

Hebrews - Commentaries by G.S. Byford

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“Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised” (Heb. 11:11).

The energy or consistency of the public testimony is often found to be closely connected with, if not absolutely dependent upon, the strength and consistency of the testimony maintained in the household. One may be greatly helped or hindered by the influence which prevails there. History furnishes many examples, and it is not at all overlooked in scripture; for we find the frequent occurrence of the mother's name of the successive kings of Judah; not so with the rulers of the revolted ten tribes. In the New Testament the names of three women are before us in the very closest connection with the entrance into this world of the One who came for the truth of God in fulfillment of the promise made to the fathers. It was said of Timothy that from a child he had known the Holy Scriptures which are able to make wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3:15); while the aged apostle was persuaded that God's Spirit had set His seal upon the faith and piety of Lois and Eunice, and that faith unfeigned dwelt in Timothy also. The faith which dwelt in those godly women had much to do with the formation and development of Timothy's character. God will acknowledge and use such things wherever they are found; for He is the giver of faith and grace, while a meek and quiet spirit is of great price in His sight.

There is nothing more clearly set before us in both Old and New Testament revelation with regard to the family, than that God holds the husband and father responsible for the conduct and order of the household. That which God saw in Abraham's household encouraged Him to make the revelation of coming judgment upon Sodom (Gen. 18:17-22); while the moral disorder in Lot's household counteracted his preaching to them (Gen. 19:14). It is a question here of fulfillment of the promise: God is ready to bless and to bless largely; but is the vessel ready to receive the blessing? By nature we have our hopes and fears, our desires and expectations, ambitions, etc; but inasmuch as self-enjoyment and exaltation is the end and ultimate object of all our inward exercise apart from grace, God has to make a complete clearance in the end of all that would interfere with His work of blessing. Empty vessels may be brought, and He will fill them out of His abundance. Clearance must precede blessing. Sometimes the flesh in us sees nothing desirable in that which God presents to faith, and the blessing is despised and perhaps bartered away as in the case of Esau, “a profane person.” It is not of course a question of eternal salvation, but of undervaluing the place of privilege and honor in testimony for God upon earth; it may lead as in his case to personal rejection at the end. Paul by bringing his body into subjection shut out such an alternative (1 Cor. 9:27). There might have been such an one among the Hebrew saints, as there may be now among Gentile Christians.

Sometimes, again, a religiously disposed mind appreciates the distinction which faith brings, and would make a personal sacrifice to get it, as Jacob. For the old nature can become religious and adapt itself outwardly to the ways of God. That which is seen afar off is agreeable to one's inclinations; and religious activity is set up to establish the vision (Dan. 11:14) or to bring about the blessing. But the effect is only to delay and obstruct real blessing; for God will not use it. Discipline, painful and humiliating at the time, is God's way of preserving and preparing the soul for the future blessing. It is not correct to speak of the power of either faith or prayer, although we often hear the expression: to hear and believe when God speaks to us, to judge that He who has promised is faithful and able also to perform is faith. To be speaking continually to God about ourselves and each other is prayer, often involving the confession of weakness as also of failure. Paul in the realization and confession of weakness found strength come in (2 Corinthians 12:10). “When I am weak, then I am strong”: prayer and faith link us up with God Himself, to whom power belongs.

The Son of David was encouraged to build the temple of Jehovah by such a revelation in the midst of the weakness and indifference of the people of God. The Lord Jesus risen from the dead instructed the apostles to tarry in the city of Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high. Had they commenced their testimony without waiting for this, there would have been a breakdown; but the promise of the Father was fulfilled with the result that “with great power gave the apostles witness.” The Spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind is upon the servants of Christ. God's Spirit has come to stay with the saints and may be counted upon. His methods are a direct application of the written word making it living and powerful in our own hearts, increasing our spiritual apprehension, revealing Christ, leading out our heart in prayer, keeping us in dependence upon and subjection to Christ Jesus the Lord, and making us to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Abraham was “strong in faith” (Rom. 4:20), he was accustomed to have to do with God personally so that when under such a trial he did not waver. The fact that Sarah his wife shared his faith must have been a great comfort and help to him; it was an auxiliary blessing not to be despised. God is pleased to use such things for the comfort of our heart and deepening His work within us. So in the case of Gideon, he was sent of God on a midnight visit to the Midianites, that his hand should be strengthened (Judg. 7). So Paul was lifted up by the coming or presence of Titus (2 Cor. 7).

