

"HAVE FAITH IN GOD"

Mark 11:20-26

On Tuesday morning Christ and His disciples were returning from Bethany to Jerusalem. Travelling on the same road which they had taken the day before, they passed the fig tree which Christ had cursed on Monday, and which had withered under His curse. This fig tree had furnished our Lord a parable of the spiritual state of the Jewish nation, which through the centuries had received the blessings of God but had failed to return spiritual fruit. We may regard this barren fig tree as a symbol of any one of our lives which constantly receives the mercies of God but fails to yield fruit for Him.

Peter expressed his surprise at seeing the miraculous change which had been wrought by the word of Christ. The vigorous, flourishing tree of yesterday was shriveled and withered to the very roots. It was a picture of the coming doom of Israel.

In answer to Peter's astonishment that the fig tree had withered so quickly, Christ taught His followers a lesson of supreme personal importance by saying, "Have faith in God." He declared that the marvel was explained by the power of faith, and He encouraged His disciples to a similar trust in God. The word of Christ had wrought the miracle because of His oneness with the Father and His dependence upon Him. He intimated that similar results would be possible for His followers if they would really trust in God. Christ told His disciples that the hindrances to their fruitfulness (that is, the fig tree), and progress (that is, the mountain), can be overcome only by faith which rests on God. In other words, by faith we can do things which otherwise would be impossible. Only by inward conviction can there be outward achievement.

Our Lord spoke these words in this text, and many others like them, to the disciples and to the multitudes because he knew that faith in God is a basic need of the human soul. We must have faith in some one or some thing. If one's faith is in self, one becomes merely an egotist. If one's faith is in wealth or intellect or power, one comes at last to a sense of disappointment and futility. But if one's faith is in the eternal God, he has a sure foundation on which to stand amid any storm that life may bring.

Faith occupies a central place in religion. All through the Bible we are reminded of this. What is it worth? What is its true place in our lives? Faith is a mystery, but that need not trouble us. All that is great is mysterious. Life is a mystery, but we do not have to interpret the riddle of existence in order that we may live. Life is for the unconscious babe as much as for the mature philosopher. We are encompassed by mystery. Faith is more than believing that there is a God. Of course, believing that there is a God is an essential element in faith, but it is only the starting point. Belief in a God of some kind is practically universal. Not to believe in a power above and beyond man and the world in which we live is abnormal. When Christ spoke our text He did not mean simply to believe that there is a God.

What is faith? It is not easy to define faith adequately. The author of Hebrews says, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The words express a great truth, but still they do not give us a clear understanding of all that faith can mean to us. Sometime ago a scientist, in talking with a friend, said there are two things science cannot explain -- what gives power to the magnet and what causes things to fall. The friend said, "Why, I thought that gravity was what caused things to fall." "Yes," said the scientist, "that is true. But that is not an explanation. It is a mistake we often make. We think that because we have given something a name we have explained it." So it is with faith. We have a name for it. In some measure we know what it will do in one's life. But so far as our being able to define it fully, we can only describe some of the ways by which it may become a power in one's life.

Faith means to have confidence in God, to trust Him, to rely upon Him. Think of what faith means in the every day affairs of life. Faith is not exclusively a religious matter. It means so much in religion because it means so much everywhere else. Faith is the foundation of the home, of business, of government, of all the great concerns of life. Faith is the operating power of all life. What would the home be without it? The absence of faith would mean the destruction of business. So in religion. Faith is the heart of religion -- confidence in God, in His wisdom, goodness and mercy. As we trust each other in the every day affairs of life, so Christ wants us to trust God at all times, in times of emergency and in times when things go their usual course. Confidence in God and reliance upon Him are the greatest steadying and uplifting power in life. Faith is taking God at His Word, about things unknown, unlikely and untried. It is trusting Christ at His invitation; trusting your soul to His care, your sins to His cleansing and your life to His keeping.

What gives faith its power? It is the fact that it links us on to God. In our text, the big term after all is not faith; it is God. God is the big term in religion. Faith is mighty because it unites us to a mighty God. The man of faith is mighty because the power of God works in Him and through Him.

One of God's problems in doing things in us and through us is to get us out of the way. I mean that He wants to get our selfish desires, schemes and ambitions out of the way, so that we can really put ourselves in His hands to be used of Him. He wants willing, pliant instruments, not willful, selfish ones.

On a mountain one can observe a wire running from post to post along the road. This wire carries the electricity to operate a coal mine. In order to operate this coal mine, which is needed a wire or electricity? One man says a wire by all means. Another says you need electricity. I get to thinking of that in religious terms. Some say you need human organization and activity. Others say you need divine power. Often we go to the extreme of putting our trust in the wire without the electricity. But only God's power can save and keep men. However, we must furnish the contact. God is dependent on us. He has made Himself so. He has ordained that men should have the gospel in earthen vessels. But sometimes we conclude that the vessel is the main thing. It is not. The electricity does the work. God's power brings things to pass. We must recognize our dependence on Him. We must get ourselves, our plans and our ambitions out of the way. Give God a chance. We should be ashamed when we think of how readily we exercise faith in men, and how slow we are to believe in God. This was a constant grief to the Lord Jesus Christ as He saw it even in His own followers.

