

In Praise of Faith.

A STUDY OF HEBREWS XI. 1, 6, XII. 1, 2.

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I.

IN the account given by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (ch. 11) of the Heroes of Faith, he makes several general statements about his subject which will reward closer scrutiny, as for Christian thought and life faith is of primary importance. The statement in the first verse of the eleventh chapter is not a theological definition of faith, but rather a practical description of what faith attempts and attempting accomplishes. The writer tells us what is faith's *Venture*. Having described the reward of faith in the instances of Abel and Enoch, he gives a reason why faith brings such gain: he estimates its *Value* (v. 6). After passing in review the succession of faith under the old covenant, he declares that even by the best of these heroes of faith the completion of their endeavour was not attained; as only in Christ has faith its consummation, and only in the life in Him can its goal be reached. Here alone is found the *Verification* of faith (12¹⁻²). At each of these aspects of the subject we may now more closely look.

1. The Revised Version of Hebrews 11¹: 'Now faith is the assurance (or *gaining*, marg.) of things hoped for, the proving (or *giving substance to*, marg.) of things not seen,' does not make the meaning clear enough. Dr. Moffatt in his *New Translation* makes the sense clearer. 'Now faith means we are confident of what we hope for, convinced of what we do not see.' We may bring out the meaning in a still freer rendering. Faith makes the future as certain as the present, and the *invisible as real as the visible*; for although it is not here explicitly stated, there is implicitly assumed a contrast between present and future, *visible and invisible*. About the reality of the visible and the certainty of the present, the common consciousness has no doubt. What the eyes see, or the hands handle, is real, and only a fool could question its reality. The memory of the past may be growing fainter, and the expectation of the future may be very vague, but a man is sure that he has the present moment at least. Common

thought and life are dominated by, in bondage to, the visible and the present. Few minds and lives are ruled by the unseen and the future, which in contrast seem unsubstantial. From the ordinary standpoint the man who allows himself to be determined by the invisible and the future is running the risk of winning a doubtful prize at a certain cost. The faith which treats the visible as real and the future as certain is making a venture, which earthly prudence would shrink from and even judge foolhardy. This heroic element in faith is deserving of recognition and emphasis.

2. On the other hand, however, faith is not rash and foolish in its venture, for it is a universal impulse of the soul of man. Man is by his very nature religious, and religion is always and everywhere concerned about these two objects of faith, the invisible and the future; its interest lies in God's existence and man's destiny. The two questions to which it offers, or we might even say risks, an answer are the *Whence* of the world, and the *Whither* of Man. The belief of savage tribes is described by the term *animism*; and this embraces both these objects. Behind the changes and movements of the seen, as their cause, *animism* discerns the unseen spirits, who dwell in, and work through, natural objects; and in man it detects a soul, which survives the body, and continues to exist. To put the matter briefly, the savage believes in gods and ghosts. Very crude are the ideas of gods and ghosts alike; but the belief makes the invisible real, and the future certain, although it may often, unlike Christian faith, bring more fear than joy. It is not necessary now to trace the age-long and world-wide history of human development in which the savage belief has been transformed into the Christian faith; but the Christian faith need not disown its ancient ancestry, its long lineage; for it is in the highest degree impressive and important to observe that always and everywhere man has challenged the dominance of the visible and the present over his

thought and life; and has made the venture of faith which makes the invisible real and the future certain.

3. The description of faith's venture here given is wide enough to embrace savage belief and Christian faith; and we may fill each of the objects to which faith is directed with the distinctively Christian content, even although the writer in the eleventh chapter confines himself to the heroes of faith under the old covenant, while unconsciously in some measure interpreting their faith from the standpoint of the new covenant. The Abraham of history, if indeed the modern critic will allow us to regard his personality as historical, did not 'look for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God' (v.¹⁰): it was not a heavenly country (v.¹⁶) that he and other believers looked for. They trusted and obeyed the invisible God for an earthly, and not a heavenly, future good. It was only in the last stages of the progressive revelation in the chosen people that faith looked beyond the earthly to the heavenly good; and the saints of God desired and expected a continuance of their fellowship with God in an eternal life beyond death. Even the Messianic hope, until transformed in the Jewish apocalypses, pointed to a kingdom of God on earth. This difference we must recognize, and yet maintain the essential identity of the Christian faith with that of Hebrew saints as making the invisible real and the future certain.

