On Faith

Aphrahat the Persian Sage (c. AD 270–345)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

On Faith

APHRAATES ON FAITH.

Hear then, my beloved, and open unto me the internal eyes of thy heart and the spiritual perceptions of thy understanding to that which I will say unto thee. Now faith is built up of many things, and is crowned with many colours; it is like unto a building which is built up of many materials, and its fabric mounteth to the top. But know, O my beloved, that stones must be laid in the foundations thereof, and then the whole edifice goeth upwards until it is finished. And thus also must it be with our whole building; its foundation must be the true Rock, which is Jesus Christ our Lord, and upon [this] Rock is faith founded, and upon faith the whole building riseth until it is finished. [This] foundation is the beginning of the whole building, for when a man draweth nigh to faith, he is founded upon the Rock which is our Lord Jesus Christ. And his building will not be washed away by the waves, and it will not be injured by the winds, and it will not fall through storms, because his building riseth upon the rock of the true Rock. And in calling Christ the ”Rock” I have not spoken according to my opinion, but the Prophets of old called Him ”Rock”, and [this] I will prove to thee.

But for the present listen concerning the faith which is founded upon the Rock, and concerning the building which riseth upon the Rock. First of all a man must believe, and when he hath believed he will love, and when he loveth he will hope, and when he hopeth he will be justified, and when he is justified he will be perfect, and when he is perfect he will be completed; and when his whole building hath risen up, and hath been finished and perfected then will he become a temple for the dwelling-place of Christ, even as the prophet Jeremiah said, ”The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, ye are the temple of the Lord if ye make fair your ways and your deeds. And again it saith in the prophet, ”I will dwell in you, and I will walk in you”. And again the blessed Apostle spake thus, ”Ye are the temple of God, and the spirit of Christ dwelleth in you”. And our Lord also thus spake to His disciples, ”Ye are in Me, and I am in you”.And when a man hath become a house and a dwelling-place then he beginneth to take care for what is required by him that dwelleth in the building, just as if a king, or some honourable man who was called by the name of king were to tarry in a house; for then all the appurtenances of royalty would be required for the king, and all the ministration which is necessary for the honour thereof.

For in a house which lacketh all good things a king will neither tarry nor dwell, nay, a king requireth all the furniture in a house with nothing whatsoever lacking; and if anything is lacking in the house in which the king abideth, the keeper of the house is delivered over unto death, because he did not make ready for the service of the king. Thus also let the man who becometh a house and a dwelling-place for Christ see what appertaineth unto the service [of the house] in which Christ dwelleth, and with these things let him make it fair. First of all let him build his building upon the Rock which is Christ, and upon the Rock let faith be founded, and upon faith all the building shall rise up. And for making the house habitable pure fasting which is stablished by faith is necessary; and he requireth the pure prayer which is accepted by faith ; and to him is useful the love which is compounded with faith; and he needeth the alms which are given in faith; and he must ask for the humility which is ornamented with faith ; and virginity which is beloved of faith must be chosen by him; and he must bring nigh unto him the holiness which is planted by faith ; and he must meditate upon the wisdom which is discovered by faith ; and he must seek after the hospitality which is increased by faith; and the simplicity which is mingled with faith is necessary for him;

and he must seek after the patience which is perfected in faith; and his mind must abide in the long-suffering patience which is acquired by faith; and he must love the life of an anchorite which appeareth by faith; and he must seek after the purity which is preserved by faith; all these things the faith which is founded upon the true Rock, which is Christ, asketh, and these things are required by the King Christ Who dwelleth in the children of men who have been builded with these works.

And if thou sayest, "Since Christ hath been laid in the foundation, how can Christ dwell in the building when it is finished?" [I answer], the blessed Apostle said these two things: "I, like a wise architect, have laid the foundation", and he distinguished there also concerning the foundation, and showed [what it was], and spake, saying, "Other foundation besides this which is laid, which is Jesus Christ, can no man lay". And moreover, that Christ dwelleth in the building is said in the words which have been written above, for Jeremiah calleth the children of men "temples", [and saith] that God dwelleth in them. And the Apostle saith, "The spirit of Christ dwelleth in you", and our Lord spake, "I and My Father are one"; therefore the words, "Christ dwelleth in the men who believe in Him", and "He is the foundation upon which the whole building riseth" agree.

