

Thoughts on Unbelief

This article take from the sermon "Unbelief Arraigned and Condemned at the Bar of God" by Ebenezer Erskine.

Ebenezer Erskine

Ebenezer Erskine (1680-1754). Founder of the Secession Church in Scotland. Son of a minister ejected in 1662 for nonconformity, he graduated at Edinburgh University in 1697, and in 1703 was ordained to Portmoak, where for twenty-eight years he ministered faithfully and imaginatively. His preaching was such that regular adjournment to the open air became necessary when the church could not contain the congregation. He was one of those who protested his general assembly's condemnation of Edward Fisher's Marrow of Modern Divinity.

"He that believeth not, is condemned already." - John 3:18

Faith is a shield that beats back the fiery darts of Satan; so unbelief is a shield that beats back all the good motions of the Spirit of God. Faith is the victory by which we overcome the world; unbelief is the victory by which the world overcomes us.

1. See hence a very relevant reason, why ministers of the gospel harp so much upon the subject of faith or believing. Why, it is for unbelief, that sinners are condemned already; and there is no way to free them from this sentence, but by bringing them to believe in the Son of God. Unbelief is the main pillar of the devil's kingdom; and therefore the main batteries of the gospel must be raised against it. It is but at best a foolish ignorant cavil of some against ministers, Why so much insisting upon faith? are not other things as necessary to be preached? I answer, Other things are necessary in their own place, but faith or believing in the first place: and till we bring you to believe, we do nothing at all, this being the laying of the foundation of all religion; and, you know, it is foolish to think or speak of rearing up a superstructure, till the foundation be once laid. Can we ever make you accepted of God without faith in his Son? No, surely, "Without faith it is impossible to please him:" we are "justified by faith without the works of the law." Can we ever make you the members of Christ without faith? No, this is the very bond of the soul's union with him; "Christ dwells in our hearts by faith." Can we ever make you the children of God who are by nature the children of wrath, without faith? No, "We are the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." It is to them who receive him, that he gives power or privilege to become the sons

of God (John 1:12). Let us press and inculcate the duties of holiness with ever such flourishing harangues of rhetoric, we shall never make you holy, till we once land you in Christ by faith, he being the fountain and root of holiness; therefore said to be "made of God unto us sanctification." In one word, whatever duties we inculcate upon you, we only call you to build castles in the air, to build a tower without a bottom, unless we first bring you to Christ by that faith which is of God's operation.

2. See hence the miserable and mournful condition of the generality of gospel-hearers; they are a company of condemned men, under sentence of death. O that God may dart home an arrow of conviction on the hearts of unbelieving sinners, and persuade them of the truth of my doctrine, that every unbeliever is condemned already. I am sure it is true, whether you believe it or not; and you shall find it to be so, sooner or later. O sirs! here is a hand-writing against you, that may make the joints of your loins to loosen, and your knees to smite one against another: HE THAT BELIEVETH NOT, IS CONDEMNED ALREADY. And, that I may, if possible, awaken you to some serious thought and concern about this matter, will you consider whose sentence it is? It is none other than God's sentence of condemnation. It is somewhat awful and terrible, to be arraigned and condemned at the bar of man; what then must it be to be condemned at JEHOVAH'S bar? The Judge is omniscient; "his eyes are as a flame of fire;" he "setteth our secret sins in the light of his countenance," so that the crime cannot be concealed from him: his justice is unbiased; his eye cannot be blinded with bribes: the arm of his power cannot be stayed from the execution of the sentence. What a fearful thing is it to fall into the hands of this living God? He is indeed a consuming fire. The solemnity of the bench adds terror to the criminal; and you may see with what solemnity the bench is to be reared, before which you and I must stand ere long, "When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory" (Matt 25:31). O! whither will the unbeliever fly for help? or where will he leave his glory at that day? If hills and mountains could cover him, he would choose far rather to be buried under them, than appear before the face of the Lamb, when he comes to ride his circuit as the universal Judge of all the earth. You may read your doom, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41). The sentence being passed, there can be no stop in the execution; the Judge will have his officers at hand, an innumerable host of angels, all ready for this service: these reapers shall gather the tares, bind them in bundles, and burn them. The Judge will stand and see the sentence executed before his face, saying, "Those mine enemies which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me" (Luke 19:27). Among all the innumerable multitudes of angels, men, and devils, who shall be spectators of the righteous execution, there shall be no eye to pity; and the reason is, because the sinner willfully, through unbelief, slighted Christ the only Saviour, and refused to accept of pardon and redemption through his blood. Who will pity the traitor, who dies for his treason, rejecting his prince's pardon presented to him to the last? Christ would have gathered you, as the hen gathers

