

*The Steadfastness
of Promises and the
Sinfulness of Staggering*

John Owen



THE STEADFASTNESS
OF PROMISES AND THE
SINFULNESS OF
STAGGERING

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ABOUT THIS BOOK



A powerful sermon preached before the English Parliament in 1649, expounding **Romans 4:20** and Abraham's unwavering faith. Owen systematically dismantles every reason for doubting God's promises, demonstrating their **unshakeable foundation** in divine truth, omnipotence, and sincerity. He argues that "staggering" — spiritual wavering and unbelief — is not merely weakness but **sin**, since God has left no legitimate ground for doubt. Moving from theological exposition to urgent application, Owen calls his hearers to **bold, resolute faith** that ventures everything upon the promises of God, even amid great uncertainty and trial.



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TITLE PAGE



The Steadfastness of Promises, and the Sinfulness of Staggering: Opened in a Sermon Preached at Margarets in Westminster before the Parliament, February 28, 1649. Being a day set apart for solemn humiliation throughout the nation. By John Owen, Minister of the Gospel.

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TO THE COMMONS OF ENGLAND IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED



Sirs,

God, in whose hand your breath is and whose are all your ways, has brought various seasons over you, and in them all has shown that His works are truth and His ways are just. He calls earnestly through them for a walk before Him that is fitting for those who, along with other distinguishing mercies, have been granted the special protection of His providence. When prosperity is in view, to sacrifice to your own net and burn incense to your own drag — as though by them your portion were fat and plentiful — is a severe provocation to the eyes of His glory. Equally, to press toward the remaining desires and expectations of your hearts through an arm of flesh, through the designs and schemes of worldly reason and outward-appearing means of accomplishment, is no less an abomination to Him. Though there may be a present sweetness to those who find success by their own hand, yet their end will be to lie down in sorrow. My particular aim in the sermon that follows was to persuade you to give glory to God by steadfast-

ness in believing, committing all your ways to Him with patience in well-doing — and to do this in contempt of even the most attractive appearance of worldly policy.

What added ready willingness to my obedience to your commands to preach and publish this sermon — namely, a serious proposal for the advancement and propagation of the Gospel in another nation — is here again commended to your thoughts, by

Your most humble servant, in our common Master, J. O.
March 8th, 1649.

THE STEADFASTNESS OF PROMISES,
AND THE SINFULNESS OF
STAGGERING: OPENED IN A SERMON
PREACHED AT MARGARETS IN
WESTMINSTER, BEFORE THE
PARLIAMENT, FEBRUARY 28, 1649



Romans 4:20 — He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief.

In the opening chapters of this letter, the apostle draws from Scripture and from the consistent practice of all kinds of people across all ages — Jews and Gentiles, wise and barbarians — to prove that the whole world, every individual in it, has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Not only that, but he proves it was utterly impossible for anyone to attain a righteousness of their own by their own strength, by any communicated assistance, or by any privileges they enjoyed — a righteousness that would be acceptable to God.

He concludes that discussion with two positive assertions.

First, regarding what is past: every mouth must be stopped, and the whole world stands guilty before God. Romans 3:19.

Second, regarding the future: even if people were to reform their ways and make better use of their assistances and privileges than before, by the deeds of the law no flesh shall be justified in the sight of God. Romans 3:20.

Since the apostle's main purpose in this letter — and in his entire ministry — was to show that God has not left all humanity hopeless and without remedy under this condition, he immediately discloses and unfolds the rich provision God has made in free grace for the deliverance of His own from this calamitous state. That provision is the righteousness of faith in Christ, which he explains, asserts, proves, and defends against objections through the end of chapter 3.

This was a matter of the greatest weight, for it contained the sum of the Gospel with which he was entrusted, the honor and exaltation of Christ which he desired above all, and the great design of God to be glorious in His saints. In short, it was the central message of the commission Christ had given him: that those who neither have nor can attain a righteousness of their own, by any effort of their own, may yet have a complete and unassailable righteousness in Christ through believing. He therefore confirms this powerfully in chapter 4 through the testimony and example of Scripture and the saints of old, also showing that although this mystery was now more fully revealed through Christ from the Father's presence, this had always been the only way for anyone to appear before God, ever since sin entered the world.

To make his case as clear as possible, the apostle singles out one example who was widely known and acknowledged by all to have been the friend of God, to have been righteous and justified before Him, and to have enjoyed sweet fellowship with Him

throughout his life — namely, Abraham, the physical father of all those who made the strongest claim of all to righteousness through privileges enjoyed and works performed.

Regarding Abraham, the apostle proves thoroughly in the opening of chapter 4 that the justification Abraham found and the righteousness he attained was purely what he had described — a righteousness of forgiveness of sins through faith in the blood of Christ.

Moreover, all the privileges and exaltations of Abraham that made him so distinguished and eminent among the saints of God as to be called the father of the faithful came from one source alone: this righteousness of grace was freely revealed and fully established to him. He received in a unique way, through faith, an enjoyment of that promise in which the Lord Christ with the whole spring of the mentioned righteousness was wrapped up.

The apostle develops this through various inferences and conclusions to the end of Romans 4:17.

Having laid that groundwork, he next gives a description of Abraham's faith — the faith by which he became an heir of those excellent things — by looking at its characteristics. Just as Abraham's justification was offered as an example of how God deals with us by grace, so his faith was to be set down as a pattern for us in receiving that grace.

He does this by examining three things: first, the foundation on which Abraham's faith rested; second, what he believed — the content of his faith; and third, the manner of his believing — how he believed.

First, the foundation on which his faith rested: the omnipotence and all-sufficiency of God, by which He was able to fulfill whatever He had committed Himself to by promise — and which He called Abraham to believe. Romans 4:17: He believed God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not exist.

Two great testimonies to the power of God appear here: first, that He gives life to the dead, meaning He is able to raise those who are dead back to life. Second, He calls things that do not exist into being — by His very word He gives existence to things that were not before, as when He said, 'Let there be light, and there was light' (Genesis 1:3), commanding light to shine out of darkness (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Abraham considers these demonstrations of God's all-sufficiency specifically in relation to what he was to believe: that he might be the father of many nations (Romans 4:17) — the father of Jews by physical descent, and the father of both Jews and Gentiles through the faith of which we speak.

Regarding the first — since his own body was now as good as dead and Sarah's womb was dead (Romans 4:19) — he rests on God as the one who gives life to the dead, believing that he will be the father of many nations.

Regarding the second — that he would be a father to the Gentiles through faith — the Holy Spirit testifies that they were not a people (Hosea 2:23). Grafting them into his line would require a power that calls things that do not exist into being, giving a new nature and existence to those who did not previously have it.

To ground ourselves on the all-sufficiency of God for the accomplishment of things that are entirely impossible apart from that all-sufficiency is genuine faith, and it is worthy of our imitation. It is also the wisdom of faith to fasten especially on that attribute of God which fits the particular difficulty it must wrestle with. Was Abraham to believe that from his dead body an entire nation must spring? He rested on God as the one who gives life to the dead.

Second, Abraham's faith is commended by its content — what he believed. In general terms, this is said to be the promise of God: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief (Romans 4:20). More specifically, the content of that promise is indicated in Romans 4:11 and 4:18 — that he would be the father of many nations, that all nations would be blessed in his seed. This was a promise entangled with a world of difficulties, given the natural inability of both his body and Sarah's body to produce children.

When God calls for believing and His truth and all-sufficiency are engaged, no difficulty or apparent impossibility in the thing to be believed should carry any weight with us — for He who has promised is able.

Third, the manner of Abraham's believing, which is expressed in four ways.

First, against hope he believed in hope (Romans 4:18). Two kinds of hope are mentioned here: one that was against him, and one that was for him.

He believed against hope — that is, when all arguments that might produce hope in him were against him.

To believe against hope means to believe against every natural motive for hope. All reasonable grounds for hope were against him. What hope could arise, by any natural reasoning, that two bodies as good as dead would be the source and fountain of many nations? And yet against all inducements to natural hope, he believed.

