

THE RATIONALITY OF FAITH

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"He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God." -- Romans iv.20.

These words were spoken of Abraham, as you will see by reading the connexion in which they are found. Faith is the heart's confidence in God. This is faith in its generic form; its specific form relates to particular things -- belief in the promises, in Christ, in the doctrines of the Bible, and in all the various assertions that God makes in his word. This specific form of faith differs from faith in its generic or simple form, which implies a general confidence in the existence, attributes, and character of God. The mind's resting in these things is faith; that is faith in its simple form. Mark, faith in God is not a mere assent to these things, nor a mere intellectual conviction that they are true; but faith is the heart, and the mind, and the will, resting in this truth -- that God is, that he possesses certain attributes, and a certain character. Faith in its specific form is the belief of the heart in certain declarations of God, a belief in his wisdom and goodness; in his assertions respecting Christ, and in all those things which he has said and promised. There are a great many specific forms in which faith develops itself -- but the root of it is heart confidence in God himself.

In speaking from the words which I have chosen for my text this morning I purpose to notice --

I. SOME THINGS IN THE WORD OF GOD WHICH ARE EXCEEDINGLY CALCULATED TO TRY THE FAITH OF FINITE MINDS.

II. SHOW HOW FAITH DISPOSES OF THESE THINGS; AND THAT TRUE FAITH IS NOT SUBDUED AND OVERCOME BY A CONSIDERATION OF THESE THINGS.

III. I SHALL SHOW THE GREAT OBJECT OF THESE TRIALS OF FAITH

IV. PROFESSORS THAT STUMBLE OR STAGGER AT THESE THINGS LOSE THE BLESSING CONSEQUENT UPON THEM, AS A NATURAL NECESSITY.

I. I shall notice some of the things which are calculated to try the faith of God's creatures.

One that is very common and most striking is the existence of so much evil and misery in this world. God declares that he is acquainted with all. He affirms that he is omnipotent, omniscient -- he is every where present, and knows all things, and is all powerful. He declares himself infinitely good, and disposed to do good. Now, that under the government of such a being as this there should be so much evil, and so much that is sinful, and so much misery -- as a matter of fact we know there is -- is greatly calculated to try the faith of men. That these things should exist, and be every where observable in this world to an immense extent, is to many minds so great a mystery, so difficult to reconcile with the existence and declared attributes of God, that they stumble, and even call in question the fact, that there is a God at all. By the bye, another thing that God asserts, and that reason also affirms, is the existence of a providence which guides and controls all events; that God has a design in everything that he does; that at the very beginning God had a design, and that in what he does he is pursuing this design to its accomplishment; and that this design proceeds from a being who is infinitely good and infinitely wise.

Now the existence of this evil that there is in the world does not seem to harmonize with the things that God says of himself -- with his wisdom and goodness -- many minds therefore find great difficulty in getting over these facts, and it is more than unbelief ever can accomplish. Understand, it is not a present my design to explain this, but simply to notice the facts at which unbelief stumbles, and which are calculated to try the faith of God's creatures. The introduction of sin into this world, and its existence in the world is greatly calculated to try the faith of the

most holy being in the universe. There is no doubt that they were unable to comprehend for a time why God allowed such a state of things to be; the reason for all this may have gradually developed itself, but at first the difficulty that was presented to their minds could have only been overcome by faith -- how this is done I shall observe in another part of my discourse.

But let me say again: the manner in which the Bible reveals God is also a great stumbling-block to many; the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, there are a great many that stumble at it because they cannot understand it, any better than they can understand a great many other things; because they cannot understand it they reject it, and say that it cannot be, and so they will not receive it simply because they cannot explain it. Just so with respect to the incarnation of the Son of God; many men because they cannot understand how humanity and Deity could be united, reject the doctrine, and will not believe it. Now it is admitted at once, there is no occasion for denying it, and to do so would be as absurd as it is unnecessary, that these doctrines are very mysterious; but they are announced as facts, that God was in Christ, that Christ was both God and man; of course it is readily admitted that this declaration is a great trial to the faith of finite creatures; but then the announcement is made by God himself and ought to be believed. The doctrine of the atonement is another stumbling-block to men; that God should give his own Son to die for the sins of mankind, and that he should actually suffer, is a difficulty that can only be overcome by faith -- unbelief will suggest a multitude of difficulties and reject it.