her chickens under her wings, and ye would not; and therefore ye must die without pity, and without remedy.

3. See hence how fitly the gospel is called a joyful sound, "Blessed is the people that know the joyful sound" (Psa 89:15). Among other reasons why it gets that denomination this is none of the least; it brings a proclamation of life to the sons of death, a sound of liberty to the captive, and of pardon to the poor sinner condemned already. One, would think that the very hint of a pardon to a condemned criminal, would make his heart to leap within him for joy: but, alas! sad experience tells us, that the gospel, which brings such "glad tidings of great joy" to condemned sinners, meets with a very cool reception from the generality, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" (Isa 53:1).

4. See hence how ill-grounded the joy and triumph of a Christless unbelieving world is. We would think that man, beside himself, who, being under sentence of death, and to be brought forth in a little to the place of execution, would spend any little time he has, in eating, drinking, dancing, and revelling. Yet this is the very case with the generality; they take up the timbrel and harp, rejoice at the sound of the organ; they spend their days in wealth and ease, without ever thinking that they are condemned already by the great God. All I shall say, to stop your career at present, is this: the triumphing of the unbelieving sinner is short, and his joy but for a moment. You may, indeed, "kindle a fire, and compass yourselves about with sparks: but this shall ye have of the Lord's hand, ye shall lie down in sorrow" (Isa 50:11).

5. See hence how much we are obliged to Christ, who came to save us from this heavy sentence of death we were under: "he came not into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." He himself was condemned, that we might be acquitted. Judgment passed upon him, that it might not pass against us. He was made a curse, to redeem us from the curse of the law. When Adam had entailed death and condemnation upon us, and all his posterity; Christ comes, and by his obedience to death, cuts off that entail, procuring our justification. "As by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (Rom 5:18). O believer, acknowledge thy obligations to the Son of God; for if he, as thy Surety, had not paid thy debt, thou hadst been condemned to the prison of hell for it for ever.

6. See hence that it is every man's duty and interest to examine and try, whether he be under this heavy sentence yea, or not. It is a miserable thing to be under sentence of death, and to know nothing of it. Neither will a man ever seek to be freed from it, till he be convinced that he is indeed under it. I shall give you the few following characters of such as are under sentence of condemnation.

1st, You who never yet saw yourselves to be condemned in the court of the law and conscience for sin, and particularly for the sin of unbelief, you are surely under sentence of death to this day; for the first work of the Spirit, when he comes to liberate a poor soul from condemnation, is to “convince the world of sin; of sin, because they believe not on him” (John 16:8,9).

2dly, You whose minds are so blinded with ignorance and prejudice against Christ, that you “can see no form or comeliness in him,” notwithstanding of the bright displays of his glory that are made to us in the word.” If our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor 4:3,4).

3rdly, You, who are yet wedded to the law as a covenant, and are seeking life and righteousness by that first husband, you are, to this moment, under the sentence of death; for, “as many as are of the works of the law, are under the curse.” If you never knew what it is to be dead to the law by the body of Christ, to have as little hope of life and salvation by the law and its works, as though you had never done any one duty commanded by the law in your whole life, you are yet married to the law as a husband, consequently, under the law’s sentence. Yea, I will adventure to say, that the legalist, or selfrighteous person, is a step farther off from heaven and eternal life, than the grossest of sinners; for “publicans and harlots,” says Christ, “shall enter into the kingdom of heaven before you.”

