

A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN THE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NATCHEZ,

ON

SABBATH, MARCH 20, 1859,

BY THE

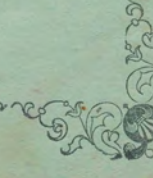
REV. JOSEPH B. STRATTON, D. D.

Published by request, and for the use of the Congregation.

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HEB. VI : 12....“Followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”

YOU WILL see, by reference to your Bibles, that this passage is a part of an exhortation addressed to Christians. It may be taken, just as well, as a definition descriptive of Christians. Take the whole succession of them from beginning to end, and determine the peculiarities which have given them at any period their distinct historical place as a class of men, and you may say of them all, “they have lived in the practice of faith and patience, and they have inherited the promises as their end and reward.” The persons to whom the Apostle specifically refers in the text, are undoubtedly the patriarchs and holy men whose biographies are contained in the records of the Hebrew nation, and were of course familiar to his readers. This is evident from the allusion to Abraham, which immediately follows the text. Of him it is said, “after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.” The same thing might have been said of others, whose lives are contained in the Scriptures. And these persons, says the Apostle to his cotemporaries and fellow Christians, “these persons do you follow.” Let it be said of you, when your histories come to be written—when fond hearts shall recall your images in the homes and the circles you have left—“through faith and patience they inherited the promises.” The Christian’s *rule* and the Christian’s *reward* are set before us in these words; and these will form the main subject of the few remarks I design to offer you this morning.

First, however, let me glance at two or three thoughts superficial to the subject, which are very naturally suggested by the Apostle's language. Observe, for instance, the confidence with which the recorded experience of God's people is appealed to here, as a recommendation and an argument for Religion. The Apostle boldly points to the case of those who had made practical trial of the principles he was inculcating as a demonstration of the excellence of those principles. Every advocate of Christianity may do the same. The Gospel lays its scheme of life before the world, and challenges the favor of men with this very important advantage, that it is an accredited thing. It shows upon all its proposals and all its promises, the superscription of thousands and tens of thousands, certifying on the ground of actual experience to its genuineness and utility. The believer in Jesus has this ground of encouragement then: he is not a discoverer, tracking his way through an unknown region; there is no risk in his enterprise; no doubt as to the issue of his course; he is not embarking upon an uncertain adventure; he is not committing himself to the hazards of an untried problem or theories; he is traveling on sure ground, walking along a high road which has been trodden by the feet of myriads before him; he is a follower of others who for ages have been exploring the territory he is traversing, and who have left behind them, from generation to generation, their most solemn attestation to the goodness and safety of the way. Scepticism might as well try to shake the confidence of a mariner in his compass and his charts, as to convince the Christian that his Religion is worthless or false. You may tell him that he is deceived—that this creed which he holds, and this policy which he pursues, will mislead him. He can answer you, I have seen the matter tested, and have seen it succeed. I have seen this creed and this policy carry others prosperously through life and through death, and I am sure they will do as much for me. I have here in my Bible a

guide, which has proved itself wise and able in the case of millions before me, and I have never seen anything else which could pretend to equal it in these respects, and I am determined to put my trust in my Bible. It is too late to tell me that Christianity is a novelty, or a cunningly devised fable. It has been doing its work—it has been dispensing its beneficent services too long in the world, for any sane man to venture to underrate or deny them. It shows me upon the pages of its inspired annals, a goodly company of Worthies, Prophets, Apostles, Saints, who, under every variety of circumstance, and in every period of the Church's history, through faith and patience have inherited the promises. And even in my own day and within the circle of my own observation, I have seen one and another, and another—it may have been a near friend or kinsman—the parent who reared me, or the brother who was the playmate of my childhood—following them in this same walk of faith and patience, and inheriting like them the promises. In their fellowship I want to be found. In their procession I mean to march. "Where they go I will go; where they lodge I will lodge; where they die I will die."

