

# Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

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UNBELIEVERS UPBRAIDED.

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## A Sermon

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“He . . . upbraided them with their unbelief.”—Mark xvi. 14.

I SHALL not dwell so much upon this particular instance of the disciples' unbelief as upon the fact that the Lord Jesus upbraided them because of it. This action of his shows us the way in which unbelief is to be treated by us. As our loving Saviour felt it to be right rather to upbraid than to console, he taught us that, at least on some occasions, unbelief should be treated with severity rather than with condolence.

Beloved friends, let us never look upon our own unbelief as an excusable infirmity, but let us always regard it as a sin, and as a great sin, too. Whatever excuse you may at any time make for others,—and I pray you to make excuses for them whenever you can rightly do so,—never make any for yourself. In that case, be swift to condemn. I am not at all afraid that, as a general rule, we shall err on the side of harshness to ourselves. No; we are far too ready to palliate our own wrong-doing, to cover up our own faults, and to belittle our own offences. I very specially urge every believer in Jesus to deal most sternly with himself in this matter of unbelief. If he turns the back of the judicial knife towards others, let him always turn the keen edge of it towards himself. In that direction, use your sharpest eye and your most severely critical judgment. If you see any fault in yourself, you may depend upon it that the fault is far greater than it appears to be; therefore, deal more sternly with it. It is a very easy thing for us to get into a desponding state of heart, and to mistrust the promises and faithfulness of God; and yet, all the while, to look upon ourselves as the subjects of a disease which we cannot help, and even to claim pity at the hands of our fellow-men, and to think that they should condole with us, and try to cheer us. Perhaps they should; but, at any rate, we must not think that they should. It will be far wiser for each one of us to feel,

“This unbelief of mine is a great wrong in the sight of God. He has never given me any occasion for it, and I am doing him a cruel injustice by thus doubting him. I must not idly sit down, and say, ‘This has come upon me like a fever, or a paralysis, which I cannot help;’ but I must rather say, ‘This is a great sin, in which I must no longer indulge; but I must confess my unbelief, with shame and self-abasement, to think that there should be in me this evil heart of unbelief.’”

Notwithstanding what I said, just now, concerning our dealings with others, I must give very much the same advice with regard to them as to ourselves, though in a somewhat mitigated form. When we see any of our friends falling into sin and unbelief, we must seek to deal wisely with them,—always kindly,—never harshly. Let us reserve all our severity for ourselves, as I have already urged upon you. Still, I am sure that it is quite possible for us to be doing our fellow-Christians serious harm by excusing their unbelief, and by pitying them for it, instead of pointing out to them, tenderly, yet faithfully, the great sin they are committing by this doubting.

Have you never seen a “coddled” lad? I have seen one, who ought to be in the open air at play, shut in a close room because his parents were fearful that he was delicate, and unable to do as other lads do. He ought to have been taking part in various healthy exercises that would have developed and strengthened every muscle in his body; but, instead of that, he was sitting down, tied to his mother’s apron strings, and so was being made weaker than he was before. He was kept in an atmosphere which was not fit for him to breathe because his foolish parents were afraid the fresh air might be too trying for him; and long before he was ill, he was dosed and physicked until he really became ill. Many a child has been murdered by being thus coddled; or, if he has lived to grow up to manhood, he has been a poor, feeble, effeminate creature, because the abundant love, which has been lavished upon him, has been linked with equally abundant folly. You can easily treat Christians, and especially young converts, in the same senseless fashion. If they are unbelieving, you can keep back from them the stern truth about the sinfulness of such a state of heart and mind, because you fear that they will be discouraged if you deal faithfully with them. That is quite as wrong as saying to the unconverted, over and over again, “Only believe,” without ever mentioning the need of repentance and regeneration. There is a way of misapplying even the promises of God to unbelieving hearts, and of giving the consolations of the gospel to those who are not in a condition to receive them, as one might give sweetmeats to sick children, and so do them harm. People, who are thus unwisely treated, are apt to remain in the same sad state until their unbelief becomes chronic, and their unhappiness becomes a lifelong burden to them. Sometimes, when a man is in great pain, it is wise to give him something that will afford him even temporary relief; but the better course is, if possible, to strike at the root of his disease, and eradicate it once for all. That should be our method of dealing with the unbelief of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must make it clear to them that unbelief is no trifle, and that it

is a thing for which its owner is not to be pitied, but to be blamed, and to be severely blamed, for it is a most grievous fault and sin. Our Saviour dealt thus with the eleven when he upbraided them because of their unbelief. He did not excuse them, or comfort them, but he upbraided them. Upbraiding does not seem to be in harmony with the usual character of Jesus, does it? Yet, you may depend upon it that it was the right thing for him to do, and the kind thing, too; otherwise, he would not have done it.

