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LIFE BY FAITH.

A SERMON



PREACHED BEFORE THE SYNOD OF NEW-JERSEY,

AT THE

OPENING OF ITS SESSIONS,

AT

RAHWAY, NEW-JERSEY,

Tuesday Evening, October 21st, 1862.

BY ALEXANDER T. M'GILL, D.D.,

OF PRINCETON, NEW-JERSEY.

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L I F E B Y F A I T H .

A SERMON

PREACHED BEFORE THE SYNOD OF NEW-JERSEY,

BY REV. ALEXANDER T. M'GILL, DD.

* "The just shall live by his faith."—HABAKKUK 2 : 4.

THIS was a favorite text with the most gifted and successful preacher that Jesus Christ ever commissioned—Paul the Apostle. Three of his comments upon it have been recognized as the word of God itself, being recorded by the pen of his Spirit: one to the Romans, another to the Galatians, a third to the Hebrews. To the Romans he preaches it, when the prospect of shame and persecution among them for the cross of Christ calls forth a declaration of Christian courage: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, the just shall live by faith." To the Galatians he preaches it as part of his conclusive argument for the doctrine of justification by faith: "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident; for the just shall live by faith." To the Hebrews he preaches it, when he exhorts them to patience and continuance through a great fight of afflictions: "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him." Thus you see, how wide a scope we are warranted to take with this text, by the example of divine interpretation itself.

In the connection before us, the original place of its occurrence

in Scripture, we discern a shade of meaning still different from any instance of its quotation in the Bible; and that is, in view of approaching trials of an extraordinary kind, we should live in a peculiar and eminent degree by the exercise of faith. A frightful vision of national calamity, an impending invasion of the Chaldeans, with all its desolating horrors, filled the imagination of the prophet; and like every considerate and godly man, he is concerned to know what are his own sins and his own responsibilities; what may be his own duty, then and now, in the midst of that trouble, and in the prospect of it: verse 1st: "I will stand upon my watch, to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd." In answer from the Lord, he is directed, first, to make a faithful record for the benefit of others. "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it." Next, to have patience with the developments of Providence concerning the trouble and the deliverance—"though it tarry, wait for it, etc.," (verse 3.) Then it is declared that humility is the only upright attitude of soul, in such circumstances; and contrasted with the proud impatience which can not wait for God, in his appointed time, is the meek reliance of the just man—"but the just shall live by his faith." Faith, as the Apostle Paul would gloss it, which embraces the true Messiah and his righteousness, as the ark of safety through all extremities of trial and danger—faith, which holds with invulnerable hand the promises of Almighty God, that are all yea and amen in him—is the secret of a just man's perseverance through all calamities, and triumph over all catastrophes.

However diversified the uses of the text, there is always one subject—life by faith: and all the varieties of its application may be grouped with sufficient unity in this two-fold aspect of the subject: Life by faith in ordinary circumstances, and life by faith in circumstances of extraordinary trial.

I. Ordinarily, the just man lives by faith. First. As it is the first act of that new spiritual life, which the Holy Ghost produces in the soul. It is that coming to Christ which the Scriptures make anterior to every other gift or exercise of grace. Repentance, in the widest acceptance, turning unto God, includes faith as one essential element. But repentance, in the restricted sense, of sorrow for sin, resolution, and amendment, follows the eye, the

step, the hand of faith. "They shall look on me whom they have pierced, and mourn." The repentance which precedes true faith is but legal, but the agitations of enmity in bonds, throes, and convulsions, which, but for the preventing grace of God, would naturally cry out, at length: "Torment me not, thou Son of David." God is pleased with true repentance, as the whole tenor of his word evinces. But "without faith it is impossible to please him." Therefore, if either of these graces may be said to precede the other in the order of nature, and the one is simply indispensable, and the other instantly pleasing, the former is foremost in the movement of renovated life. We persuade the sinner to repentance by the word of God, as it contains the law and the Gospel; enlightening his darkness, alarming his fears, exciting his soul with alternate threatening and promise, to adventure on the mercy and truth of Jesus. But all this implies, of course, that he believes the word. And thus from many a point of view, it appears that the first living act of a determination to be saved is that of believing.

