

The Foundation, Conditions and Relations of Faith

by Charles Finney

The sermon explores the foundation, conditions, and relations of faith, using Abraham's faith as an example.

Scripture: Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:1

Topics: "Righteousness", "Faith"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the foundational aspects of faith as exemplified by Abraham, highlighting that true faith is rooted in God's veracity rather than personal merit or feelings. He explains that the conditions of faith include recognizing God's attributes and the promises He has made, which are essential for a rational belief. Finney also discusses the governmental relations of faith, illustrating how Abraham's faith was credited as righteousness, allowing believers to be treated as righteous despite their sins. Ultimately, he asserts that genuine faith leads to obedience, joy, peace, and the ability to overcome worldly challenges and fleshly desires.

Transcript

"And he believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness." --Gen. 15:6.

"What shall we then say that Abraham, our father as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory, but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." --Rom. 4:1-5

The passage in Genesis 15, refers to Abraham--to the promises God had made to him--to his faith in those promises, and to the Lord's acceptance of that faith. These topics are first brought to our view in Genesis 12, again in Gen. 17, and thenceforward frequently in the course of Abraham's history. The case was highly instructive, and St. Paul could not fail to see its important bearings. Hence the free use he makes of it as an illustration, both of what faith, and of its results.

In treating this subject, it is important,

I. TO NOTICE THE FOUNDATION OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH.

II. SOME OF ITS CONDITIONS.

III. ITS GOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS.

IV. ITS NATURAL RELATIONS AND RESULTS.

I. The foundation of Abraham's faith was not anything whatever in himself. It was not the fact, either real or supposed, that he had been himself converted. There is no intimation that he ever so much as thought whether he had been converted or not. His faith seems to have been exercised irrespective of any opinions or thoughts on this question.

Nor did his faith rest on the assumption that he was himself in a right state of mind. He did not, so far as we can see, assume this, and thereupon ground his confidence that God would do for himself what He had promised.

Nor did his faith rest in the confidence he might have had in his own integrity of character. There is not the least intimation of this.

But positively, his faith rested on God's veracity. It does not appear that Abraham took into view anything else whatever as a ground of his faith, except the simple veracity of God. He simply relied on what God had said, because it was God who said it. God met him and told him certain things; he believed them, although they were apparently impossible. It was enough for him that God had said so. He rested in God as a being of veracity.

II. Conditions of Abraham's faith.

It is a very common thing for the conditions of faith to be confounded with faith itself. This is a fundamental mistake. For example, the rational recognition of God's natural and moral attributes is a condition of faith, but is not by any means faith itself. Unless a man sees and knows that God possesses the moral attributes ascribed to Him, he can see no ground for rational confidence in Him. How could Abraham have had confidence in God, if he had not believed in his natural and moral attributes? He must have believed this; else He [he] could not rationally believe that God would and could fulfill his promises.

It is especially to be noted that Abraham must have had confidence in God's moral attributes, as a condition of faith. He must have believed that God is good; for of necessity this attribute of the divine character must be intellectually apprehended before the mind can rationally believe that God will certainly fulfill his promises. Hence the distinction between the conditions of faith and faith itself is really fundamental. One might intellectually apprehend these attributes as clearly as an angel in heaven does, and yet not have gospel faith.

Another condition of faith is the promise of God. It could have been no virtue in Abraham to believe that God would grant him a son, or give his posterity Canaan, if God had never promised to do so. God first revealed his covenant with Abraham, and connected with it precious promises; then a condition was fulfilled for faith on Abraham's part--then, but not before. In the same way the covenant of grace, clearly apprehended, as revealed of God, is a condition of saving faith now. When God in any way reveals the substance of this covenant--whether through dim types and prophecies as before Christ came, or in the broad blaze of gospel day as when He actually came, then the way is opened for the intelligent and acceptable exercise of gospel faith. No doubt Adam and Eve received sufficient revelation from God to lay a foundation for their faith. Eve obviously understood from the promise given in Gen. 3:15 that salvation

