

The Higher Faith

by George MacDonald

George MacDonald's sermon encourages believers to seek a deeper faith that transcends scripture and embraces personal revelation from God.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5, Matthew 7:7, John 20:29, Romans 8:26, 1 Corinthians 2:10, Ephesians 3:20, Philippians 4:6, Colossians 2:2, Hebrews 11:1, 1 John 5:14

Topics: "Deeper Faith", "Revelation Of God"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the importance of faith beyond what is explicitly stated in the Bible, encouraging believers to trust in God's character and seek answers to questions that may not have been revealed in Scripture. He emphasizes the role of Jesus as the ultimate revelation of God, with the Bible leading us to Him. MacDonald challenges the notion of limiting faith to only what is written, urging believers to have a faith that seeks deeper understanding and revelation from God, even in areas not directly addressed in the Bible.

Transcript

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.--John xx. 29.

The aspiring child is often checked by the dull disciple who has learned his lessons so imperfectly that he has never got beyond his school-books. Full of fragmentary rules, he has perceived the principle of none of them. The child draws near to him with some outburst of unusual feeling, some scintillation of a lively hope, some wide-reaching imagination that draws into the circle of religious theory the world of nature, and the yet wider world of humanity, for to the child the doings of the Father fill the spaces; he has not yet learned to divide between God and nature, between Providence and grace, between love and benevolence;--the child comes, I say, with his heart full, and the answer he receives from the dull disciple is--"God has said nothing about that in his word, therefore we have no right to believe anything about it. It is better not to speculate on such matters. However desirable it may seem to us, we have nothing to do with it. It is not revealed." For such a man is incapable of suspecting, that what has remained hidden from him may have been revealed to the babe. With the authority, therefore, of years and ignorance, he forbids the child, for he believes in no revelation but the Bible, and in the word of that alone. For him all revelation has ceased with and been buried in the Bible, to be with difficulty exhumed, and, with much questioning of the decayed form, re-united into a rigid skeleton of metaphysical and legal contrivance for letting the love

of God have its way unchecked by the other perfections of his being.

But to the man who would live throughout the whole divine form of his being, not confining himself to one broken corner of his kingdom, and leaving the rest to the demons that haunt such deserts, a thousand questions will arise to which the Bible does not even allude. Has he indeed nothing to do with such? Do they lie beyond the sphere of his responsibility? "Leave them," says the dull disciple. "I cannot," returns the man. "Not only does that degree of peace of mind without which action is impossible, depend upon the answers to these questions, but my conduct itself must correspond to these answers." "Leave them at least till God chooses to explain, if he ever will." "No. Questions imply answers. He has put the questions in my heart; he holds the answers in his. I will seek them from him. I will wait, but not till I have knocked. I will be patient, but not till I have asked. I will seek until I find. He has something for me. My prayer shall go up unto the God of my life."

Sad, indeed, would the whole matter be, if the Bible had told us everything God meant us to believe. But herein is the Bible itself greatly wronged. It nowhere lays claim to be regarded as the Word, the Way, the Truth. The Bible leads us to Jesus, the inexhaustible, the ever unfolding Revelation of God. It is Christ "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," not the Bible, save as leading to him. And why are we told that these treasures are hid in him who is the Revelation of God? Is it that we should despair of finding them and cease to seek them? Are they not hid in him that they may be revealed to us in due time--that is, when we are in need of them? Is not their hiding in him the mediatorial step towards their unfolding in us? Is he not the Truth?--the Truth to men? Is he not the High Priest of his brethren, to answer all the troubled questionings that arise in their dim humanity? For it is his heart which Contains of good, wise, just, the perfect shape.

