

A Sermon on Hebrews 11:7

By James Henley Thornwell

Transcribed from Manuscript

HEBREWS XI.7.

By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.¹

The design of the apostle in this chapter is, by various examples, selected from every period in the history of the church, to illustrate the power of faith as the principle of perseverance in a holy life. This has been the distinguishing characteristic of good men in all ages of the world. Those whom the Scriptures commemorate as having obtained a good report are in nothing more strikingly diverse from those who are enrolled in the records of human fame than in their simple allegiance to God. Others have performed <as> splendid sacrifices, submitted to <as> cruel sufferings, experienced <as> wonderful deliverances & achieved <as brilliant>² victories³—the difference is that in the one case pride, superstition, ambition & vain glory were the sources of <magnanimity>⁴ & virtue, while, in the other, all flowed from a rational faith in God. Alexander's conquests, considered in themselves, were more conspicuous than those of Joshua. The <fortitude>⁵ of Regulus quite as remarkable as the <patience>⁶ of Job, & the victories of Cæsar no less signal than the triumphs [of] David, but Alexander <sacrificed to glory>,⁷ Regulus <to>⁸ pride, & Caesar to ambition[—]while Joshua, Job & David <sacrificed only to>⁹ God. The good report of these elders was obtained by faith. The fountain of [2]¹⁰ their inspiration was not on earth, but in heaven.

The faith, it is needless to remark, which the apostle celebrates as the parent of ancient achievement & suffering is the faith of God's elect; that which distinguishes all true & spiritual worshippers, & is itself distinguished from every other species of belief, not more by the evidence on which it rests than by the objects which it embraces. In a lax sense faith is applied to every degree of probability which falls short of certainty—in the language of common life it is very nearly synonymous with opinion. Any assent which does not amount to

knowledge is expressed in terms of belief. But in philosophical accuracy we must distinguish the beliefs of the mind, not only in their degrees, but in the evidence which produces them. There are obviously <apart from demonstration, which is not conversant about real existences,> two general sources of credibility—¹¹one in the things themselves which are the objects of thought, & another referring to them, but not derived from them—the¹² one may be called intrinsic, the other extrinsic probability. Intrinsic probability, including as it does,

1. This sermon has been transcribed from a scanned copy in the library of C. N. Willborn by Caleb Cangelosi and C. N. Willborn. Notations and "readings" on deletions and insertions have been added by Chris Coldwell. The original is in the James Henley Thornwell Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina and used here with permission. The original appears to be two sheets of period stationary paper folded in half, making a four page unit. There is some staining, fading caused possibly by glue or tape, and some of the crossed out words are hard to discern. Otherwise, the script is legible. There is a number in the upper left hand corner (3506) which is in a different hand and may be an inventory number. The pages are numbered in the upper right corners, possibly in the original hand. The beginning of pages 2, 3 and 4 are noted by a number in square brackets in the text. Interline insertions are noted by arrow brackets. A few letters are obscured in the copy, probably due to staining or aging of the original. Such faint or obscured text, interpolations, guesses and additions, are surrounded by square brackets.

2. A word, probably "splendid," has been crossed out with a line, and "as brilliant" inserted above. All insertions are interline above unless otherwise noted.

3. The following has been crossed out: "beside more/mere heroes of the ancient world whom Paul brings in [review?] [before?] [us?]. The strikethrough makes it difficult to discern the last three or four words).

4. The words "strength, & patience" are crossed out and "magnanimity" is inserted interline above.

5. "Magnanimity" is struck out and "fortitude" inserted.

6. "Fortitude" is crossed out, and "patience" inserted.

7. The phrase "was the victim of a morbid ambition" has been crossed out and "sacrificed to glory" inserted interline above.

8. The words "of stoical" are crossed out and "to" inserted.

9. The words "simply obeyed" have been crossed out and "sacrificed only to" inserted interline above.

10. Page one ends with "The fountain of" and continues to page two.

11. The words are inserted, and there is a gap between the words "credibility" and "one," with a possible indication of a dash.

12. This "the" is possibly capitalized.

all those cases of assent, in which the reasons for believing spring from the things themselves in their relations to the mind, admits most obviously of every variety of degrees from the highest certainty to the lowest possible presumption. It is the probability upon which the physical & moral sciences for the most part depend—the probability which arises from observation & experience. Assent to this species of evidence we call science or opinion, according as it relates to facts in their connection & dependence, or in their insulated character.

