

WHAT IS IT TO BELIEVE?

"Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" (John ix. 35.)

*"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life"
(John iii. 36.)*

By the late WILLIAM BARKER

(reprinted by special request)

WHAT is it to believe on the Son of God, and what is involved in that simple exercise of faith? Some may think this is a purely elementary question, only fit for babes in Christ—a question that any tyro can answer off-hand. In that case it should not be hard to give it a clear and definite reply. But alas! it is easy to assume that we know when really we do not. Such a mistake any of us may make, and even those who believe themselves to be better versed in Scripture than most of their fellow-Christians are liable to fall into it. And so I venture to entreat any who entertain this comforting belief about themselves, and all others, not to dismiss the question as if it called for no second thought. Let them search and see what the Holy Scriptures say about it—as was the custom in old days—and then inquire how far their latest views agree with that unerring guide.

I make bold to emphasize this advice. There is need of it. So many assertions are made nowadays and received on the bare word of the one who makes them. No scripture is brought forward in their support. No inquiry is made to find out whether they are warranted by the Word of God or not. And if one has courage to ask for chapter and verse he will possibly be regarded with suspicion and distrust. Never mind. Let such a one go on asking for Scripture proof and not be content until he gets it.

Now to our question, *What is it to believe on the Son of God ?* Let us look at John i. 11-13. Here the Evangelist states with the utmost brevity that "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not." What a tale those few words tell ! *He* came, the Hope of Israel—the Messiah—the Fulfiller of all the glowing promises made unto their fathers—and *they received Him not !* They searched the Scriptures and thought that in them they had eternal life. Their sacred writings—read every sabbath day in the synagogues—were His witness-bearers, and yet they did not—would not—come unto Him that they might have life (John v. 39. 40). On the contrary, they pronounced His claims false, denounced Him as a blasphemer, and insisted in Pilate's judgment hall that He should be crucified. Was ever story so tragic ? *But some did receive Him*—they were the poor of the flock—and to these He gave the

power, the right, the privilege to become children of God, even to them that believed on His name. Here, then, we plainly see that to receive Him, and to believe on His name, are equivalent terms. The one who receives is the one who believes, and the one who believes is the one who receives. To receive the rejected Saviour, to believe on Him, to confess Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, is to be numbered among God's children. And all such are born of God. It is no little thing, then, to believe on the Son of God, the Eternal Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, and in so doing we receive the right to be the children of God—that is, to take the place of such, distinctly and definitely.

In chapter ii. 23 of John's Gospel we read of others who believed on His name when they saw the miracles which He did. "But Jesus did not commit Himself unto them." How was that ? At first sight this seems strange indeed—they believed, and yet He stood aloof ! He did not trust them, no, not for a moment. Were they not sincere ? There is no reason to doubt their sincerity. How, then, is the fact to be explained that "Jesus did not commit Himself to them ?" What is the solution of this enigma ? It is found in this—that their belief was based on external evidence. They believed because they saw the miracles. Such credentials they could and did accept. But their belief went no further. It moved in the intellectual

sphere and left conscience and heart untouched. It was reasonable, it had much to say for itself, but it was a belief of which an unregenerate man was capable. Such is the faith of thousands in this day. They call themselves Christians, and never suspect that their profession is nothing but an empty shell—a house “swept and garnished,” but having no living inmate ! To believe on the Son of God means very much more than that.

To receive Him under every name by which He is revealed, the Way, the Truth, the Life—to receive Him as the Lamb of God, the Bearer away of the sin of the world—as the Son of Man lifted up that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life—as the Son of God, the proof and manifestation of God’s love to sinful men—as the Bread of Life whereof if a man eat he shall live for ever—as the Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep—as the Christ who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and who is now risen again and is in glory—to receive Him thus, to hearken to His words which are spirit and life—this is to believe on Him to the saving of the soul, and to life everlasting (Heb. x. 39 ; 1 Tim. 1. 16).

We do not mean in speaking thus that Christ in all these various ways appears in the vision of the soul at first. When the awakened jailer at Philippi was bid to be-

lieve on the Lord Jesus Christ and he should be saved, it was as a Saviour, the only refuge for the lost, that he believed on Him. And so with all of us. But from that happy moment Christ was his and he was Christ's. Now, the Christ of the fathers in the family of God is the Christ of the babes, the Christ of "Paul the aged," who had finished his course and had kept the faith, is the Christ of the Christian of yesterday. There are no two Christs. Growth in the knowledge of Him is another matter, but the One in the knowledge of whom we grow is ours *at the very start* of our Christian course.

