

CONVENTION SERMON.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FAITH AS DISTINGUISHED FROM PRESUMPTION.

ROMANS, 10TH CHAPTER, 17TH VERSE.

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

"The Prophet," says Paul, "through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

If there is the same virtue in faith at the present, (and we have no intimation given in the Scriptures that there is or ever will be less,) then nothing can be added to what the Apostle has here said in commendation of its excellence and power.

I desire, in this discourse, to point out the difference between faith and presumption—to shew the connection which subsists between justifying faith and an understanding of the Scriptures; and the relation existing between impressions of the fancy and presumption.

The two extremes of error in regard to faith are these:

1. That faith is an operation of the intellect with which the heart has nothing to do.
2. That it is a right disposition of the affections with which the intellect is unconcerned.

There is a class of texts like the one selected as the foundation of this discourse, which, if isolated, may seem to give countenance to the former. There is another class, which, in the same way, would seem to countenance the latter; for instance: "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness." It is evidently true, however, that a man may have all possible outward evidence to convince the intellect, and be incapacitated for exercising faith by the hardness of his heart and the perverseness of his will; or, on the other hand, he may have all brokenness of heart and every preparation of the affections to receive Christ, and be prevented only by a want of knowledge, as is taught in the context, "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" Hence we must infer that both the intellect and the heart are concerned in the act, and that a preparation of both is essential.

It may here be observed that presumption does not necessarily imply hypocrisy—a man may be presumptuous and at the same time be honest and conscientious; but it does imply, almost universally, one or the other of the errors just noticed. The man who is presumptuous and unreasonably confident of the divine favour upon this or that undertaking, will be found depending either upon the honesty of his intention, without reference to Scripture, or upon some promise which he considers the pledge of Jehovah, without reference to its conditions or a proper preparation of the heart. Thus hundreds are praying without any gracious answers to prayer, struggling amid temptations, without gaining victories over them making efforts for higher attainments in godliness, yet unaware of any progress. Not that God's ear is heavy that He cannot hear, or that His arm is shortened that he cannot save, nor that he does not now, as much as ever, desire his people to be constantly growing in grace, but rather because they do not assure themselves of a promise and conform to its conditions; and He cannot, therefore, consistently bless them.

The Scriptures reveal no threatenings against men, except as a penalty for transgression, nor do they propose rewards and blessings to our expectation, except conditionally.

The grace of God is manifest, not in exempting us from responsibility and in crowding his blessings upon us, irrespective of all conditions; but in proposing such conditions of his own will, without our deserving them, and when it would have been perfectly just in Him to have left us unpitied and unassisted to reap the wages of our own folly and perverseness.

The radical distinction, therefore, which we have to point out, between *Faith* and *Presumption* is this: That Faith has a respect to these conditions upon which the promises are proposed, as revealed in the Scriptures; whereas *Presumption* rejects the idea of conditions altogether, or substitutes its own conditions in the place of those which are Scriptural.

The declaration of the text, that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," amounts to just this, nothing more, nothing less: That Faith must have, as a basis upon which to rest, *knowledge*—the knowledge of God's character and of His will. This knowledge is calculated to soften and mould the heart, as well as to enlighten the understanding. *Presumption* has no such basis and is consequently worthless; for no other basis is sufficient to sustain our hopes in the hour of conflict and trial and death.

To illustrate the subject thus introduced, I would, in imitation of the Apostle, turn your attention to the father of the faithful.

"This only would I learn of you, received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? . . . Even as Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness . . . For if the inheritance be of the law it is no more of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise." Gal. iii. 2, 6, 16, 18. The promise to Abraham was that his seed, which should be exceedingly numerous, should inhabit Canaan, and also that in his seed, should all the nations of the earth be blessed. The belief of this promise of God is Faith, and his life ever after proved the genuineness and strength of his faith. It is not unusual for skeptical men to pronounce such promises contrary to sense and reason, and thus justify their unbelief. But the promise was to Abraham a sufficient ground of expectation. There being such promises it was faith in him to believe he should have a son, though at the age of himself and his companion it would be as much out of the ordinary course of God's providence as the raising of one from the dead. Had there been no such promise from God, his expectation would have been sheer presumption.

Again, when called upon to offer up Isaac, he obeyed without faltering, firmly persuaded without doubt that he would be immediately restored by the power of God; for after his birth, upon the occasion of Sarah's quarrel with Hagar, the Lord had told him that in Isaac should his seed be called. To believe this fact when he raised the knife intending to plunge it into the bosom of his son, was faith because of the promise, whereas, without the promise, any such expectation would have been presumption, as much as for any of us now to expect our dead to be recalled to life.