And now I come to the first words which I spake, that Christ was called "Rock" in the Prophets. First of all David saith concerning Him, "The rock which the builders rejected hath become the head of the building". And as the builders rejected this Rock, which is Christ, even so also did they reject it before the face of Pilate, saying, "This [man] shall not be king over us", and again in that parable which our Lord spake of a certain great nobleman who went to receive a kingdom and to return to rule over the people thereof, but they sent messengers after him, saying, "This man shall not be king over us". Thus did they reject the Rock, which is Christ. And how hath it become the head of the building except that it

hath risen up over the building of the nations? and upon it hath risen up all their building. And who are the builders except the priests and Pharisees who build not a true building, but who throw down what He hath built, even as it is written in Ezekiel the Prophet, "He built a wall, but they beat upon it that it might fall". And again it is written, "I sought for a man among them, that should make up the fence and stand in the gap for the earth, that I might not destroy it, but I found [him] not".

And again Isaiah of old prophesied concerning this Rock, for he said, "Thus said the Lord, Behold I lay in Zion a chosen Rock, in the honourable corner, the head of the wall of the foundation". And again he said there, "Whosoever believeth on it shall not fear, and whosoever falleth on that Rock shall be broken, and on whomsoever it shall fall, it shall grind him to powder". The people of the house of Israel fell upon it, and their breaking was for ever; and it fell upon the image and shattered it to pieces; and the nations believe therein and are not afraid.

And he proved concerning the Rock that it is laid as the head of the wall and [as] the foundation; now if this Rock hath been laid as the foundation, how can it also be the head of the wall? Only [in this wise]. When our Lord came He set faith in the earth like a foundation, and He went up above all the heavens like the head of a wall, and the whole building, above and below, was completed. And as concerning what I spake of faith, He hath set this faith in the earth, this did David proclaim of old concerning Christ, for he said, "Faith shall spring up out of the earth"; and [showing] that He is above, he saith, "Righteousness looked forth from heaven". And again, Daniel also spake concerning this Rock which is Christ, for he said, "A Rock was hewn out of the mountain, not with hands, and it smote the image, and the whole earth was filled therewith"; this foreshewed concerning Christ that the whole earth should be filled with Him, for with the faith of Christ behold all the ends of the earth are filled, even as David spake, "In all the earth hath gone forth the word of the Gospel of Christ". And again when He sent forth His disciples, He spake to them thus, "Go forth, and teach all nations to believe on Me". And Zechariah the prophet also spake concerning this Rock, which is Christ, for he said, "I have seen a choice stone of beauty and mercy".

That [this Rock is called] choice" [means] that He is with His Father, and that he speaks of "mercy" is because when He came to the world He spake to His disciples thus, "This is My commandment, that ye love one another. And again He said, "I have called you friends". And the blessed Apostle speaks thus: "God hath mercy upon us in the love of His Son; in very truth Christ hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us".

And he explained and made manifest concerning this Rock, [saying], "Behold I will open upon this Rock seven eyes".And what then are the seven eyes which have been opened upon [this] Rock except the Spirit of God, which abideth on Christ in seven things, even as the Prophet Isaiah saith, "The Spirit of God shall rest and dwell in Him, the spirit of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of strength, of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord". These are the seven eyes which have been opened upon the Rock, and these are the seven eyes of the Lord which "look upon the whole earth". And this also is said concerning Christ, for he

spake, saying, ”Light hath been given unto all nations”, even as saith Isaiah the prophet, I have set thee to be a light unto all nations, that My redemption may be to the ends of the earth”. And David also spake, ”Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light to my paths”. And moreover the word and speech of the Lord is Christ, as it is written in the beginning of the Gospel of our Lifegiver, ”In the beginning was the Word”; and concerning the light there also he testifieth, ”The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not”.

