

The Staggerings of Unbelief and the Persuasions of Faith

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"He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that what he had promised, he was able also to perform." Rom. 4:20, 21

A few words upon the connection of our text with the general subject of the epistle may not be altogether out of place, and may serve, with God's blessing, to cast a fuller, clearer light upon it. I love to make clear work; to act, as far as I can, upon the scripture direction, "Make straight paths for your feet." (Heb. 12:13.) By so doing, I follow also Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth, (2 Tim. 2:15.) But we cannot rightly divide the word of truth unless we first clearly understand it. No minister, therefore, should attempt to take a subject which he does not fully understand: for if he do, his want of clearness of thought will be sure to produce want of clearness of expression; and what is the consequence? Minister and hearer are soon lost in a fog of confusion. The people go away weary and perplexed, the minister, if he has any right and proper feeling, leaves the pulpit ashamed and disappointed; and what might have been a season of edification to both is little else but a season of weariness, perplexity, and confusion to all. It is, therefore, very necessary, or at least highly desirable, for all ministers are not equally gifted either naturally or spiritually with clearness of thought or expression, that every servant of God should make clear work, and not only understand his subject by the

teaching of the Holy Spirit and by some personal experience of it, but be enabled well and fully to clear his ground, and from whatever text he preaches to set forth the truth of God in such a simple, plain, clear, intelligible way that the people may understand his meaning, and derive instruction and edification from his testimony. I would not say a word against the weakest or the least of the sent servants of God but this I must say, if God has sent them he has sent them with a message to his people; that they stand up in the pulpit to instruct, comfort, encourage, and build up the church of God on her most holy faith; and therefore if they cannot do this work clearly and intelligently, they bear but feeble marks of their message or their ministry being given them of God. All ministers indeed are subject to their seasons of darkness, confusion, and embarrassment when they are miserably shut up both for gracious thoughts and a door of utterance. I feel much of it myself at times, and can therefore feelingly sympathise with others in the ministry who are similarly exercised. But with all this, I never attempt to take a text or to preach from a subject which I do not seem in some degree to understand in its spiritual meaning, or of which I do not in some measure feel the power. Many ministers, especially young ministers of an aspiring mind, aim at fine language and flowery expressions. But flowers are not food, and least of all artificial flowers. It would be much better if they would seek first well to understand their subject by an experience of its truth and power, and then to open it to the people in the simplest, plainest, clearest language that they can find.

The main subject of this epistle, as you are doubtless well aware, is the grand doctrine of justification. It is in this beautiful, or as I may well call it, this grand and glorious epistle, that we find the fullest and clearest solution of that mysterious and tremendous problem, how God can acquit, pardon, and justify a sinner, and yet remain the same pure,

righteous, and holy God? None could solve the mystery till God himself solved it in the gift and work of his dear Son; and to open the fruits and effects of this gift and work in the free justification of a sinner is the subject of the Epistle to the Romans, which may, therefore, well stand at the head and front of all Paul's epistles. I have read that more than 2,000 commentaries have been written upon it; and if there were 2,000 more they would still be unable to unfold a thousandth part of the blessed mysteries contained in it.

There always were in the mind of men, from the first promise given after the fall, fleeting hopes and expectations that God might or would pardon sin; but then came this question, Does God pardon all, or does he pardon only some? If God pardon all, where is his righteousness, where the purity and holiness of the divine nature? Is sin so slight a thing that it may be passed by as a matter of small moment with God? Has Justice no claims as well as mercy? Man's natural conscience revolts from the belief of universal pardon; and every day's experience confirms these convictions in the punishment of criminals, condemned to death as much by the verdict of society as by the verdict of the law. Divine justice, therefore, can no more tolerate universal pardon than human justice, which is but a faint reflection of the divine. But if God pardon some and do not pardon all, why does he pardon these and not pardon those? It must either be out of pure mercy, as in the case of an earthly sovereign, or there must be some qualification on the part of the recipient. But what are these qualifications, by whom prescribed, and by whom weighed and decided? How much or how many are required? and in whom are they to be found? Here was the problem. But how to solve it none could tell. Luther lay upon his bed three days and three nights, without eating, drinking, or sleeping, under the weight and pressure of that terrible problem. It has driven some almost

to the pool and to the halter. The conviction of sin from a fiery law shut out all hope of salvation by works, and ignorance of the gospel debarred them from a knowledge of salvation by grace. This was just Luther's case. The words which ground him as between the upper and nether millstone were, "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested." (Rom. 3:21.) "What!" said he, "does the gospel demand a righteousness of me as well as the law? Then, I am damned by both; for I can no more obey the gospel than I can obey the law." Now in this glorious epistle, as full of logical argument as it is of doctrinal truth, the grand mystery is solved and a full and satisfactory explanation given how "God can be just, and yet the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus." It is all contained in the compass of two or three verses, which ought to be written, I will not say in letters of gold, but on diamonds and sapphires, like the breastplate of judgment borne upon the breast of the high priest, in which there were four rows of precious stones, on which were engraved the names of the children of Israel. "But now the righteousness of God." This does not mean God's own intrinsic, eternal righteousness, but the way whereby he justifies a sinner. I mentioned just now Luther's three days' agony from the pressure of these words. I must now tell you his deliverance. As he lay on his bed thus distressed, on a sudden it darted into his mind that the righteousness of God manifested in the gospel, was the way in which God freely justifies a sinner by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. The Holy Ghost bore such a testimony to the truth of this in his soul, that he leaped off his couch in as great a transport of joy as of previous trouble. This made Luther a preacher; to this we owe the Reformation. This, then, is the meaning of the words, "the righteousness of God." "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all