Second, he believed in hope — a hope that arose, as his faith did, from considering God's all-sufficiency. This hope was an attribute of his faith; it was a faith that had hope joined to it. This believing in hope — when all natural reasons for hope were gone — is the first thing noted about the manner of his faith.

When all natural supports have failed, when every means has grown dead and the promise seems utterly impossible to fulfill, to believe with genuine hope is a commendable faith.

Second, he was not weak in faith (Romans 4:19). The Greek expression means he was by no means weak — Beza renders it 'Minime debilis.' This is a negation that, by a figure of speech, strongly asserts the very opposite of what is denied. He was in no way weak — that is, he was very strong in faith, as is later expressed. Romans 4:20: He was strong in faith, giving glory to God.

The apostle explains what this strength looked like: he did not consider his own body, now as good as dead when he was about a hundred years old, nor did he consider the deadness of Sarah's womb (Romans 4:19). His strength of faith showed itself in this — that his faith carried him beyond the consideration of every obstacle that might lie in the way of the promise's fulfillment.

It is sheer weakness of faith that makes a man dwell and brood on the difficulties and apparent impossibilities lying against the promise. We think it wisdom and strength to carefully consider, weigh, and probe the depths of every opposition and temptation that rises against the promise. Perhaps this is the strength of our fleshly, worldly reason — but it is certainly the weakness of our faith. The person who is strong in faith will not even debate or dwell on the things that cast the greatest apparent improbability — even impossibility — on the fulfillment of the promise. Strong faith will not grant them so much as a hearing, because, being not weak in faith, Abraham considered not.

Third, he was fully persuaded (Romans 4:21). The Greek word means he was full of persuasion — completely convinced. This is the third thing noted about the manner of his believing. He fully, quietly, and resolutely cast himself on this: that He who had promised was able to perform it. Like a ship at sea — for this is what the word pictures — seeing storms and winds rising, raises all its sails and makes for harbor with all speed. Abraham, seeing the storms of doubts and temptations likely to rise against the promise made to him, drove through them all with full sail to rest quietly in God's all-sufficiency. This is the third characteristic.

Fourth, he did not stagger (Romans 4:20). This is what I have chosen to press upon you as a prized part of the description of Abraham's faith, proposed for our imitation.

He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief.

These words can be summarized in this doctrinal proposition.

All staggering at the promises of God is from unbelief.

Whatever is difficult in the text will be clarified as we unfold the parts of this observation.

People are quick to claim various other reasons and causes for their staggering. They say the promises do not apply to them, that God does not intend their souls in them, that they are not the right kind of person — and these things make them stagger. But the truth is, it is their unbelief, and that alone, that puts them in this staggering condition. As in other things, so here, we are prone to offer many fine-sounding excuses for foul faults. To place the burden on the right shoulders, I will demonstrate with God's help that it is not this or that reason, but unbelief alone, that makes us stagger at the promises.

To make this clear, I must first open two things: first, what is the promise here intended? And second, what does it mean to stagger at the promise?

The promise primarily in view is the one Abraham believed when it was said of him that it was counted to him as righteousness. The apostle tells us this at Romans 4:5, and you can see when this occurred at Genesis 15:6, where it is affirmed that he believed the Lord and it was counted to him as righteousness. What God had spoken to him about at that moment was the multiplying of his seed as the stars of heaven, even though he was still childless.

The last verse of Genesis 14 leaves Abraham at the height of earthly glory. He had just conquered five kings with all their armies, been honored by the king of Sodom, and blessed by the king of Salem. And yet in the very first verse of Genesis 15, God appears to him in a vision and at the outset tells him to fear not — plainly showing that despite all his outward success and glory, he

still carried many deep anxieties in his spirit and needed great consolation and grounding. Abraham was not at peace regarding the fulfillment of earlier promises about the blessed seed, and so though he had every outward advantage, he could not rest in them. Until a child of God is at peace in the main thing — the matter of the great promise, the business of Christ — the greatest outward successes and advantages will do nothing to quiet his soul; they will only deepen his perplexities. They only occasion him to cry, 'Here is this and that, here is victory and success, here is wealth and peace — but here is not Christ.'

That this was Abraham's condition is clear from Genesis 15:2, where after God told him He was his shield and his exceeding great reward, Abraham replies, 'Lord God, what will you give me, since I am going childless?' As if he were saying, 'Lord God, you told me when I was in Haran, now nineteen years ago, that in me and my seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3).', You promised the blessed and blessing seed would come from me — but now I am growing old, every appearance is working against the direct fulfillment of that word, and that promise was the very thing I was aiming at above all else in following you. If I am to be disappointed in this, what shall I do? And what good are all these other things to me? What benefit is it to have a multitude of earthly possessions and leave them in the end to my servant?

I cannot help observing that this sighing, mournful complaint of Abraham has much weakness in it, and something of distrust mixed in. He was shaken to the very core of his soul, as it seemed to him that improbabilities were growing into impossibilities against the promise. Yet from this we can also note two things.

First, he did not brood silently or keep his burning thoughts buried in his chest, but sweetly breathed the burden of his soul into the bosom of his God: 'Lord God,' he says, 'what will you give me, seeing I go childless?' It is a mark of sincere faith to unburden our unbelief in the bosom of our God.

Second, God did not hold his servant's complaining and distrust against him, but passed over it — renewing the promise to him, settling his faith, and only then giving His testimony that he believed God. The Lord overlooks the weakness and groundless laments of His own, receives them at their best, and then bears witness to their faith.

This was the promise we are speaking of — that he would have a seed of his own, as countless as the stars that cannot be numbered (Genesis 15:4-5). And in it are contained three things.

First, the purely spiritual part that concerned his own soul in Christ. When God engaged with him about his seed, He reminded him of his own share in the blessing-bringing seed. Jesus Christ, with His entire mediatorial work and the whole work of redemption, is in this promise, along with the enjoyment of God in covenant as a shield and as an exceeding great reward.

Second, the kingdom of Christ — its spread, its establishment, and the multitude of His subjects — is also in this promise.

Third, the temporal part: multitudes of children for a childless man, and an heir from his own body.

This promise in its three branches covers your entire interest and comprises everything you are to believe for, whether considered as believers or as rulers.

First, as believers: your interest lies in two things — that your own souls have a share and portion in the Lord Christ, and that the kingdom of the Lord Jesus be exalted and established.

Second, as rulers: that peace and prosperity may be the inheritance of the nation is among your desires. View this in subordination to the kingdom of Christ, and it too falls under this promise.

To make this even plainer — since these are the three main things you are aiming at — I will lay before you three promises suited to each one. These are what you are to keep in view in all your actions, remembering that all staggering at them is from unbelief.

First, what you are to believe for is the interest of your own souls in the covenant of grace through Christ. For this I will simply point to that promise of the covenant in Hebrews 8:12: 'I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities I will remember no more.'

Second, the establishment of the kingdom of Christ despite all opposition. For this, among countless promises, take Isaiah 60:11: 'Therefore your gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day or night, so that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations, and their kings may be led to you. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish.'

Third, the peace and quiet of the nation, which you care about as rulers — as this stands in subordination to the kingdom of Christ — also comes under the promise. For this take Jeremiah 30:20-21.

These being your three main aims, fix your eyes on these three or similar promises. In the demonstration and application of the point, I will carry all three together, asking that what is illustrated in any one be always extended to the other two.

Second, what does it mean to stagger at the promise? He staggered not. The Greek word means he did not dispute or reason against it. The word is properly used of making use of one's own judgment and reason to weigh and evaluate things. It is sometimes translated 'to doubt,' as in Matthew 21:21: 'If you have faith and do not doubt' — that is, do not use internal arguments and reasonings about the promise and the things promised. Sometimes it simply means to discern or distinguish a thing for what it is, as in 1 Corinthians 11:29, where it is used of 'discerning the body.'