Didymus answers, "No doubt, what we know not now, we shall know hereafter." Certainly there may be things which the mere passing into another stage of existence will illuminate; but the questions that come here, must be inquired into here, and if not answered here, then there too until they be answered. There is more hid in Christ than we shall ever learn, here or there either; but they that begin first to inquire will soonest be gladdened with revelation; and with them he will be best pleased, for the slowness of his disciples troubled him of old. To say that we must wait for the other world, to know the mind of him who came to this world to give himself to us, seems to me the foolishness of a worldly and lazy spirit. The Son of God is the Teacher of men, giving to them of his Spirit--that Spirit which manifests the deep things of God, being to a man the mind of Christ. The great heresy of the Church of the present day is unbelief in this Spirit. The mass of the Church does not believe that the Spirit has a revelation for every man individually--a revelation as different from the revelation of the Bible, as the food in the moment of passing into living brain and nerve differs from the bread and meat. If we were once filled with the mind of Christ, we should know that the Bible had done its work, was fulfilled, and had for us passed away, that thereby the Word of our God might abide for ever. The one use of the Bible is to make us look at Jesus, that through him we might know his Father and our Father, his God and our God. Till we thus know Him, let us hold the Bible dear as the moon of our darkness, by which we travel towards the east; not dear as the sun whence her light cometh, and towards which we haste, that, walking in the sun himself, we may no more need the mirror that reflected his absent brightness.

But this doctrine of the Spirit is not my end now, although, were it not true, all our religion would be vain, that of St Paul and that of Socrates. What I want to say and show, if I may, is, that a man will please God better by believing some things that are not told him, than by confining his faith to those things that are expressly said--said to arouse in us the truth-seeing faculty, the spiritual desire, the prayer for the good

things which God will give to them that ask him.

"But is not this dangerous doctrine? Will not a man be taught thus to believe the things he likes best, even to pray for that which he likes best? And will he not grow arrogant in his confidence?"

If it be true that the Spirit strives with our spirit; if it be true that God teaches men, we may safely leave those dreaded results to him. If the man is of the Lord's company, he is safer with him than with those who would secure their safety by hanging on the outskirts and daring nothing. If he is not taught of God in that which he hopes for, God will let him know it. He will receive something else than he prays for. If he can pray to God for anything not good, the answer will come in the flames of that consuming fire. These will soon bring him to some of his spiritual senses. But it will be far better for him to be thus sharply tutored, than to go on a snail's pace in the journey of the spiritual life. And for arrogance, I have seen nothing breed it faster or in more offensive forms than the worship of the letter.

And to whom shall a man, whom the blessed God has made, look for what he likes best, but to that blessed God? If we have been indeed enabled to see that God is our Father, as the Lord taught us, let us advance from that truth to understand that he is far more than father--that his nearness to us is beyond the embodiment of the highest idea of father; that the fatherhood of God is but a step towards the Godhood for them that can receive it. What a man likes best may be God's will, may be the voice of the Spirit striving with his spirit, not against it; and if, as I have said, it be not so--if the thing he asks is not according to his will--there is that consuming fire. The danger lies, not in asking from God what is not good, nor even in hoping to receive it from him, but in not asking him, in not having him of our council. Nor will the fact that we dare not inquire his will, preserve us from the necessity of acting in some such matter as we call unrevealed, and where shall we find ourselves then? Nor, once more, for such a disposition of mind is it likely that the book itself will contain much of a revelation.

The whole matter may safely be left to God.

But I doubt if a man can ask anything from God that is bad. Surely one who has begun to pray to him is child enough to know the bad from the good when it has come so near him, and dares not pray for that. If you refer me to David praying such fearful prayers against his enemies, I answer, you must read them by your knowledge of the man himself and his history. Remember that this is he who, with the burning heart of an eastern, yet, when his greatest enemy was given into his hands, instead of taking the vengeance of an eastern, contented himself with cutting off the skirt of his garment. It was justice and right that he craved in his soul, although his prayers took a wild form of words. God heard him, and gave him what contented him. In a good man at least, "revenge is," as Lord Bacon says, "a kind of wild justice," and is easily satisfied. The hearts desire upon such a one's enemies is best met and granted when the hate is changed into love and compassion.

But it is about hopes rather than prayers that I wish to write.

What should I think of my child, if I found that he limited his faith in me and hope from me to the few promises he had heard me utter! The faith that limits itself to the promises of God, seems to me to partake of the paltry character of such a faith in my child--good enough for a Pagan, but for a Christian a miserable and wretched faith. Those who rest in such a faith would feel yet more comfortable if they had God's bond instead of his word, which they regard not as the outcome of his character, but as a pledge of his honour. They try to believe in the truth of his word, but the truth of his Being, they understand not. In his oath they persuade themselves that they put confidence: in himself they do not believe, for they know him not.