The definition of the text, therefore, it seems to me, has a special value on account of this thought: it bids us as Pilgrims, professedly on the road to heaven, to take courage from the foot-prints of the innumerable crowd which we may see impressed all along the way, assuring us that the path we are pursuing, as it did not disappoint them, will not disappoint us.

Then, secondly, we are reminded here that there is nothing required of us in the terms of the Gospel, which is not practicable by us. These terms sometimes seem hard. The processes by which faith and patience are to be exercised, sometimes appear to the mind intolerably severe. The conditions of life sometimes grow so formidable in the believer's view, that he almost despairs of ever fulfilling them, and

like the Disciples, on a certain occasion, he is ready to exclaim, "who then can be saved?" But "check," the Apostle seems to say to us here, "check" those impatient murmurs! Take heart again poor doubter! "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man!" Do you not see that others have been in precisely this strait before you? And do you not see that they have passed successfully through it? You are but following where spirits as weak as yours have led the way. Do you shudder at this cross which is set before you? Do you complain of this sacrifice which is demanded of you, as too costly? Do you stagger at this call for self-denial? Do you start back from this dark chasm of grief into which you must penetrate, or halt before this rocky hill of duty which you must climb? Oh, despond not so soon! Open your Bibles, and you will see how others have been enabled to conquer in all these battles. You will see how an Abraham, and a Jacob, and a David, and a Stephen, and a Paul, have endured just these trials, and have wrought just these prodigies of faith and patience which are now proposed to you. There their histories stand—the histories of men of like infirmities with you—showing you how like yours were their perils, their struggles and their conflicts, and assuring you that like theirs shall be your victory too, if like them you trust in God and go forward. Or read the lives of the Saints of later days, or call up the traditions of your own neighborhood, or the reminiscences of your own mind, which tell of the pious and good who have run their course and entered into rest,—and you will see how exactly THEIR difficulties corresponded with YOURS, and how triumphantly through grace, they have wrestled with them and mastered them. They went through the fire, but the flame did not kindle upon them. They passed through the waters, but the flood did not overflow them; and God, who made what seemed an impossibility possible for them, will make the same possible for you.

And this suggests the third thought to which I would allude,—and that is, that each generation, and in a measure each individual of a generation, is engaged in furnishing an influence which shall materially shape and animate the Religion of those who come after it.

The Church of to-day is doing more than fill its own place and execute its own mission. It is engendering forces which shall fix the character, and determine the destiny, to a considerable degree, of the Church of to-morrow. The same may be said of every particular member of the Church. Abraham's faith and patience have been the means of augmenting incalculably the faith and patience of thousands of Christians since his day. We follow others, and others will follow us. This happens insensibly, universally, and by a law which grows out of the constitution of our nature, and the order of Providence. Every body is a link on a chain. He hangs to somebody before him, and somebody after him will hang to him. The track left upon the road by the traveller of yesterday, no matter who he was, will decide, perhaps, the route of the traveller of to-day. This fact throws great dignity and great responsibility upon the walk of every Christian.

You may be very obscure and very insignificant in your own estimation, and in that of others too. You may have to tread your way through the world in loneliness and neglect. You may often think as you go along in solitude and despondency with your humble mien, and your noiseless step, "who cares for me? Of what use am I?" But you are making a track, you are leaving a sign, you are making more distinct the path to Heaven, and some brother pilgrim coming after you, may bless you for the helping hand your example has given him. To let our light shine while we are in the world, is a distinct command of the Saviour, and it devolves upon his disciples an important office. But the text seems to widen indefinitely, the sphere of this office. It describes the circle which we are to illumine with a radius

which reaches far beyond the limit of the present life. There will be those in the world to follow us when we have left it. Our light will not die when we die. Strike one of these natural stars from existence, and the rays it emitted while it shone in the sky, would continue to cheer the eyes of the observer upon earth, and to make night to the dwellers upon this lower world, beautiful with its sparkle for years after it is gone.