In the sense used here, as also in Matthew 21:21, the word describes a kind of internal dispute and self-consultation about contrary things being presented to us. In Acts 10:20, Peter is commanded to obey the vision, 'nothing doubting' — literally, without disputing within himself. What does that mean? It means not continuing to do what he is said to have done in Acts 10:17: 'He was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision he had seen could mean' — he was turning it over and debating it in his own mind, staggering at it.

To stagger at the promise, then, is to take the promise into consideration along with all the difficulties that lie in the way of its fulfillment for oneself, and to dispute it in one's thoughts in such a way that one neither fully casts it off nor fully embraces it. For example: the soul considers the promise of free grace in the blood of Jesus, looks at it, weighs as best it can the truthfulness of God who makes the promise, along with other considerations that might

lead the heart to rest firmly on it — but then also brings into view its own unworthiness, sinfulness, unbelief, and hypocrisy, which it supposes powerfully block the promise's effectiveness toward itself. The result is that it does not know what to conclude: if it had a grain of faith, the scale tips toward the promise; a like measure of unbelief tips it back — and it does not know what to do. It cannot let go of the promise, yet it dares not take firm hold of it; and so it staggers and wavers back and forth.

The soul in this condition is like Paul in another situation, in Philippians 1:23. He weighed his own advantage through departing on one side, and the profit to the churches through remaining in the flesh on the other, and taking in these conflicting thoughts he cried out that he was in a strait — he staggered, caught between two options, not knowing which to choose. Or like David in 2 Samuel 24:14, when offered a choice of punishments, who said, 'I am in a great strait' — seeing evil in every option and not knowing which to choose.

A poor soul looking at the promise sees what it supposes to be presumption in firmly embracing it, and yet certain destruction if it does not believe — and so it staggers, caught in a great dilemma, with arguments rising on both sides and no way to resolve them, hanging in suspense and staggering.

It is like a traveler on a journey who comes to two paths that both look promising and cannot tell which is the right way. He guesses and guesses, and at last cries, 'I do not know which of these roads I should take, but I know this much — if I take the wrong one, I am ruined. So I will take neither, but sit down here and not move one step in either direction until someone comes who can show me the way.' The soul very frequently does exactly

this — sits down in hesitation and refuses to move forward, until God comes mightily and draws the spirit toward the promise, or the devil turns it aside into unbelief.

It is like a light thing floating in the air: its own weight pulls it downward, while the air and a breath of wind carry it upward, so it drifts back and forth — sometimes seeming as though it will fall by its own weight, sometimes as though it will rise out of sight, but poised between both, tossing up and down without making much progress in either direction.

The promise draws the soul upward while the weight of unbelief sinks it downward. Sometimes the promise attracts so powerfully that you would think the heart had been drawn fully up into it; other times, unbelief presses down so heavily that you would think it lost forever. But neither fully prevails — the poor soul swings between the two. This is what it means to stagger. It is like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:14 — they talked together of the things that had happened, debating among themselves, and at Luke 24:22 they gave the result of their thoughts: 'We had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel.' They had hoped once, but now, seeing Him slain and crucified, they did not know what to say. Did they give up entirely on trusting Him? No, they could not do that. Luke 24:23-25: certain women had astonished them, saying He was alive, and others who had gone to the tomb had confirmed it. So they talked it over among themselves, and they were sad. That is, they staggered — they were in a staggering condition: much appeared in His favor, something appeared against it, and they did not know what to do.

A poor soul who has long been troubled and anxious finds a sweet promise — Christ in a promise suited to all its wants, coming with mercy to pardon, with love to embrace, with blood to cleanse — and is lifted up to roll itself in some measure upon this promise. Then suddenly terrors arise, temptations grow strong, new corruptions break out, Christ in the promise seems to die — Christ in the promise is slain and buried as far as this soul is concerned — so that it can only sigh and say, 'I had hoped for deliverance through Christ, but now all is gone again, I have little or no hope; Christ in the promise is slain to me.' What then? Should it give up entirely, never again seek this buried Christ, but sit down in darkness and sorrow? No, it cannot do that. This morning, some new signs of Christ's presence in the soul appear again — perhaps He is not lost to it forever. What does it do then? It cannot steadfastly believe; it will not totally give up. It staggers — full of inner conflict and sadness. This is what it means to stagger at the promise of God. I come now to prove that, regardless of any pretense whatever, all this staggering is from unbelief.

The two disciples we just mentioned who were staggering and debating on the road to Emmaus thought they had a fine reason and an apparently sufficient cause for all their doubting: 'We had hoped,' they said, 'that He was the one who would have delivered Israel.' What were they now stumbling over? The chief priests and rulers had condemned Him to death and crucified Him (Luke 24:20). How could deliverance come from a crucified man? This made them stagger. But when our Savior Himself drew near and explained the root of all this, He told them it came from one

source: 'O foolish men and slow of heart to believe' (Luke 24:25). Here is the origin of all their doubting — their unbelief. While you are slow of heart to believe, do not expect to find stability.

Peter, venturing out onto the water at the command of Christ (Matthew 14), saw the wind grow violent (Matthew 14:29), and a storm arose within him too, and he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' What was the cause of Peter's fear and crying out? Was it that the wind and sea had grown violent and he was about to sink? Not at all. It was simply unbelief — a lack of faith. Matthew 14:31: 'O you of little faith,' said our Savior, 'why did you doubt?' It was not the great winds but your little faith that made you stagger. In three or four other places, on various occasions, our Savior traces all the wavering and staggering of His followers concerning any promised mercy back to this same cause, as in Matthew 6:30 and Matthew 8:26.

In Isaiah 7, Ahaz was frightened by the alliance of Syria and Ephraim against him, and received a promise of deliverance through Isaiah (Isaiah 7:7). Whereupon the prophet told him and all Judah: 'If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established' (Isaiah 7:9). He did not say, 'If Damascus and Ephraim are not broken, you shall not be established' — the problem is not there. The reason you fear you will not be established is simply your unbelief, which keeps you from embracing the promise that would certainly bring you stability.

And this is the sole reason the apostle gives for why the word of promise, when preached, becomes unprofitable: it was not mixed with faith in those who heard it (Hebrews 4:2).

But these things will become clearer under the two demonstrations of the point.

When a person doubts, hesitates, and argues things within himself, his reasoning must arise either from something within himself or from something in the matter about which he staggers. Either the assurance of his mind or the certainty of the thing itself is lacking — what the Scholastics called 'Certitudo mentis' (assurance of mind) or 'Certitudo entis' (certainty of the thing).

A man who doubts whether a friend in a distant country is still alive is staggering because of the uncertainty of the thing itself — and when that uncertainty is resolved, so is he, as it was with Jacob in the case of Joseph. But a man who doubts whether a compass needle, once touched with a lodestone, will turn northward — all the uncertainty is in his own mind, not in the thing itself.

When men stagger at the promises, it must arise either from within themselves or from some occasion given by the promise itself. If it arises from within themselves, it can be nothing but unbelief — an inborn resistance to embracing and resting on the promise. If then we demonstrate that there is nothing in the promise — neither in its content, its manner, nor its circumstances — that should give any occasion for staggering, then we rightly place the burden and blame where it belongs: the sin of staggering on unbelief.

That no such occasion or cause is given by the promise will appear when we seriously consider where any such cause might come from. All the reliability of a promise depends on the qualifications of the one who makes it, relative to the ends and purposes of that promise. If someone makes me a promise and I question whether

it will ever be fulfilled, my doubt must arise from suspecting a lack of one of five things in the promiser: first, truthfulness; second, ability to make good his word given the difficulty of the matter; third, sincerity in genuinely intending for me what he says; fourth, a reliable memory to seize the opportunity to do what was intended; or fifth, steadfastness in remaining of the same mind. Now if none of these things is lacking in the one whose promises we are speaking of, then there is certainly no ground for our staggering — it comes only from our own unbelief.

Let us now examine whether any of these things is lacking in God's promises, beginning with the first.

