

furniture, his reading, in everything. He is a Rewarder.

That means His purpose is a purpose of blessing; and He will bestow it for ever upon people that will seek after Him. How easy it is. No persuasion is necessary. "Nothing in my hand I bring." I may rest assured that there will be no refusal, except the refusal of infinite Love, and His "No" is as much a proof of His love, and often more so than if He gave the thing asked for. He never denies save in love. "No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly."

Yet I would remind you that the text marks the note of urgency. Belief means more than conviction; it means obedience. It means trusting, and venturing upon God, coming to Him, speaking to Him, listening to Him, daring everything upon His word. That is the condition to which God can appeal. He who comes to God, comes to One Who rewards that kind of coming.

We should not forget the setting of the text. The section begins in the tenth chapter. Let us go further back, to the beginning of the letter. There we find that God, Who spoke to the fathers by divers portions and in divers manners, has spoken in His Son; and He stands to us in the place of God, for He is God! Faith in Christ is faith in God; and he that comes must believe that He is. So humanity is brought face to face with the Person of Christ. As we believe in Him, faith is passing through the manifestation to the thing manifested, and we are finding God; and that is the bedrock of faith.

IV

FAITH AND HISTORY: AS TO NATURE
AND INTERPRETATION

SCRIPTURE LESSON: PSALM XIX.

"Therein the elders had witness borne to them. By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen hath not been made out of things which do appear."—HEBREWS XI. 2, 3.

By citation from Habakkuk, the writer of this letter has declared faith to be the true philosophy of life: "My righteous one shall live by faith." He has, moreover, defined faith in the abstract. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen." In the rest of this chapter (xi) we have abounding illustrations of the power and the victory of faith. The writer has selected his illustrations from the stream of history, from Abel to Jesus. The consummation is reached, not in the eleventh, but the twelfth chapter.

In the words of our text, before dealing with personalities, he shows faith in its relation to human history as a whole. I know of no passage which has suffered more from misunderstanding, due to faulty translation. Let us, therefore, follow three lines of consideration, first attempting a careful examination of the passage itself; then observing the statement of its double declaration. So we shall find its interpretation of history.

I have dogmatically said that this passage has been misunderstood largely through faulty translation. Notice first of all that the writer says, "Therein the elders had witness borne to them." The Old Version read, "Through faith the elders obtained a good report." Some may say those two translations mean the same thing. They may, but they may be very different. The Authorized Version suggests a record concerning the elders. When we went to school, we took home at the end of the year a good report—at least some did—but it was a report! That is how we have understood this, the elders had a good report. Their marks were good. But if we take the translation, "the elders had witness borne to them," not about them, but to them, the form suggests a record the elders gained, and received; a good report, they had witness borne to them. They were not talking. They were listening. They were not reading something said *about* them. They were listening to something said *to* them. "Through faith the elders had witness borne to them." I do not object to the old rendering, provided we understand the meaning of the word "obtained."

Then again. "By faith we understand that the worlds have been framed by the word of God." That is constantly understood as a reference to the material universe, to creation, a reference to the great phrase, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." That is a glaring error. The word used is not "worlds," but "ages." "By faith we understand that the ages have been framed by the word of God." The word refers to a time element, not to a material struc-

ture. It does not refer to the cosmos materially, but to the passing of time, the passing of ages.

Here, then, the writer says that by faith we understand that the ages were framed by the word of God. At the beginning of this letter the writer says: "God . . . hath spoken unto us in his Son . . . through whom also he made the worlds." There is the same mistake. It is "through whom he fashioned the ages." The declaration of the writer, here, is that by faith we understand those periods, as they come and go, do not arise out of circumstances which cannot finally explain any age.

These changes in translation are of supreme importance to the true viewpoint of the great declaration made here by the writer. Let us now take those two declarations and consider them.

The writer first said, Faith is the attitude which has made possible the reception of a revelation, and so witness was borne. Through faith the elders gained, obtained news, a report, a statement, a revelation. Yes, in that sense faith obtained it, but they obtained it through faith. At once we are brought face to face with the philosophy of the passing of time, and the passing of every age; and also with the method by which we have obtained the statement found in Holy Writ. It is that statement which makes us still believe in Genesis, in spite of all criticism of Genesis. These elders obtained a report, they had a revelation. They were told how, in and through faith, the revelation came.

What was faith in their case? It was an activity which ceased speculation, and found God, an activity

that was no longer content to examine events and circumstances and matter and material. That activity may be perfectly right in its place. But this was an activity which was no longer content to dissolve the earth and universe into their component parts, and then taking some component part, again dissolve it. This was not the activity that knocked at one door of the atom only, revealing each secret force vibrant with motion. They were men who turned aside from this, and said, When we have discovered the constituent parts of the universe, and the mystery of every particle of that universe; and have discovered the mystery; when we stand confronted with that which baffles us, we are touching God. Because they passed from the realm of speculation into the realm of listening, the writer could speak of them and say that they had obtained a good report. They obtained an account of the nature of man. They obtained a revelation of the method of divine government. They obtained an interpretation that ever grew through the passing of those very ages into clearer showing of the nature and character of God. The nature and character of God were never discovered by speculation. We cannot discover any emotion by speculation or investigation. The mystery of law and government wraps us round everywhere. Not by investigation, but by faith we know; and faith obtains a good report. To that attitude God can speak.