But let me say again: the resurrection, the doctrine of justification by faith, the doctrine of sanctification by faith, and all the other doctrines of the bible, are stumbling-blocks to the minds of men. Indeed individuals who find no difficulties in them have not faith, and show that they have not well considered them; but however difficult they may be, there is ten thousand times greater absurdity in disbelieving than in exercising faith in them, given as they are on the testimony of God himself. But, nevertheless, unbelief finds great difficulty in admitting them. The mind that has not confidence in God refuses to believe, because it cannot explain how these things all are -- of course, such a mind will stumble and stagger at every step.

But once more, the manner in which sin was introduced into the world is also a great stumbling-block to those who have no confidence in God, and therefore cannot rest upon the revealed fact, unless they can explain it. Of course if they cannot receive what God says, unless he gives them his reasons for everything that he does, they will find great difficulty in getting along. Suppose a child should have no confidence in his Father, and should therefore want the reasons for his father's conduct in everything that he did, and should require to have explained to him in a satisfactory manner how everything was done before he could believe it -- who cannot see that a family of such unbelievers, stumbling and staggering at every step, would have no confidence in their father at all; for if he was a man conducting a very extensive business on a vast scale, they could not understand as children what even perhaps many men could not comprehend if it were explained to them. How absurd then for the children not to put confidence in their father because they could not understand the reasons for all his conduct.

But let me say again: the very greatness of God's promises is often a sever trial to faith. He promises things so great to persons so undeserving--indeed so ill-deserving--that unbelief finds it difficult to believe him, because he says so much, and promises so much. But again: the providence of God is often a great trial to faith. How remarkable was the conduct of god towards Abraham, and how greatly calculated to try his faith. He called him out of his father's house, and Abraham obeyed not knowing whither he went. God had reasons in his own mind for his conduct in this matter -- he intended to make of Abraham a great nation, and through him communicate his will to men, and that from his family the Saviour of men should proceed -- but he gave Abraham no such intimation of what he was going to do; he called him from his country, and told him to go to a certain place that he should show him. After Abraham had obeyed the command, God promised to give him a certain land for a possession and to his seed after him; and although he had no family, God called him and said, Look toward the heavens and see if you can count the stars for multitude, and promised that his seed should be as numerous as the stars of heaven -- and that he would give him the land of Canaan for a possession, and make him the father of many nations. This promise was long and remarkably delayed; he lived in the land that was promised to him for a possession only on sufferance, and when his wife died, he was obliged to purchase a burial place in that very land that God had promised should be his own -- yet we see no signs of any stumbling in his faith. After a long period had elapsed, God promised Abraham that he should have a son by his wife Sarah. Now both Abraham and Sarah were very old, she was long past the age when it was common for women to have children, nevertheless Abraham believed that god would do what he had promised. Those who will read and ponder

well all the circumstances connected with the trial of Abraham's faith, will see that he must have been very severely tried indeed. Now, mark, by and by, after a long time, this promised son was born. The lad grew -- when all at once God takes Abraham by surprise -- as he seems always to have done -- and says "Take thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, and go to a mountain that I will tell thee of, and offer him there for a burnt-offering." He not only says to Abraham, "take thy son," but he reminds him that it is his only son, whom he loves; and it is this son, this son of promise, this beloved son, whom he is to offer upon the altar. Now, how infinitely strange is all this; yet Abraham staggered not; he believed that God was able to raise him from the dead. He had such strength of faith that he appears not to have been much troubled of mind about it; he does not seem even to have discovered to Sarah that he had received any such communication from God; he was so calm that Sarah did not perceive anything was the matter with him. The next morning he started with his servants to offer Isaac at the place which God was to point out to him. When they came in sight of the place, he caused his servants to wait, lest they should interfere with him when carrying out the command of God. Abraham and his son ascended the mountain where the sacrifice was to be offered: Isaac did not understand what was going to be done -- he knew indeed that Abraham was going to offer a burnt offering, for they had the fire and the wood, but he did not know that he was to be the victim, it did not occur to him at all, for he asked where the lamb was that Abraham intended to offer. So calm was Abraham, that Isaac did not notice anything different in his manner; and to the question of his son, Abraham replied, the Lord will provide himself with a lamb for a burnt-offering. When he had prepared the altar, he bound Isaac and laid him on the wood, just as he would have done a lamb, and then took the knife and he was about to slay him, but God called, and said, "Abraham, Abraham" -- repeating his name rapidly, so as to arrest his attention in a moment, "lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And when Abraham lifted up his eyes, he saw a ram caught in a thicket by his horns, and he offered it instead of his son." God did this to test the implicitness of Abraham's faith; and this was as plainly manifested as if he had sacrificed his son -- for he did do it so far as his mind was concerned; he believed that God would raise him from the dead if sacrificed, for he had no doubt at all that God would fulfill his promise. Now this was a beautiful exhibition and illustration of faith. But let me say, this was exceedingly calculated to try Abraham, as you will perceive. And the manner in which God very often fulfills his promises to men is to them a great stumbling-block -- they are expecting him to fulfill them in one way, and he takes a direct opposite course, which is calculated to subvert all their ideas of things. Now all such things as these are exceedingly calculated to try our faith in God. But strong faith will not suffer itself to stumble at such things. Why should it? Faith embraces at once all the attributes of God; and, therefore, has confidence in him, and does not seek to understand everything before yielding the heart to him. There are, and must be, multitudes of things that we cannot understand, nor would it be useful for us to understand at present.

