

The Want of Power to Believe

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon emphasizes the necessity of recognizing one's helplessness and the role of the Holy Spirit in enabling true belief in the gospel.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:8

Topics: "Faith", "Grace"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes the necessity of understanding the true gospel of grace to find peace, urging listeners to examine whether their knowledge of Christ is genuine or merely superficial. He explains that many believe they know the gospel but fail to experience its peace due to a misunderstanding of their own helplessness and the role of the Holy Spirit in believing. Bonar encourages the congregation to recognize that their inability to believe is not a lack of strength but a willful rejection of Christ, and that true faith comes from ceasing to rely on self and trusting fully in Christ's finished work. He reassures that the Holy Spirit is essential for belief and that acknowledging one's total depravity is the first step toward receiving salvation. Ultimately, Bonar calls for a complete reliance on Christ, emphasizing that faith is not a work to be performed but a resting in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice.

Transcript

You say, I know all these things, yet they bring me no peace.

I doubt much in that case whether you do know them; and I should like you to doubt upon this point. You take for granted much too easily that you know them. Seeing they do not bring to your soul the peace which God says they are sure to do, your wisest way would be to suspect the correctness of your knowledge. If a trusty physician prescribes a sure medicine for some complaint, and if on trial I find that what I have taken does me no good, I begin to suspect that I have some wrong medicine instead of that which he prescribed.

Now are you sure that the truth which, you say you know, is the very gospel of the grace of God? Or is it only something like it? And may not the reason of your getting no peace from that which you believe, just be, because it contains none? You have got hold of many of the good things, but you have missed, perhaps, the one thing which made it a joyful sound? You believe perhaps the whole gospel, save the one thing which makes it good news to a sinner? You see the cross as bringing salvation very near; but no so absolutely close as to be in actual contact with you as you are; not so entirely close but that there is a little space, just a hand breadth or a hairbreadth, to be made up by your own prayers, or efforts, or feelings?

Everything, you say, is complete; but then, that want of feeling in myself! Ah, there it is! There is the little unfinished bit of Christ's work which you are trying to finish, or to persuade him by your prayers, to finish for you! That want of feeling is the little inch of distance which you have to get removed before the completeness of Christ's work is available for you!

The consciousness of insensibility, like the sense of guilt, ought to be one of your reasons for trusting him the more, whereas you make it a reason for not trusting him at all. Would a child treat a father or a mother thus? Would it make its bodily weakness a reason for distrusting parental love? Would it not feel that that weakness was thoroughly known to the parent, and was just the very thing that was drawing out more love and skill? A stronger child would need less care and tenderness. But the poor helpless palsied one would be of all others the likeliest to be pitied and watched over. Deal thus with Christ; and make that hardness of heart an additional reason for trusting him, and for prizing his finished work.

This state of mind shows that you are not believing the right thing; but something else which will not heal your hurt; or, at least, that you are mixing up something with the right thing, which will neutralize all its healing properties.

You must begin at the beginning once more; and go back to the simplest elements of heavenly truth, which are wrapped up in the great facts that Jesus died and rose again; facts too little understood, nay, undervalued by many; facts to which the apostles attached such vast importance, and on which they laid so much stress; facts out of which the primitive believers, without the delay of weeks or months, extracted their peace and joy.

You say, I cannot believe. Let us look into this complaint of yours.

I know that the Holy Spirit is as indispensable to your believing, as is Christ in order to your being pardoned. The Holy Spirit's work is direct and powerful; and you will not rid yourself of your difficulties by trying to persuade yourself that his operations are all indirect, and merely those of a teacher presenting truth to you. Salvation for the sinner is Christ's work; salvation in the sinner is the Spirit's work. Of this internal salvation he is the beginner and the ender. He works in you, in order to your believing, as truly as he works in you after you have believed, and in consequence of your believing.

This doctrine, instead of being a discouragement, is one of unspeakable encouragement to the sinner; and he will acknowledge this, if he knows himself to be the thoroughly helpless being which the Bible says he is. If he is not totally depraved, he will feel the doctrine of the Spirit's work a hindrance, no doubt; but as, in that case, he will be able to save himself without much assistance, he might just set aside the Spirit altogether, and work his way to heaven without his help!

The truth is, that without the Spirit's direct and almighty help, there could be no hope for a totally depraved being at all.

You speak of this inability to believe as if it were some unprovided difficulty; and as if the discovery of it had sorely cast you down. You would not have so desponded had you found that you could believe of yourself, without the Spirit; and it would greatly relieve you to be told that you could dispense with the Spirit's help in this matter. If this would relieve you, it is plain that you have no confidence in the Spirit; and you wish to have the power in your own hands, because you believe your own willingness to be much greater than his. Did you but know the blessed truth, that his willingness far exceeds yours, you would rejoice that the power was in his hands rather than in your own. You would feel far more certain of

attaining the end desired when the strength needed is in hands so infinitely gracious; and you would feel that the man who told you that you had all the needed strength in yourself, was casting down your best hope, and robbing you of a heavenly treasure.

