

Saving Faith

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“He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:16). These are the words of Christ, the risen Christ, and are the last that He uttered ere He left this earth. None more important were ever spoken to the sons of men. They call for our most diligent attention. They are of greatest possible consequence, for in them are set forth the terms of eternal happiness or misery: life and death, and the conditions of both. Faith is the principal saving grace, and unbelief the chief damning sin. The law which threatens death for every sin, has already passed sentence of condemnation upon all, because all have sinned. This sentence is so peremptory that it admits of but one exception — all shall be executed if they believe not.

The condition of life as made known by Christ in Mark 16:16 is double: the principal one, faith; the accessory one, baptism; accessory, we term it, because it is not absolutely necessary to life, as faith is. Proof of this is found in the fact of the omission in the second half of the verse: it is *not* “he that is not baptized shall be damned,” but “he that believeth not.” Faith is so indispensable that, though one be baptized, yet believeth not, he shall be damned. As we have said above, the sinner is already condemned; the sword of Divine justice is drawn even now, and waits only to strike the fatal blow. Nothing can divert it but saving faith in Christ.

My reader, continuance in unbelief makes Hell as certain as though you were already in it. While you remain in unbelief, you are “without God in the world, having no hope” (Eph. 2:12).

Now if believing be so necessary, and unbelief so dangerous and fatal, it deeply concerns us to *know* what it is *to* believe. It behooves each one of us to make the most diligent and thorough inquiry as to the nature of saving faith. The more so, because all faith does not save; yea, all faith in Christ does not save. Multitudes are deceived upon this vital matter. Thousands of those who sincerely believe that they have received

Christ as their personal Saviour and are resting on His finished work, are building upon a foundation of sand. Vast numbers who have not a doubt but that God *has* accepted them in the Beloved, and are eternally secure in Christ, will only be awakened from their pleasant dreamings when the cold hand of death lays hold of them; and then it will be too late. Unspeakably solemn is this. Reader, will *that* be your fate? Others just as sure that they were saved as you are, are now in Hell.

ITS COUNTERFEITS

There are those who have a faith which is so like to that which is saving as they themselves may take it to be the very same, and others too may deem it sufficient, yea, even others who have the spirit of discernment. Simon Magus is a case in point. Of him it is written, "Then Simon himself *believed* also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). Such a faith had he, and so expressed it that Philip took him to be a genuine Christian, and admitted him to those privileges which are peculiar to them. Yet, a little later, the apostle Peter said to him, "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. . . . I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:21, 23).

A man may believe *all* the truth contained in Scripture so far as he is acquainted with it, and he may be familiar with far more than are many genuine Christians. He may have studied the Bible for a longer time, and so his faith may grasp much which they have not yet reached. As his knowledge may be more extensive, so his faith may be more comprehensive. In this kind of faith he may go as far as the Apostle Paul did, when he said, "This thing I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing *all* things which are written in the law and in the prophets" (Acts 24:14). But this is no proof that his faith is saving. An example to the contrary is seen in Agrippa: "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou *believest*" (Acts 26:27).

Call the above a mere historical faith if you will, yet Scripture also teaches that people may possess a faith which is more than the product of mere nature, which is of the Holy Spirit, and yet which is *a non-saving* one. This faith which we now allude to has two ingredients which neither education nor self-effort can produce: spiritual light and a Divine power moving the mind to assent. Now a man may have both illumination and inclination from heaven, and yet not be regenerated. We have a solemn proof of this in Heb. 6:4. There we read of a company of apostates, concerning whom it is said, "It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance." Yet, of *these* we are told that they were "enlightened," and had "tasted of the heavenly gift," which means, they not only perceived it, but were inclined toward and embraced it; and both, because they were "partakers of the Holy Spirit."

