

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part II 2. Its Nature

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH

Part II

2. Its Nature

"There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness" (Prov. 30:12). A great many suppose that such a verse as this applies only to those who are trusting in something other than Christ for their acceptance before God, such as people who are relying upon baptism, church membership or their own moral and religious performances. But it is a great mistake to limit such scriptures unto the class just mentioned. Such a verse as "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12) has a far wider application than merely to those who are resting on something of or from themselves to secure a title to everlasting bliss. Equally wrong is it to imagine that the only deceived souls are they who have no faith in Christ. There is in Christendom today a very large number of people who have been taught that nothing the sinner can do will ever merit the esteem of God. They have been informed, and rightly so, that the highest moral achievements of the natural man are only "filthy rags" in the sight of the thrice holy God. They have heard quoted so often such passages as, "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9), and "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5), that they have become thoroughly convinced that heaven cannot be attained by any doing of the creature. Further, they have been told so often that Christ alone can save any sinner that this has become a settled article in their creed, from which neither man nor devil can shake them. So far, so good. That large company to whom we are now referring have also been taught that while Christ is the only way unto the Father, yet He becomes so only as faith is personally exercised in and upon Him: that He becomes our Saviour only when we believe on Him. During the last twenty-five years, almost the whole emphasis of "gospel preaching" has been thrown upon faith in Christ, and evangelistic efforts have been almost entirely confined to getting people to "believe" on the Lord Jesus. Apparently there has been great success; thousands upon thousands have responded; have, as they suppose, accepted Christ as their own personal Saviour. Yet we wish to point out here that it is as serious an error to suppose that all who "believe in Christ" are saved as it is to conclude that only those are deceived (and are described in Proverbs 14:12, and 30:12) who have no faith in Christ. No one can read the New Testament attentively

without discovering that there is a "believing" in Christ which does not save. In John 8:30, we are told, "As He spake these words, many believed on Him." Mark carefully, it is not said many believe in Him," but "many believed on Him." Nevertheless one does not have to read much farther on in the chapter to discover that those very people were unregenerate and unsaved souls. In verse 44 we find the Lord telling these very "believers" that they were of their father the Devil; and in verse 59 we find them taking up stones to cast at Him. This has presented a difficulty unto some; yet it ought not. They created their own difficulty, by supposing that all faith in Christ necessarily saves. It does not. There is a faith in Christ which saves, and there is also a faith in Christ which does not save. "Among the chief rulers also many believed on Him." Were, then, those men saved? Many preachers and evangelists, as well as tens of thousands of their blinded dupes, would answer, "Most assuredly." But let us note what immediately follows here: "but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (John 12:42, 43). Will any of our readers now say that those men were saved? If so, it is clear proof that you are utter strangers to any saving work of God in your own souls. Men who are afraid to hazard for Christ's sake the loss of their worldly positions, temporal interests, personal reputations, or anything else that is dear to them, are yet in their sins—no matter how they may be trusting in Christ's finished work to take them to heaven. Probably most of our readers have been brought up under the teaching that there are only two classes of people in this world, believers and unbelievers. But such a classification is most misleading, and is utterly erroneous. God's Word divides earth's inhabitants into three classes: "Give none offence, neither to [1] the Jews, nor [2] to the Gentiles, nor [3] to the church of God" (1 Cor. 10:32). It was so during Old Testament times, more noticeably so from the days of Moses onwards. There were first the "gentile" or heathen nations, outside the commonwealth of Israel, which formed by far the largest class. Corresponding with that class today are the countless millions of modern heathen, who are "lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God." Second, there was the nation of Israel, which has to be subdivided into two groups, for, as Romans 9:6, declares, "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel." By far the larger portion of the nation of Israel were only the nominal people of God, in outward relation to Him: corresponding with this class is the great mass of professors bearing the name of Christ. Third, there was the spiritual remnant of Israel, whose calling, hope and inheritance were heavenly: corresponding to them this day are the genuine Christians, God's "little flock" (Luke 12:32). The same threefold division among men is plainly discernible throughout John's Gospel. First, there were the hardened leaders of the nation, the scribes and Pharisees, priests and elders. From start to finish they were openly opposed to Christ, and neither His blessed teaching nor His wondrous works had any melting effects upon them. Second, there were the common people who "heard Him gladly" (Mark 12:37), a great many of whom are said to have "believed on Him" (see John 2:23; 7:31; 8:30; 10:42; 12:11), but concerning whom there is nothing to show that they were saved. They were not outwardly opposed to Christ, but they never yielded their hearts to Him. They were impressed by His Divine credentials, yet were easily offended (John 6:66). Third, there was the insignificant handful who "received Him" (John 1:12) into their hearts and lives; received Him as their Lord and Saviour. The same three classes are clearly discernible (to anointed eyes) in the world today. First, there are the vast multitudes who make no profession at all, who see nothing in Christ that they should desire Him; people who are deaf to every appeal, and who make little attempt to conceal their hatred of the Lord Jesus. Second, there is that large company who are attracted by Christ in a natural way. So far from being openly antagonistic to Him and His cause, they are found among His followers. Having been taught much of the Truth, they "believe in Christ," just as children reared by conscientious Mohammedans believe firmly and devoutly in Mohammed. Having received much of instruction concerning the virtues of Christ's precious blood, they trust in its merits to deliver them from the wrath to come; and yet there is nothing in their daily

