**÷**George MacDonald

Faith, the Proof of the Unseen

Preached in Brixton Congregational Church, Last Sunday Morning, June 1882.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

-- Heb 11:1

I read it to you as it is down here, but as it stands it never conveyed any idea to my mind at all, and I am very glad it is altered in the Revised Version, for, of all things if we are Christians--having the least claim to the name--it is with the spirit and not the letter that we have to do; and this translation has neither the letter nor spirit. Happy ought the man to be who finds the ark things in the dear Book cleared up for him--to find that what had been as a pebble under his feet was a nut with a kernel in it, a life in it, a power of growth planted within his spirit. The true heart goes to the blessed Book not as an idolater but as a disciple; not to worship the Book, but to learn the will of Him who made the Book, and that has made His Spirit to understand the Book.

But I am going to talk to you this morning about the faith that is here spoken of. We have been talking about faith ever since the Lord came. It is not exhausted yet; and God forbid that I should know yet what faith is; although I know a little what it is. I think the meaning of the phrase is this: Faith is the foundation, the root, the underlying substance of hope. If you have any hope, it comes from some faith in you. Hope, you may say, is a bud upon the plant of faith, a bud from the root of faith; the flower is joy and peace.

Now the evidence of things not seen--I cannot, as I say, find any meaning in that at all; but the true meaning is the most profound fact in human history; it is the trial or the proving of things not seen.

Now upon that turns the life of every man, especially, perhaps, in the present day. This thing of faith means the whole recognized fellowship of man to God and His fellows; it is the right position of the human soul which is made to understand the truth-- the right position of that soul towards the truth; that is faith, partly. But you must remember that whenever you begin to speak of anything true, divine, heavenly, beyond the human, you cannot speak of it at all without speaking in some measure wrongly about it. We have no words, we have no phrases, we have no possible combination of sentences--nay, we have no forms of intellect that do more than represent fragmentarily the greatness of the things that belongs to the very vital being of our nature. Much, much foolish talk has been uttered about faith. Oh, this talking, friends. I would not trouble myself to set your opinions all right from this moment, henceforth, and for ever. I would not get up into the pulpit and do so. I do not think it is worth any man's labour; but if I could stir up a single soul, instead of talking about the meaning even of the greatest things, to go and do the smallest duty, I should say that is the kind of duty for which Christ spent Himself. If you read His life wisely you will see that His constant effort is to turn a man's thought back to himself, and make him do a thing, and not talk about it. About faith they often used to say that it was antithetically opposed to works. There never was greater nonsense. They would say that Paul taught faith and St. James taught works--and indeed one would feel something like this sometimes--that St. Paul had gone too far and that St. James had to write that epistle to set him right. It is not any of us, friends, that will find St. Paul or St. James wrong, nor was there the smallest difference between them. On the contrary, I assert that faith is simply the greatest work that man can do. Taking it in its simplest, original development, it is the highest effort of the whole human intellect, imagination, will, in the highest direction. Never does the human nature put forth itself in such power, with such effort, with such energy as to have faith in God. I say it is the highest, and sometimes the most difficult, work that a man can do.