People may have a Divine faith, not only in its originating power, but also in its foundation. The ground of their faith may be the Divine testimony, upon which they rest with unshaken confidence. They may give credit to what they believe not only because

it appears reasonable or even certain, but because they are fully persuaded it is the Word of Him who cannot lie. To believe the Scriptures on the ground of their being God's Word, is a Divine faith. Such a faith had the nation of Israel after their wondrous exodus from Egypt and deliverance from the Red Sea. Of them it is recorded "The people feared the Lord, and *believed* the Lord, and His servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31), yet of the great majority of them it is said, "Whose carcasses fell in the wilderness: and to whom He sware that they should not enter into His rest" (Heb. 3:17, 18).

It is indeed searching and solemn to make a close study of Scripture upon this point, and discover how much is said of unsaved people in a way of having faith in the Lord. In Jer. 13:11 we find God saying, "For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to *cleave* unto Me the whole house of Israel, and the whole house of Judah, saith the Lord," and to "cleave" unto God is the same as to "trust" Him: see 2 Kings 18:5, 6. Yet of that very same generation God said, "This evil people, which refuse to hear My words, which walk in the imagination of their heart, and walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be as this girdle, which is good for nothing" (Jer. 13:10).

The term "stay" is another word denoting firm trust. "And it shalt come to pass in that day, that the remnant of Israel, and such as are escaped of the house of Jacob, shall no more again stay upon him that smote them, but shall *stay* upon the Lord" (Isa. 10:20); "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is *stayed* on Thee" (Isa. 26:3). And yet we find a class of whom it is recorded, "They call themselves of the holy city, and *stay themselves upon* the God of Israel" (Isa. 48:2). Who would doubt that *this* was a saving faith! Ah, let us not be too hasty in jumping to conclusions: of this same people God said, "Thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass" (Isa. 48:4).

Again, the term "lean" is used to denote not only trust, but dependency on the Lord. Of the Spouse it is said, "who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, *leaning upon* her Beloved?" (Song of Sol. 8:5). Can it be possible that *such* an expression as this is applied to those who are unsaved? Yes, it is, and by none other than God Himself: "Hear this I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that *abhor* judgment, and *pervert all* equity. . . . The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they *lean upon the Lord*, and say, Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us" (Micah 3:9, 11). So thousands of carnal and worldly people are leaning upon Christ to uphold them, so that they cannot fall into Hell, and are confident that no such "evil" can befall *them*. Yet is their confidence a horrible presumption.

To *rest upon* a Divine promise with implicit confidence, and that in the face of great discouragement and danger, is surely something which we would not expect to find predicated of a people who were unsaved. Ah, truth *is* stranger than fiction. This very thing is depicted in God's unerring Word. When Sennacherib and his great army besieged the cities of Judah, Hezekiah said, "Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there

be more with us than with him: With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God” (2 Chron. 32:7, 8); and we are told that “the people *rested themselves upon* the words of Hezekiah.” Hezekiah had spoken the words of God, and for the people to rest upon them was to rest on God Himself. Yet, less than fifteen years after, this same people did “worse than the heathen” (2 Chron. 33:9). Thus, resting upon a promise of God, is not, of itself, any proof of regeneration.

To *rely upon* God, on the ground of His “covenant” was far more than resting upon a Divine promise; yet unregenerate men may do even this. A case in point is found in Abijah king of Judah. It is indeed striking to read and weigh what he said in 2 Chron. 13 when Jeroboam and his hosts came up against him. First, he reminded all Israel that the Lord God had given the kingdom to David and his sons forever “by a *covenant* of salt” (v. 5). Next, he denounced the sins of his adversary (vv. 6-9). Then he affirmed the Lord to be “our God” and that He was “with him and his people” (vv. 10-12). But Jeroboam heeded not, but forced the battle upon them. “Abijah and his people slew them with a great slaughter” (v. 17), “because they *relied upon* the Lord God of their fathers” (v. 18). Yet of this same Abijah it is said, “he walked in all the sins of his father,” etc. (1 Kings 15:3). Unregenerate men may rely upon God, depend upon Christ, rest on His promise, and plead His covenant.

