

III

FUNDAMENTALS IN THE EXERCISE
OF FAITH

SCRIPTURE LESSON: MARK XI. 12-14 AND 20-25.

"He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him."—HEBREWS XI. 6.

IN our last study we were considering a definition of faith in the abstract. Faith is "confidence in things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." However in neither the words cited in Habakkuk nor in that definition contained in the first verse of this chapter have we struck the deepest note. Faith is there seen to be an activity in two realms, those of things hoped for, and the unseen things. We do not see that upon which faith builds.

In the words of the text we come to bedrock, as it declares the fundamental facts of the activity of faith in that duplicate sense. I say a duplicate sense, because faith may have a hundred and one suggestions; and may make many suggestions to the mind when reading the illustrations of faith in the Bible. This word, however, brings us face to face with something fundamental. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him."

The Bible assumes these two things. From the first

it assumes that God is. It assumes, moreover, that He is the Rewarder of those that seek Him. The Bible never argues for either of these things, nor did the great men of the Bible, presented to us in their messages to men. With profound reverence I may say that Jesus Himself never argued for the existence of God, nor concerning His availability to men. He assumed them. He took them for granted. He proceeded in His teaching and in His mighty work upon these very assumptions. There may be arguments about the love of God, the justice of God, the care of God, but never about His existence, and this simple fact that God and man may have dealings with each other; that God is available to human life. Indeed, the old singer dismisses with contempt the man who doubts that. He says the man who does not believe in God is a fool. Faith bursts into the realm of things hoped for, of things not seen; and faith becomes confident, and enters into covenant.

We will stay first with the central idea expressed by this writer when he says, "He that cometh to God"; and then look at the declared conditions.

We must believe that God is, and that He is a Rewarder. "He that cometh to God." For a long time, in my reading of this passage I thought of it as referring to prayer. While I have by no means given up that idea, I have come to see that it means far more than that. Prayer is involved, but there is more than prayer in coming to God. Simply and inclusively, the writer means by coming to God, approaching God, drawing near to God, getting into direct and living and vital contact with God. "He that cometh to God." Coming to God is having communication with Him.

Now we realize that a man can believe in God in certain ways, and yet never get into communication with Him. A man may have a perfectly orthodox creed. But a very orthodox thinking about God may be infinitely removed from contact with God; and it is contact with God that is rewarded here. That is what faith is for. Faith is not merely acceptance of certain truths about God. Faith goes through the truths to God Himself. "He that cometh to God." Simply and inclusively that means to approach God, to get near to God, to put oneself into communication with Him.

That approach to God has two main ideas. The simplest of all is that to come to God is to speak to God. To come to God is to hear God speak to us. We must not divorce these two ideas. That, of course, is prayer. This word does refer to prayer, but to far more. It refers to a man talking to God. There are two functions of the human soul in the matter of speech to God. The first is prayer, the second is praise. I put them in that order because I think in human experience prayer always precedes praise. In living experience we begin to pray before we begin to praise, which is the truest and highest function of speech. Prayer is the first experience, and praise is the highest and the last.

That, of course, is the whole subject of worship. We come to the Table of the Lord. We do not come there to pray but to praise. I love the word which describes the Table as the Eucharist. What is that? Simply the offering of praise, or worship. We make a great mistake if we come to the Table to confess sins. That should have been done before we came. If we have not sought for cleansing before we come, we have no place

at the Table. Therefore here supremely we approach God, speaking to Him in praise.

But to come near to God means not only that we come to speak to Him, but we come to be quiet, to listen. In that call to quietness there are two things: silence and reception. There can be no reception of the speech of God directly to the soul of man until man is quiet. Do we take time to listen? It is an old and familiar thing to say. People say, God does not speak to men as He did in the great records of the past. God does not speak to men today as He did to Abraham and to Moses. Might it not be far truer to put that in another form? Men do not listen as Abraham did. Man is not waiting to hear what God has to say as Moses did. Approach to God means time to be quiet. When the last prayer is uttered, when the last note of praise is silent; then in the silence, the heart can wait and listen to Him. I have never done that without having heard Him speak. Not necessarily with an articulate voice; but so surely as I have heard, and stopped my hurry, and bustle, and rushing, and turmoil, and ceased giving attention to the babel of voices and sounds beating all around me; and have said, "Lord, speak to me," He has done so, often in rebuke, and constantly in love. But He speaks.

Now he who comes to God, who approaches God, he who makes communication with God, which means freedom of utterance in His presence; and in the silence listens to what He would say, what are the conditions of that coming? They are so simply, clearly, and succinctly stated here that we need not stay with them. We will but emphasize the things we know. "He that

cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those that seek after him." It is a simple statement, but it is a sublime conception. The inclusive condition is that of faith, confidence, and conviction with regard to His Being; and with regard to His attitude toward certain human disability.