4. We may now limit our regard to Christian faith, and inquire what the invisible for it is, and how it is made real. While Christian faith holds that there is a spiritual world, in which dwell the possessors of the immortality, and we shall afterwards try, as it were, to catch a glimpse of their glory, yet its primary object is God Himself, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and our Father in Him, the risen, living, and reigning Christ Himself, present with and active for His people, and the Holy Spirit of God dwelling and working in the inmost life of the believer himself. It may be that few Christians do realize the Godhead in fulness of being and blessing. To many Christ alone has vivid reality; and their conception of Father and Spirit is vague. But when the believer thinks out what Christ is and does, he finds both Father and Spirit inseparably one with Christ. Above and beyond, yet also in and through the visible world of nature and humanity,

faith finds the reality of this invisible God; truth, holiness, love, grace in all, through all, and over all. In this world of time and sense he may ever be attended by this vision splendid of the Eternal God, made known and giving Himself to man as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No conception of the divine which has been reached by any other religion can compare for a moment in value for mind and soul with this reality for Christian faith, for it alone satisfies the heart's deepest needs.

5. This invisible is as real as the visible for Christian faith, because in Christ the visible and invisible are linked together, the invisible became visible, and the visible has become invisible. 'No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him' (Jn 1¹⁸). 'The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth' (v.¹⁴). The eternal Son, the incarnate Word Himself, claimed: 'He that hath seen me hath seen the Father' (14⁹). The Christian apostle confessed Him 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1¹⁵), and declared that 'in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily' (2⁹). The writer of the words we are now considering describes the Son as 'the effulgence of God's glory, and the very image of his substance' (1³). As the human personality which is invisible reveals itself in look, smile, gesture, word, to the sense of eye or ear, so the historical reality of Jesus is the perceptible manifestation of God. The revelation was rational, moral, spiritual; and it is a misunderstanding of the New Testament teaching to lay stress on the *flesh* as physical organism in the evangelist's description of the incarnation as a defence of sacramentarianism; but the inner life expressed and communicated itself through the outward signs of word and deed; and so the truth and grace of God showed their reality in the world of sense.

6. If it be objected that that reality was confined to a few years and a small country, and thus the invisible has not for us become visible, the reply lies at hand. How much we accept as real within this sensible world, which is for us past in time and distant in space, on the testimony of those who have seen and heard! How little knowledge of reality we should have if it were confined to what our eyes see, or hands handle!

It is incredible that the record of this life could have been imagined or invented; a portrait of perfection could not have been produced by sinful men unless they were copying from reality. If it be urged further that testimony does deceive, may we not plead that there is an inner witness which confirms the outer testimony.

Reason, conscience, and spirit in man set their seal to the truth of this revelation of God. If man has any sense of values in the realm of the spirit, he cannot but appreciate the absolute value of the revelation of God in Christ. Both by reliance on human testimony, which by its quality justifies our confidence, and with the confirmation of the soul's ideals and aspirations, we who have not seen can believe, and even have the fuller blessing of believing without sight. Jesus, and God in Him, may become real to us, and faith gain certainty.

7. For Christian faith the reality of Christ, however, is not confined to the earthly life, of which there is preserved a trustworthy record; the visible has again become invisible, but has not on that account lost its reality for the believer. For Paul, who had only a glimpse of the Lord of Glory, He was a constant companion. Christ lived in him, and to him to live was Christ. And not for him only, but for the Christian faith as represented in the New Testament, Christ remained the constant universal presence, and the supreme saving power. Not to dwell on instances of previous generations, but to take only one example from our own age, for Dr. Dale Christian life was *the fellowship of the living Christ*. To him the invisible Lord was real, present, active. The reality of Christ for Christian experience may be verified even for the world by Christian character.

He may be again brought within the range of the sensible world in the words and works of those whose life is hid with Him in God. As faith claims His grace, the character is so transformed that the old things pass away, and so conformed to Christ Himself that all things become new; the believer reproduces Him in perceptible manifestation. In this experience of fellowship with the living Christ, and consequent change into His likeness, the presence and power of the Spirit of God Himself is realized, and in the fruits of the Spirit there is an outer witness of this inner reality. God in Christ by His Spirit is real, present, active in Christian experience and character; but the constant and necessary condition of this manifestation

of God is human faith, apprehending, appreciating, and appropriating divine truth and grace. Faith does not make the invisible reality; but it becomes real for thought and life only through faith.