There is not only God's work in one's own soul, but the blessing He brings by that which He has wrought in the heart of another. How different was it in Jacob's family, his own beloved wife corrupting the household by bringing in false gods! But for saints walking in obedience, loving each other in the truth is to be in the line of the Spirit's action, in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, and grace and peace are multiplied. Sarah, no less than her husband, intelligently and reverently grasped the promise and waited patiently for its fulfillment. They were mutually helpers of each other's joy, but not without failure; for the flesh will never cease to assert itself while we are in the body. Yet our God is able to turn even our failure to account for His own glory and our spiritual profit; as the history of Hagar and Ishmael viewed in the light of divine interpretation (Gal. 4:21-23) abundantly illustrates. G.S.B.

"Wherein was a golden pot that had the manna," God's daily provision for the need of His people passing through the wilderness; the manna which came from heaven day by day gathered and appropriated by the people in their natural state and condition. Believers and unbelievers alike ate of it and proved its sustaining qualities. Where faith was in exercise as with Caleb, it was a daily expression of the gracious interest God took in the life and circumstances of His people; to such it was a real link which grace had formed between the God of glory who dwelt in heaven, and the needy pilgrim on his way to the promised rest. Caleb's testimony before all Israel and to Joshua, was a striking witness of the faithfulness of Jehovah which should have been the experience and testimony of the whole nation (Josh. 14:6-15). Jehovah had kept him alive "these forty and five years," and that too with undiminished strength and enthusiasm. It had been by means of the manna, but if not thus it would have been by some other means, for the word and honor of God were pledged to it. The children of Israel had wandered in the wilderness, but he had lived, nor do we read of his death; his links with God had been daily renewed, faith strengthened, and experience of God's faithfulness extended and deepened. Every case of death of rebels, who were also his brethren, confirmed the truth of Jehovah's word to his soul, while the hope set before him as time rolled on (and he knew the precise period of the wanderings of the children of Israel), became clearer and more stimulating than ever.

How well did his life's history illustrate the truth that "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith!" And how intensely individual is the path of faith in the day of provocation in the wilderness Joshua and Caleb stilled the people. Now in the day of triumph, Caleb recalls "the thing that Jehovah said unto Moses the man of God concerning me and thee in Kadesh-barnea." The fellowship of those two faithful servants had not widened out. They knew how to keep a secret, and when to declare it and to claim the prize.

We are not to suppose that there was any potent charm or mysterious virtue in the manna; it was no "elixir of life" to prolong the life of the body indefinitely. The Lord Jesus told His hearers in John 6, "Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and died," and again, "Not Moses has given you the bread out of heaven." It was very distinctly a type of Christ sent from heaven, "that a man may eat thereof and not die" which necessitates faith in His person and a real acceptance and appreciation of the grace that brought Him into this world, and which was continually in evidence in His daily life and ministry up to the cross where He then became the Antitype of the paschal lamb. But just as God ordained that an omer of manna should be laid up before the testimony for a witness to succeeding generations, so has God the Spirit, in the four Gospels, given us a divine record of the words and ways of our Lord Jesus Christ as He trod this earth the constant manifestation of grace and truth, which alone meets the real need of our souls now passing through a wilderness. There will come a time when we shall need this no longer. It came to an end when Israel reached the land of promise, "The manna ceased... neither had the children of Israel manna any more" (Josh. 5:12). And as for us, when the journey has come to a close, faith shall change to sight and we shall know as known. It will then be our experience to have gathered up the manna to prove the sympathies and grace of Christ and His strength made perfect in weakness. The circumstances of grief, weakness and poverty will then be no longer existing for us, but it is here that the "hidden manna" comes into use. It was the memorial before God of that which had been so efficacious in the past for the blessing of the people of Israel. The golden pot containing it speaks of divine excellence and particularly of divine righteousness. If the people had laid it up for themselves for future use, it would have become nauseous (Ex. 16:20), but Aaron the divinely appointed high priest was commanded to lay it up before the testimony (the ark was not then made). It was therefore a priestly act intended for the instruction and edification of future generations, and pointing to the wondrous truth that He who came down from heaven full of grace and truth, and was here upon earth for a time in all lowliness, despised, unknown and rejected (as thus it was with the manna), has gone into heaven in righteousness. The once humbled Man is now the glorified Man. He came down from heaven in grace. He is gone back in righteousness.

