden purpose, and scrutinizes every desire and every movement of the mind. He thus discovers and brings to light all the secret sins of the heart. Men in general take no notice of heart sins: if they can keep from sins in life, from open acts of immorality, they are satisfied. What passes in the chambers of imagery they neither see nor feel. Not so with the child of grace: he knows the experience described in Psalm 139. He carries about with him the secret conviction that the eye of God reads every thought. Every inward movement of pride and self-righteousness, rebellion, discontent, peevishness, fretfulness, lust, and wantonness, he inwardly feels that the eye of God reads all, marks all, condemns by his righteous law all, and, because he is so intrinsically pure, hates and abhors all. Thus he proves, amongst the "all things," which are weighed up and measured in the inward court of conscience by the unerring standard of the word of truth, the light of the Spirit's teaching, and the workings of godly fear, that he is a sinner before God, and that of a deeper dye and more crimson hue than any other transgressor, for he sees and knows his own heart, which nobody else can see or know. He is indeed aware that many may have sinned more deeply and grossly as regards outward acts; but he feels that no one can have sinned inwardly more foully and continually than he; and this makes him say with Job, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee; wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." (Job

42:5, 6.)

5. But he also proves that *he has no strength* to believe, to hope or to love; and he is led, from the testimony of the Blessed Spirit, to see that in and by the Adam-fall he lost all power and all will Godward, and became dead in trespasses and sins, without help or hope. He thus becomes deeply convinced that he cannot by any means save or deliver his own soul from eternal death; that if saved, it must be by an act of sovereign grace; that mercy must come down to him, for he cannot come up to it; that the cord of love must be let down from heaven into his heart to lift him up into the bosom of God, for without it he must sink under the weight of his sins and the helplessness of his fallen, corrupt nature.

6. But he has much else to prove. He has not only to prove that salvation is of sovereign grace, by being persuaded that it must be sovereign to reach him, and thus to learn it negatively; but he must advance a step further still in this training school of instruction, this proving house of the weapons of Christian warfare. He has to prove that *salvation is treasured up in the Person and work of the Son of God*. Hitherto he has been proving what salvation is not; now he has to prove what salvation is. The previous work was to bring him out of self, to lay him low in the dust, and thus make him a fit subject for mercy. But he has now to prove where mercy is to be found, through whom it comes, and whence it is to be obtained. But he still proves it by the word of truth, the teaching of the Spirit, and the operations of godly fear. As then the Lord the Spirit is pleased to enlighten the eyes of his understanding to see the Person and work of the Lord Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures, and to manifest him in some measure to his heart, he proves that there is salvation in the blood and obedience of God's dear Son, and in no other. As he has had to prove the justice of God in a

broken law; so has he now in the same way to prove the mercy of God in a glorious gospel. He proves it by reading with believing eyes the testimony given to the Lord Jesus in the word of truth, the unerring standard; for his faith is founded upon nothing short of the inspired word of God. His faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is no passing fancy, no warm mental emotion; it is no swelling of enthusiasm, airy flight of imagination, or dreamy, visionary fanaticism built on shadows. His faith rests upon the solid word of God—the sacred, inspired record. And this he proves by finding the instability of everything else; that feelings come and go, rise and sink, flow and ebb, like the ever-moving sea; that in them, apart from the word of truth, therefore, there is no dependence. Being often deeply tried not only about his faith, but the very grounds of his belief, he feels that without a firm foothold, faith itself cannot stand. To build for eternity, faith must build on a rock which cannot be moved; or, to change the figure, like Noah's dove, it wants something to rest upon, suitable to its nature. The dove sent out of the ark could not, like the raven, settle upon the floating carcasses destroyed by the deluge, nor rest upon the cold, dripping, foodless, shelterless mountain tops, though they were just emerging out of the general wreck. Upon the ark alone could she find rest for the sole of her foot; and when Noah put forth his hand and pulled her in unto him in the ark, she found herself fully at home again in her beloved nest. So with faith. Faith cannot rest upon fancy; it can only rest upon the solid truth of God, as revealed in the Scriptures. And when it comes into the truth of God, as Noah's dove came into the ark its own nest and home, then it finds rest and peace. I wish to express myself clearly here, as many persons think we build our faith and hope, not on the Scriptures, but on some mental feelings, or fancies of our own, distinct from the word of God. I do not, and cannot build my faith on anything but what is revealed in the Bible; and I must do it because I