First, is there truth in these promises? If there is the slightest ground in the world for suspecting the truth of the promises or the truthfulness of the one who makes them, then our staggering at them might arise from that — and not from our unbelief. This is why all human faith that rests merely on the testimony of men is at best a probable opinion: every man is a liar, and may possibly lie even in the very thing he has committed himself to. A good man would not do so to save his life — yet it is possible he could be tempted and might do so. But the author of these promises is truth itself. He is the God of truth, who has taken this as His special distinguishing attribute. He is the very God of truth, and He displays this attribute especially in the making of His promises. He is faithful to forgive us our sins (1 John 1:9). This is why His word is said not only to be true, but to be truth itself (John 17:19). All flesh is like grass, but His word endures forever (Isaiah 40:8).

But even beyond this, to make clear that no occasion for staggering comes from here: this God of truth, whose word is truth, has in His infinite wisdom condescended to our weakness and has

used every possible means to help us grasp the truth of His promises. The Lord could have left us in the dark, requiring us to piece together His mind and will from obscure expressions. And given the value of His kindness, it would be fair to expect us to do so. People in misery are glad to seize on the faintest word from anyone who can help them — as the servants of Ben-hadad watched anxiously for anything that fell from the mouth of Ahab concerning their master, who feared for his life, and when Ahab had happened to call him his brother, they immediately seized on it and cried, 'Your brother Ben-hadad!' (1 Kings 20:33). God could have left us to gather up fallen crumbs and occasional drops of mercy and supply, and we would have rejoiced to find even one word pointing that way. But to shut every objection and silence unbelief forever, He has not only spoken plainly but has condescended to use every method of confirming the truth of what He says that was ever used among the sons of men.

There are four ways by which people seek to establish credit for what they say as undoubted truth, so that no occasion for staggering remains.

First, by repeatedly affirming the same thing. When a man says the same thing again and again, it is a sign he speaks the truth — or at least that he wishes to be believed. Indeed, if an honest man plainly, fully, and frequently commits himself to the same thing, we consider it a base suspicion not to believe his genuine intentions. Now the Lord in His promises repeatedly speaks the same things — He speaks once and twice. There is nothing He has promised that He has not promised again and again. It is as if He were saying: 'I will be merciful to your sins — I pray believe Me, for I will pardon your iniquities, yes it shall be so, I will blot out your

transgressions like a cloud.' There is no need we face that He has not addressed in this way. Just as His commands are line upon line, so are His promises. This is one way God causes the truth of His promises to be evident. To remove all pretext for staggering, He speaks once, yes twice, if we will hear.

Second, the second way of confirming any truth is by an oath. Though we may question some men's simple assertions, once they come to swear in justice and judgment, very few people — even the most degraded and spiritually calloused — fail to credit their words and accept them as true. So the apostle tells us in Hebrews 6:16 that an oath for confirmation is among men an end of all dispute. Even when the truth was before ambiguous and doubtful, once an oath is interposed, the argument is over. So that nothing might be missing to win our belief in the promises of God, He has taken this course as well — He has sworn to their truth (Hebrews 6:13). When God made promises to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself. He confirms His promise with an oath. As the Latin says: 'O how blessed we are, for whom God swears — O how wretched, if we do not believe even the God who swears!' When Christ came, in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen, to make the truth of them absolutely secure, He is confirmed in His priestly office by an oath (Hebrews 7:21): 'He was made a priest by an oath by Him who said, The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, You are a priest forever.' Now what is the purpose of this great condescension by the God of heaven — to confirm by oath a word that is in itself truth? The apostle answers in Hebrews 6:17-18: God's aim was that His people, seeing Him bound by two unchangeable things — His promise and His

oath — might be fully assured that it is utterly impossible for any word of His to fall short of its truth, or for those who rest firmly upon it to be deceived. This is the second way.

Third, another way people confirm the truth of what they say is by entering into a covenant to accomplish what they have spoken. A covenant gives added strength to any engagement. When someone has merely told you he will do certain things for you, you are full of doubts and fears that he may break his word. But when he has drawn up a covenant and you can produce it under his hand and seal, you look at it, reflect on it, and feel very secure. This way also has the Lord taken to confirm and establish His truths and promises, that all doubting and staggering might be excluded. He has wrapped them all up in a covenant and placed Himself under a solemn binding engagement, so that at every temptation we can draw out His hand and seal and say to Satan and our own false hearts: 'See here — behold God bound in covenant to make good the word in which He has caused me to put my trust.' It is His very character that He is a God who keeps covenant. So with His promise restated, confirmed by an oath, and sealed by an unchangeable covenant — what more could we ask to assure us of the truth of these things? But there is still more.

Fourth, in matters of the greatest weight and consequence — such as those on which lives and the peace of nations depend — people customarily give hostages as pledges to secure one another's faithfulness and truth in all their commitments, so that each serves as a mutual guarantee of fidelity. The Lord has not left this method unused to confirm His promise either. He has given us a hostage to secure His truth — one exceedingly dear to Him, always in His bosom, whose honor He guards as carefully as His

own. Jesus Christ is the great hostage of His Father's truth, the pledge of His faithfulness in His promises. God has set Him forth and given Him to us for this very purpose. Isaiah 7:14: 'Behold, the Lord Himself shall give you a sign — a sign that He will fulfill His word — a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.' As if to say: so that you may be assured of My faithfulness, the virgin's Son shall be the pledge of it. In Him all the promises of God are yes and amen. Beyond this, to His saints He gives the further pledge of His Spirit and the firstfruits of glory, so that the full accomplishment of all His promises may be compressed into a little and presented to their sight — as the Israelites had a taste of the pleasures of Canaan in the clusters of grapes brought back from there.

From all this it is clear not only that there is truth in all the promises of God, but that this truth has been so confirmed and established that not the slightest occasion for staggering or doubting has been given from that side. Whoever disputes the promises and cannot bring himself to embrace them must find another cause — because as to the truth of the promise, there is no doubt at all, nor any room for any.

Second, even if there were truth in the promise, there might still be a lack of ability in the one making it to accomplish what was promised, given its many difficulties. This could be a second cause of staggering — if the thing committed to is beyond the ability of the one who committed to it. For example: a skilled physician may promise a sick man recovery from his disease, and though the man trusts his friend's truthfulness and sincerity, he cannot help questioning his ability in this, knowing that curing even the smallest illness is not absolutely within his power. But

when it is He who promises who is able to perform — then all such doubting is removed. Consider whether this applies to the promises we are speaking of. When God came to Abraham to bind Himself in that covenant of grace from which all these promises flow, He laid this down as the foundation of it all: 'I am God Almighty' (Genesis 17:1) — or God all-sufficient, fully able to carry through whatever He promises. When difficulties, temptations, and troubles arise, remember who it is that has promised — not only He who is true and faithful, but He who is God Almighty, before whom nothing can stand when He purposes to accomplish His word. That this was a great source of confidence for Abraham, the apostle tells us in Romans 4:21: 'being fully persuaded that He who had promised was also able to perform.' When God is bound by His word, His ability is what should especially be kept in view. The soul is prone to ask how this can be, that it seems impossible for me — but He who has promised is able. The same apostle holds this out in Romans 11:23 to anchor our faith in the great promise of the recall of the Jews and their being grafted back into the vine: 'God is able to graft them in again.' Though they now seem like dead bones, the Lord knows they may live — for He is able to breathe upon them and make them 'terrible as an army with banners.' Indeed so excellent is this all-sufficiency, this ability of God to accomplish His entire word, that the apostle cautions us not to set boundaries to it as though it could go only so far: 'He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think' (Ephesians 3:20).

