

CHAPTER TWO

Hebrews Chapter 11 verses 2-3

² *Ffor by it our elderis war weill reported of.* ³ *Through faith we understand that the worlde was ordained by ye worde of God so that the things which we se, are not made of things which did appeare.*

Recap of the first sermon

I will proceed, brethren, with the text we thought about last time—not that I will go over everything I said—but just to remind you of some of what we learned. You will recall that faith was described in terms of two properties, and, in turn, they were described in terms of two objects.

The first property of faith is that it is substantial or of subsistence, the *grounde of things which are hoped for*, that is, that are not in themselves nor are they in very deed, but are only in hope in the promise of the living God; they ‘are’ in God himself. The reason why faith is called the substance of things is that faith makes them substantial in our hearts, that is, realities in our hearts and minds. It is as if we already had them in full fruition in our hands; this is on account of the great assurance that accompanies faith. I mean that faith imparts this assurance to our hearts of those things God has promised, in such a way as if the fulfilment of his promises was already firmly¹ in our possession.

Secondly, this is why faith is called *the evidence (substance) of things which are not sene*, the evidence of things that are invisible to our physical sight; for faith brings an inward, illuminating light to the mind in such a way that by the eye of faith the mind can perceive clearly these spiritual things as if they were actually corporeal, and could be seen by

¹ Bruce’s vivid word is ‘gripid’, i.e. ‘gripped’.

our physical eyes. Regarding this clear sight in the mind that accompanies faith, it is also called a demonstration or declaration of things which are not seen.

Though faith be weak, God's love is irrevocable

The instruction here for us is that we must learn that each of these two properties of genuine, living faith produce a certain and steadfast persuasion of the mercy of God. Faith has nothing to do with personal opinions or conjectures or dubious superstitions. Rather, wherever this genuine faith is present, it works in us a clear sight, a solid and certain persuasion of the mercy of God in Christ. Certainly, though the conviction of God's mercy is a reality in our hearts, it is not always in quite the same state or condition.² Sometimes a person's faith in the divine mercy is extremely strong; at other times doubts may lurk in the soul.

The reason for such variations is that at times the firmness of our faith can be impaired by our sin. For even the very elect vessels³ of God in Christ, the most holy and upright of believers, can and do fall seven times a day. That is why the condition of a person's faith is never always absolutely constant, but can be sometimes a little greater, but sometimes a little weaker; yet at other times it can fully possess that person's heart. Nevertheless, whatever the strength or weakness of your faith, be persuaded of this: the fact that you have living faith is a sure guarantee of your election. Indeed, your very experience of faith being tossed to and fro with sundry doubts is in itself a pledge that you are truly a child of God. It is God's election that is unchangeable, and however weak, feeble and fragile your faith may be, his love for you is irrevocable.

All those who have Christ Jesus, as well as this faith that is given us as the pledge of our salvation, also have the word of God assuring us of his mercy. Further, we all have some experience of the mercy and favour of God and of his protection in times of danger. Such experiences should be called to memory. The promise of mercy found in God's word should also be called to memory, and thereby the faith in our hearts should be nourished. Then, when our assurance is attacked by the devil, we may cast ourselves back upon God.

² This last phrase was not easy to translate; Bruce has 'is not ay in ane estait'.

³ The Scots word 'veschell', meaning 'a household container, a pot or pan', is used figuratively in the sense of 'a person viewed as a receptacle of good or evil, chiefly in a religious context' (DSL). See also 2 Timothy 2:20-21.

This then is the first lesson we must learn. Even when our assurance is weak, it still remains a sure guarantee of our eternal salvation. Even though there are many other gifts from God as well as this gift of faith, yet it is not the same kind of gift as them. For when God gives us faith, he never takes it from us, he never changes his mind about it, so that he never removes it from the heart where he has placed it. Rather than revoke it or diminish it, he actually will increase it, for it may begin as very small.

Faith begins with conviction of sin

There are terms attached to Christ's gift of faith. Even though very weak and small, nevertheless it is alive and imparts life to the soul of the one in whom it lives; I do not mean it imparts physical life, rather it brings spiritual and heavenly life. Even though it is as tiny as a grain of mustard seed, and as feeble as a smoking flax that emits neither warmth nor flame, but only the tiniest spark giving off a wisp of smoke within your soul, and cannot even be seen, yet the Lord will never extinguish it, but will rather tend it, and in his own time cause it to bring forth the flame of unfeigned repentance. When faith is in this fragile state, it is subject to many temptations, doubts, vacillations and fears; it may even cause doubts about salvation.

All this partly stems from the insight a man gets of himself when it pleases God to open his eyes to his conscience, so that he sees himself as he really is, and the depth of miseries into which his own sins are casting him. It pleases the Lord to let him look into the depths of the pit of his innumerable sins, iniquity upon iniquity. Little wonder his soul quakes and his heart faints, and doubts flood his mind. Apart from the sight of the unfathomable depths of the riches and mercies of the ever-living God, no one ever glimpsed such a depth as that of the sinful heart! Imagine you lived as long as Methuselah, and then tried to measure how deep was your sinful heart, you could never plumb its depths.

So when the Lord opens the eyes of our minds and gives us just a glimpse of the wretchedness that is in us, little wonder that we foster doubts. Again, when it pleases the Lord to lay his heavy hand upon our souls and we realise his hatred of sin, and when he presents himself to us as a consuming fire, little wonder that we then may have doubts, and our souls begin to tremble greatly. Yet here is guidance for comfort for