“The people of Nineveh (who were heathen) *believed* God” (Jonah 3:5). This is striking, for the God of Heaven was a stranger to them, and His prophet a man whom they knew not — why then should they trust his message? Moreover, it was not a promise, but a threatening, which they believed. How much easier then is it for a people now living under the Gospel to apply to themselves a promise, than the heathen a terrible threat! “In applying a threatening we are like to meet with more opposition, both from within and from without. From within, for a threatening is like a bitter pill, the bitterness of death is in it; no wonder if that hardly goes down. From without too, for Satan will be ready to raise opposition: he is afraid to have men startled, lest the sense of their misery denounced in the threatening should rouse them up to seek how they may make an escape. He is more sure of them while they are secure, and will labour to keep them off the threatening, lest it should awaken them from dreams of peace and happiness, while they are sleeping in his very jaws.

“But now, in applying a promise, an unregenerate man ordinarily meets with no opposition. Not from within, for the promise is all sweetness; the promise of pardon and life is the very marrow, the quintessence of the Gospel. No wonder if they be ready to swallow it down greedily. And Satan will be so far from opposing, that he will rather encourage and assist one who has no interest in the promise, *to* apply it; for this he knows will be the way to fix and settle them in their natural condition. A promise misapplied will be *a seal upon the sepulchre*, making them sure in the grave of sin, wherein they lay dead and rotting. Therefore if unregenerate men may apply a threatening, which is in these respects more difficult, as appears they may by the case of the Ninevites, why may they not be apt to apply (appropriate) a Gospel promise when they are not like to meet with difficulty and opposition?” (Dav. Clarkson, 1680, for some time co-pastor with J. Owen; to whom we are indebted for much of the above).

Another most solemn example of those having faith, but not a saving one, is seen in the stony-ground hearers, of whom Christ said, “which for a while *believed*” (Luke 8:13). Concerning this class the Lord declared that they hear the Word and “with joy receive it” (Matt. 13:20). How many such have we met and known: happy souls with radiant faces, exuberant spirits, full of zeal that others too may enter into bliss which they have found. How difficult it is to distinguish such from genuine Christians — the good-ground hearers. The difference is not apparent; no, it lies *beneath* the surface — they have “no *root* in themselves” (Matt. 13: 21): deep digging has to be done to discover this fact! Have you searched yourself narrowly, my reader, to ascertain whether or no “the root of the matter” (Job 19:28) be in you?

But let us refer now to another case which seems still more incredible. There are those who are willing to take Christ as their Saviour, yet who are most reluctant to submit to Him as their Lord, to be at His command, to be governed by His laws. Yet there are some unregenerate persons who acknowledge Christ as their Lord. Here is the Scripture proof for our assertion: “Many will say to Me in that day, *Lord, Lord* have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out demons? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? and then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from Me ye that work iniquity” (Matt. 7:22, 23). There is a *large* class (“many”) who profess subjection to Christ as Lord, and who do many mighty works in His name: thus a people who can even show you their faith by their works, and yet it is not a saving one!

It is impossible to say how far a non-saving faith may go, and how very closely it may resemble that faith which is saving. Saving faith has Christ for its object; so has a non-saving faith (John 2:23, 24). Saving faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit; so also is a non-saving faith (Heb. 6:4). Saving faith is produced by the Word of God; so also is a non-saving (Matt. 13:20, 21). Saving faith will make a man prepare for the coming of the Lord, so also will a non-saving: of both the foolish and wise virgins it is written, “then *all* those virgins arose, and *trimmed* their lamps” (Matt. 25:7). Saving faith is accompanied with joy: so also is a non-saving (Matt. 13:20).