When people genuinely come to embrace the promise — to stake their life on it — they are very quick to question and ask whether the word of it could ever be made good to them. A man

watching a small boat floating at sea, with no personal stake in it, observes it easily, watches it toss about without any anxious fear of its sinking. But let that same man commit his own life to sea in that little vessel — what questions will he have then? What searching scrutiny of the boat? 'Is it possible,' he asks, 'that this little thing can safeguard my life in the ocean?' This is exactly how it is with us in our view of the promises. When we consider them from a distance, as they lie in the Word, of course they are all true, all yes and amen, and will all be accomplished. But when we go to venture our souls upon a promise in an ocean of wrath and temptation, every wave seems like it will overturn it. We think it cannot hold us above all these waves — is it possible to float safely on a plank in the midst of the ocean?

Here we are prone to deceive ourselves and mistake the entire question — which is the root of many distorted reasonings and troubled thoughts. We ask whether things can be for us as the Word declares, when in truth the question is not about the nature of the thing but about the power of God. Put the doubt where it belongs, and it is this: Is God able to accomplish what He has spoken? Can He heal my backslidings? Can He pardon my sins? Can He save my soul? Now, so that there may be no occasion or pretext for staggering on this point, God reveals Himself as the all-sufficient God, as one who is able to carry through all His commitments. If you choose to stagger you may do so — but this much is certain: you have no cause to do so from this direction. There is not a single promise God has ever entered into that He is not able to fulfill.

But you may say: though God is so able and all-sufficient, might there not still be defects in the means by which He works? A man may have an arm strong enough to strike his enemies to the ground, but if he strikes with a feather or a straw, nothing will happen — not for lack of strength in his arm, but for lack of fitness in the instrument he uses. But consider this:

First, when God uses instruments, they do not act by their own inherent power but by the power He communicates to them. Whatever end God is pleased to use any means toward, His choosing of them fills them with the effectiveness needed for that purpose. However weak in themselves the way and means of accomplishing what you expect from the promise may seem, know this: because God has chosen them for that end, they will be filled with power and effectiveness to accomplish it.

Second, it is expressly affirmed of the great means of the promise that they also are able — that there is no lack of power in them for the accomplishment of what was promised.

First, there is the means of procuring the promise's fulfillment, and that is Jesus Christ. The good things contained in the promises are all purchased by Him. Of Him the apostle expressly affirms that He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him (Hebrews 7:25). No lack here, no defect: He is able to save to the uttermost, able to help those who are tempted (Hebrews 2:18).

Second, there is the great means of making the promise known, and that is the Word of God. Of this also it is affirmed that it is able, that it has an all-sufficiency in its own sphere. Paul told

the elders of Ephesus that the word of grace is able to build them up and to give them an inheritance among all who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

Third, there is the great means of working the promise upon the soul, and that is the Spirit of grace. He applies the mercy of the promise to the soul. He also is able — exceedingly powerful to accomplish the appointed end. His operation has no limit or measure except His own will (1 Corinthians 12:11).

It is therefore clear, in this second respect, that there is no occasion for doubting — all staggering is excluded when we consider the ability of the one who made the promise and the means by which He works. If you continue to stagger, you need a better argument than 'it cannot be' or 'it is impossible.' I tell you plainly: God is able to accomplish the whole word of His promise. But consider a third potential cause.

Third, there may be a lack of sincerity in promises and commitments, and while we suspect this we cannot help but stagger at them. If someone makes me a promise and I suspect he does not mean what he says — that he has secret reservations about a different intention — I must doubt whether what he spoke will ever be accomplished. If the soul can suspect that the Lord does not sincerely intend it in His promises but reserves some other purpose in His mind, or that it will be so for others but not for that soul, it must inevitably dispute within itself, stagger, and hold back from believing. It must therefore be demonstrated, in this third place, that the promises of God and God in all His promises are full of sincerity, so that none need fear to cast themselves on them — they will prove real. On this point, observe the following.

First, God's promises are not declarations of His secret purposes and intentions toward specific individuals. When God holds out a promise of the pardon of sin to any person, this does not mean it is God's purpose that that particular person's sin will be pardoned. If it did, then either all to whom the word of promise comes must be pardoned — which is not the case — or God falls short of His purposes and intentions, which would make Him either powerless (unable to accomplish them) or changeable (unwilling to). But who has resisted His will? (Romans 9). He is the Lord, and He does not change (Malachi 3:6). So although not everyone to whom the promise is offered receives the fruit of the promise, this in no way diminishes God's sincerity in His promises, because He does not hold them forth for the purpose of declaring His intentions toward particular individuals.

Second, there are some absolute promises that encompass the covenant of grace. As to all those who belong to that covenant, these promises do declare this much of God's mind: that they shall certainly be accomplished in and toward every one of them. The soul may freely and confidently venture on these promises, assured of their effectiveness toward him.

Third, what God principally declares about His mind and purpose in all His promises — the thing every soul to whom they come may freely rest on — is this: faith in the promises and the fulfillment of the promises are inseparable. He who believes will receive. This is most certain. God declares His heart toward us this way: for all the good things He has spoken of to us, it shall be to us according to our faith. This is what the promises of God declare about His purpose — that the one who believes them will be the one who enjoys them. In them the righteousness of God is revealed from faith

to faith (Romans 1:17) — from the faith of God revealing to the faith of man receiving. So upon the giving of any promise, you may safely conclude that in believing, the mercy, the Christ, the deliverance of that promise is yours. It is true that if a man stands disputing and staggering over whether he has any share in a promise, and does not embrace it by faith, he may come short of it — yet without the slightest impugning of the truth of the promise or the sincerity of the one who made it. For God has not declared by them that people shall enjoy the good things of the promises whether they believe or not. In this sense the promises of grace are general and carry a truth to all: that there is an unbreakable connection between believing and enjoying the things contained in them. In this truth lies the sincerity of the one who made them, which can never be questioned without sin and foolishness. And this shuts every door on any occasion for staggering. O you of little faith! why do you doubt? Ah — you fear that you have no share in this promise, that you are not intended in it. Poor souls! There is only one thing that can keep you from it — disputing it within yourselves through unbelief. Here lies God's sincerity toward you: that in believing, you will not fall short of what you are seeking. There is therefore no room for staggering here. If a proclamation were made granting pardon to all rebels who come in by a certain deadline, would people stand questioning whether the state bears them any goodwill? No — the poor soul says, 'I will cast myself on their faithfulness and truth as engaged in their proclamation. Whatever I may have deserved personally, I know they will be faithful to their promises.' The gospel proclamation offers pardon to all who come in, to all who believe. It is not for you, poor staggerer, to

question what is intended toward you in particular — but to roll yourself on this: there is absolute sincerity in the engagement, and you may freely rest on it. But consider another potential cause.

Fourth, even if truth, power, and sincerity are all present, if the one who makes the promise should forget — that would be a ground for staggering. Pharaoh's cupbearer, no doubt, made large promises to Joseph and probably spoke them with genuine intent at the time. Standing afterward in Pharaoh's presence, restored to favor, he certainly had power enough to secure the release of a poor, innocent prisoner. But it did Joseph no good, for as the text says, he did not remember Joseph but forgot him (Genesis 40:23). That forgetting made everything else useless. But this provides not the slightest pretext in the divine promises. It was Zion's weakness to say, 'The Lord has forsaken me, and my God has forgotten me' (Isaiah 49:14). But the Lord replied: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yes, they may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands, and your walls are continually before Me' (Isaiah 49:15-16).

The causes of forgetfulness are two. First, a lack of love. Things a man does not love he does not care about — but the things he loves are continually in his thoughts. So God says to Zion: 'Why do you say I have forgotten you? Is it for lack of love? The love of the most tender mother to her nursing child falls infinitely short of My love to you. My love to you is far more fixed than that — how could you be out of My mind? How could you be forgotten?' Infinite love will produce infinite thoughtfulness and remembrance.

Second, the pressure of many obligations. With men, being pulled in too many directions causes forgetting. One says: 'I would have done as I promised, but the press of other responsibilities drove it from my mind — please excuse me.' But God says: 'Though I govern all the world, you are engraved on the palms of My hands, and therefore your walls are continually before Me.' See also Psalm 77:9. So there is not, in this respect either, the slightest pretext given us to stagger at the promise of God.