And what have the words, ”The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not”, reference to except Christ Who made His light to shine upon the people of the house of Israel, but the people of the house of Israel comprehended not the light of Christ because they believed not upon Him, even as it is written, ”He came unto His own, and His own received Him not”? And our Lord Himself also called them ”darkness”, for He said to His disciples, ”That which I say unto you in the darkness, say ye in the light; among the nations shall your light shine”, because they have received the light of Christ Who is the light of the nations. And He spake also to His disciples, ”Ye are the light of the world”. And again He said unto them, ”Let your light shine before the children of men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven”. And again He shewed concerning Himself that He was the light, for He said to His disciples, ”Walk while the light is yet with you, before the darkness overtaketh you”. And again He spake to them, ”Believe in the light, that ye may become the children of the light. And again He said, ”I am the light of the world”.

And again He said, ”No man lighteth a lamp and placeth it under a bushel or under a bed, or placeth it in a hidden place, but he setteth it on a candlestick that every man may see the light thereof”.And a shining lamp is Christ, even as saith David, ”Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”. And moreover, Hosea the prophet also said, ”Kindle ye a light and seek the Lord”; and our Lord Jesus Christ said, ”What woman, having ten zuze and losing one of them, will not light a lamp and search round the house looking for the zûzà which she hath lost”? And who is this woman except the congregation of the house of Israel unto whom the ten commandments have been given, and which hath lost the first of them with which God admonished it, saying, ”I am the Lord thy God Who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt”? And when the congregation had lost the first commandment it was unable to keep the remaining nine, because the nine depend upon the first, for it was an impossible thing when they were worshipping Baal to keep the nine commandments; thus they lost the first commandment like the woman who lost one zûzà out of ten. And the prophet cried to them, ”Light ye a lamp and seek the Lord”. And moreover, the prophet Isaiah also said, ”Seek ye the Lord, and when ye have found Him, call upon Him.

And when He hath drawn nigh, let the sinner forsake his way, and the man of iniquity his evil thoughts”. For He lighted a lamp, but they sought not thereby the Lord their God; and His light lightened the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not. And the lamp went up upon a candlestick, but those who were in the house saw not the light thereof. Now what

do the words ”the lamp went up upon a ”candlestick” mean except His going up upon the Cross? whereby all the house became dark upon [its inhabitants]. Now when they crucified Him the light became dark to them, but it shone upon the Gentiles. For from the sixth hour when they crucified Him until the ninth hour darkness came upon all the land of Israel, and the sun set at noonday, and the earth became dark during broad daylight, even as it is written in the prophet Zachariah, ”And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord, that I will make the sun to set at noon, and I will make the earth dark during broad daylight”.

And now I come to my first statement concerning faith upon which all the fair deeds of the building ascend. And, moreover, that which I have spoken concerning the building I have not spoken in a strange manner, but the blessed Apostle wrote in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, and said, ”I have laid the foundation like a wise architect, and every man buildeth thereupon. Some build with silver, and gold, and precious stones, and some build with reeds, and hay, and stubble, but at the last day the building will be tried by fire”. The gold, and silver, and precious stones will be preserved by the fire, because they are the true building ; but over the hay, and the reeds, and the stubble will the fire gain the mastery, and they will burn away. Now what are the gold, and silver, and precious stones upon which the building riseth except the good deeds of faith which are preserved in the fire ? In that true building Christ dwelleth, and it is He that will preserve it from the fire. Now let us see and understand from the similitude which God also gave us in this world in order that the promises of that world might be sure unto us;