have no other foothold for it to stand upon. Do you not feel the same, you who know anything of the trial of faith? You have had many a tossing up and down, and have often wanted a foothold for your faith to stand upon. You have tried to believe this or that doctrine, or to get into this or that experience; but you kept still falling short, for you found that your faith wanted something stronger than the testimony of men; you needed a solid foundation on which to build for eternity; for the things to be believed were so invisible and so mysterious that nothing but the word of God could suffice for your faith to stand upon and rest in. When, then, in this trial of faith, the truth of God as it stands revealed in the Scripture was applied to your heart by a divine power, then you found that there was a foothold for belief, and that your faith could then rest upon the inspired word of God, as a rock on which to build, for life and death, time and eternity. It was so with Abraham. When Abraham was looking forward to the birth of the promised seed, many a doubt or fear might have arisen in his mind as to whether he should have a son by Sarah. But he rested upon the word of promise, and thus obtained a foothold for his faith. As the apostle speaks, "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be." (Rom. 4:18.) Our faith must in the same way rest on the word of promise, that "by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us." (Heb. 6:18.) Here then is the strong foundation, that God cannot lie, and that he has spoken by two immutable things, his word, and his oath. Thus in the gospel, which we hold in our hands, the Person and work, the love, blood, and righteousness of the Son of God, are revealed as with a ray of light to believing eyes. By the operation of the Holy Spirit on your heart, you believe the testimony thus given of Jesus; you credit God's

truth; and by an unction from above, it is made life and power to your soul. Faith is thus raised up and drawn forth, and embraces the Lord Jesus Christ as thus revealed; and so the gospel becomes to you "the power of God unto salvation," for it is so to "every one that believeth." (Rom. 1:16.) You believe with your heart unto righteousness that the Lord Jesus Christ is the very and true, real and proper Son of God, and that being such by his very mode of subsistence, as a Person in the Godhead, he has taken into union with his own divine Person a sacred humanity, in which he has suffered, bled, and died, and by the offering of that sacred humanity upon the cross at Calvary, has finished the work which the Father gave him to do—which was, to bring in an everlasting righteousness, and to reconcile the church unto God.

7. But you want fully to prove *your interest therein*. You believe the doctrines which I have advanced to be true; you have no other hope, but what rests in and springs out of it: but you want to prove your clear interest in the blessing. When God the Spirit, then, is pleased to apply this glorious gospel to your heart; to reveal this precious Saviour to your soul; to sprinkle this atoning blood upon your conscience; to bring near this righteousness and to put it upon you, then you prove for yourself, that not only is Christ the Son of God, but that he is formed in you "the hope of glory;" that his blood not only cleanseth from all sin, but *you* from *your* sins; and that his righteousness justifies not only all the church of God, but your needy and naked soul, because you are a living member of that mystical body. And thus you prove the blessedness of the Gospel as a message of glad tidings, personally and individually, to yourself.

8. But there are other things which you have to prove, as well as those which I have thus far mentioned. You have to

prove that the way to heaven is a *way of trial, temptation, and tribulation*. It is not a smooth and easy, but a rough, rugged, and thorny road. Events in providence and trials in grace are continually springing up from without or from within, to teach us that lesson. Family afflictions, illness of body, painful bereavements; losses in property, and a path extremely rough and rugged in a variety of outward circumstances, are usually allotted to God's family. And to this rough path from without, there are generally added many painful trials from within. Thus they are in no uncertainty as to whether the path Zion-ward be a way of tribulation, for they find it to be so by almost daily experience: and when they examine it by the light of God's word, they find it there revealed, that "through much tribulation we must enter the kingdom." As, then, their minds are enlightened to see the way in which God's saints have trodden in all ages, as described in the Scriptures, they find it true more or less of all that "these are they which came out of great tribulation," and "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." And as the fear of God springs up in their heart, they see that they too must suffer with Christ, that they may be also glorified together. Thus they prove that the way to heaven is a rough and thorny road by its harmonising with what is declared of it in the lively oracles of God, corresponding with the experience of the saints, from the days of righteous Abel, and agreeing with the way in which the Lord is personally leading them.