4thly, You who cast off the obligation of the law as a rule of obedience, under a pretended hope of being saved by grace, without the works of the law. All practical Antinomianism, who are following the swing of their own lusts, are under the power of unbelief, and consequently condemned already, away with lying, swearing, drinking, whoring believers. Will you pretend to be the people of a holy God, the members of a holy Jesus, the federates of a holy covenant, the heirs of an undefiled inheritance, and yet wallow in your sins, or yet retain any known iniquity in your hearts? No, no. To such, not!, but God himself saith, “What hast thou to do to declare my statutes, or that thou shouldst take my covenant in thy mouth? seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee.” O sirs, they that are dead to the law as a covenant, are so far from casting off its obligations as a rule of duty, that they bind it about them as an ornament, choosing it for a light to their feet, and a lamp to their paths. We are not without law to God, when under the law to Christ. The law is so dear and sweet to a true believer, that it is his meditation day and night. O how love I thy law! says David: as if he had said, I love it so well, that I cannot tell how well I love it: “My soul breaketh for the longing that it hath unto thy judgments at all times” (Psa 119:20).

7. Is it so that every unbeliever is a condemned criminal before God? O, then, be concerned at your hearts to get rid of that dismal sentence you are under. What

can be matter of concern, if this be not? I come, in the name of God, to tell you, that this is not impossible; yea, I dare go farther, and tell you, that if you will but hear, your souls shall live, and not die under that condemnatory sentence which is gone forth against you. I dare promise you not only a reprieve, but a remission; for thus saith the great Judge, as a reconciled God in Christ, to the poor trembling panel, standing condemned before the bar of his holy law; "I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins" (Isa 43:25). Here is an act of grace passed at a throne of grace, sealed with the blood of the Lamb, published and proclaimed in the tops of the high places, that none may pretend ignorance, and that every condemned sinner may take the benefit of it, and come in upon the King's royal indemnity, granted upon the satisfaction made to justice by his eternal Son. O, then, sirs, "Hear, and your souls shall live, and he will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David" (Isa 55:3), "O earth, earth, earth, hear this word of the Lord."

I come not to tell you how you may be rich, great, and honourable in the world; these things are but trifles to people in your circumstances. Should you come to a condemned man, and talk to him of riches, honours, crowns, robes, sceptres and kingdoms: Alas! would he be ready to say, what is all that to me? I am a poor man going into another world within a few hours; if you can tell me how I may save my life, or how I may get rid of my sentence, chains, prison, you will say something to the purpose. This is the very case with thee, O sinner; for "by the offence of one, judgment is come upon all men to condemnation." And, therefore, O poor criminal, listen, lend me a believing ear for a few moments, and I will tell thee how infallibly thou shalt make thy escape.

Quest. O, may the poor criminal say, how is that? I answer, I have no advice to give thee but one; it is an old advice, a new advice, and the only advice that can be given while the world stands; it is the very same which Paul and Silas gave to a poor panel, trembling at God's bar, crying, "What must I do to be saved?" The plain advice they gave him, I give this day to you, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31): agreeably to which are the words of Christ himself, in the first part of the verse, where my text lies, "He that believeth on the Son of God is not condemned;" and verse 16: "Whosoever believeth in him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

Quest. You advise us to believe in Christ; but pray tell us what is it to believe in him? You have the answer in your Catechism: To believe, is to "receive Christ, and to rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel;" or, in other words, it is to trust and credit him, as the Saviour of sinners, with the salvation of thy lost soul, upon the warrant of his own call and command in the word. Christ's business and occupation is to save that which was lost. Now, you all know what it is to trust a man in his trade and occupation; you who have some business at law, know what it is to trust your advocates with your most valuable concerns, and the whole management of your cause depending before the

judges. Well, in like manner, to believe, is, upon the credit of God's testimony concerning Christ in the word, to trust him, as the Saviour of sinners, with the salvation of thy own soul in particular. This, I say, is the business, the office, and occupation of Christ, to save sinners; and he is so fond of employment in his trade of saving, that he says, "Come to me who will, I will in no wise cast out." And, therefore, trust in him in his occupation; put thy condemned soul in the hands of the sinner's Saviour, for that is to believe in him and on him. O, what a happy suitable meeting is it, when the sinner and the Saviour of sinners thus meet together! Some have a notion, when we bid them believe, we bid them do some great thing as the condition of salvation. But this is a mistake. Believing is a resting from works in point of salvation, and a resting on Christ alone for salvation from sin, and all the effects of it. It is to receive a salvation already completed and prepared to your hand, and brought near to you in the word of grace. But I must not stand farther in describing faith at present.