How eagerly some grasp at the idea, that they can believe, and repent, and turn of themselves, as if this were consolation to the troubled spirit! as if this were the unraveling of its dark perplexities! Is it comfort to persuade yourself that you are not wholly without strength? Can you, by lessening the sum total of your depravity and inability, find the way to peace? Is it a relief to your burdened spirit to be delivered from the necessity of being wholly indebted to the Spirit of God for faith and repentance? Will it rescue you from the bitterness of despair to be told that you had not enough strength left to enable you to love God, yet that in virtue of some little remaining power, you can perform this least of all religious acts, believing on the Son of God?

If such be your feeling, it is evident that you do not know the extent of your own disease, nor the depths of your evil heart, you don't understand the good news brought to you by the Son of God, - of complete deliverance from all that oppresses you, whether it be guilt or helplessness. You have forgotten the blessed announcement, "In the Lord have I righteousness and strength." Your strength, as well as your righteousness, is in another; yet, while you admit the former, you deny the latter. You have forgotten, too, the apostle's rejoicing in the strength of his Lord; his feeling that when he was weak that he was strong; and his determination to glory in his infirmities, that the power of Christ might rest upon him.

If you understand the genuine gospel in all its freeness, you will feel that the man who tries to persuade you that you have strength enough left to do without the Spirit, is as great an enemy of the cross, and of your soul, as the man who wants to make you believe that you are not altogether guilty, but have some remaining goodness, and therefore do not need to be wholly indebted for pardon to the blood and righteousness of Immanuel. Without strength, is as literal a description of your state, as without goodness." If you understand the gospel, the consciousness of your total helplessness would just be the discovery that you are the very sinner to whom the great salvation is sent; that your inability was all foreseen and provided for, and that you are in the very position which needs, which calls for, and shall receive, the aid of the Almighty Spirit.

Till you free yourself in this extremity of weakness, you are not in a condition (if I may say so) to receive the heavenly help. Your idea of remaining ability is the very thing that repels the help of the Spirit, just as any idea of remaining goodness thrusts away the propitiation of the Saviour. It is your not seeing that you have no strength that is keeping you from believing. So long as you think you have some strength in doing something, - and specially in performing to your own and Satan's satisfaction, that great act or exercise of soul called "faith." But when you find out that you have no strength left, you will, in blessed despair, cease to work, - and (ere you are aware) - believe! For, if believing be not a ceasing to work, it is at least the necessary and immediate result of it. You expended your little stock of imagined strength in holding fast the ropes of self-righteousness, but now, when the conviction of having no strength at all is forced upon you, you drop into the arms of Jesus. But this you will never do, so long as you fancy that you have strength to believe.

Paul, after many years believing, still drew his strength from Christ alone; how much more must you and others who have never yet believed at all? He said, "I take pleasure in my infirmities," that is, my want of strength. You say, I am cast down because of it!

They who tell you that you have some power left, and that you are to use that power in believing and repenting, are enemies of your peace, and subverters of the gospel. They, in fact, say to you that faith is a work, and that you are to do that work in order to be saved. They mock you. In yielding to them you are maintaining that posture which vexes and resists the Spirit which is striving within you; you are proudly asserting for fallen man a strength which belongs only to the unfallen; you are denying the completeness of the divine provision made for the sinner in the fullness of Him in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell.

The following sentence from an old writer is worth pondering:

"Ask him what it is he finds makes believing difficult to him? Is it unwillingness to be justified and saved? Is it unwillingness to be so saved by Jesus Christ, to the praise of God's grace in him, and to the voiding of all boasting in himself? This he will surely deny. Is it a distrust of the truth of the gospel record? This he dare not own. Is it a doubt of Christ's ability or goodwill to save? This is to contradict the testimony of God in the gospel. Is it because he doubts of an interest in Christ and his redemption? You tell him that believing on Christ makes up the interest in him. If he says he cannot believe on Christ, because of the difficulty of the acting this faith, and that a divine power is needful to draw it forth, which he finds not, you tell him that believing in Jesus Christ is no work, but a resting on Jesus Christ; and that this pretence is as unreasonable as that if a man wearied with a journey, and who is not able to go one step farther, should argue, I am so tired that I am not able to lie down, when, indeed, he can neither stand nor go. The poor wearied sinner can never believe on Jesus Christ till he finds he can do nothing for himself, and in his first believing doth always apply himself to Christ for salvation, as a man hopeless and helpless in himself. And by such reasonings with him from the gospel, the Lord will (as he hath often done) convey faith, and joy, and peace, by believing."

Your puzzling yourself with this "cannot," shows that you are proceeding in a wrong direction. You are still laboring under the idea that this believing is a work to be done by you, and not the simple acknowledgment of a work done by another. You would fain do something in order to get peace, and you think that if you could only do this great thing called faith, God would reward you with peace. In this view, faith is a price as well as a work; whereas it is neither; but a ceasing from work and from attempting to pay for salvation. Faith is not a climbing of the mountain; but a ceasing to attempt it, and allowing Christ to carry you up in his arms.

