

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part I 1. Its Counterfeits

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Transcript

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH

Part I

1. Its Counterfeits

There are those who have a faith which is so like that which is saving as they themselves may take it to be the very same, and others too may deem it sufficient, yea, even others who have the spirit of discernment. Simon Magus is a case in point. Of him it is written, "Then Simon himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). Such a faith had he, and so expressed it, that Philip took him to be a genuine Christian, and admitted him to those privileges which are peculiar to them. Yet, a little later, the apostle Peter said to him, "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God . . . I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:21, 23). A man may believe all the truth contained in Scripture so far as he is acquainted with it, and he may be familiar with far more than are many genuine Christians. He may have studied the Bible for a longer time, and so his faith may grasp much which they have not yet reached. As his knowledge may be more extensive, so his faith may be more comprehensive. In this kind of faith he may go as far as the apostle Paul did, when he said, "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets" (Acts 24:14). But this is no proof that his faith is saving. An example to the contrary is seen in Agrippa: "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest" (Acts 26:27). Call the above a mere historical faith if you will, yet Scripture also teaches that people may possess a faith which is one of the Holy Spirit, and yet which is a non-saving one. This faith which we now allude to has two ingredients which neither education nor self-effort can produce: spiritual light and a Divine power moving the mind to assent. Now a man may have both illumination and inclination from heaven, and yet not be regenerated. We have a solemn proof of this in Hebrews 6:4-6. There we read of a company of apostates, concerning whom it is said, "It is impossible to renew them again unto repentance." Yet, of these we are told that they were "enlightened," and had "tasted of the heavenly gift," which means, they not only perceived it, but were inclined toward and embraced it; and both, because they were "partakers of the Holy Spirit." People may have a Divine faith, not only in its originating power, but also in its foundation. The ground of their faith may be the Divine testimony, upon which they rest with unshaken confidence. They may give credit to what they believe not only because it appears reasonable or even certain, but because they are fully

persuaded it is the Word of Him who cannot lie. To believe the Scriptures on the ground of their being God's Word, is a Divine faith. Such a faith had the nation of Israel after their wondrous exodus from Egypt and deliverance from the Red Sea. Of them it is recorded "The people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31), yet of the great majority of them it is said, "Whose carcasses fell in the wilderness . . . and to whom swore he that they should not enter into His rest" (Heb. 3:17,18). It is indeed searching and solemn to make a close study of Scripture on this point, and discover how much is said of unsaved people in a way of having faith in the Lord. In Jeremiah 13:11 we find God saying, "For as the girdle cleaveth to the loins of a man, so have I caused to cleave unto Me the whole house of Israel, and the whole house of Judah, saith the Lord," and to "cleave" unto God is the same as to "trust" Him: see 2 Kings 18:5,6. Yet of that very same generation God said, "This evil people, which refuse to hear My words, which walk in the imagination of their heart, and walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be as this girdle, which is good for nothing" (Jer. 13:10). The term "stay" is another word denoting firm trust. "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the remnant of Israel, and such as are escaped of the house of Jacob, shall no more again stay upon him that smote them; but shall stay upon the Lord" (Isa. 10:20); "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee" (Isa. 26:3). And yet we find a class of whom it is recorded, "They call themselves of the holy city, and stay themselves upon the God of Israel" (Isa. 48:2). Who would doubt that this was a saving faith! Ah, let us not be too hasty in jumping to conclusions: of this same people God said, "Thou art obstinate, and thy neck is an iron sinew, and thy brow brass" (Isa. 48:4). Again, the term "lean" is used to denote not only trust, but dependency on the Lord. Of the Spouse it is said, "who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her Beloved?" (Song of Sol. 8:5). Can it be possible that such an expression as this is applied to those who are unsaved? Yes, it is, and by none other than God Himself: "Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity . . . The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the Lord, and say, "Is not the Lord among us? none evil can come upon us" (Micah 3:9,11). So thousands of carnal and worldly people are leaning upon Christ to uphold them, so that they cannot fall into Hell, and are confident that no "evil" can befall them. Yet is their confidence a horrible presumption. To rest upon a Divine promise with implicit confidence, and that in the face of great discouragement and danger, is surely something which we would not expect to find predicated of a people who were unsaved. Ah, truth is stranger than fiction. This very thing is depicted in God's unerring Word. When Sennacherib and his great army besieged the cities of Judah, Hezekiah said, "Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him: with him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God" (2 Chron. 32:7,8); and we are told that "the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah." Hezekiah had spoken the words of God, and for the people to rest upon them was to rest on God Himself. Yet, less than fifteen years after, this same people did "worse than the heathen" (2 Chron. 33:9). Thus, resting upon a promise of God, is not, of itself, any proof of regeneration. To rely upon God, on the ground of His "covenant" was far more than resting upon a Divine promise; yet unregenerate men may do even this. A case in point is found in Abijah king of Judah. It is indeed striking to read and weigh what he said in 2 Chronicles 13 when Jeroboam and his hosts came up against him. First, he reminded all Israel that the Lord God had given the kingdom to David and his sons forever "by a covenant of salt" (v. 5). Next, he denounced the sins of his adversary (vv. 6-9). Then he affirmed the Lord to be "our God" and that He was "with him and his people" (vv. 10-12). But Jeroboam heeded not, but forced the battle upon them. "Abijah and his people slew them with a great slaughter" (v. 17), "because they relied upon the Lord God of their fathers" (v. 18). Yet of this same Abijah it is said. "he walked in all the sins of his father," etc. (1 Kings