Therefore it is little wonder that they distrust those swellings of the heart which are his drawings of the man towards him, as sun and moon heave the ocean mass heavenward. Brother, sister, if such is your faith, you will not, must not stop there. You must come out of this bondage of the law to which you give the name of grace, for there is little that is gracious in it. You will yet know the dignity of your high calling, and the love of God that passeth knowledge. He is not afraid of your presumptuous approach to him. It is you who are afraid to come near him. He is not watching over his dignity. It is you who fear to be sent away as the disciples would have sent away the little children. It is you who think so much about your souls and are so afraid of losing your life, that you dare not draw near to the Life of life, lest it should consume you.

Our God, we will trust thee. Shall we not find thee equal to our faith? One day, we shall laugh ourselves to scorn that we looked for so little from thee; for thy giving will not be limited by our hoping.

O thou of little faith! "in everything,"--I am quoting your own Bible; nay, more, I am quoting a divine soul that knew his master Christ, and in his strength opposed apostles, not to say christians, to their faces, because they could not believe more than a little in God; could believe only for themselves and not for their fellows; could believe for the few of the chosen nation, for whom they had God's ancient word, but could not believe for the multitude of the nations, for the millions of hearts that God had made to search after him and find him;--"In everything," says St Paul, "In everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." For this everything, nothing is too small. That it should trouble us is enough. There is some principle involved in it worth the notice even of God himself, for did he not make us so that the thing does trouble us? And surely for this everything, nothing can be too great. When the Son of man cometh and findeth too much faith on the earth--may God in his mercy slay us. Meantime, we will hope and trust.

Do you count it a great faith to believe what God has said? It seems to me, I repeat, a little faith, and, if alone, worthy of reproach. To believe what he has not said is faith indeed, and blessed. For that comes of believing in Him. Can you not believe in God himself? Or, confess,--do you not find it so hard to believe what he has said, that even that is almost more than you can do? If I ask you why, will not the true answer be--"Because we are not quite sure that he did say it"? If you believed in God you would find it easy to believe the word. You would not even need to inquire whether he had said it: you would know that he meant it.

Let us then dare something. Let us not always be unbelieving children. Let us keep in mind that the Lord, not forbidding those who insist on seeing before they will believe, blesses those who have not seen and yet have believed--those who trust in him more than that--who believe without the sight of the eyes, without the hearing of the ears. They are blessed to whom a wonder is not a fable, to whom a mystery is not a mockery, to whom a glory is not an unreality--who are content to ask, "Is it like Him?" It is a dull-hearted, unchildlike people that will be always putting God in mind of his promises. Those promises are good to reveal what God is; if they think them good as binding God, let them have it so for the hardness of their hearts. They prefer the Word to the Spirit: it is theirs.

Even such will leave us--some of them will, if not all--to the "uncovenanted mercies of God." We desire no less; we hope for no better. Those are the mercies beyond our height, beyond our depth, beyond our reach. We know in whom we have believed, and we look for that which it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive. Shall God's thoughts be surpassed by man's thoughts? God's giving by man's asking? God's creation by man's imagination? No. Let us climb to the height of our Alpine desires; let us leave them behind us and ascend the spear-pointed Himmalays of our aspirations; still shall we find the depth of

God's sapphire above us; still shall we find the heavens higher than the earth, and his thoughts and his ways higher than our thoughts and our ways.

Ah Lord! be thou in all our being; as not in the Sundays of our time alone, so not in the chambers of our hearts alone. We dare not think that thou canst not, carest not; that some things are not for thy beholding, some questions not to be asked of thee. For are we not all thine--utterly thine? That which a man speaks not to his fellow, we speak to thee. Our very passions we hold up to thee, and say, "Behold, Lord! Think about us; for thus thou hast made us." We would not escape from our history by fleeing into the wilderness, by hiding our heads in the sands of forgetfulness, or the repentance that comes of pain, or the lethargy of hopelessness. We take it, as our very life, in our hand, and flee with it unto thee. Triumphant is the answer which thou holdest for every doubt. It may be we could not understand it yet, even if thou didst speak it "with most miraculous organ." But thou shalt at least find faith in the earth, O Lord, if thou comest to look for it now--the faith of ignorant but hoping children, who know that they do not know, and believe that thou knowest.

And for our brothers and sisters, who cleave to what they call thy word, thinking to please thee so, they are in thy holy safe hands, who hast taught us that whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; though unto him that blasphemeth against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven.

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