The scripture before us is the only one which speaks of the manna being in the ark; and the divine purpose in placing it there seems never to have been realized because of the inability of the Israelites to draw nigh to God in the holiest; so the garments "for glory and for beauty" intended [?] for Aaron's use in the most holy place were never worn there (compare Ex. 28:29, 35 with Lev. 16:4, 32), and yet again, the proposal that Israel should be unto Jehovah "A kingdom of priests, a holy nation" was not fulfilled under the law which made nothing perfect, but was made good to the remnant according to the election of grace who believed on the risen Christ (1 Peter 2:9). Yet such a one as David, found in the ark and its contents that which spoke of Jehovah's presence in holiness and grace amongst His people, so that faith was strengthened and spiritual affections nourished (1 Chron. 15). It is only the overcomer who escapes the corruption of the world through lust and rising to the height of the heavenly calling, that is enabled to feed upon Christ by faith and to realize that all that grace which was so blessedly manifested in Christ here on earth is the present portion of the believer, now that He is gone into heaven. It were easy perhaps to overcome the spirit of the world in its own proper place, but it has to be withstood and overcome amongst the saints, and the Lord's promise to the overcomer in the church at Pergamos appeals with peculiar distinctness to His saints to-day when all the characteristics of that assembly are so clearly marked. "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna" (Rev. 2:17).

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The Ark and Its Contents, Ark and Its Contents: Aaron's Rod, The

"Wherein was...Aaron's rod that budded". We have seen that the manna was God's special provision for a wilderness people and, in view of the time when it should be no longer necessary, God ordained that the memorial of it should be laid up within the ark, so that when the people of God were happy and prosperous they might recall to their minds the particular care and providence of Jehovah in thus nourishing them and providing for their every need during their passage through a great and terrible wilderness, wherein was nothing to minister to their necessities save what came down from heaven; or, if found upon earth, as water from the smitten rock, was made to flow in a divinely ordered channel according to their daily need. But real blessing involves much more than the constant supply of food and drink. These things

are quite sufficient for the creature, but man in his moral nature looks outside himself for light and guidance. Israel had been brought as a nation into conditions of special relationship to the God who had redeemed them from Egypt, and had undertaken their safe conduct through the desert to the promised inheritance. They had not merely been preserved from the sword of divine justice in Egypt (Jer. 31:2), but they had been brought near to Jehovah, so that He might enter into covenant relationship with them, and that they might be to Him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In view of this new relationship thus formed between Jehovah and themselves, fresh wants came into existence; for even had they (as most probably they would have) been content to have gone on indifferent to, and in ignorance of, their obligations to God under the covenant of Mount Sinai, God would not leave them without a properly qualified and duly ordained witness of His authority over them. Moreover the effect of leaving them to the action of law pure and simple would have been bondage and death. Gal. 4 shows that for Jerusalem and her children the result was bondage, and if the Galatian saints did not recover themselves and return to the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free, they would have been in a more hopeless bondage than the Jews, because of having known and rejected the grace of the gospel. Again, the effect of the application of the law to the old nature is death, "when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died" (Rom. 7:9).