If we come to God we must believe that He is. Can one really come to God if we do not believe that He is? A man may say No, and perhaps that is why we do not come to Him, and do not make contact with Him. It is not easy to believe that He is. How often that is affirmed. I am of the contrary opinion. I declare that it is the easiest thing in human life to believe in God. Effort is not required. Effort is required to disbelieve, rather than to believe.

Read again the story of Helen Keller—that marvelous and matchless story which reflects such glory upon Miss Sullivan, the woman who cared for her and taught her, a child silent, deaf, dumb, and blind, and yet reached her. When she had led Helen Keller a certain distance, she sought someone to talk to her about God. The man she approached was Bishop Phillips Brooks. He came to see her, and when he tried to bring to her the idea of God as existing, suddenly Helen Keller's face became radiant as she said to him, "I see what you mean, but I have known that all the time." All through the years she had known God, and that God is. So simple, so tender. Can you find me a little child who does not believe in God, save where that child has been brought up in utter ignorance? It is the natural instinct of a child to believe in God. All simple souls believe in God. It is a universal conviction. There

may be differing views about God, but are there any who have no conception of God? That is the first necessity. If lines of proof are asked for, I shall appeal to imagination, to reason, and then to historic manifestation.

I appeal first to the imagination. There was a book published many years ago, Paley's *Natural Theology*, one of the greatest books ever published. In it he argued from design that God was evidenced everywhere. Grasping a handful of sand, and looking at it, no one would be able to count the grains, for there are so many. Again, take a watch and hold it in your hand; whether you stop to argue concerning its natural movement, your mind would run ahead to the fact that somewhere there is a watchmaker. That is a very clear illustration of what Paley meant by evidence from design. We cannot imagine a watch without a watchmaker. Apply that to the universe in which we live. If that watch argues a watchmaker, what does this universe argue? Even if I am told watches have improved since Paley's time, that does not for a moment invalidate the argument, but rather enhances it. The better watch proves a more skilful watchmaker, but the watchmaker is there. It is a fact that the mechanism of the universe has been proved far more complex than our fathers believed; but are the growing proofs of the complexity of the universe any less an attestation of the mind of a Creator? It is easy to believe in God.

Think for a moment of the creation. Creation without intelligence? Order without arrangement? Order is everywhere. Put it to the test. Go into an apple orchard, and gather the fruit, and you will find that the

leaves on the twig grow in spirals, and the sixth is always exactly over the first. Did that just happen—happen a myriad times? No, there is method behind it: Somebody Who knows. Go at harvest time, and take an ear of corn in the field; and you will not find a single ear with an odd number of rows. Somebody counts! A man tells me that all is without God. I do not, and cannot believe that. I must believe that He is. That is the appeal to the imagination.

Then there is an appeal to reason. That has been involved in what I have said. Can we imagine man without God? Some people seem to. Surely they must be shockingly ashamed of their ancestry. If a man as he is today—I care not whether good or bad—surely there is some mind behind this creation, surely some intelligence that accounts for such a being. In appealing to reason, all I want to say is this. It is far easier for me to believe that He is, than that He is not. I must believe that. I must start there.

And yet we are not left to such illustrations. Light is beating all around us concerning God. It broke in upon human intelligence nineteen hundred years ago, when God was manifested in the flesh. The Man of Nazareth made His claim to be one with God. He exhorted men to believe in God; and His victories were always those of leading men to that conviction, and to that understanding. If we would approach Him, we must begin there, and believe that God is.

But we may believe all that, and yet fail to make contact with God. That is why the second statement of condition is of vital importance. We must also believe that He is the Rewarder of them that seek after

Him. That is not belief in the moral government of God, though that, of course, is necessarily involved. It is a belief that He does not and cannot abandon man, created in His own image and in His own likeness. A man may say that he believes in God, and in His omnipotence, and yet say that He is careless of man. It is impossible to make me believe that. Whether it be the result of scientific investigation or the result of the Biblical declaration, man is the crowning glory of creation as we know it in this world. I am only an individual in this world, and there are worlds that I have not yet seen. My thought of heaven is not merely one place, but a universe. What exercises we shall have when we investigate God's great universe! But in this earth, the highest work and form of being is man; and the highest thing in man is his moral character, his sentiment or conviction. God must have to do with that man, and He must have to do with that man morally, if He is a Rewarder. Then He must be available to man.

We must be careful here, because there are men who do not reach God, and men that God does not reach. In a certain way He reaches all men, for in Him we live and move and have our being. But there are men who are not conscious of Him, they have no dealings with Him, He cannot have dealings with them. He cannot reach them. He cannot tell them His secrets. "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him." He can communicate with such. So He is the Rewarder of them that seek after Him. It is a great word, those who diligently seek Him. It conveys effort in its simplicity and sublimity.