So it is with the Christian. A light in the world while he lived, he may be a light to the world long after he has been taken from it. Though dead, he may yet speak. Because, he through faith and patience inherited the promises—others may be encouraged and strengthened through the same means to seek the same end; others in the holy light of his influence may be enabled to find the way to heaven, when he is seen no more. The foot-print is there, though the traveler who left it has passed on out of view. I doubt not if we were to take those families or those individuals, who in any community are most eminent for piety, and if we could trace out the secret causes that have contributed to give them their prominence in spiritual attainments, it would be found in most cases, that the effect was due in no small degree to the formative power of some godly personage, who, in former years, has stood in intimate association with these families or individuals, and whose sanctity of character surviving his decease, has perpetuated its type stone in theirs. They are what they are, because it was their privilege to be placed under the influence of some one whom they remember with respect and love, and of whom the recollections always express themselves most distinctly in this form, "he through faith and patience inherited the promises." How solemnly this thought, that there are others whose course is to be determined by ours—others who are to be our followers, through life and into eternity, appeals to us to walk carefully and wisely before our generation, and to leave behind us when we are gone, a memory that shall preach evermore of

Christ, and His great Salvation in the hearts that cherish it. And as a counterpart to this, the text suggests to us the direction which the Christian ought to give to the exercises of the principle of our nature, which leads us to recall, and to converse with the absent and the dead.

Under the economy of the Holy Spirit every thing is made to minister in some way to the sanctification of God's children. It is His will we read emphatically, that they should be sanctified. And it is the duty no less emphatically enunciated to perfect holiness. The machinery of the mind therefore, in its working, is to be made tributary to this end. That disposition of the mind which fastens its regards and affections upon the great, or the beloved of other times, which makes us stand with reverence before the monument of the sage, or sit down in pensive tearfulness by the grave of the friend of our youth, is to be turned to some account in this work. That disposition is supplied with objects to contemplate whose histories are exemplifications of the holiness which the Christian is required to seek, and then is directed to contemplate them, for the sake of imitating the holiness they exemplify. As we live in a sense for those who are to come after us, and as we are enjoined to make our lives good for the benefit of those who will follow us, so in a sense, the generations of the past have lived for us. And God has taken care to raise up amongst them, good men of every type for our benefit. As the Apostle says of the various orders of the ministry, that they were given by Christ for "the perfecting of the Saints," and "for the edifying of the Church," so we may say of every man of marked piety in every community, he is a gift from God for the perfecting and edifying of His people. He was born into the world and then into the family of Christ, for this, amongst other purposes, that he might be a model of faith and patience to those who were to live after him. The patriarchs and the prophets, the confessors and the martyrs, and heroes of the Sacramental host

of God's elect, whom I read of, or whom I have known, were created in part for me. They were created that *I* might follow them, and so like them, through faith and patience inherit the promises. And this is just the direction which the Christian is required to give to those emotions of veneration and love, with which he is wont to muse upon the holy dead, or to recall the images of sainted loved ones, who have been translated out of his sight. He is not to canonize them, and then worship them with idolatrous homage. He is not sentimentally to write epitaphs, and throw garlands upon their tombs. He is to follow them. He is to use them as land-marks on the road to Heaven. He is to show his appreciation of them, not by his enthusiastic encomiums upon their merits, or his morbid regrets at their loss; but by his earnest and faithful endeavors to imitate their piety.

This is the way that religion sanctifies the affections of the heart, and amidst the warm and tender sensibilities of the soul, sows the seeds of holiness. This is the way in which God makes the good of other days, and the pious friends over whose graves we weep, do the work of angels, and minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation. And now with these remarks which have grown out of the first term of the definition I am expounding, let me pass on to notice the things included in the body of the definition.

The Christian is a follower of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Here then is his rule and here his reward. His religion, if it be a genuine and vital thing, will have the effect to make his life in all particulars, the expression of these two elements, faith and patience. In the broad sense of these terms, everything that enters into the character of his life is comprehended within them.