and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:21-24) These words I have just said should be written not merely in letters of gold but engraved upon diamonds and sapphires for beauty, brilliancy, preciousness, and permanency; but there is a better place still on which they should be written—the tables of the heart, as the apostle speaks: "Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God: not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." (2 Cor. 3:3.) And they are written there when the truth comes home with divine power to the soul, and we are able to read the testimony in our own favour that by faith in the Son of God we are justified from all things from which we could not be justified by the law of Moses.

But now comes the question, "What has all this to do with Abraham's faith?" It has this to do with it. When the apostle, under divine inspiration, thus solved the mystery, and showed how God could, as he elsewhere speaks, thus justify the ungodly, it must have appeared to be altogether a new religion, a novel, unheard-of doctrine, that there was a full and free justification by faith without the deeds of the law. To show, then, that it was no novelty, no unheard-of doctrine, the apostle comes at once in the next chapter to the case of Abraham, who was not only the acknowledged father of the Jews, all of whom came from him by lineal descent, but was "the friend of God;" and was especially called and blessed by him. Now if the apostle could show that Abraham was justified, not by the deeds of the law but by faith, how triumphantly could he establish his point, that righteousness is through faith and not by works. He therefore asks, "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to

the flesh, hath found?" (Rom. 4:1.) Did he find justification by the law? No, surely, "for if Abraham were justified by works he hath whereof to glory." If he could have been justified by his own obedience he would naturally have something to boast of. He therefore adds, "but not before God;" that is, God will never allow any one to boast or glory before him, therefore not even Abraham. But see how he fully proves his point by a direct reference to the word of truth. "For what saith the scripture?" as if that must be decisive; "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness." He thus brings forward positive Scripture testimony that Abraham was justified not by works but by faith; and therefore that all who walk in the steps of Abraham are justified in the same way as Abraham was justified.

But this brings us to the words of our text, in which the apostle opens the nature of Abraham's faith. This is really as necessary to understand as the fact itself, that Abraham was justified by faith; for unless we knew the exact character of Abraham's faith we could not compare it with our own, or obtain any satisfactory testimony that we possessed the same faith as he. He opens it, therefore, under two distinct phases, which we may call its negative and positive aspects. He first shows the *negative* side: "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief." He then shows the *positive* side: "But was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that what he had promised he was able also to perform."

In taking up these words I shall endeavour, as the Lord may enable, to bring before you four things connected with the statement thus given of Abraham:—

I.—*First*, the *negative* side: "He staggered not at the promise

of God through unbelief."

II.—*Secondly*, the *positive* side: "But was strong in faith."

III.—*Thirdly*, the expansion of this positive side in the fuller description given of the *nature* of his faith: "That he was fully persuaded that what God had promised he was able also to perform."

IV.—*Fourthly*, "How, thereby he *gave glory to God*."

I.—Taking the great bulk, the generality of the professing people of God, they know more of the negative than the positive side, not only of faith but of the truth generally. They know and must know both sides, for in all true religion there are two sides, the dark and the bright, a knowledge of sin and a knowledge of salvation, an acquaintance with the malady and an acquaintance with the remedy. But taking them in the mass, leaving out of consideration the more favoured of the living family, I think we may boldly say that the greater part of those who are quickened into spiritual life are more acquainted with the dark side than the bright, and know more of the negative unbelief than of the positive faith. This leads me, therefore, to devote a part of my discourse to that side of the question, that I may not overlook or pass by the great bulk, perhaps, here present of those who possess divine life and whose souls are continually exercised with the workings of that monster and master sin—unbelief.

I. The apostle, unfolding what I have called the negative side, tells us very clearly what the effect is of this sin of unbelief, and points out two evils connected with it: 1, first, that it causes us to stagger; and 2, secondly, he points out what the sin of unbelief chiefly regards, or rather disregards, viz., the promise of God. These two points I shall now, therefore, take up in my description of unbelief.