15:3). Unregenerate men may rely upon God, depend upon Christ, rest on His promise, and plead his covenant. "The people of Nineveh (who were heathen) believed God" (Jonah 3:5). This is striking, for the God of Heaven was a stranger to them, and His prophet a man whom they knew not—why then should they trust his message? Moreover, it was not a promise, but a threatening, which they believed. How much easier then is it for a people now living under the Gospel to apply to themselves a promise, than the heathen a terrible threat! "In applying a threatening we are like to meet with more opposition, both from within and from without. From within, for a threatening is like a bitter pill, the bitterness of death is in it; no wonder if that hardly goes down. From without too, for Satan will be ready to raise opposition: he is afraid to have men startled, lest the sense of their misery denounced in the threatening should rouse them up to seek how they may make an escape. He is more sure of them while they are secure, and will labour to keep them off the threatening, lest it should awaken them from dreams of peace and happiness, while they are sleeping in his very jaws. "But now, in applying a promise, an unregenerate man ordinarily meets with no opposition. Not from within, for the promise is all sweetness; the promise of pardon and life is the very marrow, the quintessence of the Gospel. No wonder if they be ready to swallow it down greedily. And Satan will be so far from opposing, that he will rather encourage and assist one who has no interest in the promise, to apply it; for this he knows will be the way to fix and settle them in their natural condition. A promise misapplied will be a seal upon the sepulchre, making them sure in the grave of sin, wherein they lay dead and rotting. Therefore if unregenerate men may apply a threatening, which is in these respects more difficult, as appears they may by the case of the Ninevites, why may they not be apt to apply (appropriate) a Gospel promise when they are not like to meet with difficulty and opposition?" (David Clarkson, 1680, for some time co-pastor with J. Owen; to whom we are indebted for much of the above.)

Another most solemn example of those having faith, but not a saving one, is seen in the stony-ground hearers, of whom Christ said, "which for a while believe" (Luke 8:13). Concerning this class the Lord declared that they hear the Word and "with joy receiveth it" (Matt. 13:20). How many such have we met and known: happy souls with radiant faces, exuberant spirits, full of zeal that others too may enter into the bliss which they have found. How difficult it is to distinguish such from genuine Christians—the good-ground hearers. The difference is not apparent; no, it lies beneath the surface—they have "not root in themselves" (Matt. 13:21): deep digging has to be done to discover this fact! Have you searched yourself narrowly, my reader, to ascertain whether or no "the root of the matter" (Job 19:28) be in you? But let us refer now to another case which seems still more incredible. There are those who are willing to take Christ as their Saviour, yet who are most reluctant to submit to Him as their Lord, to be at His command, to be governed by His laws. Yet there are some unregenerate persons who acknowledge Christ as their Lord. Here is the Scripture proof of our assertion: "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?' and then will I profess unto them, 'I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity'" (Matt. 7:22-23). There is a large class ("many") who profess subjection to Christ as Lord, and who do many mighty works in His name: thus a people who can even show you their faith by their works, and yet it is not a saving one! It is impossible to say how far a non-saving faith may go, and how very closely it may resemble that faith which is saving. Saving faith has Christ for its object; so has a non-saving faith (John 2:23, 24). Saving faith is wrought by the Holy Spirit; so is a non-saving faith (Heb. 6:4). Saving faith is produced by the Word of God; so also is a non-saving faith (Matt. 13:20, 21). Saving faith will make a man prepare for the coming of the Lord, so also will a non-saving: of both the foolish and wise virgins it is written, "then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps" (Matt. 25:7). Saving faith is accompanied with joy: so also is a non-saving faith (Matt. 13:20). Perhaps some readers are ready to say, all of this is very unsettling, and if really heeded, most distressing. May God in His mercy grant that this article may