lives to show that they are new creatures in Christ Jesus! Third, there are the "few" (Matt. 7:13, 14) who deny themselves, take up the cross daily, and follow a despised and rejected Christ in the path of loving and unreserved obedience unto God. Yes, there is a faith in Christ which saves, but there is a faith in Christ which does not save. From this statement probably few will dissent, yet many will be inclined to weaken it by saying that the faith in Christ which does not save is merely a historical faith, or where there is a believing about Christ instead of a believing in Him. Not so. That there are those who mistake a historical faith about Christ for a saving faith in Christ we do not deny; but what we would here emphasize is the solemn fact that there are also some who have more than a historical faith, more than a mere head-knowledge about Him, who yet have a faith which comes short of being a quickening and saving one. Not only are there some with this non-saving faith, but today there are vast numbers of such all around us. They are people who furnish the antitypes of those to which we called attention in the last article: who were represented and illustrated in Old Testament times by those who believed in, rested upon, leaned upon, relied upon the Lord, but who were, nevertheless, unsaved souls. What, then, does saving faith consist of? In seeking to answer this question our present object is to supply not only a scriptural definition, but one which, at the same time, differentiates it from a non-saving faith. Nor is this any easy task, for the two things often have much in common: that faith in Christ which does not save has in it more than one element or ingredient of that faith which does vitally unite the soul to Him. Those pitfalls which the writer must now seek to avoid are undue discouraging of real saints on the one hand by raising the standard higher than Scripture has raised it, and encouraging unregenerate professors on the other hand by so lowering the standards as to include them. We do not wish to withhold from the people of God their legitimate portion; nor do we want to commit the sin of taking the children's bread and casting it to the dogs. May the Holy Spirit Himself deign to guide us into the Truth. Much error would be avoided on this subject if due care were taken to frame a scriptural definition of unbelief. Again and again in Scripture we find believing and not believing placed in antithesis, and we are afforded much help toward arriving at a correct conception of the real nature of saving faith when we obtain a right understanding of the character of unbelief. It will at once be discovered that saving faith is far more than a hearty assenting unto what God's Word sets before us, when we perceive that unbelief is much more than an error or judgment or a failure to assent unto the Truth. Scripture depicts unbelief as a virulent and violent principle of opposition to God. Unbelief has both a passive and active, a negative and positive, side, and therefore the Greek noun is rendered both by "unbelief" (Romans 11:20; Heb. 4:6, 11), and "disobedience" (Eph. 2:2; 5:6) and the verb by "believed not" (Heb. 3:18; 11:30) and "obey not" (1 Peter 3:1; 4:17). A few concrete examples will make this plainer. Take first the case of Adam. There was something more than a mere negative failing to believe God's solemn threat that in the day he should eat of the forbidden fruit he would surely die: by one man's disobedience many were made sinners (Romans 5:12). Nor did the heinousness of our first parent's sin consist in listening to the lie of the serpent, for 1 Timothy 2:14, expressly declares "Adam was not deceived." No, he was determined to have his own way, no matter what God had prohibited and threatened. Thus, the very first case of unbelief in human history consisted not only in negatively failing to take to heart what God has so clearly and so solemnly said, but also in a deliberate defiance of and rebellion against Him. Take the case of Israel in the wilderness. Concerning them it is said, "They could not enter in [the promised land] because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:19). Now exactly what do those words signify? Do they mean that Canaan was missed by them because of their failure to appropriate the promise of God? Yes, for a "promise" of entering in was "left" them, but it was not "mixed with faith in them that heard it" (Heb. 4:1, 2)—God had declared that the seed of Abraham should inherit that land which flowed with milk and honey, and it was the privilege of that generation which was delivered from Egypt to lay hold of and apply that promise to themselves. But they did not. Yet that is not all! There was something