First, then, the Christian is distinctively a man of faith. As the Apostle says, "we walk by faith." This makes him different from other men; different in the principles and the exercises of his own mind, and different in the circumstances external to him, by which he is guided and governed. Faith makes him a new creature, and faith puts

him into a new world. Faith, that is, Christian faith, is belief in, and reliance upon, and subjection to God. It implies in the exercise of it, all those mental and moral conditions which are necessary to its existence, and all those practical effects which consistently issue from its operation.

"All men have not faith," we read, and we know it is so, because we see that in many men, there is no disposition to believe in, and rely upon, and submit to God, and in their modes of life, none of the practical effects which in the nature of the case would follow upon these acts. The Christian's faith, then is not a barren principle. It is a power which first converts the heart and then changes the life; and it is so because it brings both the heart and the life under the power of God. Hence, unbelief is represented as so flagrant a crime in the Scriptures, because it consists in a condition of the heart which will not yield to the power of God, and it is attended with every possible demonstration of this opposition to His power. And hence we see how vain is the claim which some men make to the name of believer, who all the while are indicating, that in their hearts and their lives, there is no feeling or recognition of the power of God. When we say of the Christian then, that he is a man of faith, we mean in the first place, that with an honest, cordial and intelligent mind, he acknowledges God. He gives credit to him as a reality, and he gives credit to all that he reveals concerning himself, or other things as realities. Then, in the second place, he puts to a legitimate use this knowledge of God, and of what he reveals. He makes everything in his character, his habits and his conduct, correspond with the objects which he thus acknowledges. If you could read him aright, you would find upon everything about him, this confession inscribed, "I believe in God, and all that God reveals." His whole life is adjusted to this creed, is the utterance of this sentiment.

Accordingly he treats God as a reality, by fearing him,

loving him, obeying him, adoring him. God is apprehended in all his thoughts, consulted in all his ways, seen in all things, and enthroned above all things in his affections. So, that like Enoch, he walks consciously with God. God becomes to him the central and predominant fact of the universe, interfusing itself with all other facts, great and small, and swaying by its influence, all the tides of destiny, through time, and through eternity. And in like manner he treats whatsoever God has revealed as a reality. He finds these revelations evolving themselves more or less definitely in all God's works, but taking the highest and infallible form in the teachings of the Bible. That is God's word, and the believer takes its utterances as the literal voice of God. Where that leads he follows; over all the territory which it describes, he walks in the confidence that he is planting every step on the firm ground of truth. This gives form to his faith, for this is the testimony of God, and faith is belief founded upon testimony. And under the operation of this faith, he lives amidst the objects which the Bible reveals, and accords them a force and value as definite as that which he assigns to the objects of the natural world. Hence he lives under the clear conviction of his obligations to the government of God. The rights of God in respect to him, and his duty in respect to God, are as distinctly acknowledged as any that exist under human institutions. He lives with constant reference to the ends of being, presented in the Scriptures—the glorifying of God and the enjoying of him forever. He lives under a deep and humbling impression of his misery and ruin as a depraved being, all whose relations towards God have been disordered, and all whose capacities for serving God have been disabled by sin. He lives in entire dependence upon the Lord Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and man, and upon the virtue of his righteousness as the only means of his justification before God. He lives under a solemn sense of the holiness of God's

law, and of God's nature, and of the indispensable necessity of personal holiness on his part in order to see God; and so he lives in the daily effort by the cultivation of holiness to work out his own salvation. He lives habitually under the operation of all the sacred and affecting motives which redemption addresses to the heart to draw it from sin and the world and attach it to God. He lives in constant communion with an unseen world, and with spiritual objects; ever setting over "the things eternal" against "the things temporal," and valuing the latter, whether painful or pleasant in themselves, in proportion as they can be made subordinate to the attainment of the former. He lives cautiously and circumspectly amidst the vanities and temptations of this life, remembering that the friendship of the world is enmity against God, and that the slothful and unprofitable servant must have his portion with hypocrites and unbelievers. He lives in the confident assurance that God will be true on His part to the engagements of His covenant; that He will make all things work together for his good, and that if he is faithful unto death, He will infallibly give him a crown of life. So the Patriarchs of old times and the Saints of all ages have lived, and every child of God standing in his lot, repeats the process and proves himself a follower of their faith.