When the Spirit of God begins to work with power upon a sinner's conscience, one of the very first things he does for him is to convince him of his unbelief. Thus our Lord speaks: "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they believe not on me." (John 16:8, 9.) Before this convicting work, whatever was his life as regards actual sin, he was living practically in unbelief; he was nothing else but an unbeliever; there was not a grain of what God calls faith in his soul. But he knew it not, for he was shut up in darkness and death, divine light not having yet shone into his mind, nor divine life having yet visited his soul. Though nothing but an unbeliever in the sight of God and in the sight of his people, he fully presumed that he had faith; and this faith might, as we find in many cases, have risen to a great height, and yet in the sight of God been nothing but vain arrogance and daring presumption, as not springing from the power of God, nor connected with holy fear and godly reverence of his great name. When, then, through the entrance of the word with power divine light and life enter into a sinner's soul, unbelief is one of the first things which is made manifest among the hidden sins of the heart. I have said "hidden sins," because usually outward sins are first laid upon the conscience and inward afterwards. But as "all things that are reproved (or discovered) are made manifest by the light; for whatsoever doth make manifest is light" (Eph. 5:13), so unbelief is sooner or later manifested by the light which shines into the soul.

1. Now there is one peculiar feature in unbelief which seems specially to distinguish it from other sins, and by which it is made distinctly manifest. It is a sin practically and pointedly *directed against God's faithfulness*; against God's veracity. It is therefore a sin directed against that of his attributes which

God holds most justly dear—his veracity and faithfulness. This peculiar feature distinguishes it from other sins. Thus sensuality is directed more against God's infinite purity; rebellion and murmuring more against his goodness; ingratitude more against his outstretched hand in providence; pride more against his majesty; worldly mindedness against his all-sufficiency and blessedness; covetousness and carnality more against his name and character as a God of blended holiness and love. But the sin of unbelief is directed point blank against his veracity, making God to be a liar. We read: "Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name" (Psa. 138:2); that is, above all thine other revealed attributes. To doubt, therefore, and distrust, or deny God's word, stamps unbelief with the greatness of the sin in proportion to his having so highly magnified it.

2. But unbelief has another feature which stamps upon it a peculiar and detestable character. It is a *mother sin*, a breeding sin; it is not in the heart alone, but gives birth to thousands of sins, all springing up out of its fruitful womb, like the fabled sea monsters. We see in the wilderness how all through all their journeyings the grand, the crying sin of the people of Israel was unbelief. It was the parent of all their fretfulness, murmuring, and rebellion; it lay at the root of everything done by them displeasing to God; gave birth to all their idolatry and all their other sins, and eventually shut out all but Caleb and Joshua from the promised land. Their carcasses fell in the wilderness through unbelief.

3. But it has also another marked and peculiar feature. It is a sin of so *subtle* a nature that, though ever working, it often escapes detection, except from a keen and practised eye. Conscience speaks at once against some sins: they are too flagrant and gross for conscience not at once to raise its

voice against them, not to mention the universal testimony of all good or even moral men as loudly condemning them. But there is something in unbelief so subtle; it so intertwines itself round every thought; it so meets us at every turn; it so starts up at the sight of every difficulty, that it will perhaps work most when least perceived. Lurking deep in the recesses of the heart, it escapes the unwatchful eye; as slippery as an eel, when grasped it glides out of the hand. If for a time seemingly dead, it suddenly starts up into fresh life; if for a time weakened, it seems only to rest till it regains renewed strength.

4. But I must not omit that peculiar feature of unbelief of which the apostle here speaks: Abraham's faith did not *stagger*, or, rather, Abraham did not stagger through unbelief. This is one peculiar characteristic of unbelief, that it staggers, or makes us stagger, at the promise of God. To bring this point more clearly before your mind, let us see how it thus acts in a variety of instances; and observe how it is especially directed against the promises.

For instance, God has given us in his word this gracious and encouraging promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9). But now see how unbelief staggers at this promise. Look at that poor, self-condemned, enquiring child of grace, hanging down his sorrowful head, who wants to know the full and free pardon of all his sins, to receive forgiveness into his breast, and so have a testimony of his acceptance in Christ and for Christ's sake. Now here stands the promise, most sweet and suitable to his case, and as if purposely written for him: "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." Does not he confess them, and that with many tears, with true penitence and deep sorrow of heart? But unbelief puts that promise

aside. He cannot enter into it, receive it, embrace it, or feel the comfort of it, for through the power of unbelief he staggers in it. Now what makes him thus stagger? The greatness of his sins, the holiness of God, the condemnation and curse of a broken law, and a deep sense of his own desperate state and case as a condemned transgressor before the eyes of infinite purity. He feels that his sins are of a most aggravated hue, of a peculiarly deep and desperate character. Had they not been committed under this or that peculiar circumstance; had they not been so much against light and conscience, against conviction, warning, admonition, perhaps against a profession of religion, with all its binding restraints; to sum it all up in one word, had he not been what he has been—for every heart knows its own bitterness, and it is a subject on which I must, for many reasons, touch but lightly—had he not been what he has been, and done what he has done, he thinks that mercy might reach his heart, and pardon might distil its sweets into his breast. But he staggers at the promise as seeing and feeling the greatness of his sins, the majesty of God, the holiness of the law, and how he ever is to receive it into his own bosom in all its fulness and blessedness he knows not.