from the power of Satan was to come through her posterity; for at the birth of Cain, the first born, she seems to have supposed that this was the promised seed. In this particular she was indeed mistaken; but not in her faith that God would bring salvation through her remote posterity. It is plain that both Adam and Eve received and believed at this time the revelations of divine mercy. The Lord was exceedingly kind towards them in his mode of convicting them of their first and great sin. How beautiful and how gracious that He should himself clothe them to hide the shame of their nakedness! How significant too that this clothing should be of skins--of skins, which almost beyond question were taken from animals now for the first time slain for sacrifice! It seems most fitting that here for the first time the idea of sacrifice should be developed, and the race be taught in the person of Adam and Eve that "without the shedding of blood, there could be no remission for sin." A most expressive and beautiful type! What could more forcibly express displeasure against sin--grace towards the real sinner--and the substitution of an innocent victim in place of the guilty, as a ground for the grace shown the latter!

The covenant of grace to Abraham, God revealed yet more fully, thus expanding more distinctly his purposes of loving-kindness towards a sinning race, and making yet more distinct and definite this ground of saving faith.

III. The governmental relations of saving faith. What relations did Abraham's faith sustain to the government of God?

Scripture answers by saying--"He counted it to him for righteousness." It was set down--passed to his account, as righteousness--as if it were perfect obedience. Business men will understand this phrase, so current in their pecuniary transactions. A credit passed to a man's account--a receipt in full--accounted as full payment of his debt. The obvious meaning seems to be that God accepted Abraham's faith instead of that perfect obedience which had been before required. All men having fallen into sin, and hence come under condemnation, God passes to their credit the righteousness of Christ, as if Christ had passed to their credit in the bank of heaven enough to cancel all their debt.

It should never be forgotten that the ultimate ground of the sinner's justification is God's great and pure love. In love alone, the whole scheme had its origin.

Another condition of this governmental justification is that the sinner believes. The simple belief of this record, the heart yielding itself up to the control of the truth believed--this is the condition on which the full blessings of Christ's work are conferred.

In the case of Abraham, faith gave him, as indeed it does all believers, the full benefit of all the work comprised in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. All that Christ has done for the sinner becomes his on condition of his embracing it by faith. This is the only condition. Abraham was to believe the promise before Christ actually came; all believers since Christ's death are to believe on Christ as actually come; in each case the condition is substantially the same; it is believing what God has said, and taking hold of his promise to rely upon it as truth.

The term righteousness, as used in this connection, denotes justification. This is its proper meaning. Abraham's faith, therefore, is accepted of him in the place of perfect obedience as the ground of his pardon. Thus pardoned, he can be treated as if he had not sinned. He had sinned, indeed, but under the economy of grace, he is treated governmentally as if he had not sinned. Governmentally, he is regarded as perfect. By this I do not mean that the law did not regard him as a sinner, for it did so regard him, and could not do otherwise. It could not blot from its tablets the record of his past sins, but it could, so to speak,

pass to his credit the faith he had exercised, which is accounted to him for righteousness. On this ground the Law-giver can treat him not as sinful, but as righteous.

Yet here let it not be lost sight of, that, providentially, he may be and is still treated as a sinner. Under the providential, disciplinary government of God, he is regarded as a sinner--as yet imperfect, and needing discipline to improve his character and train him for heaven. Hence, while governmentally he is regarded as righteous and not doomed to hell, yet providentially, it is not forgotten that he has sinned, and that he still needs discipline to evolve and perfect the spirit and the habits of holiness.

IV. Its natural relations and results.

1. It is naturally connected with obedience. It stands related to obedience by its very nature. Faith is confidence in God's veracity. This naturally leads the soul to obey all God's requirements.

Cases sometimes occur in which we may get from our own observation, very striking and just views of the nature of faith, psychologically considered. You may sometimes see persons give themselves up to another so completely as to believe everything they say, and be entirely controlled by their influence. I was much struck with this in the course of the Second Advent discussions. Some then seemed most manifestly to have unbounded confidence in all Mr. Miller said and believed. Often they manifested a similar confidence in their sub-leaders. For example, I heard a man say--a man who I have reason to fear is a wicked man--"That woman will do just what I tell her to do, and I can make her believe anything I say." This was said in her presence, and I had but too much reason to think that it was literally true.

