

CHAPTER 82

THE FAMILY OF FAITH

(~~813~~ **HEBREWS 11:39, 40**)

“And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect”
(verses 39, 40).

Several details in these verses call for careful consideration. First, to what does “the promise” here refer to? Second, in what sense had the O.T. saints “not received” the promise? Third, what is the “better thing” which God provided for us? Fourth, what is here meant by “be made perfect”? Widely different answers have been returned to these questions, and even the most reliable of the commentators are by no means agreed; therefore it would ill-become us to speak dogmatically, where men of God differ. Instead of wearying the reader with their diversive views, we will expound our text according to what measure of light God has granted us upon it.

As we approach our task there are several considerations which need to be borne in mind, the observing of which should aid us not a little. First, ascertaining the relation of our text to that which precedes. Second, discovering the exact relation of its several clauses. Third, studying it in the light of the distinctive and dominant theme of the particular epistle in which it occurs. Fourth, weighing its leading terms in connection with their usage in parallel passages. If these four things be duly attended to we ought not to go far wrong in our interpretation. Our purpose in enumerating them is principally to indicate to your preachers the methods which should be followed in the critical examination of any difficult passage.

As to the connection between our present verses and those which precede, there is no difficulty. The apostle, having so forcibly and largely, set out the virtue and vigor of faith, by the admirable workings and fruits thereof, both in doing and in suffering, now gives a general summary: they all “obtained a good report.” The relations of the several clauses of our text to each

other, may be set out thus: “and these all” refer to the entire company which has been before us in the previous verses; a “good report” is ascribed to them; yet they had not “received the promise”; because God had provided something “better” for the N.T. saints. The dominant theme of Hebrews is, The immeasurable superiority of Christianity over Judaism. The leading terms in our text will be pondered in what follows.

“And these all, having obtained a good report through faith.” Two things are here in view: the persons spoken of, and that which is predicated of them. The reference is to all spoken of in the previous parts of the chapter, and by necessary inference, to all believers before the incarnation of Christ who exhibited a true faith. The words “*these* all” is restrictive, excluding others who had not the faith here mentioned.

“Many more than these lived before Christ was exhibited, yea, lived in the time and place that some of these did, yet received no good report. Cain lived and offered a sacrifice with Abel, yet was none of these. Ham was in the ark with Shem; Ishmael in Abraham’s family with Isaac; Esau in the same womb with Jacob; Dathan and Abiram came through the Red Sea with Caleb and Joshua: many other wicked unbelievers were mixed with believers, yet they obtained not any such good report. Though their outward condition was alike, yet their inward disposition was much different” (W. Gouge).

Thus it is today. There are two widely different classes of people who come under the sound of the Word: those who believe it, and those who believe it not. And those of the former class have also to be divided, for while there are a few in whom that Word works effectually in a spiritual way, many have nothing more than a natural faith in its letter. This latter faith — which so many today mistake for a saving one — is merely an intellectual assent to the Divine authority of the Bible and to the verities of its contents — like that possessed by most of the Jews of Christ’s day, and which though good so far as it goes, changes not the heart nor issues in a godly life. A supernatural faith, which is wrought in the soul by the operations of the Holy Spirit, issues in supernatural works, such as those attributed unto the men and women mentioned in our chapter. It is a Divine principle which enables its possessor to overcome the world, patiently endure the sorest afflictions, and love God and His truth more than life itself.

“Having obtained a good report through faith.” Because of their trusting in Christ alone for salvation, and because of their walking in subjection to His revealed will, they received approbation. There is probably a threefold reference in the words now before us.

First, unto God’s own testimony which He bore to them: this is found in His Word, where their names receive honorable mention, and where the fruits of their faith are imperishably preserved.

Second, to the Spirit’s bearing witness with their spirit that they were the children of God (^{<41816>}Romans 8:16), the rejoicing which they had from the testimony of a good conscience (^{<40112>}2 Corinthians 1:12): this in blessed contrast from the world’s estimate of them, who regarded and treated them as the off-scouring of all things.

Third, to the esteem in which they were held by the Church, their fellow-saints testifying to the un-worldliness of their lives: this shows our faith should be evidenced by such good works that it is justified before men.