Look again at another cluster of promises, which I put together as having a certain connection, spoken by the mouth of our gracious Lord: "Ask, and it shall be given you, seek, and ye shall find, knock, and it shall be opened unto you;" "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out;" "Come unto me all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest;" "Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you." Here is promise upon promise. No vine was ever more richly laden with clusters of grapes than the word of God is here laden with clusters of promises, such as these from the Lord's own lips; and they are all, "Yea, and in him, amen, unto the glory of God by us." They

all proceed from the mouth of him who cannot lie; they are all ratified by the oath of the Covenant; all witnessed to and sealed by the blood of the Lamb; and Jesus lives at God's right hand to execute and fulfil every one of them to the utmost. Yet such is the power of unbelief, that there is a staggering in many a gracious heart at the promise, a coyly putting it aside, an inability to avail oneself of it, a hanging back, a shrinking away from it; and though the clusters hang before the eye in all their richness and ripeness, and the mouth waters after them, yet from the shortened hand it is not able to reach one of them and bring it down to the lips.

Now take another promise. "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty." (2 Cor. 6:17, 18.)

Here we have the combination of an invitation and a promise. The invitation is to come out and be separate from the world; the promise is that God will receive such, and be a Father unto them. But how often is the invitation acted upon; and yet, from the power of unbelief, there is a staggering at the promise. But do they not both go together? Why then should we separate them? Why doubt that God has received you and will be a Father unto you if you have come out from among the ungodly, and are separate from every unclean thing, whether person, doctrine, or practice?

I have no doubt that we have some, if not many here, who are daily staggering at the promise of God, and that through unbelief. They cannot but see that the word of God is full of promises; they cannot but feel how suitable those promises are to their state and case; and yet through unbelief they stagger, and as we read in Psa. 107 of "those who do

business in great waters," "reel to and fro like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end," unable to receive these promises through unbelief. Now I would not encourage any one to venture upon these promises except in the strength of that faith which God gives; for I am sure, if we take the promises with a hand which God himself does not strengthen, if we lay hold of them with a faith which is not his gift, we shall be certain to repent of our presumption in so doing, and be driven back from the standing which we have taken. The children of Israel, on one occasion, "presumed to go up unto the hill top," when "the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and Moses his servant, departed not out of the camp." And what was the consequence of their presumption? "Then the Amalekites came down, and the Canaanites which dwelt in that hill, and smote them, and discomfited them, even unto Hormah." (Num. 14:45.) Therefore, though it is painful, yes, painful in the extreme to the children of God, to be so exercised with the power of unbelief, so to stagger and be at their wits' end, and not be able to avail themselves of the promises which are directed to their case, yet in the end what profitable lessons do they learn in that school; what a sifting there is of the chaff and the dust of unbelief from the pure grains of faith. In that furnace, how their presumption, their vain confidence, their fleshly arrogance, their false faith are burnt up as by fire, and how they learn in themselves and for themselves—there being no other way of attaining to a practical knowledge of it—that faith is the gift of God, and does not lie in the operation of our own hands, or stand in the wisdom of men.

II.—But I now pass on to the *positive* side of the *subject*—*the strength of Abraham's faith*. "But was strong in faith."

We have to know both sides of the question; the negative first, and then the positive, for it is a knowledge of both

these sides, unbelief and faith, which manifests us to be the children of God. If you had nothing but unbelief, how would you be distinguished from the positive unbeliever? If there were no principle in your breast, beyond those principles of unbelief which are in the breasts of all; if you are ever putting away God's word from you, through the power of unbelief, and were to live and die in that state, what is there in you to save your soul, or distinguish you from those who die in their sins? Therefore, though we hold up the negative side in order that we may enter into the secret feelings, and describe the exercises and perplexities of the quickened saints of God, yet we must bring before them faith in its fruits and effects, and thus hold up a glass that they may see also in it the features of the work of God in their soul, and recognise in themselves marks of divine teaching.

Abraham was "strong in faith." He was to be an exemplar to all believers. He was eminently "the father of the faithful." It was therefore necessary for his own comfort as well as for that of the church of God in all ages, that he should be strong in faith. But let us not for a moment think that Abraham gave himself the faith which he possessed; let us not believe that Abraham's faith, strong as it was, was strengthened by any act of his own. Let us not pour such contempt upon the grace of God, as to ascribe to Abraham any of this strength of faith of which God speaks so highly. If he was strong in faith, God gave him every atom of the faith in which he was strong. To hold any other doctrine is to dishonour God by giving honour to man. The apostle has expressly told us, that one reason why Abraham was not justified by works, was that he might not glory before God. But if Abraham's faith was of his own giving and strengthening, it would be a work of his own in which he could glory. If he was the author of his own faith, he would be the author too of the works performed by that faith; and