Second. We live by faith, as it apprehends the plea by which the condemnation of death is set aside, or as it is a justifying instrument. We are said to live by that instrumentality which delivers us and shields us from the operation of death. "If by one man's offense death reigned by one, much more they which receive abundance of grace, and the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one Jesus Christ." The hand therefore which receives this gift of righteousness that comes on us for justification unto life is the implement by which a just man lives. And hence the best reason for his denomination "just"—one whom God has justified on account of the righteousness of Christ, imputed and made just by the cleansing efficacy of atoning blood, sprinkled on his conscience by the Holy Ghost, with that abundance of grace communicated, which is comprehended in the phrase "eternal life." Along with the ground of justification, is all the grace of sanctification received by the same hand of faith, in both of which we are said to live by faith, and not upon it. This, in the economy of spiritual life, would be absurd, as for the body, in natural life, to be subsisted on the hand, instead of the aliment appropriated by that member as an instrument.

Third. We live by faith, as it unites the soul in mystical union

with the Head, in whom there is all the fullness of life — “Christ, who is our life.” The articulated member of a glorious body, the engrafted branch of a living olive or vine, the cemented stone of a building, fitly framed and well compacted—under many a similitude of striking analogy, and yet inadequate expression, the just man is identified with the Source of all life by the faith which apprehends a justifying righteousness. No matter where we place the mystery of this incorporation as to the order of time, there is conscious vitality and true manifestation only in the actual exercise of faith.

Fourth. We live by faith, as it is in the range of its appropriation the highest and best condition of life. It furnishes the soul with all that makes life valuable and happy. The promises on which it feeds are a continual feast. There is a substance given by it to every thing we hope for. There is a realization in its credit as it looks to the veracity, and faithfulness, and wisdom, and power of God which makes any one, in any circumstances, that the world would think no life at all, exclaim with the Apostle: “I am full—I have all and abound.” Life is never stagnant, never destitute, when we have a future to live for. Even the days of our vanity in youth are counted the happiest days of lifetime, because they are both dependent and expectant; depending, without corrosive care, on a father’s provision, and expecting a greater compass of joy in the years of manly fruition. So, and much more, faith makes life a perpetual youth of joyous recumbency on a Father’s care of us and plans for us, and buoyant forecast of “an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, which passeth not away, reserved in heaven for us.”

Fifth. We live by faith, as it is a principle essentially indicative of life, active, operative, and fruitful. It works. “Faith, without works, is dead.” Apprehending for its own, such a robe as the imputed righteousness of Christ, it will ever appear “exalted” in it, and adorned with it, “even as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with jewels.” It must combine in the tissue of its own life all the vitalities and activities to which the Scriptures any where attribute our salvation. Sometimes this will be ascribed to benevolence: “Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you, for I was an hungered and ye gave me, etc.” Sometimes to hope: “We are

saved by hope." And sometimes to believing: "He that believeth shall be saved." Now, to which of these three does our salvation really belong—love, or hope, or faith? It is evident, not to one of them alone, but to all of them together. Faith is first, indeed, but it is the train which fills the temple—the fruits of the Spirit in blended beauty, which make us "all glorious within, and accepted in the Beloved." We must ever try ourselves by this touchstone of genuine life. There is far less danger in that one-sided piety, which works for salvation with fear and trembling, than that other one-sided piety which would believe it out, with barrenness of speculation in the soul; attempting eternal life at our ease, by the magic of resorting with sound but heartless thought to the grace of a living Saviour. How many perish behind the batteries they build, to level human merit in the dust! How many, on the credit of their faith, indulge once more in sin—a little one—extenuated by every circumstance, and atoned for at any rate by the secret salvo, that they have a ready recourse at any time to the blood of Jesus Christ, which cleanseth from all sin, thus magnifying the virtue of his cross, and the riches of his grace, only to make the precious fountain of the Saviour's blood a laver of convenience for the filthy washing of lust and sloth! Show us your faith by your works, or you are dead and perishing.

II. Such being the constitution and economy of a just man's faith in ordinary circumstances, let us now see how it survives in circumstances of extraordinary trial.

First. The first of these to be considered is, that which oppressed the mind of the prophet, when this text was uttered—calamity; that which exceeds the bounds of ordinary affliction. The word of the Lord, by the mouth of Ezekiel, defines it as "a sword—a sword sharpened and also furbished; it is sharpened to make a sore slaughter, it is furbished that it may glitter; terrors by reason of the sword shall be upon my people; smite, therefore, upon thy thigh. Because it is a trial, and what if the sword contemn even the rod?"—the rod being the emblem of ordinary affliction. It is a time when the righteous and the wicked are involved in a common tribulation; when the scourge slayeth suddenly, and He who dispenses all events will "laugh at the trial of the innocent"—rejoicing in the power of his own arm to chastise a sinful nation,

and the faith of his own followers to outlast the sorest vials of his fury.