Fifth and finally, where all other things are in place, yet if the one making the promise is changeable — if he may alter his resolution — a man may justly doubt and debate within himself whether any promise made to him will be fulfilled. He may say: 'It is true that he now speaks his heart and mind, but who can say he will hold the same mind tomorrow? He may change, and then what becomes of the golden mountains I promised myself based on his commitment?' Therefore, in the last place, the Lord carefully dismisses all sinful suspicions about any change or alteration in Him or any of His engagements. He is the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning (James 1:17) — no shadow, no trace of any such thing. 'I am the Lord,' He says, 'I do not change; therefore you, the sons of Jacob, are not consumed' (Malachi 3:6). The Lord knows that if anything in us could move Him to alter a word that has gone out of His mouth, we would surely perish. We are poor, provoking creatures — therefore He rests our not being consumed solely on this: His own unchangeableness. We may rest on this: He is of one mind, and who can turn Him?

In these observations I have given you the first demonstration of the point: all staggering is from our own unbelief.

The experience we have of God's mighty workings for the fulfillment of all His promises sheds further light on this. We have found it true that once He is engaged, He will certainly carry through to the appointed end, even if it requires laying out His power and wisdom to the uttermost. Habakkuk 3:9: 'Your bow was made quite bare, according to the oaths to the tribes, even Your word.' If God's oath has been passed and His word engaged, He will surely accomplish it, though it cost Him the full laying bare of His bow — the fullest display of His power.

It is true: no one has ever waited on God for the fulfillment of a promise without finding many difficulties arising between the word and its fulfillment. So it was with Abraham in the matter of a son, and so with David in the matter of a kingdom. God wills that His promised mercies fall like dew upon parched, gasping earth, or like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land (Isaiah 32:2) — very welcome to the traveler who has had the sun beating on his head all day. Zion is a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem in the hand of her God (Isaiah 62:3). The precious stones of a crown must be cut and polished before they are set in beauty and glory. Often God wills that the precious living stones of Zion endure many a sharp cutting before they are fully fixed in His crown. Yet in the end, whatever obstacles stand in the way, the promise has always worked out its passage. Like a river that is dammed — it keeps rising and gaining more and more strength, until it bears down everything before it and reaches its appointed place — so every time opposition blocks the fulfillment of a promise and seems to hinder it for a season, the promise only gains more force, until the appointed hour comes and it sweeps all before it.

If there were anything at all that experience had not shown being overcome to open a way for the fulfillment of every word of God, we might conceivably stagger over it from some cause other than unbelief.

What is there in heaven or earth — apart from God and His ministering spirits — that has not at one time or another risen in fullest opposition to frustrate the word in which some of God's saints had put their trust? Devils in their temptations, baits, subtleties, accusations, and opposition; men in their counsels, reasonings, schemes, interests, dominions, alliances, armies, and the full extent of their efforts; the whole frame of nature in its originally instituted course — fire, water, day, night, age, sickness, death — all in their courses have fought against the accomplishment of the promises. And what have they gained by all their striving? All disappointed, frustrated, turned back, transformed — and serving only to make the mercy of the promise more striking and glorious.

I would gladly illustrate this demonstration with a specific example, so that the almighty, all-conquering power that lies in the promise — which traces all staggering back to its proper basis of unbelief — might be made more evident.

I might here speak of Abraham, with all the difficulties and apparent impossibilities the promise to him had to pass through and cast down, until the mercy of it at length arose, as it were, from the grave — for he received his son from the dead in a figure (Hebrews 11:19). Or I might speak of Joseph, Moses, or David. But I will rather choose a precedent from God's own works in our own day — something in which we may set up our Ebenezer and say, 'Thus far the Lord has helped us.'

Look at the affair of Ireland. The engagement of the great God of vengeance against murder and treachery, and the interest of the Lord Christ and His kingdom against the man of sin, furnished those undertaking the work with many promises to carry them toward a desired and blessed outcome. Now consider briefly some of the mountains of opposition that lay in the way of any success there, and hear the Lord saying to each one: 'Who are you, O great mountain? Before My people you shall become a plain' (Zechariah 4:7).

Without mentioning the strivings and conflicts of two very different kinds of people within this nation, which for a long time utterly blocked the bringing forth of any deliverance for Ireland — nor yet that great mountain (which some mistakenly called a level) that seemed ready at one stroke to shut an everlasting door on that expedition — I will set before you a few of the many obstacles that attended it.

First: the silence that has prevailed in heaven for half an hour, so to speak, regarding this business. The long cessation of earnest prayer from many churches has been no small mountain in the way of the promise. When God purposes to do good for Zion, He requires that His watchmen give Him no rest until He accomplishes it (Isaiah 62:7). Yet sometimes even at the end of His people's supplications He gives an answer by terrifying things (Psalm 65:5). Sometimes He is silent to the prayers of His people (Psalm 28:1). Is it not then all the more remarkable when He grants a request even when His people have grown silent in prayer? How many congregations in this nation could have their prayers, tears, and supplications for the carrying on of God's work in Ireland described as written with the lines of emptiness? What a

silence has prevailed in the heaven of many churches for this last half hour! How many who began with the Lord in that work never sacrificed at the altar of Jehovah Nissi, nor considered that the Lord has sworn to have war with such Amalekites as are there from generation to generation (Exodus 17:15-16)? They have forgotten that Ireland was the first of the nations to lie in wait for the blood of God's people seeking to enter into His rest, and that therefore their latter end shall be to perish forever (Numbers 24:20). Many are as angry as Jonah — not that Babylon is spared, but that it is not spared. Has this not stood as a mountain? What will you do when certain people and parties look upon you as grass on the rooftops that withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand nor the one who binds sheaves his arms — people who will not even say, 'The blessing of the Lord be upon you; we bless you in the name of the Lord'? But shall the faithlessness of men make the faith of God of no effect? Shall the kingdom of Christ suffer because some of His own — whether through worldly wisdom or spiritual folly — refuse to come forth to His help against the mighty? Surely not! The Lord sees it and it displeases Him. He sees that there is no man and wonders that there is no intercessor — marveling that there are not more prayers on this behalf. Therefore His own arm brought salvation, and His own righteousness sustained it. He put on righteousness as a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on garments of vengeance for clothing and was wrapped in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so He will repay — fury to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies, and to the islands He will repay their due (Isaiah 59:15-18). Some men's failure to pray will

not hinder the promises from being accomplished. They may more easily discover an idol in themselves than disappoint the living God. This was a mountain.

Second, our own counsels and strategies have often stood in the way of the promises coming to fruition. This is not the time or place for full accounts, so I will say only this in general: if the best and most rational strategies of the army had not been overridden by God's providence, there is every probability that your affairs would have been set back by more than ten degrees from where they now stand.

Third, the visible opposition of the combined enemy in that nation seemed, by our own strength, unconquerable. The wise man tells us that a threefold cord is not easily broken — but Ireland had a fivefold cord twisted together to make strong chains against Zion. Never, I think, did such different interests bear with one another to accomplish a single common end.

A person who encountered a lion, a fox, and an ass traveling together would wonder where these ill-matched companions were bound. And his wonder would not cease when he heard they were going on a pilgrimage in a matter of devotion.

Consider someone who should encounter Protestants — covenanted Protestants who had sworn before the great God to extirpate Popery and Prelacy, as the Scots in Ulster — alongside others who felt themselves bound by an equally sacred obligation to maintain Prelacy, the prayer book, and the like, as the whole party of Ormond's adherents; joined with a great number who for eight years had sealed their vows to the Roman religion with the blood of others and their own; adding to these those who were inclined

to revolt back and forth as suited their own interests, as some in Munster — all closing with the party they themselves had worked hardest to make odious and execrable as being stained with innocent blood. Seeing all these, after seven years of mutual conflict and bloodshed, marching all in the same direction together, a person could not help but wonder where they were all heading so agreeably together. And surely his astonishment would not lessen when he heard that the first thing they intended and agreed upon was to cover the innocent blood of 1641, contrary to that promise: 'Behold, the Lord comes out of His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity; the earth also will disclose her blood and will no longer cover her slain' (Isaiah 26:21). And next, to establish the Catholic religion — the kingdom of Babylon — throughout the whole nation, in opposition to the engaged truth and the visibly manifested power of the Lord Jesus in our day, along with various other things contrary to their knowledge and conscience, their covenant and their convictions, indeed the trust and honor of most of the chief leaders among them.