thus we should come at once to justification by works. But Abraham, as I shall presently show, displayed on more than one occasion, the weakness of his faith, and God has left this upon record to show us that Abraham's faith was not his own gift, or stood in his own power. It may seem hard to reconcile an apparent contradiction—that unbelief is a sin and a very great one, and yet we cannot give ourselves faith. It might therefore be objected, "Why are we blamed? Why are we punished for unbelief if we cannot give ourselves faith?" But the same objection may be made against our other sins, and upon similar grounds we might argue: "Why are men lost at all? Why punished for their sins if they cannot help sinning?" But the whole objection arises from an ignorance of the nature and depth of the fall. Because we have lost all our own righteousness, must God sacrifice all his justice and holiness? But I cannot enlarge on this point. Let us rather see in what consisted the peculiar strength of Abraham's faith. It had to fight with not only an apparently insuperable difficulty, but with, humanly speaking, a practical impossibility. I need not tell you, you are fully aware of the peculiar difficulty which Abraham's faith had to meet as springing out of his own advanced age and the similar case of Sarah. God gave him three special promises, and every one of these promises was connected with his having a child. One promise was, that the land of Canaan should belong to his seed for an everlasting possession. The second promise was, that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. The third was that God would be a covenant God to him and to his seed after him. Now all these promises depended upon his having a child and as God had promised that Sarah his wife should be "a mother of nations, and that kings of people should be of her," it was necessary that the promised son should come from her, as well as from him. But, as you well know, two difficulties stood in the way of the fulfilment of the promise, connected with himself and his

wife, and that these were not only naturally insuperable, but gathered fresh strength, so as to speak, every day. The strength then of his faith was shown in fighting against those natural difficulties, and in believing that God who had given the promises would in his own time and way overcome them, and perform what he had promised unto the uttermost. But God saw fit for five-and-twenty years to try that faith. The prospect would become naturally darker and darker, and the promise farther from its fulfilment as years rolled on. Yet Abraham's faith held through all these wearisome years, bearing with Sarah's fretfulness and unbelief, sustaining both himself and her, and manfully resisting every difficulty. By this patient endurance, it was manifested that he was strong in faith, and that he was fully persuaded that what God had promised he was able to perform.

III.—But this brings us to our next point—the peculiar *nature* and *character* of Abraham's faith. He was fully persuaded of the power of God to accomplish his own promise.

We are not to suppose that he was altogether free from unbelieving doubts and fears. His faith was subject to changes like our own, and by this it was distinguished from the faith which stands in the wisdom and power of man; the secret of its strength being that it stood in the power of God. When, therefore, that power was suspended, his faith was proportionately weakened. We have several remarkable instances of the weakness of his faith on some trying occasions. When, for instance, he said to the Lord, "Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?" was not his faith weak? Had not God said to him, "I will make of thee a great nation." (Gen. 12:2.) And again, "And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered."

(Gen. 13:16.) Yet, here he laments his childless state, and fears that his steward will be his heir. We see the weakness of his faith more especially manifested in two instances; once at Egypt, and again at Gerar. For in both places he denied that Sarah was his wife, and called her his sister. We see this weakness also in a more marked degree in his listening to Sarah's carnal advice to take Hagar to wife. It is true that God at that time had not especially promised him a son by Sarah, but he should have known better than to leave his own wife to take another to his bosom. Thus, Abraham with all his faith was not free from the workings of unbelief; nay, they seemed from the instances which I have brought forward to have sometimes risen in him to a high pitch.

And yet, with all the weakness of his faith, which was doubtless left upon record for our instruction, and that no man, not even Abraham, should glory in the flesh, this was the character of his faith, that he was fully persuaded that what God had promised, he was able also to perform. He therefore, in the strength of that faith, overlooked all creature difficulties. Weighed in nature's balance, they seemed insuperable. But he looked beyond all difficulties, and hung his faith simply upon this—God has promised it.

But now let me apply this more particularly to our own faith, of which Abraham's is brought forward as the representative pattern. I have before shown you that faith deals with the promises of God in the word, as Abraham's faith dealt with the promises made to him by God's own mouth. Now, the promises with which our faith has to deal are for the most part of a two-fold nature. 1, There are general promises in the word spoken to characters; and, 2, there are special promises spoken by the mouth of God out of the word to individuals. With both these kinds of promises, faith then has to deal, for we have already pointed out that our faith, if

genuine, must be of the same nature with the faith of Abraham; for in this sense he is "the father of all them that believe," and by walking in the steps of his faith we share his blessing, as the apostle says: "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." And observe the conclusion which he draws from this. "So then, they which be of faith, are blessed with faithful Abraham;" and thus, "the blessing of Abraham comes on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (Gal. 3:7, 9, 14.) I cannot here enlarge; but if you will carefully read and compare together Roman 4 and Gal. 3, you will find the whole subject clearly and beautifully opened by the pen of the Holy Ghost in the hand of Paul. Bear then this in mind, that the simple character of faith is that it consists in being fully persuaded that what God has promised he is able also to perform.