War and famine, pestilence and earthquake, early conspired to impeach the objective faith of Christianity, and occasioned, on the part of its defenses, the best achievements of literature among the Fathers. But the refutation of pagan infidelity has never sufficed to deliver the grace of faith from all confusion and perplexity, when God arises to "shake terribly the earth, and bathe his sword in heaven." It is still hard to explain why one event happeneth to all, when a particular providence has in charge the safety of God's own children; harder to explain why the increase of his seed, as pillars of the land and salt of the earth, does not preserve its foundations from being destroyed; and, upon the other hand, why the ship of the commonweal is actually driven with the tempest, and dashed by the billows, for the sake of Christians themselves, that, like Jonah, may be asleep in their unfaithful departure from God.

And there was never, since the world began, a problem for our faith to solve, so hard as that which tries American believers at this time. We trusted that this model and mighty republic had been it, which should have redeemed the world from the curse of despotic rule, and the turbulence of incessant revolution. We trusted that a mission of millennial glory had been the reserve for which the bright evangelization of this continent was long preparing, and that the tie of the nation's heart with British nationality, in its aims of enlightened faith and freedom for the whole race, which had just been restored, was the very league that God's anointed would ordain to guarantee the world's salvation. But, alas! how suddenly and horridly has all this hope and trust been dashed to pieces! The most peaceful realm beneath the sun has become already the most bloody battle-ground on the face of the earth. And Edomitish envy, aristocracy, and greed, all at once forget the league they courted, and cry out against the hated republic: "Raze it, raze it, even to the foundation thereof." Hostile camps, which frown defiance at each other with such a bitter hate, that scarcely a sentinel can live between them, are hostile prayer-meetings also; and the Lord of Hosts himself is held by a wrestling faith, which seems strong enough on each side to remove mountains. Faith

against faith fights, as if even Christ were divided, and the elements of this fratricidal strife would go up to mingle in the censer which burns in the most holy place of the highest heavens.

How can faith live through this deadly duel? How escape the ruin of a house divided against itself? Or persevere, when all the promises on which it lives and feeds are made themselves a common object of rapine and plunder?

Hard as the problem may be to reason, there is no great difficulty to the exercise of faith; it never claims that prayer must be answered in the very form, and at the very time, the anguish of the heart may dictate, and feels that prayer is well requited, when faith alone is strengthened, and some other boon of visible or invisible mercy is given, as much better for our best welfare, as God's wisdom is greater than ours. Blind and bewildered as we are, in all the calculations of sense, there is chart enough in the volume of inspired and uninspired history, to guide us in believing. "Shall I go up again to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother?" said the weeping multitude of the children of Israel, when they asked counsel of the Lord, after having lost twenty-two thousand men before the gates of Gibeah, notwithstanding all their own overwhelming advantages. "And the Lord said, Go up against him." Faith obeyed; and was again defeated, with the loss of eighteen thousand men, who all drew the sword. Again they came to the oracle of God, with weeping and fasting, burnt offering and peace offering, and said: "Shall I yet go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?" "And the Lord said, Go up, for to-morrow I will deliver them into thy hand."

Such was the agony of faith in that great civil war, which desolated the Hebrew commonwealth in the morning of its greatness. Such the piety and persistency of its life, until a peace was conquered by the extermination, almost, of one tribe in Israel: yet the beauties of Old Testament religion follow that war with a brighter effulgence than ever; as the spirit of inspiration has given its pages to our faith. We have Ruth, and Samuel, and David, in quick succession, we have the magnanimity of all the tribes, effacing the rancor of Benjamin, by taking the first of their kings from this diminished tribe; and excepting the sin of asking for a king at all, we have all the lustre of that theocratic empire in the sequel;

its consolidation, its renown, its greatest benefit and blessing to the nations of the earth.

History hardly affords us another parallel so near to our condition; unless it was when the Puritans under Cromwell, and the Presbyterians of Scotland were marshaled against each other, and each camp was like a Bethel, for praying and preaching. Terrible tribulation followed that quarrel, at the restoration of Charles the Second, which it speedily accomplished; and both parties were punished, until the whole theater of their unnatural and unseemly feud became a threshing-floor, on which almighty wrath seemed intent on crushing liberty, religion, and morals in a common destruction. But at length "an handful of corn," thrust out in the extremities of persecuting violence, and trampled in the ground by Claverhouse and his dragoons, came up to "shake like Lebanon," giving to Great Britain the principles of her best revolution, and to America the seed of ours, and to the world a rich inheritance of regulated freedom.