The word "elders" here is synonymous with the word "fathers" in the first chapter. We could translate in our language "presbyter." In the past God spoke to the fathers, the elders, in divers portions and manners. They were men of faith, who came to the

conclusion that nothing can be finally explained until God is found. By faith in God they obtained a good report, witness was borne.

Take the other declaration, "By faith we understand." What do we understand? We understand that the things seen "hath not been made out of things which do appear." By faith we understand that these ages have been framed by the word of God. "By faith we understand." We remember Tennyson's line:

"We have but faith; we cannot know."

I believe that to be entirely untrue. The truth is we now have faith, and so can know. That is a very different thing. That is what this writer says, "By faith we understand." That word "understand" simply means we exercise the mind. The mind may be exercised with God shut out, but no discovery is made as to the secret of the universe, or the character of God, or the nature of man. But by faith we understand. Faith is apprehension. It is the rational attitude of the soul. When faith has found God it has found the realm of reason. Faith is never credulity. "By faith we understand." Faith appeals to the intelligence. Faith interprets, and so we understand.

What is it we understand? I come back to the word so full of significance. "By faith we understand that the ages have been framed by the word of God." This is a most stupendous statement. What are the ages? Periods of time, and they are always unlimited. An age does not necessarily mean a certain period of time. It is an interesting and revealing study in scientific investigation to read about the Stone age, and the Bronze

fining ourselves to the history of this literature, all history reveals the faithfulness of God to His own creation in the freedom of human will. God is seen here, but I read through, and watch, and I see the human will is free, free to obey, free to disobey. God has created man, and has so fashioned the ages that they revolve around that central and marvellous mystery of the human will, with power to choose and elect. But God is revealed.

The second thought revealed is that of the maintenance of the authority of God as symbolized in the Garden of Eden at the beginning. Man was put into the Garden, and two things were said to him. "Thou mayest" and "Thou shalt not." "Thou mayest freely eat of every tree of the garden." It is the great charter of freedom. Thou shalt not eat of this one tree. That is the word that marks limitation and restriction of liberty, under the authority of God. God has never abandoned man. It has been true in all history and of the human race. Man has been free to obey or to disobey; to recognize or to rebel; but we have never been away from His authority.

That leads us a step further. The choices of humanity are worked out always to their logical conclusion, because this is a moral universe. It is in that fact that this is a moral universe that we recognize the government of God. He has fashioned the ages. He is always there. We cannot escape Him in any realm. Break a law, any law—I do not mean necessarily the Decalogue, or even the Sermon on the Mount—break law, and we have smashed God's universe. God is forevermore seen reigning, ruling. All human disaster is the result

of human choice, worked out to its necessary issue. It is this compelling force of God's order that is making it so. God fashions the ages, but we are free. We can, if we like, take a philosophy that says that the ideals of Christ are the ideals of weakness. Such choose deliberately, and throw overboard the Man of Nazareth, and substitute the man of the mailed fist. Such teaching of the human race permeates the whole of it.

I speak now with reverence. Says God: Very well, you are free; but remember this, that your choice will work itself out to a harvest which is inherent in your choice. One harvest came in 1914, and the misery and muck of war were due to a philosophy that had turned its back upon Christ. That philosophy permeated us here in England, and we hugged it. There was a period when even theologians were not considered to be perfectly prepared for their work unless they had had a final year in the country that supported this philosophy. It goes on, and it works out in that way, because God is there, and He has created a moral universe in which man is free within limits; and the freedom of the will at last works out to the inevitable conclusion of the thing chosen, and that because God is governing.

That is the conviction of faith, and it is that confidence in the unseen that gives us conviction concerning things hoped for. We cannot escape Browning at this point:

"That, after Last, returns the First;
 Though a wide compass round be fetched;
 That what began best, can't end worst,
 Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst,"

In every age, as it succeeds, God is in it, moulding it, and allowing man his choice; but so shutting him in to the moral of eternal principles that at last his choice, whether for good or evil, comes to the harvest. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man," or a nation, "soweth, that shall he also reap."

Yet the last thing to say in this connection is this: All history shows—and this is the marvel of it—God is making possible recovery, in spite of pain. There is always a second chance. There are always forces available to humanity, wherein and whereby humanity may turn in repentance, and find recovery and grace, and so be enabled to move forward. It is the very fashioning of the passing ages that they are for evermore moving on toward that final age when that rule and reign shall be acknowledged, and when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

V

THE FAITH OF ABEL

SCRIPTURE LESSON: GENESIS IV. 1-16.

"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he had witness borne to him that he was righteous. God bearing witness in respect of his gifts; and through it he being dead yet speaketh."—HEBREWS XI. 4.

FAITH has already been defined by the writer of this letter as to conduct: "My righteous one shall live by faith." It has been defined also as consciousness, "Faith is the confidence of things hoped for," based upon "conviction of things unseen." Moreover, we have considered what may be described as the creed of faith. "God is," and "He is a rewarder" of such as "diligently seek after him."

In illustrating the victories of faith the writer has declared it to be the origin of the records. Faith received a good report, and had witness borne to it concerning the will of God. Moreover, he has declared that by faith is discovered the ultimate truth concerning human history, the ages.

Turning then to the stream of human history, he selected illustrations of the power of faith. He began with Abel, and ended with Jesus.

The story behind the particular reference to Abel is recorded in Genesis iv, and is very familiar. Our Lord referred to him and to his death, "The blood of right-