Now how can the promise stand against this many-headed monster? What does it say to this combined opposition? First, says the Lord: 'Though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not go unpunished' (Proverbs 11:21). Their covering shall be too short and narrow to hide the blood which God will have disclosed.

And next: though they give their power to the beast and fight against the Lamb — agreeing in this who agree in nothing else in the world — yet they shall be broken in pieces. Though they unite together, they shall be broken in pieces. If Rezin and the son of Remaliah — Syria and Ephraim, old adversaries — combine in a new enmity against Judah; if covenant and Prelacy, Popery and

treachery, bloodguilt and (as to that matter) innocence join hand in hand to stand in the way of the promise — yet 'I will not join in this with them,' says the Lord. Though they were kept in their separate interests for seven years of mutual conflict, serving as scourges to one another, yet if they close ranks to block God's engagement in the word of His promise, not much more than a quarter of a year shall reduce some of them to nothing and fill the rest with rage and anguish.

As for the ways God has worked mightily and effectively — mixing folly into their counsels, spreading fear, terror, and confusion over all their undertakings — to carry forward His own purpose, I could easily give substantial examples. What has been said in general is sufficient to ground us in this: while we are in the way of God, all staggering over the outcome is from unbelief, for He can and will do more such things as these.

First application: the first application concerns temporal matters, which as I noted also come under the promise and are not to be staggered at, within the limits previously mentioned. Learn from this to live more by faith in all your actions. Believe, and you shall be established. In the course of my life I have observed this evil under the sun: many professing Christians who were called into public life have made it their great design to manage all their affairs with cleverness and political strategy, like the people of the surrounding nations. Living by faith upon the promises appeared to them as too lowly a thing for the condition and employment they now held. Now they had to plot and scheme and strategize, laying down principles of worldly, fleshly wisdom to be pursued to the fullest extent. And what, I ask, has been the outcome of such undertakings?

First, the power of genuine religion was entirely consumed by that lean, hungry, never-satisfied beast of worldly policy. No trace remains that it was ever in their hearts. Being conformed to Christ in gospel graces is looked upon as a mean and contemptible thing. Some of them have fallen into outright atheism, and most of them into wretched formalism in the things of God. And then:

Second, their plots and undertakings have generally proved swollen and empty — producing nothing. Frustration and disappointment have been the portion of their remaining days. Ceasing to lean on the Lord and striving to be wise in human ways — like the people of the world — has produced more Rehoboams than anything else in this generation.

What lies at the root of all this? Simply staggering at the promise through unbelief. What kind of building is that which rests on a staggering foundation? When God does not answer Saul, he goes to the witch. When the promise will not hold us up, we turn to worldly policy — it cannot be otherwise. People who find one road blocked will immediately try another. If people begin to stagger at the promise and conclude in their fears that it will never be fulfilled — that the fountain will run dry — they cannot help but think it high time to dig cisterns for themselves. When David said, 'I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul' — whatever God had said to the contrary — his next course was, 'Let me go to the Philistines'; and you know how that turned out. Political detours from pure dependence on the promise always draw a long time of entanglement in their wake.

Allow me to give a word of caution against one or two things that people who stagger at the promises through unbelief typically run toward in their worldly wisdom — so that they may not be

found in your honorable assembly.

First, take heed of handling the things of God and managing religion to serve the advantage of your present circumstances and political posture. The things of Christ should be like Joseph's sheaf — the one to which all others bow. When they are made to cringe and bend and put on a flattering face to attract some group into their interest, they are no longer the things of Christ. I wish it had not been too plainly evident in former times that people tangled in their affairs and holding authority have pursued with all diligence some particular appearance of religion — not because they were themselves passionately committed to it, but merely to satisfy certain people whose help and cooperation they needed for other purposes. Oh, let the things of God no longer be mixed with worldly calculations. His truths are all eternal and unchangeable. Give them at once the full sovereignty of your souls, and have not the slightest thought of bending them to serve your own ends — however good and righteous those ends may be. Do not think to obtain the promise as Jacob did, by presenting yourselves in the things of God as something other than you are.

Second, do not suppress any truth of God — in that sphere of expression which has been committed to you — out of fear that it might be harmful to your affairs. Whatever influence and authority flows from your power that is due to any truth of God, do not withhold it through worldly calculations. I could elaborate on these and similar things further, but the warning is simply this: live upon the faith of that promise which shall surely be established, without turning aside into needless and crooked paths of your own making.

Second application: be faithful in doing all the work of God to which you are engaged, just as He is faithful in doing all your work to which He is engaged. Your work — the work to which God is committed on your behalf, while you walk in His ways — is your safety and protection. God's work — the work to which you are committed — is the propagation of the kingdom of Christ and the raising up of the standard of the Gospel. As you find God going forward with your work, go forward with His. How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all His garments with the blood of His enemies, with no one to hold Him out as a lamb sprinkled with His own blood to His friends? Is it the sovereignty and interest of England alone that is to be accomplished there? For my part, I see no further into the mystery of these things than this: I could heartily rejoice that the innocent blood being atoned for, the Irish might possess Ireland as long as the moon endures — so long as Jesus Christ might possess the Irish. But God, having allowed those sworn servants of the man of sin to break out into such villainy as justly exposes them to punishment, under such principles of government among men as He has appointed — is there therefore nothing to be done but to put a cup of blood into their hands? Surely the way by which God will bring the followers of the beast to their deserved destruction, for all their enmity against the Lord Jesus, will be by allowing them to commit such acts against men as will righteously expose them to judgment, by acknowledged principles among the sons of men. But is this all? Does He have no further aim? Is not all of this meant to make way for the Lord Jesus to take possession of His long-promised inheritance? And shall we stop at the first part? Is it fair to the Lord

Jesus to call Him to battle and then withhold His crown? God has been faithful in doing great things for you — be faithful in this one: do your utmost for the preaching of the Gospel in Ireland.

Allow me to add a few motivations for this duty.

First, they are in desperate need. There is no want like that of people who lack the Gospel. I wish there were at present at least one Gospel preacher for every walled town in the English-held territory in Ireland. The land mourns, and the people perish for want of knowledge. Many run to and fro, but it is on other business; knowledge is not increasing.

Second, they are aware of their need and are crying out for help. The tears and cries of the inhabitants of Dublin longing for the preaching of Christ are ever before my eyes. If they were in the dark and content to remain there, it might somewhat close the door on the compassion of our hearts. But they cry out from their darkness and are ready to follow anyone — anyone at all — just to have a candle. If their being without the Gospel does not move our hearts, perhaps their urgent cries will disturb our rest and wring help from us, as a beggar wrings alms.

Third, if we do not act, deceivers and blasphemers will not be slow to sow their weeds — and those unplanted fields will readily receive them if no one sows the seed of the Word. Some have already come over there without any call or appointment, for no other purpose than to boast that they are God — as they have done openly in the streets, with detestable pride, atheism, and folly. So, just as Ireland was once described in civil terms as a dumping ground for bankrupts — because of the great number of people with failed estates who went there — it will surely prove in religion

to be a dumping ground for monstrous, outrageous, and contradictory opinions, if the work of preaching the Word of truth and sound doctrine is not carried on. And if that is the outcome of your present undertakings, will it be acceptable to the Lord Jesus — do you think — that you have used His power and might to make way for the very things His soul abhors?