Perhaps some readers are ready to say, all of this is very unsettling, and if really heeded, most distressing. May God in His mercy grant that this article may have just these very effects on many who read it. O if you value your soul, dismiss it not lightly. If there be such a thing (and there is) as a faith in Christ which does not save, then how easy it is to be *deceived* about *my* faith! It is not without reason that the Holy Spirit has so plainly cautioned us at this very point. “A deceived heart hath turned him aside” (Isa. 44:20). “The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee” (Obad. 3). “Take heed that ye be not deceived” (Luke 21:8). “For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (Gal. 6:3). At no point does Satan use his cunning and power more tenaciously, and more successfully, than in getting people to believe that they have a saving faith when they have not.

The Devil deceives more souls by this one thing than by all his other devices put together. Take this present article as an illustration. How many a Satan-blinded soul will

read it and then say, It does not apply to *me*; I know that *my* faith is a saving one! It is in this way that the Devil turns aside the sharp point of God's convicting Word, and secures his captives in their unbelief. He works in them a sense of false security, by persuading them that they *are* safe within the ark, and induces them to ignore the threatenings of the Word and appropriate only its comforting promises. He dissuades them from heeding that most salutary exhortation, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; *prove* your own selves" (2 Cor. 13:5). O my reader, heed that word *now*.

In closing this first article we will endeavour to point out some of the particulars in which this non-saving faith is defective, and wherein it comes short of a faith which does save. First, with many it is because they are willing for Christ to save them from Hell, but are not willing for Him to save them from *self*. They want to be delivered from the Wrath to come, but they wish to retain their self-will and self-pleasing. But He will not be dictated unto: you must be saved on *His* terms, or not at all. When Christ saves, He saves from *sin* — from its power and pollution, and therefore from its guilt. And the very essence of sin is the determination to have my *own* way (Isa. 53:6). Where Christ saves, He subdues this spirit of self-will, and implants a genuine, a powerful, a lasting desire and determination to please Him.

Again; many are never saved because they wish to divide Christ; they want to take Him as a Saviour, but are unwilling to subject themselves unto Him as their Lord. Or, if they are prepared to own Him as Lord, it is not as an *absolute* Lord. But this cannot be: Christ will be either Lord of all, or He will not be Lord at all. But the vast majority of professing Christians would have Christ's sovereignty limited at certain points; it must not entrench too far upon the liberty which some worldly lust or carnal interest demands. His peace they covet, but His "yoke" is unwelcome. Of all such Christ will yet say "But these Mine enemies, *which would not* that I should *reign over them*, bring hither and slay before Me" (Luke 19:27).

Again; there are multitudes which are quite ready for Christ to justify them, but not to sanctify. Some kind of, some degree of sanctification, they will tolerate, but to be sanctified *wholly*, their "whole spirit and soul and body" (1 Thess. 5:23), they have no relish for. For their hearts to be sanctified, for pride and covetousness to be subdued, would be too much like the plucking out of a right eye. For the constant mortification of *all* their members, they have no taste. For Christ to come to them as a Refiner, to burn up their lusts, consume their dross, to utterly dissolve their old frame of nature, to melt their souls, so as to make them run in a new mould, they like not. To utterly deny self, and take up their cross daily, is a task from which they shrink with abhorrence.

Again; many are willing for Christ to officiate as their Priest, but not for Him to legislate as their King. Ask them, in a general way, if they are ready to do whatsoever Christ requires of them, and they will answer in the affirmative, emphatically and with confidence. But come to particulars: apply to each one of them those specific commandments and precepts of the Lord which *they* are ignoring, and they will at once cry out "Legalism"! or, "We cannot be perfect in everything." Name nine duties and perhaps they are performing them, but mention a tenth and it at once makes them

angry, for you have come too close home to *their* case. Herod heard John gladly and did “many things” (Mark 6:20), but when he referred to Herodias, he touched him to the quick. Many are willing to give up their theatre-going, and card-parties, who refuse to go forth unto Christ outside the camp. Others are willing to go outside the camp, yet refuse to *deny* their fleshly and worldly lusts. Reader, if there is a *reserve* in your obedience, you are on the way to Hell.

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