have just these very effects on many who read it. O if you value your soul, dismiss it not lightly. If there be such a thing (and there is) as a faith in Christ which does not save, then how easy it is to be deceived about my faith! It is not without reason that the Holy Spirit has so plainly cautioned us at this very point. "A deceived heart hath turned him aside" (Isa. 44:20). "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee" (Obad. 3). "Take heed that ye be not deceived" (Luke 21:8). "For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself" (Gal. 6:3). At no point does Satan use his cunning and power more tenaciously, and more successfully, than in getting people to believe that they have a saving faith when they have not. The Devil deceives more souls by this one thing than by all his other devices put together. Take this present article as an illustration. How many a Satan-blinded soul will read it and then say, It does not apply to me; I know that my faith is a saving one! It is in this way that the Devil turns aside the sharp point of God's convicting Word, and secures his captives in their unbelief. He works in them a sense of false security, by persuading them that they are safe within the ark, and induces them to ignore the threatenings of the Word and appropriate only its comforting promises. He dissuades them from heeding that most salutary exhortation, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves" (2 Cor. 13:5). O my reader, heed that word now. In closing this first article we will endeavour to point out some of the particulars in which this non-saving faith is defective, and wherein it comes short of a faith which does save. First, with many it is because they are willing for Christ to save them from Hell, but are not willing for Him to save them from self. They want to be delivered from the wrath to come, but they wish to retain their self-will and self-pleasing. But He will not be dictated unto: you must be saved on His terms, or not at all. When Christ saves, He saves from sin—from its power and pollution, and therefore from its guilt. And the very essence of sin is the determination to have my own way (Isa. 53:6). Where Christ saves, He subdues the spirit of self-will, and implants a genuine, a powerful, a lasting desire and determination to please Him. Again; many are never saved because they wish to divide Christ; they want to take Him as a Saviour, but are unwilling to subject themselves unto Him as their Lord. Or, if they are prepared to own Him as Lord, it is not as an absolute Lord. But this cannot be: Christ will be either Lord of all, or He will not be Lord at all. But the vast majority of professing Christians would have Christ's sovereignty limited at certain points; it must not entrench too far upon the liberty which some worldly lust or carnal interest demands. His peace they covet, but His "yoke" is unwelcome. Of all such Christ will yet say "But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me" (Luke 19:27). Again; there are multitudes which are quite ready for Christ to justify them, but not to sanctify. Some kind of, some degree of sanctification, they will tolerate, but to be sanctified wholly, their "whole spirit and soul and body" (1 Thess. 5:23), they have no relish for. For their hearts to be sanctified, for pride and covetousness to be subdued, would he too much like the plucking out of a right eye. For the constant mortification of all their members, they have no taste. For Christ to come to them as a Refiner, to burn up their lusts, consume their dross, to utterly dissolve their old frame of nature, to melt their souls, so as to make them run in a new mould, they like not. To utterly deny self, and take up their cross daily, is a task from which they shrink with abhorrence. Again; many are willing for Christ to officiate as their Priest, but not for Him to legislate as their King. Ask them, in a general way, if they are ready to do whatsoever Christ requires of them, and they will answer in the affirmative, emphatically and with confidence. But come to particulars: apply to each one of them those specific commandments and precepts of the Lord which they are ignoring, and they will at once cry out "Legalism!" or, "We cannot be perfect in everything." Name nine duties and perhaps they are performing them, but mention a tenth and it at once makes them angry, for you have come too close home to their case. Herod heard John gladly and did "many things" (Mark 6:20), but when he referred to Herodias, he touched him to the quick. Many are willing to give up their theatre-going, and card-parties, who refuse to go forth unto Christ outside the camp.

Others are willing to go outside the camp, yet refuse to deny their fleshly and worldly lusts. Reader, if there is a reserve in your obedience, you are on the way to Hell. Our next article will take up the Nature of saving faith.

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