“Received not the promise.” The singular number here implies some pre-eminent excellent thing promised, and this is Jesus Christ, the Divine Savior. He is said to be given according to “the promise” (^{<4133>}Acts 13:23). God’s “promise” was declared to be fulfilled when He brought Christ forth (^{<4133>}Acts 13:32, 33). In ^{<4133>}Acts 2:39 and 26:6 Christ is set forth under this term “promise.” Christ Himself is the prime promise, not only because He was the substance of the first promise given after the fall (^{<0015>}Genesis 3:15), but also because He is the complement or accomplishment of all the promises (^{<4011>}2 Corinthians 1:20). The great promise of God to send His Son, born of a woman, to save His people from their sins, was the Object of Faith of the Church throughout all the generations of the O.T. era. Therein we may discern the rich grace of God in providing for the spiritual needs of His saints from earliest times.

“Received not the promise.” As several times before in this epistle, “promise” is here used metonymically for the thing promised, and this it is which explains the “received not.” As Owen expressed it, “The promise as a faithful engagement pledge of future good, they received, but the good thing itself was not in their days exhibited.” They did not live to see historically accomplished that which their faith specifically embraced. As the Lord Jesus declared to His disciples,

“Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them” (~~4037~~ Matthew 13:17).

Herein we behold the strength and perseverance of faith, that they continued to look, unwaveringly, for so many centuries for Him that should come, and came not in their lifetime.

“God having provided some better thing for us.” The verb here looks back to the eternal counsels of Divine grace, to the Everlasting Covenant; it is a word which denotes God’s determination, designation and appointment of Christ to be the propitiatory sacrifice, and the exact season for His advent.

“When the fullness of time was come (the season ordained by Heaven), God sent forth His Son” (~~4044~~ Galatians 4:4).

Thus it should be clear that the contrast which is pointed in the sentence before us, is that between “the promise” *given* and “the promise” *performed*. It is at that point, and no other, we find the essential difference between the faith of the O.T. saints and the faith of the N.T. saints: the one looked forward to a Savior that *was* to come, the other looks back to a Savior who *has* come.

It seems strange that what is really so obvious and simple should have been regarded by many as obscure and difficult. In His “Great Cloud of Witnesses” E. W. Bullinger began comments on this passage by saying, “These verses must be among those to which Peter referred when he said, speaking of Paul’s epistles, there are ‘some things hard to be understood.’ For they confessedly present no small difficulty.” But what is there here which is “hard to be understood”? The very epistle in which this verse occurs supplies a sure key to its correct interpretation. As we have said above, the great theme of it is, The immeasurable superiority of Christianity over Judaism, and those of our readers who have followed us through this series of expositions, will recall how many illustrations of this have been before us. Another one is present in 11:39, 40: “*they* received not the (fulfillment of) the promise,” *we* have — “God having provided some better thing for us”: cf. ~~4079~~ Hebrews 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34 for the word “better.”

It is really pathetic and deplorable to see what most of the moderns make of our present verse. In their anxiety to magnify the contrast between the Mosaic and Christian economies, and in their ignorance of much of the

contents of the O.T. scriptures, they have seized upon these words “God having provided some better thing for us” to bolster up one of their chief errors, and have read into them that which any one having even a superficial acquaintance with the Psalms and Prophets should have no difficulty in perceiving to be utterly untenable. Some have said that the “better thing” which we Christians have is eternal life, others that it is regeneration and the indwelling of the Spirit, others that it is membership in the Body of Christ with the heavenly calling that entails — denying that these blessings were enjoyed by any of the O.T. saints. Such is a fair sample of the rubbish which is now to be found in most of the “ministry,” oral and written, of this degenerate age.

In their crude and arbitrary attempts to rightly divide the word of truth, those calling themselves “dispensationalists” have wrongly divided the family of God. The entire Election of Grace have God for their Father, Christ for their Savior, the Holy Spirit for their Comforter. All who are saved, from the beginning to the end of earth’s history, are the objects of God’s everlasting love, share alike in the benefits of Christ’s atonement, and are begotten by the Spirit unto the same inheritance. God communicated to Abel the same kind of faith as He does to His children today. Abraham was justified in precisely the same manner as Christians are now (^{<5412>}Romans 4:2). Moses bore the “reproach of Christ,” and had respect unto the identical “recompense of the reward” (^{<5126>}Hebrews 11:26) as is set before us. David was as truly a stranger and pilgrim on earth as we are (^{<4399>}Psalms 119:19), and looked unto the same eternal pleasures at God’s right hand as we do (^{<4961>}Psalms 16:11; 23:6).