Jesus upbraided these disciples of his because of their unbelief upon a very special point on which they ought to have been the first to believe. Many persons had seen their Lord after he had risen from the dead; and the eleven apostles, who ought, by reason of their greater spiritual advantages, and their more intimate companionship with Christ, to have been the readiest to believe the good tidings, were not so; and, therefore, Christ "upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he had risen." Yet these eye-witnesses—Peter and John, Cleopas and his companion, and Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the other Mary, and the rest of the holy women,—who had come to the eleven, were their own brethren and sisters in the faith; so Christ might well say to them,—and I daresay he did,—“Why did you doubt their testimony? You did them an injustice by acting in such a manner. They are honest and truthful, and they have told you the truth. You have not been accustomed to doubt their word; so, as you have believed their witness concerning other matters, why did you not believe them in this instance? Moreover,” our Lord might well say, “there were many of them; it was not merely one, who might have been mistaken; but a considerable number saw me, and I spake with them; and they came and told you that it was even so, yet you did not believe them. The number of the witnesses, and their well-known character, are sure signs that you must have been in a wrong state of heart and mind, not to be able to receive such clear evidence as theirs; and, therefore, you are blameworthy for your unbelief.”

In the case of these apostles, unbelief was peculiarly sinful, for they had the promise of their Lord to back up the testimony of his disciples. He had often told them that he would rise again from the dead, and had even foretold the very day of his resurrection, so that the unbelief of the apostles was altogether inexcusable. Yet this very fact, which was a cause of stumbling to the apostles, appears to me to give point and power to the appeal which I make to myself, and to you, against our unbelief. We all believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead; we have no difficulty in accepting that great fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith; all of us, who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, fully endorse Paul's words to the saints in Rome, and say that our Lord "was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." Well, then, brethren and sisters in Christ, if we believe that Jesus rose from the dead, the ground is completely cut from under the feet of unbelief. for his promise is, "Because I live, ye shall live also." If he lives, then the gospel is true, and the promises of the gospel are sure to all who

believe in him. If he lives, then he lives to intercede for us; and, through his intercession, every covenant blessing is certain to come to us. Therefore, if we harbour unbelief in our hearts, we are doubly guilty; and if the Saviour were here in bodily presence, though his face would still beam with infinite love to us, I am quite sure that he would, even in sterner tones than he used towards those eleven apostles, upbraid us because of our unbelief. If Thomas will not believe that Christ is risen until he has put his finger into the print of the nails in his hands, and thrust his hand into his Saviour's wounded side, that is bad enough; but it is worse if you, who do believe that he is risen, and who do not doubt any one of the doctrines that he has taught you, still have unbelief mingled with the faith which you do possess. Whether that supposed faith is all true, or not, is more than I can say; but, with so much faith as you profess to have, how can you still continue to doubt?

I want, in this discourse, to upbraid myself, and you also, for any unbelief that we may have harboured, by noticing, first, *the evil of unbelief in itself*; and, then, *the evils that surely flow out of unbelief*.

I. First, then, I have to say to any of God's children who have given way to unbelief in any degree,—YOUR UNBELIEF IS AN EVIL THING IN ITSELF.

This truth will come very closely home to you if you will just *think how you would feel if others disbelieved you*. If anyone were to question your veracity, you would be very vexed; and if you made a promise to any man, and he expressed a doubt as to the fulfilment of it, you would feel hurt; but if those, with whom you are most closely connected, were to disbelieve you, you would feel still more grieved, for you expect absolute confidence from them. If mutual trust were taken away from any family, how unhappy the members of that family would be;—the children suspecting the sincerity of their parents' love,—the wife doubting the reality of her husband's affection,—the husband dubious of his wife's faithfulness! Try to conceive, if you can, what it would be if those, who now call you friend, or child, or husband, or wife, or brother, or sister, should no longer accept what you say as being true. Suppose, also, that you were perfectly conscious that you had never broken your word to them,—that you had faithfully kept every promise that you had made to them, and had been in all things honest, and true, and sincere, would you not feel their doubts and suspicions most acutely? I am sure you would; they would touch the very apple of your eye, and cut you to the quick; you could not endure such treatment from them. Then, how can you mete out to the Lord Jesus Christ such treatment as would be so painful to yourself? And, further, how can you expect your child to trust you when you doubt your Saviour? How can you look even to your wife for confidence in you when, if there be some little trouble, or things go somewhat awkwardly, you straightway begin to mistrust your God and Saviour?