During the progress of these scenes, I felt constrained to say to one lady--"I am afraid you will go to destruction; you have given yourself up to be led any where, and I do greatly fear this will not end short of plunging you in absolute ruin. You believe the most utter nonsense as strongly and firmly as if God Himself had met you and told you to believe it."

This case may serve to illustrate the natural results of faith. Let one man commit himself to another as a leader and teacher, and the latter can lead him any where and any how he pleases. Let a soldier commit himself thus to his general; he can then be led right into the very jaws of death. So let confidence be cherished in another; its natural result will be to bring the confiding mind under the complete dominion of the mind confided in.

Such was the natural influence of Abraham's faith. We see him hanging upon what God said, just like a child upon its parent. If anything happened to try him, we see him coming forth from the trial in the utmost simplicity of character. How beautiful and how noble to see him stand firm as a rock while the storms of temptation dash around his feet! So it is with real faith always. Abraham's faith had in it nothing peculiar in character or in results. It was simple faith--nothing more.

2. Faith naturally results in joy and peace. The things believed are such that the mind can not but feel the highest joy and the most quiet repose. If you really understand and believe what God says, why not feel at rest? What more need He say to inspire confidence in Himself? Who does not know that confidence in One believed to be able to save to the uttermost must assuredly inspire the rest of sweet repose--the joy of unalloyed confidence and trust? Verily, God has said everything we need to have said to make us feel that His promised protection is round about us as the mountains are round about Jerusalem. Has He not told us that his everlasting arms are underneath us evermore? And can we ever sink, sustained by such supports? Who does not know that simply to believe in all this, naturally results in peace, quietness, and

assurance forever? Who does not see that these results flow as naturally as any other results flow from their appropriate cause? Who can believe this good news, and not be greatly glad? Is not that joy both intense and abiding which springs from peace, deep and broad as a river, and from a righteousness which flows and rolls its mountain waves as the sea?

3. This faith overcomes the world. By this I mean that it overcomes the influence of the world upon the mind.

Let a man believe what is said of the future state; he will then deem it a small thing to be judged of man's judgment. But Oh! to stand right in the eye of the Great and final Judge--this will be his supreme concern. Let him only be assured of this, and all within is peace and joy. Let him only apprehend God's universal providence and put his trust in this all-present and all-controlling Deity; then all is peace and joy. Whether sick or well, it is all the same; nothing disturbs his peace; for he knows that under God's hand all things shall work together for his good. No matter whether he has much or little of earthly supply; he knows that he has just so much as is good for him, for the amount is wisely and kindly measured out to him by One who both knows and loves. He may enjoy honor, or dishonor; may have much learning, or none; all is well, if he knows that God has appointed all just as it is, and if he can thoroughly trust it all to be perfectly right. Be the circumstances what they may, he knows that what is infinitely wise and good is taking place and always will be. Now he has only to believe this, and it is all the same to him whether he have little, or much, or none at all of this world's good things. If he will only believe with unfaltering faith that all is wise and well, he has a key in his own bosom with which he can unlock all treasures.

Here is a professor of religion, under God's glorious government, fretting about a pin! Alas! what is the matter? He has lost a single pin! This is not the worst thing--he has lost his faith! I saw him one day in great trouble and anxiety of mind. It was a few days after his conversion, and then he seemed a bright and joyful convert; but he lost his way and fell into temptation. Alas! go and ask him now what is the matter. "I have lost my Jesus!" It is well that he knows it. Many do not seem to know it when the fact is most obvious to everybody else. Listen to the Psalmist, and mark the beauty and pertinence of his words. He sinks into the deep mire of the Slough of Despond; yet opening his eyes somewhat to his condition, he cries out--"Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise Him." He would excite his own soul to believe God, and hence he begins to arraign and catechise himself for his causeless unbelief. O, my soul, Why art thou cast down? Believe thou in God! Believe what? Believe in God. Believe that thou shalt still praise Him.