As a believer in Christ, I can not despair of my country. I can not see why we should be slow of heart to believe that this baleful distress which fills us with so much grief and dismay, is only another agony upon the threshing-floor, in which pestilent theories of civil government shall be crushed out forever, and pestilent evils of social and domestic life shall be uprooted safely, or girdled till they die; and a new growth, of deeper root, and loftier hight, and wider shade, shall be the future of our chastened life as a nation.

However this may be, faith has enough on hand, without a moment for speculation, to engage the intense activity of this heavenly grace. Like Noah, when warned of God and moved with fear, the just man will be employed in preparing an ark for the saving of himself and his house. Instead of returning to the world at each interval of relief and hope, with eager and animated chase of its gains or its honors, he will by all means make sure of the "covenant," and hide himself only there, and take his children there, and see that it is repaired and finished as God has directed. To this ark he will gather all the institutions of God, which are the only hope of our land. He will no more allow the cause of Missions at home or abroad, the cause of Education, or that of a sanctifying Literature to perish, or be imperiled in this "overflowing scourge," than Noah would have left one or all of his sons to

perish with the world of the ungodly. He will search out his own sins, and those of his house, and those of his church, that more than any others, endanger the nation in which she is embosomed; and provoke the Mediator in his kingdom, to join his eyes of fire, with the ministers of destroying providence, to scourge the Church and the world together. Lukewarmness, the loathsome sin of Laodicea; contentment with outward order and immunity from scandal, the sin of Sardis; want of love among ourselves, and love of the world, strong enough to efface the distinction of God's own people, and to invade even the pulpit with its maxims and policy—these the man of faith will mortify, as the tempest of judgment approaches.

Second. Another trial is that of reproach for the faithful maintenance of truth and holiness. This is one, however, which is ordinary, instead of extraordinary, just as often as the spirit of heroic consecration dares to rise above the level of an average conformity, or pass beyond the circle of common expedients, in aggression upon darkness and sin; or stand like "a brazen wall" and "a defended city," against the rage of prejudice and passion in times of excitement. Times like the present are full of peril to any form of uncompromising Christianity. Unregenerated nature, always, when stirred to its lowest depths by the pressure of public woe, rages against the barriers of a pure faith; in proportion as it stands up to witness for God, when his hand is stretched out, in controversy with men. And we, of "this sect which is everywhere spoken against," may look for obloquy to come in the tumults of public disorder—for the bigot and the latitudinarian, the skeptic and the fanatic, the voluptuary and the demagogue, to say to each other, "a confederacy"—as often as the standard of this camp goes forward among the tribes of Israel.

Faith, in such a trial as this, probably the hardest of all, to the fortitude of its heavenly temper, will seek above all things to experience the power, sweetness, and consolation of every thing in our profession, for which we are denounced or derided; will wake into life and beauty every hated feature of our testimony, and without plan or apology, concealment or accommodation, fix an eye on the authority of Jesus, and his example; "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross and despised the shame." We have seen already, how it was to the Hebrews, when they were

“a gazing-stock, both by reproaches and afflictions,” that the great Apostle administered the text, where he tells them, they “have need of patience,” and exhorts them: “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.” (Hebrew 10.)

Third. Another trial is the return of infidelity—extraordinary, in that no completeness of defeat can prevent its returning invasion. It is the only thing under heaven that never dies out, beneath the light of demonstration against it—even boasting itself as “the Nemesis of faith;” and being born of night, will indeed ever seek to reverse the day with its shadow; even when “the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold as the light of seven days.” It is sure to watch its opportunity, in times of public disorder, when religion fails to subdue the passions of men, and providence appears to disappoint the faith of the just; in order to unsettle hope and confidence in God, because his ways are not our ways. It exchanges persecution, and ridicule, and learned seclusion, and rhetorical flourish, and philosophical doubt, forms which have all in turn been exhausted; and now becomes Tractarian to the masses, courting the enthusiasm of ignorance, as it streams through the workshops, the camps, and the trains of foreign immigration.

We may have to meet it in terrific forms—true as it is to nothing, but the venom with which it began the assault on “this Galilean.” We must meet it in these new forms of activity and aggression. Faith, in this trial, goes on with her march of intellect, her work of education, lifting higher its standard, and keeping her sons in the van of all human learning, and at the same time, with equal concern, she will repair that old redoubt of bluff and simple piety, from which the most unlettered of men may exclaim, “One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see”—and the most learned repeat, “Let God be true and every man a liar.” Child-like faith is a giant, more than a giant; it has a sling and a stone, before which every giant must fall, to be dispatched by his own sword.