But surely this was not the realization of God's purposes concerning His people. On the contrary, He established the priesthood amongst, and over, them, and His covenant with Levi was "of life and peace" (Mal. 2:5), in complete contrast to the death and bondage of the law. God in a merciful way took knowledge of human infirmity and weakness, and established the priesthood in Israel that His people might be instructed in all the ordinances and commandments pertaining to the Levitical economy and might also have an ever-present resource in times of difficulty and need. The priesthood, for its efficacy, depended upon two principles—authority, which must be that of God Himself, and therefore unquestionable, and sacrifice, such as He had appointed, and therefore acceptable to Him. The law in itself had no blessing for Israel, for it could not recognize a partial obedience; its curse, strictly applied, would have reached to every man in the nation, for "cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). The sentence and curse of the law were, however, arrested in their exercise by the sin offering which the repentant sinner brought to the priest; and when all was carried out according to divine instructions, defilement being removed from the camp, cleansed ones restored to their privilege, vows fulfilled etc., then the full priestly blessing was sanctioned and made good by Jehovah Himself (Num. 6:22-27). What value there was in the priestly benediction, and the regard which any faithful Israelite would have for it, are shown in the case of Hannah (1 Sam. 1:17, 18). The principles of law and grace which entered into God's government of His earthly people were prevented from appearing antagonistic by the sacrifice offered by the priests.

It being thus scripturally established that the priesthood was really a gracious provision whereby God would bring blessing to Israel, we may be able to perceive the real significance of the rod of Aaron that "budded and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds" (Num. 17:8). The previous chapter sets before us in great detail that serious rebellion against Moses and Aaron (king and priest,) which undoubtedly prefigures the last great development of evil and self-will against God's Christ who as King and Priest shall be established in Zion, and reign a Priest upon His throne. The character of the sin and its unique judgment bespeak this. Compare Num. 16:30-35 with Rev. 19:20, 21 and Jude 11. When the people on the next day showed how readily the lie of the devil is accepted and the plague had begun, it was made manifest that the only hope of salvation from death was in priestly intercession. Christ, in all His own excellency and value of His finished work, was prefigured by Aaron with the censer (as also in the holy place, compare Lev. 16:12, 13) now standing between the living and the dead, making atonement for the rebels. It points in a way to the mediatorial intervention in perfect grace of the "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." This is what is witnessed by the preaching of the gospel, and what alone stays the hand of God in judgment. So too, David was permitted to occupy this place of mediatorship in 1 Chron. 21:26, 27. The difference between the daily supply of manna and the golden pot that had the manna has been already noticed, and we may trace the same difference between the daily ministrations of Aaron on ordinary occasions and the unusual and extraordinary intervention between the living and the dead at this time. Such a crisis had not been anticipated in the divine instructions to the priests, but Aaron was no doubt led to act upon divine instincts and the special guidance of God's Spirit in such a way as was effectual for arresting the execution of wrath, and serving for the illustration of the real value of the priesthood in blessing and fruitfulness for man. "Aaron's rod that budded" was, then, a constant witness in the immediate presence of God, and for those who had access there, of the priestly grace of Him who glorified not Himself to be made priest but was called of God; and God will surely vindicate the power and authority in which He acts in grace now, so that "He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him"; as He will overcome the rebels gathered together against Him, when He appears the second time, seeing that He is King of kings, and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

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The Ark and Its Contents, Ark and Its Contents: Tables of the Law, The

The believer has little difficulty in recognizing the significance of the fact that the two tables of the law found a resting place in the ark of the testimony. They formed the sum total of God's requirements as to the life and conduct of the people toward Himself and to each other. They were the conditions of the covenant under which Israel was to enter into the land and dwell there, and leave it for an inheritance to their children after them. The holy oracles were in this way committed to them as the people of God, and made binding by the sprinkling of blood. But inasmuch as they were a sinful people and totally incompetent to observe that holy law (in spite of their solemn professions that all that Jehovah hath spoken we will do), setting forth as it did the terms or conditions of their covenant relationship with Jehovah, the ark was made specially to contain it. For if the throne of God was to be established upon earth for the government of His people and "righteousness and judgment are the habitation of His throne" (Psa. 97:2) it could not be otherwise.

We know not at what time or in what way "the golden pot that had the manna" and "Aaron's rod that budded" disappeared from the ark in which they had been put, but we do know that when Solomon had finished all the work of the house of Jehovah, and the priests brought in the ark of the covenant of Jehovah into its place there was nothing there but the two tables of stone.