4. Faith naturally overcomes the flesh. If a man have faith, why shall he go about to gratify his appetites? Shall he make their gratification his chief good? Nay, verily. He will understand that the kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink. If you see a man given up to the indulgence of his appetites, you see an unbeliever. You see one who does not apprehend the great things of the eternal world as living and all-controlling realities. He is under the dominion of his flesh. But faith breaks up this dominion, and asserts its own in its stead. What has faith to do with sensuality? What communion is there between light and darkness? What concord between Christ and Belial? Just the same as between faith and sensuality. Faith overcomes Satan. One who believes God knows that Satan is a liar and the father of lies. Without faith, you are Satan's dupe, Satan's slave, Satan's drudge; but faith in Jesus emancipates the soul from the dominion of his lies.

REMARKS.

1. The faith of Abraham was purely a mental act. The apostle speaks of it curiously. "If Abraham were justified by works, he would have whereof to glory;" but now he has nothing of which to glory, and therefore he is not justified by works. Plainly he was not justified at all by works in the Jewish sense. It was not on the ground of certain external doings, but on the ground of his mental faith, that he was justified. The purely mental act of faith was the condition, itself antecedent to all external manifestations, and the condition of them. This faith is accounted to him for righteousness.

2. Some confound the condition of faith with faith itself. Some just knowledge of God is doubtless an indispensable condition to the exercise of faith; but this knowledge--this intellectual apprehension of God, is not to be confounded with faith itself.

3. Some look to something within themselves as the ground of faith. Consequently they attend continually to their own mental states, instead of looking up to God. They are evermore looking within at their state of feeling for evidence upon which they are to believe. Believe what? Not believe in themselves, but believe in God. Under the pretense of self-examination, they are forever playing the fool with themselves, and looking down, as they suppose, into the depths of their hearts, to find evidence on which to believe. God announces to them a truth, and says, Believe. They reply--I can believe that, if I can only get the evidence that I am in a right state of mind. But what is a right state of mind? A state of faith. Believing is the right exercise; nothing else is right. The great piety of Abraham, when brought out in the Bible, is simple belief--trust; this constitutes a right state of mind. He believed what God said, not on the ground of having certain right emotions and feelings, but because it was God who had said it. What if Abraham had said--O, I could believe all God has said, if I only had the evidence--of what? Do you want evidence that God is true? No, but I want evidence that I am in a right state of mind. Abraham was not such a fool as to back out of God's light into the darkness of his own mind, and draw a veil of thick darkness over and all round about him. No, it was enough for him that God had spoken, and that God was true.

It would really seem as if God was unable to say anything to Abraham which he would not believe. God almost seemed to tell him lies, to try his faith; but yet Abraham would believe. The Lord told him he should have a son; but still he went on in his providence as if He never meant to fulfill his promise. Continually He seemed to contradict Himself. After Isaac was born and grown, He told Abraham to take him far away to a specified mountain, and there kill him! O, what a scene was that! Yet Abraham believed God. He knew that God could even raise his Isaac from the dead; hence, why should he fear to obey God, even when He gave such a command? If this man of God were among us in our prayer-meetings, would he do as some now do--be looking continually after his feelings? No; he would simply believe God.

Yet mark how sorely God tried him. "Take now," said He, "thy son, thine only son Isaac," (how every word sinks to the bottom of a parent's heart!) take him away from his loved home, and from his fond mother--forever! Set off on this dreadful expedition to-morrow. One night intervened. Did the tried father sleep quietly as ever that night? If he did, it must have been the rest of faith. In the morning he rose, said not a word to Sarah; he could not have her sympathy, for (probably) he could not trust her faith against her maternal feelings. His own faith stood apparently, unflinching. The simplicity of his faith was the glory of his piety.

Yet Abraham had but few things to believe. If those full revelations made to us had been made to him, what a mighty, triumphant life he must have lived! In what a sunset of glory he must have died! Only a single ray fell from heaven upon his eye, yet his eye caught this one ray, and his heart believed. On that ray he kept his eye fixed continually. Oh, if he were to live now and among us, what would he think of our

faith? What could he think of us, always prating over our unbelief as if we had not faith enough to keep us above the fear of hell!

4. What many Christians say is greatly calculated to stumble young converts. They seem not to have gone a step beyond babyhood. They are no more able to stand alone than a mere child, though counting the years of their Christian life, they ought for the time, to be men of adult age and of adult strength.