Now for the application of this. I brought forward in the first part of my discourse some premises which are spoken to characters, such as the promise of pardon to those who confess their sins; that God will receive graciously and be a Father to those who come out of the world, and separate themselves from all evil; that those who shall seek shall find, those who ask shall receive, and to those who knock it shall be opened; that Christ will cast out none who come unto him; and that whatever we ask in Christ's name he will do it unto us. Now these promises are spoken to characters, to those in whom the blessed Spirit has begun, and is carrying on a gracious work, whom he has fitted for the reception of these promises not only by the first giving of them in the word of truth, but by preparing the heart to receive them, in due time applying them, and establishing and confirming them in the believing soul. The first thing, then, we have to do in the acting of our faith, is to be fully persuaded that

what God has promised he is able to perform. He has promised to pardon those who confess their sins; he has promised to receive graciously those who come out of the world, and cast themselves simply upon his favour; he has promised to those who ask, pray, and knock that he will hear and accept and bless them. Now unless we firmly believe that God is able to perform, and that to us every one of these promises, we cannot take a single step forward. Here it is that the children of God first begin to learn their weakness. They see the word filled with promises, and all of them most suitable to their state and case. But when they seek to lay hold of those promises, appropriate them, and make them their own, then they find every difficulty arrayed in the way against them. If they could merely look at, and admire them, as seeing them in the word, and did not want to get into them, and to find their accomplishment in their own bosom, all these difficulties would at once vanish. But children of God can never be satisfied short of appropriation, for a view of the promise without its personal, experimental fulfilment would make the kingdom of God to be with them in word only. But they know from the testimony of God and the verdict of their own consciences, that "the kingdom of God is not in word but in power;" that it is not meat, and drink, or anything natural and carnal, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. Thus, though they perfectly know that what God has promised he is able to perform, the knowledge of that as a bare fact does not satisfy them; nor indeed will anything fully satisfy them until they come into the personal, clear, and happy enjoyment of that promise as fulfilled in their own experience. Still in this they manifest that they are partakers of true faith, of the very faith of Abraham, that they are fully persuaded that what God has promised he is able also to perform; and in the strength of this faith they are looking to him, waiting upon him, and expecting from him in due time its performance.

But I will now take up the other class of promises of which I have before spoken. God sometimes very graciously speaks a special and particular promise to the hearts of his people. In a time of trouble, trial, and deep necessity he has a word for them, exactly suitable to their case, which he speaks into their conscience, and gives them power to believe it shall certainly be fulfilled. But no sooner has he done this than he tries them, "for the Lord trieth the righteous;" and it is the "trial of our faith which is much more precious than of gold that perisheth." He tried Abraham's faith, and he will try ours. But the trial of the faith is in proportion to its strength. As Abraham's faith was the strongest upon record, so was his trial the greatest upon record. As the apostle speaks: "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only-begotten son." (Heb. 11:17.) Thus, every promise spoken to the heart will always be tried; and it will be tried by difficulties arising out of the very circumstances to which the promise is adapted. Everything will go point blank against the fulfilment of the promise; and yet such is the nature and character of living faith that it will hang upon the promise, and look forward to its fulfilment. And why? As being fully persuaded that what God has promised he is able also to perform. We cannot see, perhaps, how or when God will do it; but faith rests simply upon this one firm point, God is able; and as he is able, so also his veracity is implicated in it. If he fail in this, he may fail in the other; if he has given a promise, and fulfil it not, his faithfulness, his veracity are at stake; he is not the God he says he is—a God who cannot lie. If he can break one promise he can break another, and thus he may break all. So that whatever difficulties be in the way, faith keeps hanging upon this one point: he is able, he is able. Now it may seem at first sight that this is not very great faith; but it is. Abraham had little enjoyment during those

five-and-twenty years during which the fulfilment of the promise was delayed; but his faith was always hanging upon one point: God is able. Unbelief might say, "Abraham, you are getting older." But he would answer, "God is able." "Sarah is getting older, too." "God is able." "There is not the least prospect now of a child. More than twenty years have rolled away, and you are further and further from being a father." But still the same answer: "God is able." So, with that one simple word in heart and mouth, "God is able," Abraham met every difficulty. Now our faith, if genuine, will resemble his; for there is but "one faith;" and we have to walk in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham. We read of him: "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.) Against hope he believed in hope; and this was the strength of both his faith and his hope, that he was fully persuaded that what God had promised he was able also to perform. It is this ability of God to overcome every difficulty, to remove out of the way every hindrance, to still every rising doubt and fear, and to appear for the soul in "its darkest hour, which stamps upon faith its genuine character. The greater, therefore, the trials which encompass that faith, the more insuperable the difficulties which seem to hem the way, the more this faith stands forth as being the gift and work of God, when in the face of every difficulty it can simply say, "Well, God is able to perform that which he hath promised. He has promised that he will never leave me nor forsake me: then I believe he will never leave me nor forsake me. He has promised that he will bring me through: then I believe that he will bring me through. He has promised that no weapon formed against me shall prosper: then I believe that no weapon formed against me will prosper. He has promised that, as my day is, so shall my strength be: then I believe that, as my day is, so my strength shall be. He has promised that, when heart and

flesh shall fail, he will be the strength of my heart and my portion for ever: then I believe that what he has said will be fulfilled; that when my heart and flesh fail, God will be the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." Thus, faith having once got hold of a promise of God, and being fully persuaded that that promise is not only in God's book, but has been spoken by the power of God to the soul, faith embraces and holds on by that promise, on the simple ground that God is able to perform that which he has promised. How simple all this is, and yet how true and scriptural. But this is the very beauty of true religion, as well as of true faith, that it is so simple, when experimentally known, and thus so free from all guile, deceit, craft, and hypocrisy.