Quest. What influence (may you say) will our believing have upon our being delivered from this condemnatory sentence we are under? Answ. Much every way. For,

1. That moment thou believest, thou becomest a member of Christ, as a new covenant head. While under the power of unbelief, thou art a member of the lust Adam, and consequently under Adam's covenant, which is a cursing and condemning covenant to all who are under it, "judgment being come upon all men to condemnation," through Adam's breach of it; but in believing, thou becomest a member of Christ, the second Adam, the head of the new covenant, the covenant of grace and promise, which contains nothing but blessings to the soul that takes hold of it, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). It is not said, there is nothing culpable or condemnable in the believer; but there is no condemnation to him; he is no more liable to the penalties of Adam's covenant, Christ, his glorious Surety, having endured these in his room and stead; and it were inconsistent with justice, to demand payment of the same debt, both from the cautioner and principal debtor.

2. To clear this yet farther, the poor soul, in believing, is married to a new husband, even Christ and being under his roof, the covert of his blood and righteousness, the condemning law call have no action against it, this new and better husband having made his spouse free indeed, by the imputation of his law-magnifying righteousness, "Ye are dead to the law by the body of Christ (or, by the offering of his body on the cross,) that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead." (Rom 7:4) He does that for us, which the law could not do, through the corruption of nature; particularly, "condemns sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us. Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." And if the law have its end, and be fulfilled as the believer, by virtue of his union and marriage with the Son of God, how can he be liable to condemnation, or any law penalties?

3. That moment the condemned sinner believes in Christ, he is entered heir of a new family, a member of a new corporation: he is come, not to Mount Sinai, but to Mount Zion; not to the earthy Jerusalem, which is in bondage, but to the heavenly Jerusalem, which is free. He is “no more a stranger and foreigner, but a fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the household of God.” He comes in among the general assembly, and church of the first-born. He becomes an “heir of God, and a joint-heir with Jesus Christ;” and the inheritance is settled upon him by a charter, which contains no irritant clauses. No, no: having taken hold of God’s covenant by faith, he hath a name and a place within the walls of God’s house, even an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off; and therefore must needs be free from the condemnatory sentence he lay under before he believed.

4. That moment you believe, your cause is carried into a new court; I mean, from a tribunal of justice to a mercyseat, where all the acts and interlocutors that pass are acts of grace and mercy, acts of pardon and acceptance in the beloved. No sentences of condemnation pass in the court of grace: no; this is inconsistent with the nature of the court. O let every guilty sinner, who finds himself condemned in the court of the law, and of conscience, carry his cause, by a solemn appeal, to this court; for the court is open to all corners, and the Lord merciful and gracious, who sits upon this throne of grace, receives all appeals that are made to him, and will in no wise cast out the sinner, or cast his appeal over bar. O, therefore, “let us come with boldness unto a throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help us in time of need.”

Quest. But (may you say) if matters stand thus with a believer, that he cannot fall under the sentence of the law, cannot come into condemnation, then he may live as he lists. Does not this doctrine open a wide door for licentiousness and profanity? for if once a man be a believer, according to this doctrine, he has nothing to fear, and so may do what he will. Were it not better for ministers to forbear doctrines that are liable to such abuse? I answer,

1. The whole counsel of God must be revealed, and not one hoof of divine truth must be suppressed, though a whole reprobate world should break their necks on it, by wresting it to their own destruction. The gospel will be the savour of death unto some; Christ crucified will be a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence. But shall we because of this, forbear to preach Christ, and his gospel? God forbid; we must not starve God’s children, out of fear lest dogs snatch at it to their own perdition.