The worst mistakes made by the “dispensationalists” grow out of their failures at the following points: first, to see the organic union between the Mosaic and Christian economies; second, to perceive that the “old covenant” and the “new covenant” were but two different administrations under which the blessings of the “everlasting covenant” are imparted; third, to distinguish between the spiritual remnant and the nation itself. The relation between the patriarchal and the Mosaic dispensations and this Christian era may be stated thus: they stood to each other, partly as the beginning does to the end, and partly as the shell does to the kernel. The former were preparatory, the latter is the full development — first the blade (in the patriarchal dispensation), then the ear (the Mosaic), and now the full corn in the ear, in this Christian era. In the former we have the type and shadow; in the latter, the antitype and substance. Christianity is but the

full development of what existed in former ages, or a grander exemplification of the truths and principles which were then revealed.

The great fact that the Everlasting Covenant which God made with Christ as the Head of His Church formed the basis of all His dealings with His people, and that the terms and blessings of that Eternal Chapter were being administered by Him under the “old” and “new” covenants, may be illustrated from secular history. In practically every country there are two chief political parties. The policy, and particularly the methods followed, by these rival factions, differ radically, yet though the one may succeed the other in power, and though great changes mark their alternative regimes, and though many diverse laws may be enacted or cancelled from time to time, yet *the fundamental constitution* of the country remains unchanged. Thus it is under the Mosaic and Christian economies: widely different as they are in many incidental details, nevertheless God’s moral government is always according to the same fundamental principles of grace and righteousness, mercy and justice, truth and faithfulness, in the one era equally as much as in the other.

The distinction between the regenerated remnant and the unregenerate nation during O.T. times, is as real and radical as that which now exists between real Christians and the multitude of empty professors with which Christendom abounds; yea, one is the type of the other. Just as empty professors now possess a “form of godliness” but are destitute of its “power,” so the great bulk of the lineal descendants of Abraham were occupied only with the externals of Judaism — witness the scribes and Pharisees of Christ’s day; and just as the lifeless religionists of our time are taken up with the “letter” of the Word and have no experimental acquaintance with its spiritual realities, so the un-quickened Israelites of old were engaged with the outward shell of their ritual, but never penetrated to its kernel. There was an election within an election, a remnant who were Jews “inwardly” (~~4129~~ Romans 2:29), among the great company surrounding them who were Jews only in name, outwardly.

The spiritual portion of that O.T. remnant of God’s saints was identically the same as that of the Christian’s now. They were the recipients of the free gift of grace in Christ (~~0068~~ Genesis 6:8) as we are. They possessed eternal life (~~4988~~ Psalm 133:3) as truly as we do. They rejoiced in the knowledge of sins forgiven (~~4930~~ Psalm 32:1, 2) as heartily as we do. They

were as really instructed by the Spirit (^{<4020>}Nehemiah 9:20) as we are. Nor were they left in total ignorance of the glorious future awaiting them:

“These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country” (verses 13, 14).

The word for “Country” there is not the ordinary one “chora,” but “patris,” which signifies Homeland, or Fatherland — *such* a “country” as one’s father dwells in.

The question, then, returns upon us: Seeing the O.T. saints enjoyed all the essential spiritual blessings of which Christians now partake, *exactly what* is the “better thing” which God “provides for us”? The answer is a *superior administration* of the Everlasting Covenant: ^{<8130>}Hebrews 13:20. In what particular respects? Chiefly in these. First, we now have a better view of Christ than the O.T. saints had: they saw Him, chiefly through types and promises, whereas we view Him in the accomplishment and fulfillment of them. Second, there is now a broader foundation for faith to rest upon: they looked for a Christ who was to come and who would put away their sins; we look at a Christ who has come and who has put away our sins. Third, they were as minors, under teachers and governors; whereas we are in the position, dispensationally, of those who have attained their majority: ^{<840E>}Galatians 4:1-7. Fourth, there is now a wider outpouring of God’s grace: it is no longer confined to an elect remnant in one nation, but reaches out to His favored people scattered among all nations.

“That they without us should not be made perfect.” “The law (or Mosaic economy) made nothing perfect but the bringing in of a better hope did” (^{<8079>}Hebrews 7:19). The “perfecting” of a thing consists in the well-finishing of it, and a full accomplishment of all things appertaining thereto. There is no doubt that the ultimate reference of our text is to the eternal glory of the whole Family of Faith in heaven; yet we believe it also includes the various *degrees* by which that perfection is attained, and the *means* thereunto. They are,

First, the taking away of sin — which makes man most imperfect — and the clothing him with the robe of righteousness, in which he may appear

perfect before God. These were secured by the life and death of Jesus Christ. In that, the O.T. saints were not “made perfect *without us*,” for their sins and our sins were expiated by the *same* Sacrifice, and their persons and our persons are justified by the *same* Righteousness.

