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The Faith of God's Elect

by T. Austin-Sparks

Edited and supplied by the Golden Candlestick Trust.

Reading: Rom. 4:9-10,13,16-18.

I have it in my heart just to make one further emphasis upon a matter with which we are not unfamiliar. Quite frequently in recent days the Lord has led us to think about the faith of God's elect. There has been a matter exercising us very much in prayer, namely that of release and enlargement, and I feel these two things go together. The key to release and enlargement is faith, and until there is that requisite faith, there is bondage and limitation. Release and enlargement always come through the Cross, and faith therefore relates to the Cross of the Lord Jesus.

Of course there are various aspects of the meaning and value of the Cross, and the various aspects have to be given their due emphasis from time to time. But here is one aspect, and it certainly needs to be kept very clearly before us, that the Cross of the Lord Jesus is intended to be the instrument of our release. I am afraid that in the case of many of the Lord's people, there has been a failure to recognise that, with the result that the Cross has really brought them into bondage; that is, that they have regarded and apprehended the Cross as something which must all the time be on top of them, something that is holding them down, keeping them in check, something that is very firmly regulating everything, controlling, vetoing, prohibiting, making them extremely careful, guarded, and really the Cross has become a burden to many of the Lord's people. It has almost become an oppression. It has tied them up; they are afraid lest in any way they might speak or act as uncrucified ones. They have developed a mentality about the Cross which really results in the Cross being a limiting and binding thing, instead of a releasing and enlarging thing.

Now, here there is no need to point out the necessity for the Cross. How important the Cross is in dealing with all that which must be set aside. We are very familiar with that, and we will not take

away from that one little bit. But that is one side. Let me repeat - the Lord means the Cross to be the instrument of our release and enlargement, not of our curtailing, narrowing down and imprisonment in that sense that we are deprived of liberty. No, the Cross is the great liberating instrument of the Lord for the believer, and the great enlarging means in the life of the believer.

Now, all release and enlargement must begin within. There can be no outward release and enlargement only as that has taken place within the believer. There is need for release and enlargement outwardly, release to fruitfulness, to ministry; release to expansion and growth in the outward form, in the outward way of life in usefulness to the Lord, in influence and in many other ways. But all that depends entirely upon the inward release, and therefore faith, which is essentially an inward thing, is the key - faith in relation to the Cross of the Lord Jesus in the direction of release and enlargement.

Now, when we speak of faith, we always have to look to the father of us all in this matter. For so Abraham is called in Romans 4, "who is the father of us all" - the father of us all in the sense of faith and faith's paternity. I have been tremendously impressed, in meditating in this chapter recently, with the wonderful meaning of Abraham's faith. What a range there was in Abraham's faith, and what a power there was in his faith! In the sovereign purpose of God, Abraham was chosen, elected, apprehended by the God of Glory for a very great purpose, which was to be a father of many nations - yes, but something more than that - to be the heir of the world. That is a pretty big proposition! A tremendous thing! But that is from the side of sovereign choice or election. There is the other side, that he could only be the father of many nations and the heir of the world on the basis of an adequate faith. It required a faith of the dimensions of many nations, of the world, the conquest and possession of the world - it required such a faith in Abraham to realise God's purpose in the election. So that in that one man the whole battle for the inheritance of the world and the fatherhood of many nations was fought out on the one principle of faith. What a faith! A faith so big, so great, that its issue was many nations and the heirship of the world. That was what was bound up with the faith of Abraham. How far it had to go on! Abraham's faith has not yet reached its end. It spread itself over one millennium, two millenniums, three millenniums; it is going on through yet another millennium. It is covering them all, it reaches right on until the world is in possession of Abraham's spiritual seed, the world is inherited by the spiritual children of Abraham, Christ's many nations. What a long-range faith! What a tremendous faith! What a mighty faith! It has got to go all that way, achieve all that, accomplish that end. Oh, what there is bound up with that faith! Now you see how great this faith was, how far-reaching, how mighty the power of its accomplishment, what it is achieving and is to achieve. That is faith.

What is the essence of that faith, the nature of that faith? It is all gathered up into some short fragments. His faith "was reckoned unto him for righteousness". As Paul puts it "righteousness which is of faith". Who will inherit the world? The righteous. Who, therefore, would put out of the possession of the world that which holds it contrary to God? The righteous. Who will displace the god of this world, the prince of this world, and his whole spiritual kingdom? The righteous. Who will have the dominion of this world in Christ? The righteous, and those who are righteous primarily by faith in Jesus Christ.