Further to illustrate this same point, and also to show the necessity of conforming to the Lord's conditions, I would refer to the case of Paul on his voyage to Rome. Luke in his

record writes thus: (Acts 27th ch.) "When neither sun nor stars in many days appeared, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope that we should be saved, was then taken away," that is, there was no reasonable ground of hope left. To hope then, would have been presumption in any of them. "But," he continues, "after long abstinence Paul stood forth in the midst of them, and said, 'Sirs I exhort you to be of good cheer for there stood by me this night the angel of God whose I am and whom I serve, saying, fear not Paul: thou must be brought before Cæsar; and lo God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God that it shall be even as it was told me.'" Now to believe is no more presumption, but faith; for "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God," and God has sent word to Paul, and through Paul to the rest. The promise is—"no man's life shall be lost save only the ship;" let the waves lash themselves ever so furiously, let the frail bark be tossed and driven or shattered even, it is not presumptive to expect life, for God has promised it, and the belief of God's word is faith.

But another point is to be considered. Faith has reference to the conditions of a promise.

Several days after Paul had spoken to them the word of the Lord, they found by soundings that they were approaching land, and fearing lest they should be dashed upon the rocks, not having faith as Paul had, the crew endeavoured to escape in the boat under pretence of casting out an anchor, and Paul observing it (notwithstanding what he had previously said) tells the Centurian and the soldiers that unless the crew abide by the ship, they could none of them be saved.

Here two important questions may arise in many minds. First: how did Paul know this fact, if it was not spoken in connection with the promise? Secondly: why if it was a fact, was it not spoken in connection with the promise? In reply to these questions we may remark, that any man would have known if he had an ordinary share of good sense, that those who knew nothing about a ship could not manage her at all in a storm, to bring them to land with safety; and because this would suggest itself to any sensible person, it was not made a matter of special revelation. Special revelation is to do that for us, which unassisted reason and ordinary means of information could not afford, and seldom, if ever, shall we find it doing more.

This matter deserves attention, because circumstances so often occur when questions of this character arise: thus, if war is wrong, why do not the Scriptures state it explicitly? If theatre-going and balls and pleasure parties are wrong, why are they not particularly forbidden? So with many other follies and vices left in the same way. Now in regard to the first, the general tone and spirit of the Gospel makes it unnecessary—its spirit is to wrong no man; to resent not injuries to love and pray for our enemies, and consequently any reasonable man might infer that it was wrong and wicked to fight and war.

So of the second, if we are required to keep God and heavenly things in mind continually, to avoid all foolish talking and jesting—to make the best possible use of all our time, and if we are warned against speaking, even an idle word, because of the account we are to render for it at the great day, every man's good sense should teach him the right or wrong of all vicious or in any wise dissipating amusement, which tend to banish God and serious things from the mind, and to foster vanity, pride, envy or extravagant feelings of any kind.

But returning from this digression, we remark it was absolutely necessary for the safety of those whose lives had been promised them, that they should conform to conditions which God had made known to them, whether by their good sense which he had given them or by his ordinary providences or by special revelation. To hold to the promise and disregard its conditions would be presumption, as much as to cherish a hope without any promise.

The Lord has made many promises, but as has been observed, all of them conditional. He has promised to hear prayer—but conditionally. He has promised to forgive sins—conditionally; to revive religion in the churches—upon conditions; to convert our friends and the members of our families—upon conditions. Now it is not enough for me to believe that He will hear prayer and forgive sins and the like, irrespective of conditions. If I pray and expect to be heard without attending to the conditions, it is presumption not faith.—God has revealed himself a prayer-hearing God, but has taught me at the same time, that "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." John was only recognising this necessary condition when he says, "Beloved, if our hearts condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God, and whatsoever we ask we receive of Him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in his sight."

When surprised that our prayers are not answered let us then enquire if our hearts are clean and our consciences clear—if we are not living in the habitual indulgence or neglect of something, for which as often as we think of it we feel condemned—if so, however strongly we may have been expecting an answer, it was presumption, not faith.

To what purpose shall we exhort a man to pray for the remission of his sins, who is every day cherishing a hardness in his heart against his neighbour? If he should expect to be heard under such circumstances, it is presumption, not faith; for God has not only not promised to forgive such a man, but has most severely threatened every such one in the parable of the unmerciful debtor, who would not forgive his fellow servant his debt.

In like manner it is useless to exhort a church to pray, and to believe that God will hear their prayers for a revival, whilst there is any connivance at each other's sins or any concealed wickedness, or any violation of the known and acknowledged will of God. It is exhorting them to believe a lie, for God has said He will not hear them, nor bless them, on the contrary, if they do not repent and cease to do wrong, He will give them up to destruction—He will remove their candlestick out of its place. He has said that from such a people He will turn away and return to his own place, and leave them in the midst of afflictions and chastisements to return to Him. The word of God is, "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion." There is no ground of expectation to such, so long as they remain thus, because there are no promises in the Scriptures made to them.

Here then we perceive, what in the early part of this discourse was said would appear—the connection subsisting between faith and an understanding of God's word. It is impossible, from the nature of the case, to believe, according to the Scriptural use of this term, without a ground or reason of belief, and there is no sufficient ground but the promise of God, and when the conditions of these promises are observed

we may have the same implicit confidence in what is to come as we have in what is past, for not one jot or tittle of God's word can possibly fail.