But what an encouragement this gives to plead his promises with God in prayer. "Thou hast promised, Lord." What a prevailing plea is this. You may be burdened with guilt; sin may lie as a heavy load upon your conscience. Are you enabled to confess your sins, to forsake them, to mourn over them; and are you begging of God to manifest to your conscience the forgiveness and pardon of them all? Then there is a promise for you, which I have before quoted and enlarged upon, and God is able to fulfil it to the joy of your soul. Plead it, then, with him on the simple ground of his ability to perform it. Or you may be sadly tried with temptations, and may find them so strong and powerful that you daily fear your feet may be entrapped in some snare, and you may fall a prey to the tempter. But God has declared that all things work together for the good of those that love him; that no temptation shall assail you but what is common to man, and that he "is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape that you may be able to bear it." (1 Cor. 10:13.) Then hold on: God has promised deliverance,

and he is able to fulfil it. Or your backslidings may lie with great weight and guilt upon your conscience; you may feel them more than ever you felt even the sins of your youth; for we do feel the pain of backsliding more than even the vile and open sins which we committed in the days of unregeneracy; nay, they seem at times so great as to be scarcely capable of being healed. But God has said, "I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely." He has given this promise, and he is able to fulfil it. Now faith has to hold on, to believe he is able, and to wait upon him for its fulfilment.

Or you may have difficulties in *providence*; your path may be very dark as regards your present prospects. You look round on every side and cannot see whence deliverance can come, or what friends can be raised up to help you. There may be few openings in the dark and gathering clouds of providence as in times past. The whole prospect may seem exceedingly gloomy, and you scarcely know how the scene will end, and whether wreck and ruin may not burst upon you. But God has said, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." "Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it." "Call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me." "The silver and the gold are mine and the cattle upon a thousand hills." Have not you yourself in times past found that God has appeared in extreme moments of difficulty, has raised up friends, and given you unexpected help? He will do it again. Faith's work is to hold up and to hold on, to believe he is able; and if we can but come with a promise or two in our hand and keep pleading with the Lord, "Lord, thou hast promised this; Lord, thou hast promised that thou art able; if I look at myself, if I view my sins, guilt falls upon my conscience; if I view the difficulties which surround my path, I am in perplexity and full of confusion; but thou art able. When in darkness thou canst give light; when dead thou

canst give me life; when all things are against me thou canst make all things work for me. Thou art able." If we can thus plead, surely he will appear. O what a struggle there is sometimes going on in the mind when staggering from unbelief. "How can it be? It seems impossible. The difficulties are so great, the trials so severe, the temptations so powerful, my fears and foes so pressing, how can I ever come honourably through? How ever can I bless and praise God for this trial? How ever can my mouth be filled with singing and my tongue with rejoicing? How ever can I thank, praise, and bless his holy name for this trial, for that temptation, for that painful vicissitude, for that severe affliction, for that heavy loss, and, above all, for that peculiar circumstance which so cut me to the very quick?" He is able. Thus faith simply acts upon this ability of God, that what he has promised he is able also to perform.

But now observe how faith is kept secure from presumption and falling asleep under a sense of God's ability. If we were simply to fall back in our easy chair and say, "Ah, it is all right, it is all right; God is able to perform; I need not trouble myself; God will do it all:" *that* would not be faith. Did such language ever come out of the mouth of Abraham? Hear Abraham pleading with God for the saving of Sodom. Did any such presumptuous language come out of Abraham's mouth? Mark his reverence of God. See how earnestly he pleaded with him, and yet bowed down before him as dust and ashes. With this faith, therefore, that believes the power of God and hangs upon it, there is needed that gracious tenderness, that reverence and godly fear, that sense of the majesty of God which prevent all trifling with him, cut the very sinews of arrogance and presumption, and cast the soul at his feet in deep self-abasement. This is one way by which faith is kept in its right place.

But there is also another. Afflictions and chastisements are mercifully sent to keep the soul from resting in a carnal confidence, a dead assurance, a vain presumption, that because God has said he will perform his promises we may fall asleep in the corner of the carriage, and be sure the train will come to the end of the journey; that we need not get out to stoke the fire or drive the engine. I say, faith is not that easy first-class, passenger in a man's breast sleeping securely in the corner of a well-cushioned carriage. Faith is all alive to difficulties, dangers, trials; is timid, looking out of the window to see what may occur; and is continually in a state of exercise as to the result, hanging upon God as alone able to preserve the soul and body too from a collision or a crash. God takes care to exercise his people well, that their faith may not be rickety nor fall asleep, and, so to speak, snore its life away with all the intoxication of a drunkard. These trials, afflictions, exercises, reverses in providence, smitings of conscience, doubts and fears, infidel suggestions, and the path of tribulation generally which God's people have to tread, instrumentally serve to keep alive the grace of God in their souls. Thus while God by the secret influence of his Spirit and grace through the power of his truth, keeps us on the one hand from sinking into despondency and despair, or giving way wholly to unbelief, so on the other he preserves us from getting into the chair of the slothful, or turning aside into the by-path of ease by exercises, trials, and afflictions. We are thus mercifully preserved from being driven by the storms of life upon the rocks of carking cares and worldly anxieties on which so many make shipwreck of body and soul, from being sucked in and engulfed in the maelstrom of despair, and from being stranded in the dark upon a lee shore through the sailors going to sleep, and no watch kept on deck upon course, sail, land, sea, or helm. It is thus that the ship of the soul is held on by the mighty power of God in that course by which the sea of life is safely crossed, and the

harbour of rest, through every storm and calm, reached at last in the bosom of a glorious and endless eternity.