2. I own, that a carnal gospeller, who has some swimming notions of the grace of God in his head, may abuse the doctrine of the believer’s freedom from condemnation by virtue of his union with Christ: but the grace of God in the heart teaches the very reverse of this, namely, to “deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.”

3. Though the believer be delivered from the law as a covenant, and its condemnatory sentence, through Christ, yet it does not in the least pave a way to licentiousness; because at the same time that he is absolved and acquitted from his obligation to the law as a covenant, he comes under stronger and more powerful ties than ever to yield obedience to it as a rule of duty.

I shall conclude by naming a few of these bonds of obedience the believer remains under, even when delivered from condemnation.

1st, He is still under the bond of the royal authority of the great God, both as a Creator and Redeemer. The authority and obligation of the divine law can never be dissolved, while God is God, and the creature a creature.

2ndly, He is under the bond of interest, to obey the divine law. It is true, his obedience does not give him the title to the reward of glory; it is only his union with Christ, the heir of all things, that gives him this; but yet his own personal obedience is evidential and declarative of his title through Christ. And is it not much for the believer's interest, to have his claim to glory and everlasting life cleared up and made evident to his own soul? In this sense I understand that word, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gate into the city" (Rev 22:14).

3rdly, He is still under the bond of fear "I will put my fear in their hearts that they shall not depart from me" (Jer 32:40). This is not a slavish fear of hell and vindictive wrath, for that is inconsistent with his freedom from condemnation: but is a filial fear of God as a Father, flowing from an affectionate regard to his authority, interposed in the commands of the law. Though they be not afraid of being cast into hell; yet they "fear him who is able to cast soul and body into hell." Though they have no reason to fear him as an avenging and condemning Judge; yet they have much reason to fear him as a fatherly Judge, lest he "visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes;" for, pass who will unpunished, they shall not pass: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities."

4thly, He is under the bond of love. He studies to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind; and this love of God in Christ, like a strong cord, draws him on in the way of obedience, "I drew them with the cords of love:" "The love of Christ constraineth us," says Paul. This love laid in the believer's heart has such a force and power with it, "that many waters cannot quench it, neither are all floods able to drown it" (Song 8:7; Rom 8:35, 39).

5thly, He is under the bond of gratitude; being bought with a price, he studies to glorify God in soul and body, which are his. Christ leaving delivered him from the hand of his enemies, he serves the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness, all the days of his life. The believer, when delivered from the hand of the condemning law, says to Christ, as the men of Israel did to Gideon, "Rule

thou over us; for thou hast delivered us from the hand of our enemies”(Judg 8:22). Suppose a king should not only pardon a rebel, but restore him his forfeited inheritance, advance him to the highest places of honour about the throne; yea, make him his son, his heir, and set him upon the throne with himself: would not that man be under a far greater obligation to serve and obey the king, than if he had never received such singular favours at his hand? There is no bond of obedience like the bond of gratitude to an ingenuous spirit.

6thly, He is under the bond of a renewed nature. The man is made a partaker of the divine nature, by which the life of God, the love of God, and the law of God, is laid in his very heart; and this is a mighty bond to obedience “I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts” (Heb 8:10). It is engraved there with the finger of the holy Ghost: his heart is cast into a divine mould, moulded into the will of God, his will of brace, his will of precept, and his will of providence; so that he “delights in the law of God, after the inward man. The law of his God is in his heart,” and therefore “none of his steps shall slide.”

Lastly, The inhabitation of the Holy Ghost is another efficacious bond to obedience: “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes; and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” (Eze 36:27) This law of the Spirit of life, which is in Christ Jesus, makes them “free from the law of sin and death.” And being led by the Spirit, they do not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. To conclude, that very grace of God which frees them from the law as a covenant, binds them to it as a rule. (Titus 2:11, 12).

These are some gospel bonds of obedience: and you who never knew what it is to have your souls under the sweet influence of these, but only obey the law with a view to purchase a title to heaven, or to redeem your souls from hell and wrath, I, in the name of God, pronounce the heavy doom of my text against you, he that believeth not, is condemned already.