One can walk through the cornfields, and across the meadows by the river bank, and over the mountains, and never touch Him. We must "seek Him." The word has all the force of investigation, of demand made upon us. Why should I use any other words than those that Jesus uttered, "Ask . . . seek . . . knock"? They describe the attitude of the soul to which God can make His response. He is the Rewarder of those that seek after Him. These are the people who "ask, seek, knock," who reach God, and whom He can reach.

But is that possible? The first proof that it is possible is found in the ability of man to do this very thing. God has so created man that he can ask, he can seek, and he can knock. There are no half measures in Nature, we are told. If God gives a fish fins, there is water in which to use them. If God gives a bird wings, there is air in which it can fly. If God gives to man the capacity to seek Him, there is the possibility of an answer to his seeking. We may therefore conclude that God is a Rewarder, which is testified by the experience of man. If testimony is to be accepted as evidence on any subject, it must be accepted here. Multitudes of people have testified to the fact in their lives that having sought, they have found; having asked, they have been answered; having knocked at the door, it was swung open, and God has come to them.

The final proof is the testimony of the Man of Nazareth, Who, whatever doubts we may have concerning some of the things He said, as to what they meant, has left no room for doubts that He believed, and intended men to believe that God is available to souls, will answer them, will reward them, will come to them in

grace, in succor, in strength, in love, in help—when they seek after Him.

Let us consider, in conclusion, the teaching involved. In the whole of the Biblical revelation, from beginning to end, belief in God is manifest as in One Who knows, and Whose wisdom is infinite. There is no journey to take to find Him. He is all-powerful. He is alive. How easy it is to come to Him, for perfect love casts out fear.

"This is the God we adore,
Our faithful infallible Friend;
His love is as great as His power,
And knows neither measure nor end."

If we believe He is a Rewarder, it means we believe He is interested in us, an infinite mystery and wonder, something that baffles the intellect. Amid all the wonders of the far-flung splendors of the universe, here am I, insignificant, a grain of dust, and yet God is interested in me! I think it is well to advise young people to go back and study the Old Testament, and particularly the book which some people consider dry and uninteresting—Leviticus. There we see how interested God is in man, in the very simplest matters. He is interested in what we wear, according to the climate, and the texture of wool or cotton. The clothing ordered then was hygienic and necessary, in that climate, for the people. That is illustrated all through the Bible. "Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk." Have we ever stopped to think about that command? I see His interest in man, in him, and his home, his

furniture, his reading, in everything. He is a Rewarder.

That means His purpose is a purpose of blessing; and He will bestow it for ever upon people that will seek after Him. How easy it is. No persuasion is necessary. "Nothing in my hand I bring." I may rest assured that there will be no refusal, except the refusal of infinite Love, and His "No" is as much a proof of His love, and often more so than if He gave the thing asked for. He never denies save in love. "No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."

Yet I would remind you that the text marks the note of urgency. Belief means more than conviction; it means obedience. It means trusting, and venturing upon God, coming to Him, speaking to Him, listening to Him, daring everything upon His word. That is the condition to which God can appeal. He who comes to God, comes to One Who rewards that kind of coming.

We should not forget the setting of the text. The section begins in the tenth chapter. Let us go further back, to the beginning of the letter. There we find that God, Who spoke to the fathers by divers portions and in divers manners, has spoken in His Son; and He stands to us in the place of God, for He is God. Faith in Christ is faith in God; and he that comes must believe that He is. So humanity is brought face to face with the Person of Christ. As we believe in Him, faith is passing through the manifestation to the thing manifested, and we are finding God; and that is the bedrock of faith.

IV

FAITH AND HISTORY: AS TO NATURE
AND INTERPRETATION

SCRIPTURE LESSON: PSALM XIX.

"Therein the elders had witness borne to them. By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen hath not been made out of things which do appear."—HEBREWS xi. 2, 3.

By citation from Habakkuk, the writer of this letter has declared faith to be the true philosophy of life: "My righteous one shall live by faith." He has, moreover, defined faith in the abstract. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen." In the rest of this chapter (xi) we have abounding illustrations of the power and the victory of faith. The writer has selected his illustrations from the stream of history, from Abel to Jesus. The consummation is reached, not in the eleventh, but the twelfth chapter.

In the words of our text, before dealing with personalities, he shows faith in its relation to human history as a whole. I know of no passage which has suffered more from misunderstanding, due to faulty translation. Let us, therefore, follow three lines of consideration, first attempting a careful examination of the passage itself; then observing the statement of its double declaration. So we shall find its interpretation of history.