II. We see then, how it is that faith disposes of these difficulties.

If God's attributes are what he declares them to be, there are things that cannot be explained to finite beings. Now for example; take the doctrine of the Trinity. To be sure human reason cannot explain that, nor is any explanation called for; God simply announces the fact in the bible, that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are God. Now that God should manifest himself in ten hundred thousand beings at one and the same time is not contrary to reason. For example, we find that at one time, before the destruction of Sodom, three individuals appeared to Abraham, and one of them who is called Jehovah, informed Abraham what they were going to do, and Abraham put up a prayer to have Sodom saved -- you recollect the afflicting circumstance. We learn that there were three men, or apparently so; two of them probably were angels in human form, and the other was no less a being than Jehovah himself. Now mark! Who can doubt but that God could have assumed the same form in millions of cases at the same time in different parts of the world, for there would be nothing contrary to reason in that. There is nothing then unreasonable in the supposition that God should exist in three persons or three hundred thousand million persons! We say there is nothing unreasonable in it. Who does not know that there is not? What then do men mean when they say that they cannot believe in the Trinity? Why not believe? What do such men suppose they know about infinity? Can they affirm of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost that these three cannot exercise and manifest the attributes of God? But as the fact is announced, there need be no evidence of it to the man who has faith. Faith makes no effort to understand it. If you object to this, let me ask, how do you know that

you exist yourselves? O yes, you say, we know that we exist; we believe it. What makes you believe it? Can you explain it? Did you choose your body? Can you tell the connection between matter and spirit?

How can you prove what yourselves are?

Some years since, I was walking with a gentleman in the city of New York, and we were talking about religion and mind, and he stopped right short in the street and said, "you say such and such things about mind; now what is mind?" "If you tell me," said I, "what matter is, I will tell you what mind is." "Why," said he, "matter has the the property of extension, solidity, and so forth;" but he did not name any of the primary attributes of matter. "Well," I replied, "mind wills, thinks, feels, and the like." He looked at me quite astonished. I continued, "you have told me some of the attributes of matter, can you tell what those attributes are?" "I do not know," said he. "Neither can I explain what the substance of mind is." If the wisest philosopher in the universe were standing in this pulpit, a little child might ask him such questions as he could not answer or explain any more than we can explain the doctrine of the Trinity not a bit. There is not a single thing in the universe in all the kingdom of nature when you come to dive to the bottom of it, which is not as difficult to explain as any doctrine of the Bible. Why then believe in any and all of these things? Why believe in your own existence? The fact is, that men do not disbelieve things because they are mysterious 'till they come to the subject of religion, because the world around them is so deeply mysterious that there is not a single thing that they can understand to the bottom, yet they are enabled to believe in them. It is very frequently the case that people do not realize that there is a mystery in anything but religion.

Now I know that philosophy can in part explain many things, and that those things which a few years ago were considered mysterious and even marvelous, are now understood. Science has already placed mankind in a position to explain the theory of many things that were deep mysteries and spread them out before the minds of the people. But speaking generally, both with regard to the spiritual and the natural world, men have to live by faith. They believe in the various things around them in the natural world although they may not be able to understand them. The same is true of spiritual things; we must receive much on testimony that cannot be explained to us; and probably, in many cases, God would not explain them to us even if we could understand them because it would not be well for us, but he leads us step by step to a correct understanding of things that may be useful and necessary for us to know.

Now in relation to the question of sin and its necessary attendant, misery, as it exists in our world; there is a mystery about it. Of course, every mind affirms that where sin is, there misery ought to be; but the question of wonder is, how sin came into the world, why it was permitted! But that this is a wise order of things, nobody can doubt. Man was made superior to all the rest of the inhabitants of this globe; and we see by his power and sagacity and knowledge, he was designed to be the head of the creation. But mark! men are in rebellion against God. This is a simple matter of fact; there is nothing more certain in the universe than that men as a race have set God at nought and bid him defiance.

