

The Heavenly Foretaste

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*“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.” (Heb. II:1).*

In these words we have a perfect definition of the grace of faith. True faith is God’s gift, and it is begotten in the soul by the Spirit of God. All men may have some kind of faith, but all men have not the faith which rests on Christ alone for salvation, and which, whatever the trials in the way, brings the soul to Heaven. Saving faith is a grace which the hand of the Heavenly Father has planted in the soul of the renewed man. It thrives and matures to the extent in which it is exercised in relation to the Lord and His Word. Both the written Word, and the Personal Word — the Lord Jesus — are the proper foundation, life, and objects of saving faith. We must, therefore, never confuse ordinary, rational, historical, or even theological faith, with the faith, which, in union with the living Head in Heaven, is the substance of things hoped for. Let us think then, for a moment, of:

I. The Things which God's People Hope for:

The “things” mentioned in the verse do not, of course, come within the category of “things seen”. “For what a man sees why doth he yet hope for it.” “We look not”, says the apostle, “at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.” In other words this faith has a far reaching vision which sees, or apprehends, things beyond the visible and temporal order, or even beyond space and time. It apprehends the things which are spiritual and eternal. A supernatural grace, it brings the blessings of “the heavenly places” into the hearts of true believers while they are still sojourning in this lower world. Some of the things hoped for by those who have this precious faith are mentioned in the immediate context.

The context reminds us, for example, that all true Christians hope for the fulfilment of all the Divine promises, which “by faith and patience” they shall inherit at last. The promises of God are not only great and precious, but in their variety and number we cannot fully describe or reckon them. (Ps. 40). Like the stars which fill the night sky. their number is known only to God.

Some of His promises relate to our requirements, trials and comforts in this broken life. These come within the sweep of God’s Covenant love and care, as expressed in the

words, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." As our needs arise, and our trials come and go, we see the Lord daily fulfilling His Word in providing grace for the journey which, otherwise, is "too great" for us.

The large majority of the promises, however, can only be inherited in Heaven with God. The streams of daily mercy and grace communicated through the promises of God here, shall at last give way to a full and perfect realisation of all that we hoped for in this life.

We read in this chapter, that one of the things which all the people of God hoped for in the past was the promise of "a city which hath foundations". He gave this promise to Abraham. It was the promise of Heaven. In all his pilgrimage, therefore, he sought that city which, by faith, he saw as through a glass. The view that he enjoyed of that good land "wherein dwelleth righteousness" led him to confess that he was a stranger in the earth. Both his heart and walk were, from the day that God called him out of the world, bent towards the heavenly country, the land of his desire. God convinced him that here he had no continuing city. Man, indeed, is destined to outlive the physical universe, but only the Heaven-born man acts on that knowledge by seeking a dwelling-place with God. "But now they desire a better country, that is an heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city." To that longed-for Home God will bring His people. "He led them forth by the right way that they may go to a city of habitation." (Ps. 107). Our glorified Lord is now in that city of many mansions, preparing a place for His chosen and redeemed people. Do we not associate our sweetest earthly joys with the word "Home"? It is so spiritually. Home is where our loved ones reside. And Heaven is the palace of the Great King, our Father in Christ, who has begotten us to Himself. Our beloved Redeemer is also there. So is our Mystical Mother, the "Jerusalem which is from above" or "the Church of the first-born written in Heaven". There the whole family of God will meet at last to enjoy the pleasures which are at His right hand for evermore.

But again. God's redeemed people hope also that the Lord will fit them to enjoy Heaven with Himself. Reconciled by His blood, clothed in His righteousness, regenerated and sanctified by the Spirit, they are made meet to inherit His Kingdom. The many corruptions which still cling to them God will put away. When they pray for holiness He sometimes answers their prayers "by terrible things in righteousness". (Ps. 65). He brings them through the fires of suffering that in the end they may come forth as purified gold. "Many shall be purified, and made white and tried." This process necessarily precedes the glory that shall be revealed in them. Then shall they "shine as the brightness of the firmament and . . . as the stars for ever and ever." (Dan. 12).

They hope and long also for unbroken communion with God. All their future happiness lies within the promise that they shall see His face and dwell eternally in His presence. In the communication of His love and in the enjoyment of His felt presence the Lord here is often "like a wayfaring man". One day His love flows sweetly through the soul, while the next we seem to dwell in a "thirsty land where there is no water". (Ps. 63). Christian enjoyment has its ebbs and flows. But what is the promise? "We shall be

satisfied with the goodness of thy house.” In Heaven they shall thirst no more. All divinely planted desires which form the life and content of true Christian hope, God will at last satisfy. “He will fulfil the desire of them that fear Him.” (Ps. 145). Heaven is a place where the provisions and consolations of God’s covenant love shall surprise and delight us beyond all we ever knew or thought.