9. They have to prove also that God is *a faithful God*—that he has made a covenant with his dear Son and the Holy Spirit on their behalf, and that all his promises are "yea and amen in Christ Jesus to his own glory." But though they believe this from the testimony of God in the word, they find many things very much to try their faith in the faithfulness of God, as regards themselves. Dark clouds often gather round them,

through which they can see no friendly beam of light appearing; temptations spring up to darken their evidences; God hides his face and they cannot behold him; the work of the Lord upon their souls, which once seemed plain and clear, is now cast in obscurity. Then they begin to doubt God's faithfulness. But after a time the clouds disperse, the sun shines, and the Lord lifts up once more upon them the light of his countenance; faith then springs up, hope again casts out its anchor, and love flows forth afresh to the God of all their mercies. They then see and believe that he is a faithful God; that what he has promised he will certainly fulfil; that he told them the way to heaven was through much tribulation; and that they must suffer with Christ, that they might also be glorified together. Thus they see he is faithful in leading them into fellowship with Christ's sufferings, that they may share his glory; for he told them they would be hated and despised by the world, and would have to walk in a path of sorrow. They find, then, that he is faithful to his word, by leading them into those paths in which they find this trying experience verified. But they also find that all these things work together for their spiritual good, that none of these trials and afflictions do or can separate them from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus their Lord. They discover also, that all these things are weighed out in due weight and measure, are all appointed by sovereign wisdom, and all timed by eternal love. Thus they prove the faithfulness of God—that even if he hide his face, he is faithful as well as when he discovers it; and that if he bring affliction, he is as faithful to his promise in laying it on, as in taking it off. Thus they prove that he is an unchanging and unchangeable God, one "in whom there is no variableness or shadow of turning;" that all the fluctuations are in themselves; but that the Lord is of one mind and none can turn him, for he ever rests in his love.

ii. But they prove also many things not only as regards themselves, but *as regards others*. 1. They prove that God *has a people here below* whom he especially loves; whom he has redeemed by the blood of his dear Son and reconciled to himself; and whom he is training up for glory. They find these people are led for the most part into the same path as themselves; have the same temptations and trials, and enjoy the same blessings and mercies; have the same God and Father, the same elder Brother and Saviour, and the same Holy Spirit as their Teacher, Guide, and Comforter. This kindles love to this peculiar people; and as their hearts are drawn forth in love and affection towards them, they prove their possession of one of the first marks of regenerating grace.—"We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren." (1 John 3:14.) But they have also to prove that these brethren are compassed with many infirmities, and that they have to bear and to forbear with one another in love. Thus they learn that the church of God here below is no more perfect than themselves—than even those who possess the grace of God are often very crooked in their tempers, obstinate in their determinations, and prejudiced in their feelings; that jealousy and envy are soon awakened and slowly put to sleep; that strife and division exist in well-nigh every church; and that many things are very trying in the choicest saints. But they thus prove their continual need of the exercise of much Christian forbearance, brotherly love, meekness, patience, and longsuffering, and the urgent necessity on their own part of avoiding all cause of contention and division.

2. They prove also, as the Lord leads them onward, that God has *servants of his own teaching, equipping, and commissioning*, whom he sends forth to preach the gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. If in rich mercy their lot is stately cast under a gospel ministry, they also

prove to their soul's joy and establishment in the truth that the Lord does sometimes put into the mouth of his servant a message from himself, for he describes their experience, the feelings of their soul, their peculiar temptations, as well as their deliverances and blessings; and thus as eye sees to eye and heart feels to heart, they have an inward evidence that God does teach his servant and enables him to preach with light, life, and power to their conscience. They thus prove also that the word of God has in the hands of the Spirit a living effect upon the heart—that it can wound and that deeply at times, and that it can also blessedly heal; that there is in the word of grace, as preached by the servants of God, a power to comfort when cast down; a power to deliver from darkness and bondage; a power to stir up the life of God within, to revive the graces of the Spirit, and to deepen and carry on the work of faith, the patience of hope, and the labour of love.

iii. As thus led and taught and blessed, they prove also other things. 1. They prove *the power of prayer*: that though there is at times a sad destitution of prayer as well as of every other grace of the Spirit within, yet that the Lord does occasionally pour out upon them the Spirit of grace and of supplications, and that he answers the prayers that he thus indites. When, then, they get answers to prayer, not only sweet liberty of access to the throne, but inward and outward testimonies that their petitions are heard and answered, they prove that there is still a God in Israel, who yet says and fulfils what he says, "Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." (Psa. 50:15.)