far worse: there was another element in their unbelief which is usually lost sight of nowadays—they were openly disobedient against God. When the spies brought back a sample of the goodly grapes, and Joshua urged them to go up and possess the land, they would not. Accordingly Moses declared, "notwithstanding ye would not go up, but rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God" (Deut. 1:26). Ah, there is the positive side of their unbelief; they were self-willed, disobedient, defiant. Consider now the case of that generation of Israel which was in Palestine when the Lord Jesus appeared among them as "a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God" (Romans 15:8). John 1:11, informs us, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not," which the next verse defines as "they believed" Him not. But is that all? Were they guilty of nothing more than a failure to assent to His teaching and trust to His person? Nay, verily, that was merely the negative side of their unbelief. Positively, they "hated" Him (John 15:25), and would "not come to" Him (John 5:40). His holy demands suited not their fleshly desires, and therefore they said, "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14). Thus their unbelief, too, consisted in the spirit of self-will and open defiance, a determination to please themselves at all costs. Unbelief is not simply an infirmity of fallen human nature, it is a heinous crime. Scripture everywhere attributes it to love of sin, obstinacy of will, hardness of heart. Unbelief has its root in a depraved nature, in a mind which is enmity against God. Love of sin is the immediate cause of unbelief: "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). "The light of the Gospel is brought unto a place or people: they come so near it as to discover its end or tendency; but as soon as they find that it aims to part them and their sins, they will have no more to do with it. They like not the terms of the Gospel, and so perish in and for their iniquities" (John Owen). If the Gospel were more clearly and faithfully preached, fewer would profess to believe it! Saving faith, then, is the opposite of damning belief. Both issue from the heart that is alienated from God, which is in a state of rebellion against Him; saving faith from a heart which is reconciled to Him and so has ceased to fight against Him. Thus an essential element or ingredient in saving faith is a yielding to the authority of God, a submitting of myself to His rule. It is very much more than my understanding assenting and my will consenting to the fact that Christ is a Saviour for sinners, and that He stands ready to receive all who trust Him. To be received by Christ I must not only come to Him renouncing all my own righteousness (Romans 10:3), as an empty-handed beggar (Matt. 19:21), but I must also forsake my self-will and rebellion against Him (Psalm 12:11, 12; Prov. 28:13). Should an insurrectionist and seditious come to an earthly king seeking his sovereign favour and pardon, then, obviously, the very law of his coming to him for forgiveness requires that he should come on his knees, laying aside his hostility. So it is with a sinner who really comes savingly to Christ for pardon; it is against the law of faith to do otherwise. Saving faith is a genuine coming to Christ (Matt. 11:28; John 6:37, etc.). But let us take care that we do not miss the clear and inevitable implication of this term. If I say "I come to the U.S.A." then I necessarily indicate that I left some other country to get here. Thus it is in "coming" to Christ; something has to be left. Coming to Christ not only involves the abandoning of every false object of confidence, it also includes and entails the forsaking of all other competitors for my heart. "For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls (1 Peter 2:25). And what is meant by "ye were [note the past tense—they are no longer doing so] as sheep going astray"? Isaiah 53:6, tells us: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to His own way." Ah, that is what must be forsaken before we can truly "come" to Christ—that course of self-will must be abandoned. The prodigal son could not come to his Father while he remained in the far country. Dear reader, if you are still following a course of self-pleasing, you are only deceiving yourself if you think you have come to Christ. Nor is the brief definition which we have given above of what it means really to "come" to Christ any forced or novel one of our own. In his book *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, John Bunyan wrote: "Coming to Christ is attended with an

