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Doubt and Faith

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Sermon Twenty=five

TEXT: Will the Lord cast off for ever? and will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies? . . . Thou art the God that doest wonders: thou hast declared thy strength among the people.

PSALM 77:7-9, 14

THESE words are merely the starting point of what I have to say. I take them as the starting point because they reveal to us a man in what is a not uncommon state of mind, and it is of that state of mind I want to speak. The state of mind is this: that a man finds his thoughts about God in conflict with one another. There is one side of him which, when it is active, finds it an easy thing to affirm God, to believe that there is a high and holy purpose of righteousness and love, such as the Bible speaks of, behind our life and calling for the service of men. There is another side of him (usually, though not always, active at a different time and in different circumstances) which finds it just as easy to doubt and deny the goodness of God, and even to question whether there is, in any sense that really matters to anybody, a God at all. You have a picture of these two opposed moods in this psalm. In the first half the writer expresses a mood of doubt and questioning; in the second, he seems to recover himself, and to come through to a mood of affirmation and faith.

It is hardly necessary, I think, to give other illustration of this state of conflict in the soul, of doubt confronting faith, and faith doubt: of something within us that instantly says "Yes! a thousand times Yes!" to all that the New Testament bids us to believe about God, wrestling with something else within us which whispers, and indeed sometimes even bawls down the corridors of the mind, "No! it cannot be, it is a dream." For myself my mind often goes back to a quiet spring morning many years ago in an apple orchard. The trees were in blossom. There were daffodils under them. The scent of the trees, the soft air, the blue sky, the tender light—everything spoke of God. Then suddenly there hopped from behind a bush a thrush whose song I had heard a minute before. It was followed by a cat. The cat bit off its head at my feet. At that moment the Yes, which so much in life gives to God, met its own No face to face in my soul. Today for many people, because of the events of these times, this same conflict, in an even more poignant form, is their almost daily companion. To contemplate a bombed city, not to speak of other things, is at once to hear within the innermost recesses of one's soul the skeptic's question, the unbeliever's question, Where then is thy God? On

the other hand, to see, as many of us have seen, the almost unbelievable courage and patience and self-sacrifice and humor of ordinary folk in that same bombed city is to hear again the answering Yes of faith: "Well, at any rate He is unmistakably here and here and here."

That being the state of affairs, what are we to do about it? I want to put to you this: that there is an extremely important question in regard to this conflict which we ought to ask and to answer, which we ought to settle with ourselves, once and for all, and perhaps the sooner we do it the better. It is this: to which of these two voices in the soul concerning God are we going to make up our minds deliberately and consciously always to give the greater weight? Are we going to adopt the policy of always putting our belief in God in the dock and making it justify itself before the magistrate of our doubts, and if it cannot do so, cast it out: or are we going to adopt the policy of always putting our doubt, our unbelief, in the dock and making it justify itself fully before the magistrate of our belief, and if it cannot do so, cast it out? Are we going to say, my belief in God must prove itself up to the hilt in face of my doubt, before I will abide by it, or my doubt must prove itself up to the hilt before I will abide by it?

I have just said that we ought to ask and answer this extremely important question *deliberately and consciously*. I emphasize those words, for the position is this, that if we do not make ourselves answer it deliberately and consciously and thoughtfully, life itself will continually force us to answer it again and again undeliberately and unconsciously and unthoughtfully. The result will be that we shall continually oscillate between the two positions, sometimes answering it in one way without knowing it, and sometimes answering it in the other way without knowing it: this, to say the very least, is not a very dignified or effective position for an intelligent and responsible being, whom God has put in some measure in charge of his own destiny, to be in.