Now reason affirms that the curse of God should be written upon everything in the universe in order to testify to God's real character, and that it should not be mistaken. But while we see that God does testify against sin, there are also indications that he has a strong disposition to be merciful as far as he wisely can; but the difficulties are many and great in the way of his forgiving sin. But let me say, faith in God does not find it very difficult to remove all these obstructions. Disbelief says sin exists, and looking at God's government as a system of moral law, it does not appear that sin can ever have been forgiven; in such a government, pardon is impossible. But faith says at once, God is kind, wise, and good, as well as infinitely powerful; misery and sin exist, but they are allowed to continue in the world only for a wise purpose to assist in bringing about the end at which he aims; for although sin is so great an abomination, God will bring good out of it. Look at the sin of Judas; the devil put it into his heart to betray the Son of God to his enemies and to his dismay, he saw the greatness of his crime; but God overruled their evil intentions. His purpose was that the blood of his dear Son should be shed as an atonement for sin.

Now, although we cannot understand the reason why God should permit the existence of sin in the world at all, faith can easily dispose of the difficulties which may suggest themselves. Faith believes that everything that God does must be infinitely good and wise. The fact is, unbelief in such matters is the most unreasonable thing in the world. If you profess not to believe anything 'till you understand it, why do you believe in your own existence? What do you

know of volition? You move your muscles, but how you cannot tell. Faith, I say, disposes of all these difficulties, and is not unreasonable in so doing. Take Abraham's case. God promises that Abraham shall have a son. "I shall have it," he says; "I am very old, and Sarah is very old; no matter how old, God is able to give us a son." The child is born and is growing up when God calls to Abraham and tells him to go and offer Isaac in sacrifice, and Abraham says, "I will go, God has a good reason for the requirement; I know he must; he cannot have any other; he is infinitely good and infinitely wise; he cannot have made any mistake. The path then of duty is plain and I will walk in it." Oh, says unbelief, how will the promise be fulfilled, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called!" "I do not know," said Abraham, "but God is able to raise him from the dead." Thus, you see his faith very quickly disposed of the difficulty although it was very great. Now is there anything inconsistent with reason in all this? Why no. Just look at it right in the face.

My own reason tells me that God is infinitely perfect in all his attributes, everywhere and in everything, and that either permissively or actively, he is concerned in everything that takes place. I find myself in a universe surrounded by a multitude of things that I cannot explain and that even God himself could not explain to me because of my limited capacity, but these things are true nevertheless; and as the law of progression operates, I come to understand many things which were before, dark and inexplicable to my mind. And does not reason tell us that there must be a vast many things in the government of an infinite God that a finite mind cannot comprehend? But when a man is in a spiritual state of mind, faith takes the place of knowledge. The little child, for instance, lives by faith. Human society exists by faith; destroy all confidence, all faith, and society could not exist; and no business be transacted. And in the spiritual state of man, faith is just as necessary. I have not time to enlarge upon this now. We now come to explain briefly

III. The design of these trials.

Everyone can see that one great object is to strengthen faith. I have often heard it remarked, by intelligent people too, that in heaven faith will not exist, because there, we shall walk by sight. Now there is some truth in that, but much greater error. It is true that many things which we merely believe here we shall know there; but there will be much to call forth our faith; for there must be in the government of God much that it would require millions of ages to understand, and we shall go on acquiring knowledge throughout the immensity of eternity, and thus, there will be need of faith in God in eternity as in time; it will be as true in heaven as on earth. Suppose that the angels had not faith, why the fall of man must have given a shock to the inhabitants of heaven. But they believed that God had some wise design in that he permitted man to fall. Now this is the way faith disposes of everything; and let what will come, there is no alarm or doubt but all will be right.

I had intended to show in the next place that those who stumble and stagger must lose the blessing consequent upon believing as a natural necessity, which everyone can see must be the case, but I see that I must close with one remark. Those who will not believe God, there is no hope for. Suppose you had a family of children and they should lose confidence in you as a business man, they would stagger and stumble at every step you took just because you could not explain to them all your plans. You say to them, dear children, I cannot explain these things to you, I am labouring for your good, therefore be quiet, be passive, and have confidence in me that all will be well; but if they will not, what can you do with them? They must remain in their unbelieving, unconverted state. Now it is the same in God's government. There are many things that cannot be explained to men and yet they will not exercise faith, and if they persist in their unbelief, they will go stumbling and fretting to the gates of hell! Some people will take nothing on trust; they must catechize their Maker; and if he does not explain everything to them, they have no confidence in him hence, it is said that they shall have their part with liars in the lake of fire. My dear hearers, the most unreasonable and blasphemous abomination in the world is unbelief.