And now the second article in this rule of the Christian is patience. This is the fruit of faith; it is a form of experience which results naturally from faith, and which cannot exist without faith. The term implies that the party is in some sense a sufferer. Patience exists under disappointments, and provocations, and griefs. The Christian is to be a man of patience under these circumstances, and the Saviour has told him he will not lack occasions for the exhibition of this character, for he has caused it to be written, "through much tribulation ye must enter into the kingdom of heaven." Patience is a part of the yoke which Christ's disciples must take upon them. It is a yoke that clasps the neck of self-

will, and bows the head of pride. It is not natural to bear it. It is not natural to be still under the hand that chastens us; to kiss the rod that smites us; to bless the being who has bereft us of our friends, or spoiled us of our treasures. But this yoke the Christian has learned how to bear. All God's children have had to bear it hitherto, and all may expect to bear it in the time to come. Precisely in the form in which I have represented it as consisting in the endurance of suffering, they may expect to have to bear it, for very few, if any, get to Heaven without having been wrung with heart-aches and goaded by sorrows at some period on the way. But the term patience I conceive has a wider sense, and may be made to suit other circumstances than those of suffering. It may be applied to men under circumstances of prosperity, and then it means the opposite of haste, eagerness, importunate and excessive desire, or what the Bible calls "concupiscence." The Christian is a man of patience then, because he is to be in all conditions a man of sobriety, a man of moderation—as the Apostle exhorts, "be sober, for the end of all things is at hand," and "let your moderation be known to all men." The impatience of the covetous and ambitious world, the extravagance of the idolatrous votaries of earthly grandeur, wealth and pleasure, he must eschew. His tastes, his aspirations, his affections must fasten "upon things above where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God," and in the palace no less than in the hovel, he must wear the pilgrim's garb and show that he is seeking "a better country, even an heavenly." And then patience means further—continuance or steadfastness in labor. And in this sense, too, the Christian is a man of patience. He is directed in one place to be "steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord;" and in another he is described as one who, "by patient continuance in well doing, is seeking for glory, and honor, and immortality." The patience that exhibits itself in this form, evidently applies to the case of all the people of God. They

are not their own, they are the bond-servants of Christ ; they are called to manifold duties, and are charged with the use of manifold talents. "Occupy till I come" has been said to every one of them,—and from them all, the high and the low, the wise and the unwise, the Master will demand some fruit at his coming. And there is great danger of the Christian's exhibiting restiveness under these obligations, and forgetting his vows and sleeping at his post, and declining to put his Lord's money to usury. So that this kind of patience is a virtue of no little significance, and one which needs to be cultivated with no little solicitude. The men of old had it, Moses had it, Elijah had it, Paul had it, God's true children have always had it, and we must have it, if we would follow them into the inheritance of the promises.

These remarks must suffice as to the Christian's rule ; let me say a word or two now as to his reward. The practice of faith and patience are evidently spoken of in the text as means to an end, and the end is to inherit the promises. And what are the promises? To the Saints of the Old Testament they were summed up in the promise of Christ, and to believers still it is declared that "all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him are Amen." The promises of God then embrace everything which he undertook to do for his people in giving Christ to them. And who shall measure the boundless grace of God which is contained in Christ, or describe the innumerable blessings which cluster around such a gift? "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all," argues the Apostle, "how shall He not with him freely give us all things?" And this is just the conclusion to which the Gospel will bring every mind which really understands and receives it—if Christ is ours, all things are ours. Nothing can be withheld when such a boon has been bestowed. And this general proposition is fully sustained by an examination of the particular promises which we find in the Scriptures. They embrace everything which

the heart can ask, for this world or the next. They cover every conceivable emergency which can arise in the Christian's course. They suit every variety of character, every phase of Providence, every vicissitude of fortune. They hover like bright-winged Angels over every spot in life, and they gather in a celestial phalanx around the believer's dying bed to form his convoy to the skies.