When a young convert sets out in the Christian life with a flood of emotions and these soon subside, it happens not seldom that he falls into deep trouble. Like a raw hand aboard ship, he shows but too soon that he is no sailor. A storm comes on, the mountain waves dash high--such a wind he never knew before--his knees smite together, and he cries out "Alas! I am lost, I am lost!" So the timid convert feels when he thinks he has lost his Jesus. The fact is he has only lost his faith. And perhaps this sad loss has befallen him because he was misguided by much older Christians, who should have strengthened his faith rather than weaken it.

How plain it is that God meant to confirm our faith and teach us to keep it always strong and earnest. Else why did He give us such a history as this of Abraham? Look at this man of living faith! See him pushing his way along with only one dim ray of light, yet firm as a rock amid the waves; steadfast, though all around be dark as death. But Oh, what a zigzag course many now pursue! Faltering now, and now turning aside to shun the lions in the way;--feeling their path along as if they could not trust the Mighty One who has said, "This is the way; go forward, and fear not, for I am with thee." How many such Christians would it take to promote a revival? Ten thousand of them would not promote one! In fact, the more there are, the worse for the cause of God; the greater the difficulties in promoting revivals where their influence is felt. O how weak and sickly they are! They need to be fed with a spoon like an infant. You might as soon march an army of invalids against Gibraltar, as lead such Christians out to conflict by prayer and faith in promoting revivals on religion. I can afford and endure to see infancy and weakness in young converts; but O, when I see old Christians still shut up to the diet and leading-strings of infants, it is so afflictive, so disheartening! To see them go round and round forever in a circle after their feelings, their feelings. What an abomination that they don't learn to walk by faith! A perfect state of the physical system don't (sic.) make a man think much about his health. It leaves him to mind his appropriate business and seek the proper enjoyments of life. If his digestion is good, he never thinks of his stomach. Why should he? Perhaps he never knows from any sensations felt that he has any stomach. But if his digestion is bad, then alas! the poor man has enough to do in thinking of his troubled stomach. So of the sickly Christian. You see him perpetually troubled about his feelings, his feelings, like the invalid who runs to the glass to see his tongue! O when will such Christians learn to have faith, and be strong in the Mighty God of Jacob.

5. That is a most unhealthy religion which is forever dwelling on views and frames and feelings. How is it in heaven? Are they thinking of their feelings and frames? No; they are so absorbed in the great objects before them that they are unconscious of the lapse of time. Perhaps a thousand of our years may pass over them and leave no consciousness of its having been a moment. Is this extravagant? No. Have you not been sometimes so engrossed that you could not mark the lapse of time at all? We mark time by noticing the succession of events. Have you not been so much engrossed as not at all to notice this succession? I recollect the case of a young convert in the northern part of New York State, who on one occasion prayed all night. When he came to consciousness of time and began to think what time it was, he was astonished to find it morning!

It is said of William Tennant that he rode all day in thought so profound that he never knew till he reached the end of his journey, that he had been bleeding profusely at the nose. Now in such cases, their own state is not the subject of thought at all. Of course they are far indeed from studying and watching over their own feelings.

This latter is, as I have said, a most unhealthy state. He who is forever dwelling upon his own spiritual frames, instead of being absorbed in the objects of faith, is a poor, spiritual dyspeptic. This thinking of his own frames, is the very thing which destroys his religion.

Suppose I go to England and leave my wife at home. Far away from her, I set myself to examine my feelings to see if I love my wife. I turn my mind away from her, and fasten it upon my love. I make this love the only and the all absorbing subject of my thought. What will be the result? Who does not know that the affection of love is correlated to its object? In this case my affection is correlated to my wife, and can not spring up and develop itself, except in view of its object. Hence I must think of my wife, if I would make it possible for the affection of love to develop itself. Contemplation of the object is the condition of all manifestation of the affections. Consequently by turning my mind wholly away from the object, and then demanding that love to that object should manifest itself, I demand a natural impossibility. Let me do this and I might pronounce myself a stark hypocrite, and be as well employed as many Christians are who withhold their contemplations from God and all the proper objects of faith, and exercise themselves in scanning and trying to judge of their feelings. O what misguided efforts are these!

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