Now the hope of these things is not a lovely dreamland, or a species of wishful thinking, which has no foundation in reality. The words hint at:

II. The Evidence of their Existence, and the Certainty of their Enjoyment:

The evidence of these things we have in the infallible Word of God. God’s promise of eternal life and happiness to His people is so certain that in order to show its immutability He confirmed it by an oath (Heb. 6-17). “For when God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater he swore by himself, saying, surely blessing I will bless thee. And so after he had patiently endured he obtained the promise.” (Heb. 6:15). Every promise made over to the Church of Christ is thus ratified and sealed. One specific reason why the Scriptures are given us is “that we may know that we have eternal life.” The inner faith of the believer rests, therefore, on God’s testimony in His Word. And when we believe His witness we have the evidence of its absolute certainty in our own souls. Those born of God have this witness in themselves (I John v). The accents of faith have thus the ring of certainty and assurance. True faith, therefore, is not only theological: it is also experimental. “We know and are sure that this is the true God and eternal life.” Even should our faith falter at times — during these seasons when darkness and sorrow descend upon us — yet God remains faithful to His promise, “for He cannot deny Himself.” A frowning providence may seem at times to stand opposed, or even in contradiction, to the promise. Like Jacob we say: “Against me are all these things.” But in every storm His Covenant promise remains sure and steadfast. “The end of the Lord” is always good and kind in His dealings with His people, and though Heaven and earth shall pass away His Word can never be broken.

There is, however, another side of our text. Some there are who give ready assent to the truths of God’s word. They accept and adhere to systems of sound doctrines in all intellectual honesty. Their minds may have much light, and they may have a sense of appreciation of the value of the truths cherished. And yet such people may be quite destitute of the **substance**, or the life, which these truths should convey to the soul by the Spirit of God. The Pharisees, for example, had the cold light of truth, but Christ said to them: “I know you that the love of God is not in you.” Thus faith goes deeper and higher than any acquiescence in a doctrinal system, however absolutely necessary to our faith such an acceptance must be. True faith brings the very substance of what we hope for into our souls. Believers get a “foretaste” on earth of all their future enjoyments in Heaven. This is what is called “the earnest” of good things to come. The assurance and enjoyment of the love of Christ; the peace which reigns in the conscience through the sprinkling of the blood of atonement; joy in the Holy Ghost, and communion with God, are the very life and substance of the things we hope to enjoy in Heaven. Does not

Christ Himself dwell in our hearts by faith? What life and sweetness did the Bride extract from the promises! Though she was still on her pilgrimage to Heaven, Christ addressed her in these words: "Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb; honey and milk are under thy tongue." (Songs 4). She had in her heart the very food of Canaan even while she was still in the desert. The grace of life in the soul is glory in the bud, and Heaven in miniature. It is the day spring from on high with tokens of the coming everlasting summer. These enjoyments have their roots in reality. They are refreshing streams of life from the very Throne of God. But they are infinitely beyond the reach, or the knowledge, of those who have only a form of godliness but who know nothing of its power.

We are not, however, to conclude that the sensible enjoyments of Christian experience — however sweet and precious — are, in the matter of faith, of equal value with God's testimony in His Word. No. Faith must often live without its assurance or enjoyment. It must cling to the promise in the days of darkness and destitution. Such days are not, by any means, rare in the history of the Church of God. The disciples on the Mount saw the glory of the Redeemer. They heard the voice out of the cloud. They tasted the powers of the world to come. The very bliss of heaven touched their souls. It was a day in His Courts, which is better than a thousand elsewhere. Such seasons belong to an exercised Christian experience, and are greatly to be prized and sought after. They prove that we are welcome guests at God's table, and that we have "the knowledge of the holy." And yet they are not the foundation of our faith; but that Word which is for ever settled in Heaven. (II Pet. 1). Lastly let me mention:

III. The Infinite Importance of Ascertaining Whether this Faith is our own:

There is, as we hinted a moment ago, a form of faith which consists entirely in an external and nominal profession. For example, the foolish virgins had all the outward exercise and appearance of the wise. They had lamps, but no oil; they had faith without substance. They lacked the life of God in their souls. God puts His treasure in the earthen vessels; but those vessels are renewed by the grace of God, and are therefore "unto honour". The love of Jesus is shed abroad in their hearts. If the love of Christ is shed abroad in our hearts our hope shall never be put to shame. An empty faith may pass the test of time, but not the test of death or judgment. Therefore the lamps of the foolish ones flickered and died in the hour of death. Many, for example, travel to the great eternity sure that if they have a certain ecclesiastical connection, and if they fulfil their several religious duties, then Heaven is sure. Too often we presume that God is pleased with what pleases us. The Immortal Dreamer, John Bunyan, tells us how "Ignorance" went through life and death sure that his "Vain Hope" would take him to Heaven. It was at the door of Heaven that he made the dread, and to him the very surprising, discovery that he was destitute of saving faith. From the pinnacle of presumption he was cast into the depths of perdition. Satan can weave a false hope and a false faith in our soul; but only those who have the Spirit of God can say, "Thou knowest, Lord, that I love thee." Does our faith then rest on what Christ is, what Christ says, and what He did when He died on the tree? Have we experienced the great

change of a new birth which all who hope to enter Heaven must know? Can we say that “the Lord our Righteousness” is all our hope, and that we love Him who first loved us? Have we indeed this faith which works by love?

Let each and all of us here today face these solemn questions; and may the Lord enable us to answer them in a way that shall be to His own glory and to the everlasting good of our souls. For the night cometh when no man can work.

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