On extrinsic probability the grounds [3] for believing are not in the things themselves in their relations to our minds, but in their relations to the minds of others. The truth is not manifested, but attested. The things do not prove themselves, but others prove them instead. The reason of assent is testimony, & not observation or experience. <The assent given>¹³ upon this ground is what is specifically denominated faith. It is evident that here also there may be an infinite variety of degrees, according to the nature of the testimony, from the highest certainty to the lowest possible presumption. When the witness is a human being we call it human, when God, we call it Divine faith. This is the faith upon which the apostle had his eye when he ascribed such signal & glorious affects to its influence. The efficacy of it he attributes to two circumstances—its being the substance of

things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.¹⁴ It is a mistake to suppose that in this description he intended to give, as many commentators have rashly imagined, a definition of faith. There is no definition in the case—all the elements of faith are not included either directly or <by necessary> implication. If Divine faith is the belief of all that God has revealed simply upon the ground that he has revealed it, to <say that>¹⁵ the substance of things hoped for <is an adequate acco[unt of it]> would be virtually saying that¹⁶ revelation can contain nothing but promises of good. <For>¹⁷ future good is the only object of hope. It is manifest, however, that God can threaten as well as promise, that He can reveal what should excite our fears as well as our hopes. Hence the matter of revelation is inadequately described in the expression—the substance of things hoped for—No more does the other expression, the evidence of things not seen, embrace all the objects of faith. [4] Things seen as well as things unseen may be <included>¹⁸ in the word of God. [There]¹⁹ is nothing in the nature of the case, to limit the Divine testimony to the past or [the] future. Certainly God testifies to the structure of our frames, our compound [nature,] the moral condition of our souls[,] <our weaknesses, & dependence,> all of which are, to every man, present real[ities.] <The>²⁰ design <of the apostle, therefore,> was not to define, nor to give an adequate description of faith, [but] to single out those properties <of its nature,> upon which its efficacy, in promoting holine[ss of] life & especially perseverance in grace, most largely depends. It controls & [regu-]lates human conduct[,] <he would say,>²¹ it becomes the master principle of life, because [it] has the effect of giving the force of a present subsistence, or a present re[ality] to those future goods which God has <promised.>²² The invisible world it [brings] near—the great things <to come,> which shall be experience, it makes, in some se[nse ex-]perience now. It causes us to feel & act as if amidst those august & gl[orious] scenes to which we must soon be introduced. It <sees>²³ [the] invisible & <approximates>²⁴ the remote.²⁵ [It] lives in the unseen world & expatiates <on>²⁶ distant delights. Faith is to the [good] man, what sense is to others. It gives him the objects from which his thoughts[,] habits, passions & affections are constantly fed. Hence its grandeur. Hen[ce its] power. It sees with the eye of God & feels with a heart attuned to His.

To illustrate the effect of these properties in producing the noblest instances of obedience the apostle appeals to recorded examples of faith which adorn every period of the history of the church & every dispensation of religion in our fallen world.■

13. The phrase “What is credible” has been crossed out and “The assent given” inserted interline above.

14. Hebrews 11:1.

15. The words “represent it as” are crossed out and “say that” inserted.

16. The word “no” has been crossed out.

17. “For” has been inserted interline above, and it looks as though a capital “F” has been made lowercase in “future.”

18. The word “embraced” has been crossed out and the word “included” inserted.

19. The text is partially obscured and faint. There is evidence of possibly tape, or the residue of it, or some kind of applied glue in a uniform band running the full length of the right edge of page four. Hence the many words in square brackets in the transcription of this last page of the sermon.

20. The word “His” has been crossed out and the word “The” inserted interline above.

21. There is a gap between “conduct” and “it” and a possible indication of a dash. There is no comma after “conduct,” but an insertion mark for “he would say,” could be mistaken for one as in the previous instance at “souls[.]” A comma has been inserted in both cases.

22. A word has been crossed out (possibly “provisione”?) and “promised” inserted interline above.

23. The text “is this power of seeing” is crossed out and “sees” inserted.

24. The words “of approximating” has been crossed out and “approximates” inserted interline above.

25. A period has been added after “remote” and the phrase “which gives to faith its influence.” has been crossed out.

26. The word “among” has been crossed out and the word “on” inserted interline above.