Remember, too, that *the sin of your unbelief may be measured by the excellence of the Person whom you mistrust*. I said, just now, that, if you were conscious of your absolute sincerity, you would be the more deeply wounded by the suspicion of those who doubted you.

What think you then, of the sin of doubting Christ, who cannot lie, who is "the Truth" itself? I know, beloved, that you have a very high opinion of your Lord and Saviour; do you not worship him as Divine? Do you not also feel his truly human sympathy? You know that there is no clause in his everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure, which he has not already fulfilled, or which he will not fulfil at the appointed time. His incarnation, his life here below, his shameful sufferings, his vicarious death;—all these he promised to undergo, and all these he performed in due season, and he will go right through, to the end, with the great work of your eternal salvation. By the mouth of his servant Jeremiah, the Lord asked, long ago, "Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness?" And the Lord Jesus might well say to his professed followers, "Have I been as the barren fig tree was to me when I found on it nothing but leaves?" As he points to the long list of his favours to us, he may well ask, "For which of them do you thus misjudge and mistrust me?" And when he spreads out the whole roll of his life and work before you, he may well enquire, "Upon which part of my life or work do you base your suspicions? What is there in my nature, as Divine and human,—what is there in my character,—what is there in my life below, or in my life above,—that should lead you to question my faithfulness to you, my power to help you, my readiness to sympathize with you, my willingness to bless you?" Why, you are doubting him whom the angels adore and worship! You have felt, sometimes, as if you would like to wash his feet with your tears. How, then, can you ever insult him with your doubts? You have even said that you could die for him; and it has been your great ambition to live for him; yet you cannot trust him! If you have run with the footmen in the matter of these minor trials of your faith, and they have wearied you, what would you do if you had to contend with horsemen, as many others have had to do in the day of martyrdom? And if, in the favourable circumstances in which you have been placed, you have doubted your Saviour, what are you likely to do when you are in the swellings of Jordan? Ah, my brethren, when you think of unbelief as aiming her darts at Jesus Christ, the Well-beloved of our soul, surely you will say that it is a shameful sin, and a disgraceful crime against infinite love!

Then, *remember, beloved in the Lord, the relationship in which Jesus Christ stands to you.* You know that, the more closely we are allied to a person, the more painful any suspicion on the part of that person becomes. I have repeatedly used, in this connection, the figure of a child's trust in a parent, a husband's trust in his wife, and the wife's trust in her husband; and you have readily accepted the comparisons because you have felt that the nearness of the relationship would involve a corresponding degree of trust. How near—how very near—we are in kinship to Christ! Are we not married to him? Has he not espoused us unto himself for ever? There is a conjugal union between Christ and his Church of which the marriage bond on earth is but a feeble type. Then, can you, who have been renewed in heart by the Holy Spirit, and washed in the blood of the

Lamb, doubt him whom your soul loveth? Can you distrust him to whom you are so closely allied? Oh, shame, shame, shame, that want of confidence should come in to mar such a wondrous union as that!

But we are even more closely knit to Christ than the marriage union implies, for "we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." I cannot explain that secret, mystical union of which the Scripture speaks; but it is a true union, whatever mystery there may be about it. Then, shall there be such disunion amongst the members of the body that the eye shall begin to doubt the heart, and the hand to mistrust the foot? It would be pitiful if such a state of things could prevail in our bodies; then, what must it be if such a state of things prevails among the members of the mystical body of Christ? Beloved, may God render this unbelief impossible by sending such life floods of grace through all the members of Christ's body that never more shall a single thought of mistrust of our glorious covenant Head enter our minds even for a single instant!

Consider next, I pray you, dear friends, *how many times some of us have doubted our Lord.* The sin of unbelief becomes all the greater because it is so frequently committed. God be thanked that it is not so with all Christians: for there are some who walk in faith, and dwell in faith. I suppose that, as birds fly over everybody's head, so doubts fly around all good men's minds; but our old proverb says, "You need not let birds build in your hair," although there are some people, who let doubts come and lodge in their minds, and even dwell in their hearts. We know some persons of this kind, who seem to be very easily led into despondency, and doubt, and mistrust of Christ. Well now, if a man has done this only once, I think he might well say to himself, "I did once question everlasting truth. I did once stain the spotless robe of infinite veracity with a dark blot of suspicion;" and I think that he might find it difficult to forgive himself for having done a thing so vile even once. But when it comes to many times, and when it comes to long periods of doubt and mistrust, it is still worse. I want to press this point home upon all whom it concerns, and I want your consciences to be wide awake, so that, as you recall the many times in which you have thus sinned against your Heavenly Father, and against his blessed Spirit, and against his Divine Son, you may recollect that each distinct act of unbelief is a sin,—each act of mistrust is another wounding of the Lord. God grant that we may truly repent as we think of the many times in which we have been thus guilty!