and let us also understand from those three righteous men who fell in the fire, and were not consumed, ----Ananias, Azarias, and Misael----upon whom the fire gained not dominion, because they built a sure building, and rejected the command of Nebuchadnezzar the king, and did not worship the image which he made. But upon those who transgressed the commandment of God the fire gained dominion straightway, and it set them on fire and they were burned mercilessly. And the Sodomites were burned like hay, and reeds, and stubble; and Nadab and Abihu who transgressed the commandment of God were also burnt; and two hundred and fifty men who were offering [strange] incense were also burnt; and the two captains, together with a hundred men who were with them, who had drawn nigh to the mountain upon which sat Elijah, who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, were also burnt; and the calumniators also were burnt who dug pits for righteous men. On this account, my beloved, the righteous are tried in the fire like gold, and silver, and precious stones, and the wicked are consumed by fire like hay, and reeds, and stubble, over which the fire gaineth dominion, even as saith the prophet Isaiah, ”The Lord judgeth by fire, and therewith He trieth all flesh”. And again he saith, ”Ye shall go forth and see the dead bodies of the men who have wrought iniquity against Me, whose worm dieth not and whose fire is not quenched; and they shall be a wonder unto all flesh”.

And, moreover, the Apostle hath explained unto us concerning this building, and concerning this foundation, for he saith thus: ”Foundation other than this which is laid can no man lay, which is Jesus Christ”. And again the Apostle speaketh concerning the faith which is

mingled with hope and love, for he spake thus: "Now these three abide, faith, hope, and charity", and he shewed concerning faith that it is founded as a sure foundation first of all.

Now the sacrifice of Abel was accepted because of his faith. And because Enoch pleased [God] by his faith he was removed from death. And because Noah believed he was saved from the Flood. And because Abraham had faith he was blessed, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness. And because Isaac believed he was loved. And Jacob was preserved because of his faith. And because of his faith Joseph was tried in the waters of contention, and he was delivered from temptation, and the Lord set a testimony upon him, even as David spake, "He set a testimony on Joseph". Moses too by faith wrought many marvellous and mighty deeds, and by faith he made an end of the Egyptians with ten plagues. And again by faith he divided the sea, and led his people over, and drowned the Egyptians in it. By faith he cast a stick in the bitter waters, and they became sweet; by faith he brought down the manna, and satisfied his people; by faith he spread out his hands, and overcame Amalek, even as it is written, "His hands were [stretched out] in faith until the sun set". By faith also he went up to Mount Sinai, having twice fasted forty days; and by faith he overcame Sihon and Og, kings of the Amorites.

Now this is a wonderful and great marvel which Moses wrought in the Sea of Reeds, for the waters were divided by faith, and they stood up like high mountains, and mighty rocks, and they were restrained, and stood up by the command, and were confined as in leather bottles, and they were shut in above as well as below; and their mobility did not pass over the boundary [set for them], and they changed the nature in which they had been created, and though insensible creatures they became obedient. And the waves stood upright awaiting the reward when the people should have passed over, and the billows marvelled and waited, and were looking towards the commandment and the reward. The foundations of everlastingness were revealed, and that which had been wet from the beginning suddenly became dry. And the doors lifted up their heads, and the everlasting gates were lifted up. And a pillar of light went in and illumined all the camp, and the people passed over in faith, and a righteous judgment came upon the Pharaoh, and his host, and his chariots. Thus also did Joshua the son of Nun by his faith divide the Jordan, and the children of Israel passed over as in the days of Moses.

Now know, O my beloved, that that passage of the Jordan was divided three times : first of all by Joshua, the son of Nun, secondly by Elijah, and thirdly by Elisha. Now the word of the Book maketh known that Elijah was taken up to heaven opposite that place of crossing by Jericho. For when Elisha returned from following him, and divided the Jordan and passed over, the sons of prophets of Jericho went out to meet Elisha, and said, "The spirit of Elijah dwelleth in Elisha". And of the people when they crossed over in the days of Joshua, the son of Nun, it is written, "The people passed over opposite Jericho" . And Joshua, the son of Nun, by faith overthrew the walls of Jericho, and they fell without labour. And again by his faith he destroyed thirty-one kings, and made the children of Israel to inherit the land. And again by his faith he spread out his hands to heaven, and held back the sun in

Gibeon, and the moon in the valley of Ajalon, and they were restrained and stood still in their courses. Finally, all the righteous fathers have by faith triumphed in everything which they have done, even as the blessed Apostle testifieth concerning them all, saying, "By faith they became prosperous". And again Solomon saith, "Many men are called merciful, but who can find a faithful man"? And again Job saith, "Remove not my integrity from me, and I will continue in my righteousness".