For my part I have settled it with myself, that without running away from doubts and questionings (for often through doubts and questionings we come to a deeper truth) I am always going to put the greater emphasis on faith. I am always going to put my doubts in the dock first. I am going to doubt doubt before I doubt faith. When it comes to an issue, I am going deliberately and consciously to trust my belief, my faith, that deep something within me which affirms God, which says yes to the God revealed in the New Testament, and to seek to direct my life accordingly. I have come to that conclusion for four main reasons, which I want to state to you very briefly. Perhaps I may be permitted to cast them in a personal form; it will help us to be a little more concrete and save us from a lot of roundabout phrases.

The first reason is this: I have noticed this quite unmistakable fact about myself, and I can only ask you to observe whether it is not true of you also, that my doubts and skepticisms about God tend to grow in frequency and force when my personal life for one reason or another has dropped to what

can only be called a lower level. When in an even greater degree than is usual the spirit of slackness has crept in, when personal attitudes to others have not been what they ought to be, when, in the presence of the high requirements of righteousness and truth, I have prevaricated and compromised and indulged myself, then the positive affirmation of faith in God has seemed to grow more difficult, and the negative attitude of doubt and unbelief and fear more easy. The vision of God seems, in short, to vary with the order or disorder of my personal and moral life. This has happened far too often to be without significance. It suggests what I believe to be the fact, namely, that it is without whole personal being that we see God. Hence, if our personal life is not whole but, on the contrary, is disordered and undisciplined and disheveled, then the vision of God becomes, and must become, obscured and distorted—even as it is impossible to see the physical world properly if the physical eye is out of order. Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he said *blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. Seeing God, on the one hand, and a certain sincerity of mind, a certain singleness of purpose in relation to what we know to be good and evil, or right and wrong, on the other hand, do undoubtedly go together. What, then, follows from this? Does it not plainly follow that the sensible thing to do, when it comes to a choice, is to trust, and to continue to trust, those things which I see most clearly when my life is at its best (even though it be admittedly a mighty poor best) and to distrust the doubts which arise, or at least gain strength when it is not at its best? to trust my vision of God as against my doubts of Him? It would seem to be the only honest and sensible thing to do.

The second reason is this. I have noticed that as people live in the light of belief in God, so many of those very things in life which help to create and nourish doubt and unbelief tend either to disappear or, if not to disappear, to lose their power to defeat and overwhelm the soul. Let me say a word on both these points.

First, then, belief in God tends to eliminate many of the evil things in life which suggest unbelief. Is there any question that a great many of such evil things are themselves, in the first instance, created by unbelief, by men's refusal to live as though there really is a divine purpose of righteousness and love at work in the world with which they have in the end to settle all accounts. They may cause unbelief, but they are themselves caused by unbelief and would disappear with the unbelief itself. I am not saying that this is true of every evil, but it is true of a great many, of far too many, for it to be ignored. Nor am I saying anything so pointless as that, if only everybody believed in God, everything in human life would be instantly what it ought to be. I am not talking vaguely about what might happen if only something else which has not happened and is not likely to happen did happen. I am talking about what *has* happened, and *does* happen, before our eyes; I am talking about evidence. I can stand here now and think of a half dozen evil situations I have personally observed, which are spreading

a blight all around them, and which there is not the least hope of ever being put right until one or two persons involved can be brought to live a life of faith instead of a life of unbelief.

Second, it has been found again and again that if a man, when he is confronted with some evil which suggests unbelief and skepticism and doubt to his soul, ignores the suggestion and tackles the evil on the basis of faith in God, then, it begins to lose all its power even to make precisely that suggestion. It begins, indeed, to be no longer a source of questioning and doubt but, on the contrary, a source of light and increased certainty and knowledge of God. This has happened too often to be accidental and insignificant. The evidence is that some of life's richest gifts come, like registered parcels, in coverings which are tough and ugly and heavily sealed and tied with a multitude of entangling knots. Tackle the knots, remove the coverings, in the faith that the gift is there, and, behold, you find the gift and the wonder of an overshadowing presence.