Then, that is attended by thousands and thousands of other works of faith. In the present state of England's history--and we may add that of several other countries to it--it seems as if it were more difficult to believe than ever it was before. It seems also--I may say seems--it seems also to many people, and some people in certain moods, as if there was less faith in the world than ever there was before. And when they look in their own hearts--even those who would feign rank themselves among believers they recognise there an amount of doubt, difficulty, and fear that appals themselves. What?! Is the whole thing going to vanish like "the baseless fabric of a vision"?--all this story of Christ, His life and death, and the conquests that were made in His name--is it all going out of sight; and are we to be left where the world was before He came? I should like to help some of you, if I can, friends, about all this. It troubles some of your hearts; and some of you, perhaps, ought to be a little more troubled about it than you are, because it lies at your door in some measure; but I should like if, ,on the minds of young men particularly--although there is sad enough ground for including young women, too--if I could impress upon them that, let the thing look to them as it may, it is a notion and a false idea of Christianity that has come into their minds, partly because their own doors were opened narrow, partly because their own aspirations were so low, partly because they have been so little in earnest for the truth; it is about to vanish away and must perish; but the true thing--God's notion of it; what Christ thought and felt while He was here; what He thinks and feels now when He is here still--is that which shall never pass away but is the true fountain of truth and life to all the generations. But first of all let me say a word to the man or woman who is troubled with the difficulty of believing. Now-a-days, there is such a talk about science, and such a contempt poured forth on the man who thinks to walk without that kind of science for the guide of his life, who has a different goal, a different ambition, whose thoughts stretch further than the things of this life--the things he sees and hears and handles--if there be such a man among us, friends, who does the work of the world, and does it well, but his head is in heaven--that is the kind of thing we ought all to be an to seek. And there are perhaps a few even now of this kind, and there are more growing. But let me say to you about your own fears and doubts and difficulties--it is a great thing to believe. Are you fit to believe? I have just said that I believe it to be the loftiest exercise of the human being and of human nature. How can you expect to believe? Are you like Nathanial--an Israelite indeed, a man without guile? What are your ways? What have you been about? What are your desires in life? How have you been ordering yourself? If it may be that although the power of God upon you makes you feel that you ought to believe, that you are such that you cannot believe, and it is your own fault. Fully do I recognise the difficulty. I question if there is a doubt or a sense of difficulty that prevails now that has not passed through my own mind as a thing to be encountered and understood and settled. It is natural that we should doubt, with such cries especially on all sides of us, and the intellect so much more awake than ever it was before, and indeed the conscience not more asleep than before; and with one on this side and one on that side crying out, "I have reached, I have seen, and I have found no God." Settle this with yourselves to begin with. Not all the intellect or metaphysics of the world could prove that there is no God, and not all the intellect in the world could prove that there is a God. If you could prove that there is a God, that would imply that you could go all around Him, and buttress up his being with your human argument that He should exist. As soon might a child on his mother's bosom, looking up into his mother's face, write a treatise on what a woman was and what a mother was.

But do not think that God is angry with you because you find it hard to believe. It is not so; that is not like God; God is all that you can honestly wish Him to be, and infinitely more; He is not angry with you for that. And He knows perfectly well what the scientific man calls truth--although you will observe that he is always constantly, and everywhere changing his theories--that what the scientific man calls truth is simply an impossibility with regard to God; And God knows it. Your brain, the symbol of your intellect, cannot, concerning Him, if He exists, receive that kind of proof which you have when you read a proposition of Euclid. It commends itself to your mind and your understanding. You say, "So it is, and it cannot be otherwise." But you cannot receive that kind of; there is no such proof with regard to the Mighty God. And therefore I say if you doubt the existence of the living God, He is not angry with you for that. But I am speaking of those who would fain believe if they could, I ask you, have you been trying the things not seen? Have you been proving them? This is what God puts in your hands. He says, " I tell you I Am. You act upon that; for I know that your conscience moves you to it; you act upon that and you will find whether I Am or not, and what I Am." Do you see? Faith in its true sense does not belong to the intellect alone, nor to the intellect first, but to the conscience, to the will, and that man is a faithful man who says "I cannot prove that there is a God, but, O God, if Thou hearest me anywhere, help me to do Thy will." There is faith, "Do this," and he does it. It is o, friends, that is faith; it is doing that thing which you, let me say, even only suppose to be the will of God; for if you are wrong, and do it because you think it is His will, He will set you right. It is the turning of the eye to the light; it is the sending of the feet into the path that is required, putting the hands to do the things which the conscience says ought to be done. You will notice that all this chapter from which I have taken the text is a list of people that did things. Some of them were made kings, and some of them were sawn asunder for it; but it was all for faith, and nothing but faith. There was a truth; there was a live truth; a truth that had welled through and called the knowledge of truth up in us, nay, called up in us the very possibility of feeling truth; and according to this law these men walked through all the world, and all the worlds together set themselves against them, and in the name of the original vital law of the universe-- namely, the living God--they walked right on and met their fate. Yes; victory and the participation of the Divine nature, that was their faith.

Therefore, friends, the practical thing is just this, and it is the one lesson that we have to learn, that whatever our doubts or difficulties, we must do the thing we know in order to learn the thing we do not know; but whether we learn it or not, "If ye know these things," saith the Master, "happy are ye if you do them." It is the doing that is everything, and the doing is faith and there is no division between them.