2. They also prove the *blessedness of union and communion with the Lord Jesus Christ*; that there is such a living and divine reality as being united to the Lord the Lamb, as a member to the body, as a branch to the stem, as a wife to

the husband; and that this union and communion with the Son of God produces also union and communion with the Father and the Holy Ghost; and thus they have sacred fellowship with each Person of the Holy Trinity.

3. They also prove as a fruit of this union and communion other heavenly blessings; as that there is such a thing as God's *opening his heart* and speaking in words of consolation to their troubled breast. So they prove at times that there is such a blessing, such a divine reality as the kingdom of God set up in the heart, and that this is the beginning of heaven below; that even here in this vale of tears they may have such a foretaste of immortal joy as will amply recompense them for all their troubles and sorrows, and fully satisfy them that they are in the way to Zion to enjoy it in full.

iv. But to prove all these things *will give them* more or less a *daily task*; for if "all things" are to come before them, both good and evil, and they have to prove them all by examination according to God's word, the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and the movements of godly fear, what a daily task lies before them; a task always beginning and never ending! Thus, sometimes all manner of sin and uncleanness works within and strives for the mastery: they have to prove its evil; temptations of every kind assail their faith, and dash their very hope; they have to prove their violence; snares are laid for them by Satan: they have to prove their danger. Sometimes they have to prove their weakness in the hour of temptation, and to prove therein the power of God; how he is able to deliver in the darkest hour, and what strength and consolation he can give to their fainting spirit. Thus day by day, as the work of God is being carried on in their breast, they keep proving all things: for a living tribunal is set up in their heart—a court of conscience, which is ever sitting and allowing no vacation. Though outwardly, therefore, the child of God may seem unoccupied, his occupation is within, in

that busiest of all busy worlds—his own heart. He may have little to say to others, live a solitary and secluded life, for his occupation is with God and his own soul; and this is ample work. But "in all labour there is profit," and so he finds it; for in this daily task of proving all things, he finds much to discourage and much to encourage, much to sink and much to raise him, much matter of humiliation, grief, and godly sorrow, and yet much matter for praising and blessing his kind and gracious God.

III. But I pass on to my next point, which is, to show that when we begin to prove all things, we are sure to *find much to be rejected*. The very circumstances of our being called upon to "prove all things," assumes that there are things which cannot stand the trial; and as we are expressly told to "hold fast that which is good," it is clearly implied thereby, that we are to reject and throw aside that which is bad. The child of grace, then, as he begins to prove all things, soon finds much to be rejected. It is with him almost like a warehouse where there has lately been a fire. When the fire is extinguished, the goods are in due time examined. Some are thoroughly burnt and worthless; others are damaged with the water which has been brought to quench the flames; others again are partially scorched, or so much so as to fall in pieces directly they are touched. Then there may be a few goods, perhaps, in the very innermost part of the bales which neither water nor fire have injured; and these are kept when the rest are thrown away.

Or we may compare this examination to that of a ship which has been cast upon the shore and wrecked: when what remains of the cargo is examined, much is found so damaged by water as to be utterly worthless. In parts of the ship which the water has not reached, as in the innermost cabin, or the water-tight locker, a few articles may be found

untouched, untarnished, and these are carefully separated from those which have been irreparably injured. So it is in this divine examination when the Christian comes to prove all things, he finds the task much like examining damaged goods. He finds many burned bales—bales once filled with his own strength, wisdom, and righteousness, with which house and warehouse, parlour, cellar, bedroom, and attic were all thoroughly crammed. The fiery law has passed over and through all these things and scorched them up.