It will appear also, from what has been said, that impressions of the fancy or imagination, are the fruitful source of much presumption.

Those who are governed altogether, or for the most part by their feelings or impressions, suggested simply by their experience and observation, instead of being governed solely by the Scripture promises and threatenings, are the ones most generally disappointed in their expectations. Their fancy and feelings constitute the rule of their service and expectations, and God in arranging His providence, and dispensing his favours, is not controlled by any man's fancy, but by certain unchangeable laws, (sufficiently revealed in the Scriptures,) which may justly be denominated the fixed principles of his moral administration. Were they not fixed, they could not be the subject of Scripture revelation, nor would any one be able to know what to expect; and as they are fixed, if we would enjoy the blessings they are calculated to afford, we must make ourselves acquainted with them, and conform ourselves to them.

There are one or two things more to which I would advert before closing, which seem intimately related to this subject.

First: The question is often asked—is it right to pray without faith, or is it not wicked to pray without faith? When this same thing is expressed differently it almost answers itself. For instance,—is it right to ask God for that which we have no reasonable ground to expect He will bestow? certainly not. But if after careful consideration, we think it would be for the glory of God, or our own good that He should answer any particular request, though we cannot think of a particular promise meeting the case exactly, it is not wrong to make the request, because we know that God is always interested to promote His own glory, and that He will not withhold any good thing from them that serve Him. Now we may have erred very much in our judgment on this point, and God may see it best not to grant our desire, but if our prayer was offered after careful consideration, and with an honest desire after right, and an acquiescence in God's will to have the petition granted or not, we have no reason to fear the divine displeasure. These are the prayers to which, in closing, it is proper to add, "Not my will but thine be done." There are many prayers to which this is added, when it is improper, because it is virtually questioning the Divine veracity. For instance, when a person prays to have his sins forgiven, God has stated explicitly over and again many times, what his will is on this point. If a person is not willing to forsake sin, if he secretly wishes or intends to continue in it, it is mocking God to ask forgiveness; if he hates sin and desires to be rid of it and from its dominion, there is no need of asking what the Divine Will is, for it is already sufficiently revealed in the Scriptures and in every thing else which speaks to us of God.

Just so with reference to prayer for a revival of our graces, or a revival in the churches. It is wrong to make this prayer when we are living and intending to live in a manner which is inconsistent with a revival; whereas, if we are grieved at the low state of Zion, and feel to bear her burden; if we suffer with her in our feelings, and weep for her, and are ready to welcome a revival, and do all we can to forward one, it is right and proper to pray for one in our own hearts; and if two or three are agreed as touching such a thing in a church, the promise seems to extend to them, and afford them a reasonable ground of expectation, that it would be consistent for God to revive his work, and if it is consistent to defer his anger and exercise mercy, there can be no doubt about his will. God first loved us and gave his son to die for us; and He who has done this will certainly not withhold any good which He may consistently confer.

Again: A prayer is often put up by christians to this effect—"Lord increase our faith." Now what do we gather from our subject in relation to this prayer? "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God." Some doubtless offer this prayer as though the Lord could or would answer it without any effort on their part, and as a consequence, it is not answered.

It is as unreasonable to expect to have our faith increased without intermediate means, as it is to have our hunger satisfied without food. If our faith is increased, it will be by our attaining a clearer and more general understanding of the Scriptures, or by a greater familiarity with the ways of God, as gathered from our observation of His providences. And we must not expect the Lord to supercede in our behalf the necessity of studying the Scriptures and meditation, nor that He will do these for us. These are the duties enjoined upon us and should never be neglected by us—only therefore, when we are willing to use these means and are using them is it right for us to offer this prayer.

But some may, without much thought, inquire: why pray for it at all if these are the ways in which it is to be obtained, and if it is not immediately and directly imparted to us of God? Because these are only means, which, in common with all other means of grace, require God's blessing to make them effectual. Just as when we pray for the conversion of a friend, we are in duty bound to be using all the known means in our power, to bring them to a sense of their need of a present and immediate conversion: or, as when we pray for growth in grace, we are bound to be using all proper means and attending upon the gospel ordinances to that end; so, when we pray for an increase of faith, we are bound, at the same time to be neglecting no opportunity of reading the Scriptures, or of meditating upon Scripture truths and promises and the providences of God.

These considerations teach us that no one step in religion can be taken, nor one favor obtained without sincerity and effort on our part. Would we enter the kingdom we must be sincere in our desire and strive to enter; or would we obtain any one favor in answer to prayer, we must be alike sincere, and in coming to God believe that He is, and that he is the rewarder of all who diligently seek Him.

An indifferent and careless life, and a neglect of gospel means, will inevitably result in our destruction; as it is despising the council of God against our own soul, and judging ourselves unworthy of everlasting life.

The use and necessity of a conviction of the truths now considered in order to a hearty and zealous prosecution of the work of this Convention, must be apparent to all. "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word." "How can they hear without a preacher, and how can they preach except they be sent?" Every nation needs the Bible in its own language, and they need the voice of the living preacher. Every preacher needs suitable qualifications to bring from the