Then I would say a word to those who are further on. They have been trying to serve God for many years now, they do not seem to themselves to have made much of it. They find that they are still troubled in their soul--not whether they be of God; but does he manage everything now? "Where is He? I have never seen Him; if He would but speak to myself! I have been crying for Him for all these years, and I have never had a sign out of the great blank. Oh, if He would but show Himself; if He would but do something--give me the meanest sign that He actually is, and that He cares about me." You say, "I feel as if I could go and on for ever then." Friends, I believe there is no sign God could give you, but what you would begin to doubt again. I do not believe there is any miracle He could work before your eyes even, that by-and-by you would not begin to doubt, and be just as lost as before. God will not give us little things to spoil our appetite for great things. God will never be content until we are one with Him as He is one with Christ; God will not give us signs and wonders and these inferior things, for be sure God's common and usual way is far better than His miraculous way, as we call it; If it were all miracle, we would make it all common. You may be sure then, that God's usual way of doing things is the best way. I say He will not give us signs of anything outside to give us confidence in Him. Nothing will serve God turn but this--that our faith in Him shall be complete, go instantly with our perception of what He is. It is by the vision in our souls, the feeling and perception in our souls of what God is, that we are able to believe in Him. Let a man once see God as Christ saw Him, and he believes. He does not see Him perfectly, and his faith will never be absolutely complete until he comes to that point when he recognises the character and being and relation of God to himself; and then he believes; and any glimmer of the truth in regard to our Lord's nature helps us to believe--enables us to go on, and on, and on; So that you see that the same thing that the intellect does with Euclid, the whole mind, heart, intellect, imagination, conscience, and will does with regard to God when a man sees God and knows Him. The man says, "I know enough to make life a grand and blessed and strong thing to me, and I am going on." We will see. "I cannot convey to you," he may say, "my conviction; that will only come with the conviction itself; you must see, else you do not know; but life to me is enough." So would he say; but then, "What is the way to this?" you say. Ah! my friends, if you have been at it for twenty or thirty or forty years, surely you have learnt by this time what you have just to go on doing--that is hearkening to Christ and doing His will. Let me try you a bit.

What is your first thought in the morning? Is it "God is life"? or is it "How am I to order my day's work?" Is it "God is very rich and I am His child and He will see to me"? or is it "How on earth shall I get through this that lies before me?" Are you afraid? Are the cares of this world troublesome to you? Well, you have not got on much. But if you are not trying to suppress them, if you are not trying to get rid of them, I am afraid you have not got on at all; and if you had been thirty or forty years trying to serve Christ, it has been a kind of service that He does not care much about, and it is no wonder that you do not get on. You have been very careful reading your Bible and going to church, and this thing and that thing that you think belongs to religion; but have you been doing the thing Christ told you? If you do that, I do not care whatever else you do; you cannot be wrong then. The same holds with you as with the beginner who is troubled as to whether there is a God or not. But you that believe in a God do not trust Him; whereas, the other is not sure that there is a God; and you think it very horrible of him to doubt the existence of a God. And yet you, believing that there is a God, are afraid of the trouble, the poverty, the opinion of the world, and are ambitious to get on this way or that! Oh, had almost sooner say you do not believe in a God than say that you believe in God, and yet He is nothing to you. And when you feel inclined to say heavy and hard things about your atheistic neighbour, think that there may be a beam in your own eye even worse--if we can bear to call it so--than the mote in his. Indeed, friends, it is because our life does not shine that men have stood up and said "There is no light." You see a man greedy and grasping--as much taken up with the things of this world as if he were to live--I will not say to the age of Methusaleh-- but to the age of seventyfive or eighty. He works in the world as if he were to live for ever in it; and sometimes, I think, the punishment that would fit him best would be to be condemned to live for ever in the world. What a thing that would be! Ah!, the man who is most sure that there is no God and that he can get on pretty well--he won't say first rate--but pretty well without Him; I think the better way would be just to let him live on and on and on, until he got heartily sick of himself and hated himself, and would gladly yield anything to get out of himself. Ah, friends, there is a worse thing than dying never to wake again. There is a worse thing than dying for ever, and going soul and brain to the dust, and that is to wake up and find that there is no God. That is the horror of horrors to me. But to tell me that I am to live for ever, and that there is no God! For anything any man knows who does not believe in a God it may be so. He cannot tell with certainty that he is going to die forever because he sees no more of those that have gone before. Why should not they go on to some other sphere as they came into this one? Without any warning or any choice, they do not know until they find themselves here. Why should it not be so in another state of existence? But to find yourselves there without a God! There is no use praying to be killed, because there is no |God to hear your prayer. You can no more annihilate yourselves than make yourselves; the whole thing would be utter misery, especially when the man has such ideas that he is satisfied with himself. But what is to be done with you and me, who cannot finish ourselves? Poor creatures! we feel that if God is like us, He had better cease and we had better all cease; but if we see He is like us--only He is perfect, absolute in grandeur and loveliness, ah then, "I shall get rid of this bad in me--this poor, mean stuff in me, and I shall become glorious, true, and excellent like Him." That is worth living for; nothing else is; it is for that that Christ tells us to put confidence in Him and obey His word, and we shall see the Father. "He that heareth and openeth the door, I will come in, sit down with him, and sup with him and he with Me." When God is seated at the very fireside of our hearts, then there is no more doubt. I say, friends, it is a good thing that you should have doubt until you see that nothing less than that will do, and until you come to desire that, and to turn your judgments, your thought, and feeling in that direction. Oh! friends; I know nothing else in the world worth knowing. I could go on talking to you all the day long about this, but I should weary you. Faith is the trying of the things unseen--the putting them to the test, and whatever your doubts or your fears are try Him by obedience, and then you will get help to carry you on. Less than that won't do. The darkness of life's closing time will come round about you, and find you very doubtful, very sad, looking, looking into the darkness and wondering "Shall I wake or shall I sleep?" But if you believe that that man died and rose again, the whole thing is full of the dawn of an eternal morning. Coming up beyond the hills of this life, and full of such hope as the highest imagination of the poet has not a glimmer as of yet.