honest and sincere forsaking all for Him [here he quotes Luke 14:26, 27]. By these and like expressions elsewhere, Christ describeth the true comer: he is one that casteth all behind his back. There are a great many pretended comers to Jesus Christ in the world. They are much like the man you read of in Matthew 21:30, that said to his father's bidding, 'I go, sir: and went not.' When Christ calls by His Gospel, they say, 'I come, Sir,' but they still abide by their pleasure and carnal delights." C. H. Spurgeon, in his sermon on John 6:44, said, "Coming to Christ embraces in it repentance, self-abnegation, and faith in the Lord Jesus, and so sums within itself all those things which are the necessary attendants of those great steps of heart, such as the belief of the truth, earnest prayers to God, the submission of the soul to the precepts of His Gospel." In his sermon on John 6:37, he says, "To come to Christ signifies to turn from sin and to trust in Him. Coming to Christ is a leaving of all false confidences, a renouncing of all love to sin and a looking to Jesus as the solitary pillar of our confidence and hope." Saving faith consists of the complete surrender of my whole being and life to the claims of God upon me: "But first gave their own selves to the Lord" (2 Cor. 8:5). It is the unreserved acceptance of Christ as my absolute Lord, bowing to His will and receiving His yoke. Possibly someone may object, Then why are Christians exhorted as they are in Romans 12:1? We answer, All such exhortations are simply a calling on them to continue as they began: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him" (Col. 2:6). Yes, mark it well that Christ is "received" as Lord. Oh, how far, far below the New Testament standard is this modern way of begging sinners to receive Christ as their own personal "Saviour." If the reader will consult his concordance, he will find that in every passage where the two titles are found together it is always "Lord and Saviour, and never vice versa: see Luke 1:46, 47; 2 Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18. Until the ungodly are sensible of the exceeding sinfulness of their vile course of self-will and self-pleasing, until they are genuinely broken down and penitent over it before God, until they are willing to forsake the world for Christ, until they have resolved to come under His government, for such to depend upon Him for pardon and life is not faith, but blatant presumption, it is but to add insult to injury. And for any such to take His holy name upon their polluted lips and profess to be His followers is the most terribly blasphemy, and comes perilously nigh to committing that sin for which there is no forgiveness. Alas, alas, that modern evangelism is encouraging and producing just such hideous and Christ-dishonouring monstrosities. Saving faith is a believing on Christ with the heart: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness" (Romans 10:9, 10). There is no such thing as a saving faith in Christ where there is no real love for Him, and by "real love" we mean a love which is evidenced by obedience. Christ acknowledges none to be His friends save those who do whatsoever He commands them (John 15:14). As unbelief is a species of rebellion, so saving faith is a complete subjection to God: Hence we read of "the obedience of faith" (Romans 16:26). Saving faith is to the soul what health is to the body: it is a mighty principle of operation, full of life, ever working, bringing forth fruit after its own kind.

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