This question of righteousness by faith is no elementary truth of the Gospel. It is the truth which bounds everything, and goes right on to the end. A righteousness which is of faith. Now, on that ground, Abraham secured the inheritance in himself - that is a tremendous thing. A father, he is called, the father of us all, a father securing in himself by his own faith many nations and the inheritance of the world. Well, there have been fathers who have done wonderful things, who have built up great heritages, acquired great fortunes, in whom there have been secured vast resources,

the founders of great concerns from which many generations afterward have drawn their living, but none like Abraham. Many nations draw upon Abraham's faith, and in him the inheritance of the world is secured. It was all secured in Abraham by God's covenant, and on the ground of his faith, and the faith which had but one object in view - righteousness. You see what righteousness leads to, you see what righteousness issues in, how far-reaching, how mighty righteousness is. It is a tremendous thing. In the end the world will be possessed by righteousness, inherited on the ground of righteousness.

Now then, Abraham was the father of us all, but then we come in as heirs, heirs through faith, the same faith to be exercised in us and by us as Abraham exercised, the inclusive ground of which is righteousness. We often refer to that chapter, Rev. 12, in which a great battle is seen to be raging between the dragon, the serpent, the devil, the adversary, and the woman and her seed. There are two fragments in that chapter which make that ultimate battle one with the initial battle, "They overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb." Well, what does that mean? We know that it does not mean that there was any literal taking and applying of the blood, it was faith in the blood, it was their resolute and immovable faith in the meaning and value of that blood, the blood of the everlasting covenant. That can be put in another way. In the blood of the Lord Jesus, God had made a covenant to the inheritance, and faith in that blood brings us as heirs into the inheritance. They overcame because of the blood, in other words, because of their faith in the blood. Then there is this other fragment. "The accuser of our brethren is cast down." The accuser. That is only coming at the same thing from another angle. Why is Satan here referred to as the Accuser? What is the object in bringing that up at this point? Why, the whole battle is raging upon this ground. If Satan can only undermine the faith of God's people in the value of the blood by bringing home to their acceptance that they are unrighteous, he has won, and so he accuses the brethren. He is working to accuse all the time, and if only he can get home his accusation, he has got the day. "They overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb", and the blood stands as the bulwark against the accusation of the Accuser. We are righteous, not in ourselves, but because of that blood. We are righteous; no sin can be imputed to us. Do you believe that absolutely?

Look back at Romans 4 verse 8 quoting from David, "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Is it possible? Does that belong to some future time, when we are perfect, when all is done and we stand glorified and the Lord no longer reckons sin? But now, *now*, on the ground of the blood of the Lord Jesus, the Lord reckons no sin to us. Yes, we are full of sin and God does not reckon it to us. We are righteous before God in Jesus Christ, because of the blood. Satan is always trying to get us off that ground, and so he pursues right to the end, and here you have it, right at the end: "The accuser of our brethren", and "They overcame... because of the blood." What is the key to the deposing of Satan? How will he be cast out? How will his dominion in the heavenlies be brought to an end? By faith in the blood of Jesus Christ which has been brought to the point of overcoming power, overcoming faith.

Now, you see, Abraham was taken through all that. As the father of us all in this matter, he was taken through it all. He was called out to the obedience of faith, but then, step by step and stage by stage, that faith was tested, tried, but he went triumphant through every ordeal. Sometimes he made a mistake, he took a wrong step; sometimes he failed for a moment, but in the long run he came out in faith in God. Whatever in himself there was of imperfection and weakness, in the main issue his faith in God and God's promise did not fail. He came out at last absolutely triumphant over everything that could be set against that faith, and became a father, and the inheritance was secured to him.

Now, we are children of God by faith, and we are Abraham's seed by faith. Our faith brings us out to trust God. We step out in the first instance to trust God. We believe God, but then it is one thing all the way through right to the end - faith. But faith as focussed upon one matter, that of righteousness. It is God's faithfulness to His promise that, standing on the ground of Christ, of the Cross and the blood, everything is secured unto us, and nothing that we are or that is in us by nature, makes any difference to that. I do want that to get into every heart.