Fourth. Another trial is apostasy—extraordinary, because it has been ordinary so long and so immovably. Like infidelity, it is always on the alert, in times of confusion and trouble, when the foundations of the earth are out of course; the sort of times in

which it began to erect that vast incorporation, which for many centuries has been making merchandise of the souls of men. Clothed with civil power in the councils of the nation, and speeding on public errands, as if it were the soul of patriotism itself. Popery is the same political religion it has always been, and in nothing so unchangeable as its ambition to bestride the state. It has always clambered up on the existing temporal power, no matter on what side of the question; the first to chant a *Te Deum* in Charleston when Fort Sumter fell, and the first to rally the masses of New-York to avenge that fall. "Popery is dead at heart and living at the extremities," says a great writer of this age. It is living in these extremities, with power and policy of sufficient portent to make us keep in mind the martyr declaration of Bishop Latimer, whose blood was spattered on its fangs: "Once I thought that Popery would never return into England; but now I find, it was not faith, but fancy."

Faith sees in the promises of God, a determinate time, when this great Babylon will sink, as a mighty millstone in the sea; and, without the help of curious computations on the one hand, or political combinations on the other, "waits for it" — never discouraged, that it tarries so long; and never secure and relaxed when this "Man of Sin" appears to droop, as if destined to perish in a gradual decrepitude. Rather, the just man's faith will wait for the overthrow of this great apostasy, from the height of that prosperity which sits a queen, and "glorifies herself and lives deliciously" — with instantaneous and astounding interposition of Almighty God — "her plagues shall come upon her in one day — for strong is the Lord God that judgeth her" Till then, the faith which lives, in the exercise of vigilance that never sleeps, and efforts that never slacken, will cry out in sympathy with "souls beneath the altar" on high — "O Lord! how long?"

Such is an imperfect view of true faith, in its habits of ordinary exercise, and in situations of critical and extraordinary trial. How admirable its constitution! How rich its resources, what consolatory evidence does it afford us, that this life of faith is an imperishable principle; and that there is in any fainting extremity of its nature, a quenchless vitality, which may be called on to revive and "strengthen the things that remain and are ready to die." It is first in order; every other grace in the soul implies the prece-

dence of this faith, and must be lost — hope herself must give up the sure and steadfast anchor, before this inner and ultimate life of faith can be destroyed. It is justifying; and stands in the presence of God on the ground of a satisfaction, so infinite in value, as to guarantee the protection of that very justice which was arrayed against us. Justice herself expires, before the just man's faith will die. It is uniting; and lives in mystical incorporation with Christ himself, in the fullness of him who is "alive for evermore and hath the keys of hell and death." Sooner may the keys be stolen and pulsation cease from the hand which holds them, than the vital cord between that glorious Head and the meanest member, to whom he gives eternal life, can be dissevered. It is realizing; and so diffuses light and breath to all other sensibilities of human life, that a visible existence will go out, before a soul of life like this expires. It is fruitful; and "herein is my Father glorified that ye bear much fruit." Sooner than a fruitful faith will die, God would relinquish his glory. All its ordinary properties prove, it is deathless — that the just man lives by faith, and lives forever.

And amidst calamities the most dreadful, it rides above the waves in an ark of safety. Amidst reproach and scorn the most bitter, it realizes the honor which cometh from God, and despises the shame which cometh from man. Amidst infidelity the most virulent, and apostasy the most signal and sear, it overcomes by the blood of the Lamb and the testimony it holds. All these extreme hostilities it smiles at with defiance; and when flesh and heart would faint and fail, finds in God the strength of our hearts and a portion forever.

Have you such a faith, my brethren? Not in conscious competency now, for every form of diversified trial and firm endurance — for as your day is, your strength shall be — but in that "spirit of your minds," which takes you always and immediately to Jesus? It is time, surely, to know what manner of spirit we are of — when the judgments of God are abroad over all this broad land. Already it is a Bochim. And God only knows how soon every house may be mourning a first-born, and more than a first-born. The end may be worse than the beginning. Famine, pestilence, anarchy, may tread upon the heels of war. Wicked ambition and vile corruption, at the North, may bring upon us fiery trials, in the very triumph which crushes out a wicked rebellion

and a vile Confederacy at the South. And if none of these things be coming, death is at hand; the Judge is at the door; unchangeable eternity is near. Oh! let us see to it, that we now live and stand fast in the Lord; so that over us the second death shall have no power. "Blessed is that servant whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing."

Perishing sinners, will not you beg that it may be given you, on the behalf of Christ, to believe on his name? Without another moment's delay, will you not plead that God would fulfill in you "the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power"? "He that believeth not, shall be damned." "He that believeth on the Son, hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."