Second, the subduing of the power of indwelling sin, enabling those justified to walk in the paths of righteousness, which is through the enabling of the Spirit. In this too the O.T. saints were not (relatively) “made perfect *without us*,” as is clear from ^{<49234>}Psalm 23:4; 51:11 etc.

Third, the Spirit enabling those who are united to Christ to stand up against all assaults, and to persevere in a spiritual growth; in this also the O.T. saints were not “made perfect *without us*,” as is evident by a comparison of ^{<49770>}Psalm 97:10 with ^{<6015>}1 Peter 1:15.

Fourth, the receiving of the soul to Glory when it leaves the body: this also was common to O.T. and N.T. saints alike — we are not unmindful of the carnal theory held by some who imagine that prior to the death of Christ, the souls of saints went only to some imaginary Paradise “in the heart of the earth”; but this is much too near akin to the subterranean *limbus* of Romanism to merit any refutation.

Fifth, the resurrection of the body. In this the whole Family of Faith shall share alike, and at the same time:

“In Christ shall all be made alive; but every man in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards *they that are Christ’s* at His coming” (^{<4652>}1 Corinthians 15:22, 23).

And *who are* “Christ’s”? why, *all* that the Father gave to Him, *all* that He purchased with His blood. God’s Word knows nothing of His people being raised in sections, at intervals.

Sixth, the re-union between the soul and body, which takes place at Christ’s appearing. In ^{<8023>}Hebrews 12:23 the O.T. saints are referred to as “the *spirits* of just men made perfect, but they are still “waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body” (^{<4083>}Romans 8:23). In this too all the redeemed shall share alike, being “caught up *together* to meet the Lord in the air” (^{<5147>}1 Thessalonians 4:17).

Seventh, the entrance into eternal glory, when O.T. and N.T. saints alike shall, all together, be “forever with the Lord.” Then shall be completely

realized that ancient oracle concerning Shiloh “unto Him shall the gathering of the people be” (~~490~~Genesis 49:10). Then shall be fulfilled that mystical word,

“I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the Kingdom of heaven” (~~4081~~Matthew 8:11).

As the Lord Jesus declared,

“I lay down My life for the (O.T.) sheep; And other (N.T.) sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be *one flock* (Greek and R.V.), one Shepherd” (~~4105~~John 10:15, 16).

Then it shall be that Christ will “gather *together in one* the children of God that are scattered abroad” (~~4152~~John 11:52) — not only among all nations, but through all dispensations.

In all of these seven degrees mentioned above are the elect of God “made perfect”; in all of them shall the O.T. and N.T. saints share alike: all shall come

“in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (~~4043~~Ephesians 4:13).

God deferred the resurrection and final glorification of the O.T. saints until the saints of this N.T. era should be called out and gathered into the one Body:

“God has so arranged matters, that the complete accomplishment of the promise, both to the Old and New Testament believers, shall *take place together*; ‘they’ shall be made perfect, but not without ‘us’; we and they shall attain perfection together” (John Brown).

Thus to “be made perfect” is here the equivalent of *receiving* (the full accomplishment of) the promise, or enjoying together the complete realization of the “better thing.” Verses 39 and 40 are inseparably linked together, and the language used in the one serves to interpret that employed in the other, both being colored by the dominant theme of this epistle.

Thus our understanding of these two verses which have occasioned so much trouble to many of the commentators, is as follows.

First, though the O.T. saints lived under an inferior administration of the Everlasting Covenant than we do, nevertheless, they “obtained a good report” and went to Heaven at death.

Second, the “better thing” which God has provided for the N.T. saints is a superior administration of the Everlasting Covenant, that is, we enjoy superior *means* of grace to what they had. Spiritual and heavenly blessings were presented unto the Church in the patriarchal and Mosaic dispensations under temporal and earthly images: Canaan being a figure of Heaven; Christ and His atonement being set forth under symbolic ceremonies and obscure ordinances. As the substance exceeds the shadows so is the state of the Church under the “new” covenant superior to its state under the “old.”

Third, God has ordered that the entire Family of Faith shall be “perfected” by the same Sacrifice, and shall together enjoy its purchased blessings throughout an endless eternity.

The *practical application* of the whole of the above unto our hearts, was well put by John Calvin: “If they on whom the light of grace had not as yet so brightly shone, displayed so great a constancy in and during evils, what ought the full brightness of the Gospel to produce in us! A small spark of light led them to heaven; when the sun of righteousness shines over us, with what pretense can we excuse ourselves if we still cleave to the earth?”