The necessities of a people passing through the wilderness had been fully met, in the riches of God's grace, by those things which witnessed to His faithfulness and goodness, and which also brought blessing to the people. The circumstances were now no longer the same. The son of David reigned in Zion, and righteousness must characterize his kingdom. "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God." So shall it be in millennial days when David's Son and Lord, the great Antitype of Solomon, shall reign in righteousness, and bring the nations into, at least, outward or feigned obedience (2 Sam. 22:45).

The ark of shittim wood overlaid with pure gold, containing the testimony, was indeed a striking type of Him who was manifest in flesh, and in whom divine and human righteousness met. He alone could say, "I delight to do thy will, O God; yea thy law is within my heart." The righteousness of God finds its full and perfect expression in that Blessed One risen from the dead and now glorified in heaven. He who in grace came forth from God to seek man, is the one who has gone back to God after accomplishing the work of atonement, and is in Himself the full display of divine righteousness. "If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous one." Such is the blessed provision for the child of God, who, though confessedly weak and oft-times failing, has, nevertheless, the Holy Spirit, the power for good (Gal. 5:16-25), and the written word to guide, in order that we may not sin (1 John 2:1). Satan is ever ready to act the part of accuser before God and may find, alas, too many an occasion in my walk here, yet am I represented on high by the righteous Advocate against whom he can bring nothing. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses from all sin." I do not try to hide or extenuate my sins, but sorrowfully confess them, with the result that "He is faithful and just" (He cannot be otherwise) "to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:7-9).

Such truths as these (so good and necessary for us to know as walking in the light as He is in the light) were but dimly foreshadowed by these patterns of heavenly realities, yet were they there in type. True, Israel could not, and were not expected to, enter into their full spiritual meaning. We, in the light of the New Testament, can look back and see clearly enough that God found His own deep joy in all that pointed to Christ's coming into the world, and in this scene where man had fallen, and God was dishonored, recovering in grace what man had lost in disobedience, and above all glorifying God in the holy judgment of our sins when on the cross he was made a sacrifice for sin.

It were well to glance briefly at the circumstances in which Moses placed the testimony within the ark at Horeb, the more so as the Spirit of God has been most explicit in recording the circumstance for our instruction, but has given no historic record of the placing of the other two objects within the ark. Thus, were it not for Heb. 9:4 we could not have certainly known that they were actually within it. If we read carefully Ex. 25:10-22 (particularly noticing vers. 16, 21, 22), we shall find that from the beginning God's purpose was that the ark should be prepared for the reception of the testimony. He well knew that His people were incompetent even to receive it, but it was necessary that Moses, faithful servant as he was, should learn this by sorrowful experience, for with what anguish of soul must he have listened to the revelation of the people's sin, from the lips of God Himself (Ex. 32:7-10); and how bitterly must he have realized the awful nature of that moral catastrophe which had exposed them to the wrath of Jehovah, and the curse of a broken law, before even they had seen it! Yet had they not been made acquainted with its requirements? and with a light heart accepted it and promised to fulfill all its conditions (Ex. 24:3)? When Moses came within hearing and view of the profane revelry which witnessed to the apostasy of Israel, can we wonder that his anger waxed hot, and that, in sight of the evil-doers, he brake the two tables of stone casting them out of his hands at the foot of Horeb? Surely it must have been fatal to the whole nation to have brought them into the idolatrous camp! There was then no ark to receive them—this handwriting of the finger of God.

The whole history of God's way with His servant and His guilty people, as set forth in Ex. 32 is deeply instructive, as illustrating the principles of mediatorship, of God's sovereignty in mercy, and of His call to separation from evil, for such as sought the Lord outside the camp. Deut. 10:5, however, shows us (what Exodus does not), that the solemn crisis which had arisen made it imperative for Moses to prepare the ark, before returning to God, so that immediately on his return to the people he might place the two tables of stone there. Perhaps, it was not then overlaid with gold; that remained for Bezaleel to complete hereafter (Ex. 37:2). However, that may be, it appears clear, from a comparison of the two scriptures, that the ark was prepared for the reception of the law, in the interval between Moses' first descent from the mount and his going up the second time, so that on his return it was there for the reception of the testimony.

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