This, then, is the second reason for making the decision to abide by one's faith and always to doubt one's doubts, namely, that the evidence is that the facts of life do, as it were, tend unmistakably to swing round in support of that belief in proportion as one lives by it. Evils do tend to disappear. Doors do open to those who knock—in faith. Enrichments are given to those who ask—in faith. Light does await those who seek it—in faith.

The third reason why I have decided always to trust my belief against my doubt is that I can see clearly why the God who speaks to my heart through all that is beautiful and good and true in human life and, above all, through Christ and the pages of the New Testament, should have left me to make precisely this choice; should have left room for doubts and questionings. If His aim is, as the New Testament says it is, to bring me to a mature personal life, in which I am a son to Him and not merely a slave or a puppet or a child, then He must leave room in my life for sheer adventurous faith and trust, for a readiness to affirm and commit myself to His goodness, even when I cannot for the life of me understand what He is at, and evil things happen which I would have preferred otherwise. It would be no use His "spoon-feeding" me. A truly personal relationship must have an element of adventurous confidence in it, without a continuous clamoring for full explanations and written guarantees. In other words, only from circumstances that strongly stimulate doubt can we learn courage and trust; and if God is the Father of my spirit, then courage and trust are two of the things I have simply got to learn. The point is: given the truth of my belief in God, I can see a reason why I am allowed to have doubts. But if I start from the supposition that my doubts are true and there is no God, I cannot see why something within me should speak so plainly and compellingly of Him.

The fourth reason is Jesus Christ. I look at Jesus and I see—well, what do I see? Not the somewhat meek and placid figure that looks down upon us from a stained-glass window, or from the pictures in a book of Bible stories

for children. God forbid. I see a being of literally tremendous intellectual power. The more I study the Gospels the more I am impressed with the sheer mental force of Jesus. How he cuts right through all the subtle argumentation of his questioners to the one central issue! I see a being, too, of the intensest aesthetic sensitivity. The beauty of the world deeply stirred his soul. His sayings and parables are those of a poet. I see, above all, a being of intensest moral purity and strength, one so utterly released from himself that at one and the same time he has walked to the middle of the stage of history like a God, and yet has been forever afterwards the very pattern of humility. As I stand alongside him I know, without any affectation, that I am infinitely small and poor, and he infinitely great and rich, in personal life. And further, I find this: even as he is greater than I in every way, so he is the more certain than I am of God. The fog of unbelief and doubt which drifts at times across my spirit is absent from his. I cannot but believe that his spirit saw the reality of things more clearly than mine. I cannot but ask myself this question again and again: Which, after all, are more likely to be right, the doubts of H. H. Farmer or the magnificent certainties of Jesus Christ? The answer to that question is obvious. It seems to me to be the sincere thing, the intelligent thing, to trust his certainties and that voice in my own soul which, however falteringly at times, point the same way.

And if you say as you might well say: But was there not a time when Christ also doubted? did he not also in the weakness and agony of the cross cry, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me"? the reply is that, when I come, as I must often come in this tragic world, to stake my life on Christ and on his vision of God rather than on my feeble thoughts and feelings, then I am more thankful than I can say that that cry of the Master is there recorded for us in the Gospels. For it shows that Christ himself at least once knew the fullest weight and pressure of those things which in our human life seem to hide the face of God, knew it as none of us can ever know it. Yes, and it shows too that even then he won the victory. For this is not a cry of defeat, not a cry of loss of faith: it is rather faith thrusting through to its final victory. It is faith asking a question, not unbelief asking it, for the question is addressed to *my* God, *my* God. And the answer was given to his cry, for shortly afterwards he said, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." God succours our faith not less but more, because of that cry upon the cross.

Will you think about these things? Will you, especially those who are younger, make this decision, that if and when it comes to a conflict of two voices in your soul, you will always trust that voice that speaks of God rather than that one that is minded to deny him? You will doubt your doubts before you doubt that to which all that is best within you really points, namely, that Christ is the way and the truth and the life, and to him and to his vision of God you may, you must, come what may, commit your whole being and your whole life.