Therefore, when he examines these goods after the flames have somewhat subsided, he has to cast them all away, because they could not stand the fire. But he finds some precious jewels in the cabinet, some gold and silver in the cash box, which the fire has not touched. Other goods are scorched, and fall to pieces when handled. Thus he finds there are many doctrines and sentiments, views and opinions in religion of which he once thought highly, but which he now has to reject as worthless: they could not stand the fire. They may look pretty well, but handled by firm Christian fingers they drop to pieces like scorched handkerchiefs. He finds also, as he goes on with the examination, that he has to give up many people whom he once held very close. He begins to see that there are in the visible Church such characters as dead professors, loose antinomians, it may be, under the sound of the gospel which he himself hears, erroneous men who hold part of God's truth, and cloak up their errors with soft glozing words, letter-ministers, sound in the truth but without life or power in their souls or their ministry; all these he feels he must reject as goods either scorched by fire, or damaged by the very water which they have brought to put out the flame.

He finds also that the world he once so fondly loved not only in its company and maxims, but in the inward spirit of it; the

bosom sins which sticks so close; the idols set up in the chambers of imagery, he must give up all, because to keep them is not consistent with the word of truth, the light and life of God in the soul, and the dictates of a tender conscience. As, then, he pursues his examination, he finds he must give up one thing after another until well nigh all is lost, and he seems to have scarcely anything left. His own good name; his reputation amongst men; the opinion of his own wisdom and abilities and what he fain would be amongst his fellow creatures,—all these he has to discard, because they are inconsistent with the grace of God, the mind of Christ, and the teachings of the Spirit. Thus the more he proves all things by the standard of God's truth, the light of the Spirit within, and the dictates and workings of godly fear, the more and more he has to discard. To revert to our figure: As in this burnt house, or in this shipwrecked vessel, much at first sight might appear passable, but a closer examination betrays it to be worthless; so it is with many things which the Christian once held very closely. A better examination, a closer acquaintance, a deeper knowledge of God's truth, show the worthlessness of many things and of many persons too, once by him highly esteemed. All these must be discarded, until at last he seems, not only despised by the world, as a poor narrow-minded, prejudiced, bigoted creature, ever discontented and dissatisfied, but to have lost everything except what God has wrought by his own power in his soul.

IV. We now then come to that which you are "*to hold fast,*" namely "*that which is good.*" Now that you have gone through your examination and proved all things, there are certain things which you find to be good. *The truth of God* you find to be very good: it has been life and power to your soul. You never saw before as you do now the beauty and blessedness of God's truth; and the more you see it in the light of God's Spirit, the more you love and the faster you

hold it. It is the very nature of the things of God to make themselves more and more acceptable to an enlightened judgment and an honest heart.

But, as time presses, I can only name a few of these good things. There are two things especially which every saint of God is called upon to hold fast: these are, First, *the beginning of God's work* upon his soul; and, secondly, his *deliverance*. Any manifestation too that you have had of the Lord Jesus Christ; any application of his atoning blood; any discovery of his glorious Person or shedding abroad of his love; hold that fast, for it is good. And so I may say, hold fast any promise you have ever had applied; any answer to prayer you have ever received; any felt blessing that may have been wrought in your heart by a divine power. All this is good. It comes from a good God; it works in a good way: it leads to a good end; it will make a good death-bed, and will land you in a most blessed eternity. Therefore "hold fast that which is good." Everything which is commended to your conscience as really good; every good man; every good minister; every child of God with whom you feel union or communion; every good precept, word, and work; in short, whatever is fully commended to your conscience as spiritual and divine, hold that fast, and you will find the benefit of it. Discard and reject everything bad, unbecoming, inconsistent, ungodly, erroneous, or heretical; discard them all—show them no mercy. In heart but not in hand, hew them down, as Samuel hewed down Agag in Gilgal.

Thus I lay before you a sum to prove, and you are called upon to prove it every day of your life; and do it you will, do it you must, whether I call you to do it or not. You cannot but do it; it is God's own word: "Prove all things." Prove, then, for yourself all that I say. Begin with my ministry, what you hear from my lips, or read from my pen; examine my

doctrines, the experience I preach, the precepts I enforce: examine them well by the light of God's truth. They will bear examination. I am not ashamed of my religion, of what I preach and write, or of my doctrines. Let what I bring forward as the truth of God be fairly examined: it will bear it. If it cannot, let it perish. So with you: what God has done for your soul will bear examination. What you have received of God, here or elsewhere, is good: hold it fast, for it is your life.