If any thus receive Christ, if they thus believe on Him, do they not receive forgiveness of sins ? Are they not justified from all things, and sealed with "that Holy Spirit of promise" ? Undoubtedly it is so if Scripture is to be believed (Acts xiii. 38, 39 ; Eph. 1. 13). But in the teaching of the Apostle John those who thus receive Him have another thing, namely, *eternal life*, and they are owned as God's children (John i. 11-13 ; iii. 36). Are, then, these different terms—forgiveness, justification, eternal life, etc.—of equal value ? Do they all mean the same thing ? No indeed. Some of them are richer than the rest, but *in having Christ we have them all*. They are ours, though we have to learn their worth and meaning afterwards. Let us take pains to be clear as to this. We fear that some who once saw what we are saying

plainly enough are letting it slip and even doubting, if not denying it. They tell us that "we do not get eternal life by believing—that faith is the title to it." Nothing more. But we cannot recall a single passage of Holy Scripture which puts it in that way. And we earnestly ask those who speak this new language, whether we only acquire a *title* to Christ, when, through grace, we believe on Him, or is He, indeed, ours then and there ? Can we have Christ and not eternal life ? Ignorant we may be, having everything to learn. But if I know that Christ is mine—the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me—am I not warranted in saying that eternal life is mine and that I have it in having Him ? Does it not say in 1 John v. 12., "He that hath the Son hath life" ? Surely so, and it cannot be for our mutual comfort to deny it, or in any way to becloud the blessedness of it, in the soul of the youngest believer.

But let us not hold the truth in terms only—content to know that eternal life is ours without seeking to understand that great phrase in all the fulness of its many meanings. This is where some come short. They are sure that eternal life is theirs, and if believers on the Son of God they have the warrant of the Word of God for saying so, but when you ask them to tell you something about the life they have, they are not able to say much, if anything at all. And what they do say seems to show

that they see no difference between the new birth, forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life. In their eyes they all have but one meaning. Now babes in the family of God may be excused if they can say but little. We do not expect them to distinguish between things that differ, or to express in accurate terms all that which they truly enjoy according to their measure. A babe in its mother's arms knows what it is to love and be loved long before its infant lips can frame a sentence or utter a single syllable. But we must not remain babes nor be satisfied with the knowledge of the truth in terms, but go on to possess it in the faith of our souls. Then it becomes substance to us—real riches—and our inward and outward life pass under its mighty influence. When a child is born heir to a crown and kingdom, he knows nothing of his birthright and his high estate. The nursery, the cradle, and his nurse's knees are the things the child knows most about. But we expect him to grow in understanding, and when at length he comes to realize who and what he is, his whole life, so to speak, undergoes a great change. And so, if life, eternal life, is communicated to the soul at the earliest dawn of its spiritual history, let the one who knows that he has it, in that he knows that he has Christ, go on to learn more of it in its ever-expanding meaning. Life is a profound thing, eluding all definitions and full of ever-multiplying wonders. And if this be true of creature-life as we see it in the

world around, how much more is it true of eternal life, in which the knowledge of the Father and the Son and of those unseen and eternal things which God has prepared for them that love Him has so large a place (John xvii. 3 ; 1 Cor. ii. 9-12). It is in harmony with this that Christians who are rich in this world, and who have within their reach all that money can buy, are enjoined to lay hold of that which is life indeed (1 Tim. vi. 19), while Timothy, that choice servant of the Lord, is exhorted to flee these things, to fight the good fight of faith and lay hold of eternal life.

Let us, then, be on our guard lest we make knowledge and experience the measure of the blessing wherewith we have been blessed. *In having Christ we have all*, for every blessing is treasured up in Him. At the same time we must take care not to be like a man who holds parchment deeds that prove him the undoubted owner of rich estates, yet who never takes trouble either to survey or to enjoy them, but leaves them lying idle, and yielding no wealth either to himself or to anyone else. It is the diligent soul that shall be made fat, and unto him that hath shall more be given.

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