Then there is this further point,—*some of these actions have been repetitions of former ones.* For instance, a man is in trouble, and he has doubts concerning the providence of God; but he is delivered, God is gracious to him, and helps him out of his difficulty. Well, now, if he falls into a similar trouble, and if he is again guilty of harbouring doubt, this is far worse. If a man should doubt your word the first time you speak to him, you might say, "Well, he does not know me." The second time, you might say, "When he has proved me more, he will trust me." But what shall I say of those, whose hair has a sprinkling of grey in it, and whose Christian experience extends to a score of years, or more,—perhaps, two score,—

possibly, three score? Oh, if you doubt the Lord now, it will be a crying shame! It will not be surprising if some of us act thus, for so did Israel for forty years in the wilderness; but that does not mitigate the evil in our case. It is a desperately evil thing that God should be mistrusted over and over again, and that he should have to say, "How long will it be ere ye believe me?"

I scarcely like to linger on such a sad theme; yet it does our hearts good to be thus upbraided; so, recollect that, *oftentimes our unbelief has come in the teeth of our own assurance to the contrary*. Do you not sometimes catch yourself saying, after a very great mercy, "Well, I never can doubt the Lord again"? When you have had an answer to prayer of a very memorable kind, you have said, "Oh, I must believe in the power of prayer now! For me ever to think that the Lord will deny me, must be impossible." Yes, in that respect also, we are just like the Israelites, who promised to keep the covenant, yet speedily broke it.

There is also this aggravation of your sin; *although you do not trust the Lord as you should, you do trust your fellow-creatures*. You can believe that lie of the old serpent,—

"The Lord hath forsaken thee quite;  
Thy God will be gracious no more;"—

yet you cannot so readily believe the oath and promise of God. If an earthly friend were to say to you, "I will help you," how readily you would jump at his offer! If there be an arm of flesh near, how cheerfully you lean upon it; and, though, perhaps, there be nothing for you to stay yourself upon but a broken reed, you think it is a strong staff, and throw all your weight upon it. It is quite true that ungodly men, who have no faith, generally have any amount of credulity. They cannot believe the truth, but they can believe lies to any extent. So is it, alas! with God's own people when they get off the track of faith. They seem to become credulous concerning the things seen, which are temporal, in proportion as they become dubious of the things unseen, which are eternal. Is not this a sin of the greatest blackness? Thou canst not trust thy husband, but thou canst trust a flatterer who deceives thee! Thou canst not trust thy God, but thou makest idol gods unto thyself, and trustest to them. Thou canst not stay thyself on Jehovah, but thou canst stay thyself on Egypt. Thou canst stay thyself on the promise of man who is but as a moth which is soon crushed; but as for him who made the heavens and the earth, and all things that are, thou canst not rely upon him. I feel as if I could sit down and cover my face for shame, when I think of those occasions wherein I have been guilty of this sin. Perhaps the best thing we could all do would be to go home, and fall on our knees, and ask our blessed Saviour to wash away all this unbelief, and not to believe us when we talk about doubting, but only to believe that, as he knows all things, he knows that, after all, we do trust him.

II. Now, with great brevity, I have to speak upon the second point, which is, **THE MANY EVILS WHICH COME OUT OF UNBELIEF TO THOSE OF US WHO LOVE THE LORD.**

Brethren and sisters, it is enough of evil—if there were no more,—that *unbelief is so cruel to Christ, and grieves his Holy Spirit so much*. I should but repeat myself if I reminded you how mistrust grieves you; and, speaking after the manner of men, in the same fashion it grieves the Holy Spirit. He dwells in you; shall he dwell in you to be grieved by you? He assuages your grief; will you cause him grief? Your vexations vanish because he is the Comforter; will you vex the Comforter? And what can vex him more than suspecting the ever-faithful heart of Christ? That is evil enough,—to wound Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Next, remember,—though this is a more selfish argument,—*how much unrest and misery unbelief has caused to yourself*. You have never had half as many trials from God as you have manufactured for yourself. Death, which you so much dread, is nothing compared with the thousand deaths that you have died through the fear of death. You make a whip for yourself, and you mix bitter cups for yourself, by your unbelief. There is quite enough trial for you to bear, and God will help you to bear it; but you put away the helping hand when you are unbelieving, and then you increase your own burden. Oh, you can sing, even by the rivers of Babylon, if you have but faith! You may lie on your sick bed, and feel great pain; yet your spirit shall not smart, but shall dance away your pangs, if your heart be but looking in simple confidence to Christ; and you shall die, as the negro said his master died,—“full of life,”—if you have true faith in Jesus. But if faith shall fail you, oh, then you are distressed when there is no cause for distress, and full of fear where no fear is!