The first step of faith is belief in God. The second step is the conviction that God has revealed, and does reveal, Himself to man. God reveals Himself even in the natural world: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth His handiwork." He reveals Himself in the pages of His Word as Creator, Ruler, Judge, Guide, Redeemer and Father. He reveals Himself in Christ, Who says, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." He reveals Himself in our own hearts. We know this because we have heard Him speak and have recognized the voice as the voice of God.

Over and over again the importance of faith is stressed in the teachings of the Bible. We cannot please God unless we have faith. "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). All of the blessings promised in the Bible are obtained through the exercise of faith. "Faith is the hand that reaches out and takes the blessing. Faith sees a thing in God's hand and says, 'I will have it.'" "Faith is the key that unlocks the cabinet of God's treasures; the king's messenger from the celestial world, to bring all the supplies we need out of the fulness that there is in Christ."

Faith is the one indispensable condition alike to salvation and service. The Christian life is cradled in faith and must continue with faith till life's latest breath. Faith is not merely intellectual assent to a given proposition. It involves all that belief does, and infinitely more. We believe in a thing, but we have faith in a person. Faith in Christ carries with it a committing of the life to Christ and a trust in Him as our only hope of salvation. We cannot be saved without faith. It is the conduit that conveys to the sinful soul the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. It is like the coupling pin that connects the cars to the engine that furnishes the power.

We should be careful to distinguish between faith and feeling. We are not saved by feeling, or by faith and feeling. Our feelings cannot be substituted for faith. Feelings are the result and not the procuring cause of salvation. Faith honors God by its trust, and God honors faith with His blessings.

How may one obtain faith? By coming in contact with God. How may one increase faith? By putting faith into practice, by reading the Bible and praying, by stepping out on the promises of God, by remaining strong in faith all the way through the testing experiences of life.

This is exactly the time to have faith in God. The undoing sin today is lack of faith in God. Israel was kept out of the Promised Land for forty years because of unbelief. So now, God's people are kept out of many lands of promised blessings because of unbelief. They doubt God's ability or willingness or both. "According to your faith, so be it unto you."

What then is our response to the challenge of faith? Moody used to say, "If God be your partner, make your plans large." That is one response we may make -- to "attempt great things for God, to expect great things from God." That is the response of trust.

The man of little faith, or no faith at all, looks upon a troubled world and becomes disheartened. He sees a world of sin and death and war and catastrophe and poverty and sorrow and is ready to give up the struggle. He is defeated in his own soul. Henceforth, he looks forward to nothing but the destruction of civilization and the world's return to the dark ages.

Not so the man of faith. He too sees that sin and death and war and catastrophe and poverty and sorrow; but above and beyond it all he sees, too, the over-ruling providence of a God of love Whose purposes must ultimately be accomplished. He is ready to say with the missionary, Judson, who spoke out of his own physical suffering amid the hardships of the jungles of Burma: "The future is as bright as the promises of God."

The difference between the man without faith and the man with faith is not in the external world but in their own hearts. It is the difference between one who does not trust in God and one whose faith cannot be shaken because it is based on eternal reality. Faith is our holding fast to our trust in the wisdom and love of God amid the worst things that life can bring upon us. Faith is the anchor that holds in any storm.

By faith we can do things that are otherwise impossible. The natural expression of faith is prayer. Three things are necessary if prayer is to be effective.

1. It must be the prayer of faith.

The phrase about removing mountains was quite common among the Jews. It was a regular, vivid phrase for removing difficulties. It was used especially of wise teachers. A good teacher who could remove the difficulties which the minds of his pupils encountered was called a mountain-remover. So the phrase means this, that if we have real faith, prayer is a power which can solve any problem and make us able to deal with any difficulty. That sounds very simple, but it involves two things. First, we must be willing to take our problems and our difficulties to God. Secondly, we must be willing to accept God's guidance when He gives it to us. It is very common for a person to ask for advice when all he really wants is approval for some action that he has already decided to take. It is useless to ask God for His guidance unless we are willing to accept it.

2. It must be the prayer of expectation.

When we pray, it must never be a mere formality. It must never be a ritual with no hope. For too many people prayer is either a pious ritual or a forlorn hope. It should be a thing of burning expectation.

"What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them." "Believe that ye receive them" (at the moment of asking; the aorist tense is used), "and ye shall have them (future)." To faith God's promise is as good as His performance, and so the believing soul enjoys the answer before it arrives. The secret of all achievement is faith in God.

3. It must be the prayer of love.

The prayer of a bitter man can never get out of the wall of his own bitterness. Why? If we are to speak with God there must be some bond between us and Him. There can never be any intimacy between two people who have nothing in common. The principle of God is love. If the principle of a man's heart is bitterness and the unforgiving spirit, he has erected a barrier between himself and God. Prayers which come from an unforgiving heart will not be answered. Before the prayer of such a person can be answered, he must ask God to cleanse his heart from the bitter spirit and put into his heart the spirit of love. Then he can pray to God and receive an answer to his prayer.