Now, these promises, through faith and patience we inherit. Without faith and patience it is impossible to get access to the benefit of them. But faith and patience will infallibly admit us to the enjoyment of them. In this world they will have this effect, so far as the promises relate to this world. Just in proportion as we rise to eminence in the practice of these graces, we shall find ourselves in command of a larger field, spanned and illumined by the promises. We shall inherit them so far as we have capacity to do so, in the sense of possessing the blessings contained in them. But what we do not yet possess, we may still inherit, we may hold as our own, by a sure and indefeasible title. And in this sense there are promises not to be fulfilled in this world, which the Christian inherits. They are the promises which tell us of the things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, which God hath prepared for them that love him. They are the promises which speak of the mansions in His Father's house, where Christ has gone to prepare a place for His friends. They are the promises which unfold to us the glories of the heavenly Jerusalem, with its golden streets and gates of pearl. They are the promises which lead us to the river of the water of life, which flows fast by the throne of God. They are the promises which show us the white robes, and the palms, and the crowns of those who have come up out of great tribulation; and they are the promises which describe to us the home which sin can never pollute, nor sorrow invade; where the mourners shall never weep, nor the dead be carried to the grave. Precious promises not *yet*

to be realized, and yet already inherited. They lie along the horizon of this dark world like the streaks of morning, and the day's glad harbingers to the weary watchers of the night; and faith and patience, like the lark's wings which bear it up into the mantling glories of the East, are the pinions of the soul, by which it is mounting upward, ever nearer and nearer to the point, where these promises shall be turned into facts, and the joy of expectation shall be merged in the rapture of possession.

And now, dear friends, what kinder wish can I leave with you this morning, than that you all may be enabled so to exemplify this faith and patience as to be found at all times inheriting these promises? The circumstances under which we are met, on the eve of a separation of unusual length, may excuse me for saying that I have desired earnestly, in my ministrations to-day, to communicate to you, some special spiritual benefit, and I have thought I could not do you a better service than by holding up before you, and impressing upon your minds, this definition of the Christian contained in my text, "Followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises." Remember it, engrave it upon your hearts and your consciences, and exemplify it in your lives. I can give you no truer expression of my interest in your welfare than is contained in this counsel. Months will probably pass, before we join in the worship of God in this house again. What changes are involved in these months, we know not. But one thing we do know; these months will sweep us all onward towards eternity, if they do not sweep us into it. We are all moving in the grand procession, which is marching, generation after generation, to the grave. We are followers of nations, who have gone before us, to the regions of the dead. In this respect we are all alike. But in this procession there are many subdivisions; parties bearing different banners, and following different leaders. Mammon has its crowd after it; Folly has

its crowd after it; Lust has its crowd after it; Ambition has its crowd after it; Pleasure has its crowd after it. All men are ranged in some of these bands, following those whom they have chosen to make their models and their oracles.

O! Christians, let your position in this motley scene be well defined. Let others go after whom they please; do you be followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises. Could I go from house to house, and leave a blessing at every door, this should be the blessing, "faith and patience for every inmate here," for then I should know that I was leaving another blessing there, that is, the promises. And then, whatever might be the history of those families during these months before us, whatever sorrows might visit them, or whatever breaches death might make in their little circles, I should know that these promises would be there, to console the downcast spirit, to dry the mourners' tear, and to give the dying a triumphant ascent to glory.

Brethren and friends, I cannot give you this blessing, but I can breathe a prayer to God for you, that he may give it; and I do here most earnestly beseech him, that he may be pleased to spare every one of you, till through His grace, it shall be possible to say of you when you come to die, "through faith and patience he has inherited the promises,"