And, then, *how much you lose, in other things, besides happiness!* A thousand promises are missed because there is not the faith to claim them. There are the caskets, and you have the keys; yet you do not put the keys into the locks to open them. There are Joseph's granaries, and you are hungry; but you do not go unto Joseph, and show your confidence in him by asking for what you need. Ye are not straitened in God, but in yourselves. If you believe not, you shall not be established, neither shall your prayers prevail, nor shall you grow in grace. If you believe not, your experience shall not be of that high and lofty kind that otherwise it might have been. We live down here in the marsh and the mist, when, had we faith, we might live in the everlasting sunshine. We are down below in the dungeons, fretting under imaginary chains, when the key of promise is in our bosom, which will open every door in Doubting Castle. If we will but use it, we may get away to the tops of the mountains, and see the New Jerusalem, and the land which is very far off.

Further, *unbelief weakens us for all practical purposes*. What can the man who is unbelieving do? O brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a terrible thing to think how much work there is that falls flat because it is not done in faith. You saw the trees when they were covered with bloom; there seemed to be a promise of much fruit; but there were chilling winds, and sharp frosts, and so, perhaps, only one in a hundred of the blossoms ever turned to fruit. The tree of the Church seems, at times, covered with beautiful

blossoms; what can be more lovely to the sight? But the blossoms do not knit,—faith is the bee that carries the pollen, it is faith that fructifies the whole, and makes it truly fruitful unto God. What might my sermons not have done had I believed my Master more? You, Sunday-school teacher, may say, “Had I taught in greater faith, I might have won my scholars.” Or you may say, “Had I gone to my visitings of the poor and the sick in the strength of the Lord, who knows what I might have done for him?” Faith is the Nazarite lock of Samson; if it be shorn away, Samson is weak as other men. Then, as to suffering, wonderful is the power of faith there. If you are trusting your Heavenly Father, believing that all is right that seems most wrong, that everything that happens is ordered or permitted by him, and that his grace will sweeten every bitter cup, you can suffer patiently; and, as your tribulations abound, so will your consolations abound in Christ Jesus. Like the ark of Noah, as the waters deepen, you will rise upon them, and get nearer to heaven in proportion as the great floods increase.

Unbelief, in any Christian, no doubt *has a very injurious effect upon other Christians*. There are some, who are like sickly sheep, which—

“Infect the flock,  
And poison all the rest.”

Especially is it so, dear brethren, if you happen to be in office in the church, or to be doing any prominent work for Christ. If the commander-in-chief trembles, the army is already conquered; if the captain begins to fear, fear will take possession of every soldier's heart in his company. Was it not grand of Paul, in the shipwreck, when all others were dismayed, and thought they should go to the bottom, but he said, “Have no fear, sirs,” and he bade them eat, as he ate,—calmly giving thanks to God before them all? Why, Paul saved them all by his calm confidence in God. If we have but faith, we shall strengthen our brethren; and if we have it not, we shall weaken them. I am sure, too, that *the influence of unbelief in Christians, upon the unconverted, is very serious indeed*. If we do not play the man in times of trial,—if we do not show them what faith in God can do,—they will think that there is nothing in it. And suppose, brethren, you should make anyone think there is nothing in religion, how sad that would be! When the devil wants a friend, surely he could not find one more able to do him service than a child of God who is full of mistrust. The children say, “Our father only trusts God for bread when there is plenty in the cupboard.” And the servants say, “The master is only happy in the Lord when he is in good health.” And those who know our business affairs say, “Oh, yes! So-and-so is a great believer; but, then, he has a big balance at his banker's; you should see him when trade is bad; you should see him when there are bad debts; and you will find that he is not a bit more a believer in Jesus Christ than any of the rest of us. He is a fair-weather Christian; he is like the flowers that open when the sun shines; but take away the summer prosperity, and you will see but little of his religion.” Let it not be so with any of us, but may God deliver us from this tremendous evil of unbelief!