IV.—But Abraham, we read in our text, gave glory to God, which brings us to our last point; for this is what faith, true faith, always does. *It gives God the whole glory.*

Now if there were anything in us to which we could look, on which we could hang, and which we were sure would be a friend to us when we wanted it, or a neighbour to whom we could have recourse to borrow all that was demanded by our necessities, and who would lend us a helping hand when we required it, we should naturally turn away from God to seek that creature help. It is strange to say, but no less true than strange, that God is the last from whom we seek help. Everybody, and everything else will be looked to before we look to him; for we never really come to him, to our shame be it said, except when we are absolutely compelled by sheer and hard necessity. When, then, the creature has been resorted to, and proves a broken reed; when natural hope gives up the ghost; and natural faith is unable to maintain its ground; when presumption, arrogance, and vain confidence slink out of the camp and get out of sight, like the children of Ephraim, turning their backs in the day of battle, then poor, despised little faith begins to lift up its humble head, raises itself amid the storm which has filled the whole cowardly crew with terror and confusion, and looks out of the wreck of all creature hopes around. And what does faith, thus left alone, do when there is not a man left even to haul at a rope? It does what Jonah did when he was in the whale's belly: "Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet will I look again toward thy holy temple." (Jonah 2:4.) Nor will it look in vain. It will be with it as with him: "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple." (Jonah 2:7.) And what will

be the issue of this prayer and its answer? Giving glory to God. Was it not so with Jonah? "But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay *that* that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord." (Jonah 2:9.) It is when we know that "salvation is of the Lord" that we give the whole glory to him. But Jonah had to learn that salvation was of the Lord in the whale's belly, and even in a worse place still—"the belly of hell."

But how does faith give glory to God? It glorifies him mainly for two things: first, that he should have given in his word promises so suitable to our state and case, promises to meet us in our extremity; and, secondly, that he should so amply and blessedly fulfil them. Abraham gave glory to God by believing the promises made to him of a son before its fulfilment. Our Lord said to Thomas, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." (John 20:29.) Such was the faith of Abraham. He believed the promise without seeing it fulfilled. But it is chiefly when the promise and its fulfilment meet together that we can give glory to God.

Let us apply this to some of the cases I have already named. Take, for instance, the case of a poor sinner convinced of sin, with a heavy burden of guilt upon his back, unable to see how he can be forgiven consistently with the demands of the law and the justice of God. Now what a relief it is to him to be able to confess his sins, and to find as he confesses them mercy coming into his soul, some breaking in of the light of God's countenance, some healing word, some comforting testimony, some melting sense of the goodness of God in Christ Jesus, some sight of atoning blood and justifying righteousness, some persuasion of an interest in redeeming love which he can lay hold on, feel the sweetness of, and in some measure appropriate. It may not bring full deliverance.

Many of God's dear children cannot get much beyond gentle intimations of his mercy, passing touches of his gracious hand, and softenings of heart under a sense of undeserved goodness and love; yet they feel sensibly relieved by what their faith thus lays hold of and brings in, and give glory to God. Sometimes again, as they hear the preached word and get a blessing under it, or some precious promise comes home to their soul with divine power, or they are favoured in secret prayer, and light and life break in upon their mind, they see such a glory in what is thus made known to them that they glorify God for what they see and feel.

But more especially when the way of salvation is opened up to them; when Christ is revealed to their soul by the power of God; when they see that wondrous plan unfolded, how God can be just, and yet the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus; then as they view in the greatness of the mystery of the Person of Christ the blessed solution of the problem which has so exercised their mind, they freely and fully give all the glory to God. "Lord," they cry, "who and what am I, that thou shouldest have had pity and compassion upon me, shouldest have touched my heart by thy grace, shouldest have planted thy fear in my breast, led me to pray and seek thy face, and listened to my feeble cries, shouldest thus have given me to hope in thy mercy, and blessed my soul with a manifestation of thy dear Son? O, who and what am I to be thus favoured, when thousands are left to perish in their sins? O, how glorious art thou! what a good God! how thy mercy melts my heart, and thy goodness softens my soul! To thy name, be all the honour and praise, both now and for ever and ever." Here is giving glory to God. Thus, true faith will always give God the glory: will never take an atom of its own praise to itself, but will ascribe the whole glory to God as its sole author and finisher, until blessings here end in blessings hereafter, and streams of grace on earth issue into

the boundless ocean of glory in heaven.