8. As this relation to God in Christ is to an eternal reality, the life of man in God is an eternal life. Accordingly the reality of the invisible carries with it the certainty of the future for Christian faith. Union with Christ as Saviour and Lord is the condition and the assurance of a perfect, blessed, and glorious immortality. 'Because *he* lives, *we* shall live also' (Jn 14¹⁹). In His Resurrection He is 'the firstfruits of them that are asleep' (1 Co 15²⁰), 'the firstborn among many brethren' (Ro 8²⁹). 'As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly' (1 Co 15⁴⁰). 'It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is' (1 Jn 3²). 'We all, with unveiled face reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit' (2 Co 3¹⁸). The present conformation of the Christian character to Christ is the promise and pledge of the future glorification of the Christian personality in the clearer vision and closer communion of the heavenly life. It is true that this hope of the Apostolic Age was connected with the expectation of the Second Advent and the general Resurrection; but it need not lose its substance, even if it change its form. Even Paul had to recognize that he might die before the expectation he cherished was realized; but faith did not on that account lose its certainty of the future. He was 'of good courage, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord' (2 Co 5⁸). Because death was a home-going to the Christ who had been his life, death was gain to him (Phil 1²¹). Christian faith to-day has the warrant of the faith of the New Testament in using of Christ the words of the 23rd Psalm (v. 4), even if the reference in the historical interpretation of the words is to deliverance from earthly peril. 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.' Not on some remote future is this Christian hope fixed; but it can triumph even in the hour and the article of death. The Valley of the Shadow becomes radiant with

the glory of the presence of the Conqueror of death ; and the unseen world is no longer a dreaded mystery, but the many mansions of the Father's house, to which, as a place prepared by His love for them, He receives all who live in Him, so that where He is and as He is, they too shall be. It is His saving and blessed will that all who are given to Him may be with Him, to behold the glory given Him by the Father (Jn 17²⁴). Christian faith can meet the challenge of the mystery of death, the agony of the separation of the loved and loving, and the tragedy of the silence of the departed by an unshaken and unshakable assurance that all who are Christ's live eternally in Him, whether on earth or in heaven.

9. When the world is all sunshine without cloud or storm, when life is a bright and an easy path, when love is undisturbed in its joy, faith may be lightly held and easily won ; but when faith is most needed, when the world is dark and drear, life hard and bitter, and love is smitten by bereavement, then faith often becomes very difficult, appears even impossible. And yet it is then that

faith can prove its worth, by relieving the gloom, lightening the burden, and bringing comfort and companionship in the loneliness. The soul's extremity has often been faith's opportunity.

Men have fallen back on God and immortality when no other refuge remained to the soul. To believe that this seemingly unintelligible world has a meaning, and that that meaning is love, the divine Fatherhood in all, through all, and over all ; to believe that through the shadows of death gleams the glory of the eternal life in God, is a possession worth gaining, even if hard to win. Man cannot achieve this victory of faith for himself in the darkness and despair of his soul. But then Christ meets him with the victory which He achieved over the world, sin, sorrow, and death, through His faith in the invisible and the future, God the Father, and the eternal life in God ; and, inspired by His faith, man, too, can exercise faith, and become a sharer of His victory, even more than a conqueror through Him that loved him with a love which endured the uttermost of sacrifice to save to the uttermost.

In the Study.

Books for the Pulpit.

PROFESSOR JAMES STALKER has done a thing which, to our certain knowledge, several men have had the hope of doing, and he has done it admirably. He has shown how Psychology may be used with effect in the pulpit. It was his deliberate purpose to show this. He wished to provide 'a welcome change to hearers rather tired of the rope thrown to a drowning man or the rescue by a fireman from a burning house.' In Kirkcaldy, he tells us, and in Glasgow he taught psychology in its religious aspects to a Bible class, 'and no other subject I ever tried either drew so large a class or kept it so well together to the end of the session.' Pursuing the subject, he delivered lectures at Richmond and Auburn Seminaries in the United States of America. These lectures are now republished in the volume entitled *Christian Psychology* (Hodder & Stoughton ; 5s.).

Dr. Stalker's success will encourage other men. We believe that in this direction it is possible to

move with excellent results ; but it is a course dotted with pitfalls, and only the most wary and best equipped will avoid them. Dr. Stalker is both well equipped and wary. He has left much psychology alone ; he has used as much as could be relied upon and made intelligible. His success in turning to new uses old and discarded weapons of interest, such as dreams, habits, the heart, the memory, is his reward.

Dr. Paterson-Smyth has published a volume of sermons containing 'some lessons of the present crisis.' The title is *God and the War* (Hodder & Stoughton ; 2s. 6d. net). Four of them form a series ; and in them he has the Christian courage to deal with the life beyond in direct reference to the men who have died in battle. His courage is the greater because he holds that 'in a very real sense this life may be the sole probation time for man.'

War and Christianity is one of the volumes of sermons which the present time has brought into