Do you hope for anything, friends? Thank God, that comes from you faith. No man that has not faith can hope. But do not think the world is going all to the devil. There is a better and stronger faith coming. It was a great thing that this foolish, actionless kind of religion should vanish, and that a simple, obedient, hoping, trusting life should takes its place. The world is not worse than it was. Many even of those that do not believe in God have faith towards their neighbour. Even those who do not believe, on the whole are better in this century than those that did not believe in the last. Only, we are a set of foolish men and women who simply talk and nothing else--neither believe nor disbelieve--who have neither the soul nor the heart to be in earnest about anything. God has a hold upon them too, and He has but to place His hand upon them to make them feel it.

But, friends, what we have to do is let our light shine. Do you get any light? Let it shine. I do not mean be an example to other people. You have no business to set yourselves up for an example; you have to be and to do, and that is letting the light shine. It ought not to be possible to mistake a Christian for a man of the world. His very dealings with every man that comes near him have something to show, something that Christ would have done that a man of the world would not do. Tell me how you would like Christ to come in upon you at any moment in the midst of your business talk. Would you be ready to turn to H m and say, "Master, this is how I am saying the thing to my friend; this is how I see it in the light of Thy love!"? Would you be ready for that, or do you think that a great part of your being and your life can be conducted upon other laws than Christian? If a man does that, he is altogether wrong-- altogether wrong. Christ is God, the all-in-all, or nothing at all. If we were as the bush--if every Christian were as the bush that burned with fire--that would be the shining our light before men. Atheism would soon vanish; unbelief would draw in its horns; reproved, judged, condemned by the very presence of faith.

I would have you, then, friends, remember that faith is the trying of the thing that you do not see, and that you cannot be sure about, a thing that you do not see and which, not seeing, you have doubt about, you can yet try--that is faith; and if you are honest, that will be a great opportunity and a great help to you; it will start a fresh faith which you have not thought of before, and give your life a new start. Faith is intended to put to the test the unseen world of truth, love, law, hope, redemption. God grant us all faith enough to carry on from point to point till the faith shall vanish into light, and we have never to think about faith more, nor to think about Church more, nor the Bible more, nor prayer more, but our whole being shall be a delighted consciousness of the presence of God and His Christ.

<http://www.george-macdonald.com/faith brixton.htm>

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