You seem to think that it is your own act of faith that is to save you; whereas it is the object of your faith, without which your own act of faith, however well performed, is nothing. Supposing that this believing is a mighty work, you ask, "How am I to get it properly performed?" But your peace is not to come from any such performance, but entirely from Him to whom the Father is pointing, "Behold my servant whom I have chosen." As if he would say, "Look at him as Israel looked at the serpent of brass: forget everything about yourself, - your faith, your frames, your repentance, your prayers, - and look at Him." It is in Him, and not in your poor act of faith, that salvation lies. It is in Him and in his boundless love that you are to find your resting place. Out of Him, not out of your exercise of soul concerning him, that peace is to come. Looking at your own faith will only minister to your self-righteousness; it is like letting your left hand know what your right hand doeth. To seek for satisfaction as to the quality or quantity of your faith, before you will take comfort from Christ's work, is to proceed upon the supposition that the work is not sufficient of itself to give you comfort, as soon as received; and that until made sufficient by a certain amount of religious feeling, it contains no comfort to the sinner; in short, that the comforting or comfortable ingredient is an indescribable something, depending for its efficiency chiefly upon the superior excellence of your own act of faith, and

the success of your own exertions in putting it forth.

Your inability, then, does not lie in the impossibility of your performing aright this great act of believing, but of ceasing from all such self-righteous attempts to perform any act, or do anything whatever, in order to your being saved. So that the real truth is, that you have not yet seen such a sufficiency in the one great work of the Son of God upon the cross, as to lead you utterly to discontinue your wretched efforts to work out something of your own. As soon as the Holy Spirit shows you the entire sufficiency of the great propitiation, for the sinner, just as he is, you cease your attempts to act or work, and take, instead of all such exercises of yours, that which Christ has done. The Spirit's work is not to enable a man to do something which will save him or help to save him, but so to detach him from all his own exertions and performances, whether good, bad, or indifferent, that he should be content with the salvation which the Saviour of the lost has finished.

Remember that what you call your inability God calls your guilt; and that this inability is a willful thing. It was not put into you by God; for he made you with the full power of doing everything he tells you to do. You disobey and disbelieve willingly. No one forces you to do either. Your rejection of Christ is the free and deliberate choice of your own will.

That inability of yours is a fearfully wicked thing. It is the summing up of your depravity. It makes you more like the devil than almost anything else. Incapable of loving God, or even of believing on his Son! Capable of only hating him, and of rejecting Christ! Oh, dreadful guilt! Unutterable wickedness of the human heart!

Is it really the cannot that is keeping you back from Christ? No, it is the will not. You have not got the length of the cannot. It is the will not that is the real and present barrier. "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life." "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

If your heart would speak out it would say, "Well, after all, I cannot, and God will not." And what is this but saying, "I have a hard-hearted God to deal with, who won't help or pity me?" Whatever your rebellious heart may say, Christ's words are true, "Ye will not." What he spoke when weeping over impenitent Jerusalem he speaks to you, "I would but ye would not."

"They are fearful words," writes Dr. Owen, "ye would not." Whatever is pretended, it is will and stubbornness that lie at the bottom of this refusal." And oh! what must be the strength as well as the guilt of this unbelief, when nothing but the almightiness of the Holy Ghost can root it out of you?

You are perplexed by the doctrine of God's sovereignty and election. I wonder that any man believing in a God should be perplexed by these. For if there be a God, a King, eternal, immortal, and invisible, he cannot but be sovereign, - and he cannot but do according to his own will, and choose according to his own purpose. You may dislike these doctrines, but you can only get quit of them by denying altogether the existence of an infinitely wise, glorious, and powerful Being. God would not be God were he not thus absolutely sovereign in his present doings and his eternal pre-arrangements.

But how would it rid you of your perplexities to get quit of sovereignty and election? Suppose these were not aside, you still remain the same depraved and helpless being as before. The truth is, that the sinner's real difficulty lies neither in sovereignty nor election, but in his own depravity. If the removal of these hard doctrines (as some call them) would lessen his own sinfulness, or make him more able to believe and repent, the hardship would lie at their door; but if not, then these doctrines are no hindrance at all. If it be God's sovereignty that is keeping him from coming to Christ, the sinner has serious matter of complaint

against the doctrine. But if it be his own depravity, is it not foolish to be objecting to a truth that has never thrown one single straw of a hindrance in the way of his return to God?[25] Election has helped many a soul to heaven; but never yet hindered one. Depravity is the hindrance; election is God's way of overcoming that hindrance. And if that hindrance is not overcome in all, but only in some, who shall find fault? Was God bound to overcome it in all? Was he bound to bring every man to Christ, and to pluck every brand from the burning? Do not blame God for that which belongs solely to yourself; nor be troubled about His sovereignty when the real cause of trouble is your own desperately wicked heart.

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