And our Lifegiver spake unto every one that drew nigh unto Him to be healed thus: "According to thy faith shall it be unto thee". When the blind man came to Him, he said to him, "Dost thou believe that I am able to heal thee? and he said unto Him, "Yea, Lord, I do believe"; and his faith opened his eyes. And to him whose son was sick He said, "Believe, and thy son shall live". He saith unto Him, "Lord, I believe, help Thou my little faith"; and by his faith his son was made whole. And by faith was healed the son of the royal servant who came to Him, and said to our Lord, "Speak the word, and my child shall be healed"; and our Lord wondered at his faith, and according to his faith so was it unto him. And when the chief of the congregation asked Him concerning his daughter, He spake thus to him, "Believe only, and thy daughter shall live"; and he believed, and his daughter lived and stood up. And when Lazarus died, our Lord said to Martha, "If thou believest thy brother shall rise up". Martha saith to Him, "Yea, Lord, I do believe"; and He raised him up after four days. And Simon, who was surnamed 'Rock', because of his faith was called "the true Rock". And when our Lord gave the mystery of baptism unto His disciples, He spake unto them thus: "Whosoever believeth and is baptized shall live;

but whosoever believeth not shall be condemned".And again He said unto His disciples, "If ye believe, and doubt not, there is nothing which ye shall not be able to do". For when our Lord walked on the waves of the sea, Simon also, by his faith, walked with Him, but when his faith wavered and he began to sink, our Lord called him "little of faith". And when His Apostles asked our Lord, they begged for nothing from Him, but they said to Him, "Increase our faith". He saith unto them, "If ye have in you faith, even a mountain shall depart from before you". And He said to them, "Be not doubtful, and be not sunk in the world", like Simon who as soon as he doubted began to sink in the sea. And again He spake thus: "This shall be a sign unto those who believe: They shall speak with new tongues, and devils shall be driven out, and [when] their hands shall be laid upon the sick they shall be healed".

Let us then, my beloved one, draw nigh unto the faith whose mighty deeds are so many. For faith lifted up to heaven; it overcame the Flood; it made barrenness to give birth to children; it enriched the poor; it unloosed the prisoners; it saved the persecuted; it extinguished the fire; it divided the sea ; it cleaved the rock and made the thirsty to drink ; it satisfied the hungry; it vivified the dead; it brought up out of Sheol; it calmed the waves; it healed the sick; it vanquished hosts; it swept away walls; it closed the mouths of lions; it extinguished the flame of fire; it humbled the boastful; and brought the humble to honour. All these mighty deeds were wrought by faith. Now this is faith. A man must believe in God the Lord of all, Who created the heaven and the earth, and the seas and all that therein is, Who made

Adam in His image, Who gave the Law to Moses, Who sent His Spirit into the Prophets, Who also sent His Christ into the world; and a man should believe in the vivification of the dead, and also in the mystery of baptism. This is the faith of the Church of God. And a man must be free from the keeping of hours, and weeks, and months, and seasons, and incantations, and enchantments, and the magic of the Chaldeans, and sorcery, and from harlotry, and singing and dancing, and vain doctrines, and the vessels of the Evil one, and the blandishments of sweet words, and blasphemy, and adultery; and a man must not bear false witness, neither must he speak with a double tongue. These are works of the faith which is set upon the sure Rock, which is Christ, upon Whom riseth the whole building.

And, moreover, O my beloved, in the Holy Scriptures are many things concerning the matter of faith, but these few out of many have I written to remind thy love that thou mayest know, and make known, and mayest believe and make thyself a believer. And when thou hast read and learned the works of faith thou shalt be like unto that tilled land upon which the good seed fell, and which brought forth fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, and some thirtyfold; and when thou shalt depart to thy Lord, He shall call thee ”good, and excellent, and faithful servant”, who on account of his exceedingly great faith shall enter into ”the kingdom of his Lord”. [Footnotes renumbered and moved to the end]

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.