After this covenant was made with Abraham, after God had said, "A father of many nations have I made thee", Abraham made some mistakes. He lied to Abimelech. He was not righteous because of what he was in himself. It says he believed God and it was counted for righteousness. Then he told a lie; he deceived a man. Well, this is a contradiction. Not a bit! His faith put him on to another ground, and that is not to excuse sin. Do not misunderstand. That is not to condone wrong, not to say, "Well, we are all right, we can do just as we like!" That is not the point. But the point at the moment is this, that the Lord Jesus is our Substitute.

Now that word "Substitute" has been held in a limited sense and unfortunately so. But the Lord Jesus is our Substitute in judgment and in death. Yes, it is gloriously true that He is our Substitute as a sacrifice to be destroyed, consumed, because of our sin. But He is our Substitute in a far bigger sense than that. He is our Substitute in righteousness, in acceptance, in God's very presence dwelling without a question being raised; He is our Substitute right there. He is made unto us from God righteousness and sanctification. It is what He is. You and I in ourselves are full of weaknesses and imperfections and sins, in our flesh dwells no good thing. It could be put in the more positive way - in our flesh dwells every bad thing. That is true, and yet in this very moment God reckons no sin unto us but calls us righteous altogether, if we have the link of faith with Jesus Christ. Faith has linked us with Him as our Substitute, not only in guilt, sin, judgment and death, but in righteousness, in life, in acceptance, in what He is. Oh, how mighty is the link of faith in Jesus Christ. "That life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me."

Now then, release and enlargement - until this is settled right inside of us, we are in bondage and we are of very little use to the Lord. Life will be limited; ministry will be limited. But when we can come to the place where, although we make a mistake, we may blunder, where something evil as of ourselves might rise up, and we might know what a sink of iniquity our own hearts are still if left to ourselves, yet knowing it all, feeling it all, we stand by faith in God that on His side, it does not make any difference to the fact that we are righteous in Jesus Christ. Until we come to that place with both our feet on that ground, steady and settled, we are of very little use to the Lord regarding service and usefulness. That is why the devil as the accuser is always trying to get us on to another ground where we nullify the blood of Jesus Christ.

Do let us be very careful as to how we allow the subjective and progressive meaning and value of the Cross to undercut the objective power and value of the Cross. We may be all the time crying to the Lord to inwardly deal with us, and apply the Cross in this way and that way, to our minds, thoughts, desires, feelings and self-strength, until we are living under condemnation by a false emphasis or an overemphasis upon the subjective aspect of the Cross. The Cross becomes a bondage, a burden, a crushing load which keeps us down and limits us. Our way out is to recognise that that Cross, that precious blood, has secured righteousness for us no matter what we are, however much we need the application of the Cross. We recognise that, accept that, count on the Lord to do that, bring every consciousness of that to the Lord and say, "Lord, You know all about the failure, the mistakes, but I stand on the ground of promise!" Not being weakened in faith concerning the promise.

I do trust you have caught the significance of the word. We have got to get release through the Cross to that place where we are free from ourselves because of Christ, and until we have got there, the Holy Spirit cannot safely get on with His subjective work. If He were to do that, then the only consciousness we should have would be the application of the Cross killing us. But we want to be able to rejoice while the Holy Spirit applies the work of the Cross to us and for that we have got to be on covenant ground. The Holy Spirit, by the very application of the Cross, knows what I am that I should not be, but the Holy Spirit is not bringing me under condemnation. He is only dealing with that; there is no condemnation. He may rebuke me, but that is not bringing me under condemnation. He is dealing with me. There is another side where I stand clear of condemnation - "unto whom the Lord reckons not sin".

Let us keep these two things clear, and with all our recognition of the need of the application of the Cross, let us ask the Lord to give us the firm, fixed, unshakeable ground of that objective work for us in making us righteous. It is not faith in the working out of the Cross, it is faith in what the Cross has worked out that is our deliverance. He has done it. So we shall be free if we really believe in the blood of the Lord Jesus and we should be victorious.

The breastplate of righteousness! Well, that covers the very vitals of our spiritual life. Our heart should be kept in peace when the breastplate of righteousness is ours. Being a breastplate, it speaks of conflict, and shows the enemy is always attacking that matter of righteousness. If he can undercut that imputed righteousness, he has laid us low. So may the Lord strengthen us concerning the covering, concerning the blood.