First, will it be to His honor that the people He has claimed for Himself with so mighty a hand should, at the very moment of His taking possession, be leavened with those lofty and heavenly-sounding notions which have a clearly demonstrated tendency to earthly, fleshly, and degraded practices? Or:

Second, will it be to the credit and honor of your profession of the Gospel that such a breach should occur under your watch — and by your means, as it were? Will it not be a sword, an arrow, and a hammer in the hands of your critics? Who can bear the just scandal that would follow? Scandal upon the magistrates and ministers of this generation for neglecting such an opportunity to advance the Gospel — sleeping through the day while others are busy sowing weeds.

Third, where will be the hoped-for and expected consolation of this great undertaking, when the testimony and pledge of Christ's special presence among us is lacking — given such an outcome?

What then should we do? This matter is often spoken of but seldom brought to any conclusion!

First, pray. Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out — to thrust forth — workers into His harvest. The workers themselves are ready to say, 'There is a lion in the way' — there are real difficulties to contend with. And for some people, it is hard to see the call of

God through difficulties. If only a call would clothe itself in a few earthly advantages — how plain it becomes to them! They can see it through the tiniest crack. Be earnest therefore with the Master of these workers, in whose hand is their life and breath and all their ways, that He would powerfully press them to be willing to enter the fields that are white for harvest.

Second, make such provision that those who are willing to go may be shielded from outward hardship and anxiety, as far as the uncertainty of human affairs in general and present turbulent conditions permit. And I beg you, let this not be the kind of action that is resolved on and never followed through. But also:

Third, let some people be appointed — generals die and fade on their own — to give this matter serious attention and to hear whatever sound proposals any person may bring whose heart God has stirred for so good a work.

This, I say, is a work in which God expects faithfulness from you. Do not stagger at His promises or at your own duty. By every means possible in this matter, I have striven to discharge my own soul of its obligation.

Once more, alongside this call to faith, let me also stir you to a work of love — on behalf of many poor, perishing people who lack all the basic necessities of life. There are parentless children lying begging, starving, and dying in the streets with no one to help them. There are also people of standing who have lost their dearest loved ones in your service and are now seeking bread and finding none. Oh that some serious thought might be given to these as well, by those who will take up the care for the Gospel.

Third application: I now wish to make a more personal application of the doctrine as it concerns purely spiritual matters. Until you know how to believe for your own souls, you will scarcely know how to believe for a nation. Let this therefore teach us to lay the burden and trouble of our lives on the right shoulder. In our staggerings, our doubts, and our disputes with ourselves, we are prone to assign this and that reason for them — when the real and only reason is our unbelief. We say: 'If such and such a cause were removed, I could believe' — as though faith were only needed when there were no obstacles. Faith must remove the mountains that lie in the way, and then all will be plain. It is not the greatness of sin, nor continuance in sin, nor backsliding into sin, that is the true cause of your staggering — whatever you claim. The removal of all these things comes from that promise whose stability and certainty I have already set forth. The sole cause of staggering is your unbelief — that root of bitterness which springs up and troubles you. It is not the distance of the earth from the sun, nor the sun's pulling back, that makes a dark and gloomy day — it is the blocking of the light by clouds and vapors. Neither is your soul beyond the reach of the promise, nor does God withdraw Himself. It is the vapors of your unbelieving heart that cloud you. It is said of one place that Christ could do no great work there. Why? Was it for lack of power in Him? Not at all — it was simply because of their unbelief. The promise can do no great work upon your heart — cannot humble you, pardon you, or quiet you. Is it for lack of fullness and truth in the promise? Not at all — it is simply for lack of faith in you that keeps it at a distance. People complain that if only such and such things were removed, they could believe, when in fact it is their unbelief that throws those obstacles in the way. It is like a man who

scatters nails and sharp stones in his own path and then says, 'Truly I could run, were it not for those nails and stones' — while he himself continues to put them there. You could believe, if not for these doubts and difficulties and staggering perplexities — but they all come from your unbelief.

Fourth application: see the sinfulness of all those staggering doubts and perplexities that consume the thoughts of many poor souls. As the root is, so is the fruit. If the tree is bad, so will its fruit be. People do not gather grapes from thorn bushes. What is the root that produces this fruit of staggering? Is it not the evil root of unbelief? And can any good come from that? Are not all the streams of the same nature as the fountain? If the fountain is bitter, can the streams be sweet? If the body is full of poison, will not the branches carry venom too? Surely, if the mother — unbelief — is the mouth of hell, the daughters — staggerings — are not the gates of heaven.

Of the sin of unbelief I will not now speak at length. In short, it is the universal opposition of the soul against God. Every other sin rises against some particular aspect of His revealed will. Only unbelief sets itself in direct contradiction to everything of Him that is known. This is why the weight of condemnation in the Gospel rests consistently on this sin. He who does not believe has the wrath of God resting on him; he shall be condemned. Now, just as every drop of seawater carries the bitterness and saltiness of the whole ocean, so every staggering doubt that flows from this unbelief carries in it the same offensiveness and displeasure to God that is in the whole.

Let me offer a little further light into how the Lord receives our staggering thoughts — since our estimate of everything within us must be shaped by how He receives it.

Notice that such staggering: first, grieves God; second, provokes Him; and third, dishonors Him.

First, this frame of mind grieves the Lord. Nothing presses genuine love more than any appearance of suspicion. Christ came to Peter and asked him, 'Simon, son of Jonas, do you love Me?' (John 21:15). Peter, glad of an opportunity to confess his love for the One he had not long before denied, readily answered, 'Yes, Lord, You know that I love You.' But when Christ came with the same question again and again, the Holy Spirit tells us that Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?' It deeply troubled Peter that his love should be questioned so many times, when he knew it to be sincere. The love of Christ for His own is infinitely beyond the love of His own for Him. All our doubting is nothing but so many repeated questionings of His love. We cry, 'Lord Jesus, do You love us?' and again, 'Lord Jesus, do You love us?' — and with distrustful thoughts that He does not, that He cannot. Of the unbelieving Jews, the Holy Spirit tells us that Jesus was grieved over the hardness of their hearts (Mark 3:5). And as unbelief is bitter to Him at the root, so also is it in the fruit. Our staggering and debating when we have a word of promise is a grief to His Holy Spirit — it is the unkindest return we can make for His love.

Second, it provokes Him. Zechariah said, 'How can this be — that I should have a son?' And the Lord replied: it will be so, and you yourself for your questioning will be a sign of it — 'You shall be mute and unable to speak' (Luke 1). His doubting was a provoca-

tion. Our Savior expresses no less in that sharp rebuke to His disciples over their wavering (Matthew 17:17): 'O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you?' He meant: how long shall I put up with you in this unbelieving frame. Poor souls are quick to marvel at God's patience in other areas — that He spared them in such and such sins, at such and such moments of danger. But His extraordinary patience with them in their worldly reasonings and fleshly objections against believing — this they do not marvel at. Indeed, they generally think it should be so — that God would not have them one step further. They even suppose they could be more steadfast in believing if only it pleased God to let them be — when all along, this very frame, above all others, is the greatest provocation to the Lord. He never exercises more forbearance than He does toward this kind of unbelief.

When the spies had gone into Canaan, seen the land, and brought back samples of its good fruit — and then repined and questioned whether God would bring them in — this caused the Lord to swear in His wrath that they would not enter into His rest. When God has brought people to the very borders of heaven, showed them the riches and excellency of His grace, even allowed them to enter as spies into the kingdom of glory — and then they fall to staggering over whether He intends to let them in — this lies heavy on Him. The same can be said of all promised mercies and deliverances whatsoever.

That this is a provocation, the Lord has abundantly shown — for it has caused Him many times to snatch sweet morsels from the mouths of men and to turn aside the stream of mercies when it was ready to flow in upon them. 'If you will not believe, you shall

not be established' (Isaiah 7:9). The very mercy just promised concerning your deliverance shall be withheld. Oh, do not stop the progress in Ireland through unbelief.

Third, it dishonors God. At the close of Romans 4:20 it is said that Abraham was strong in faith — that is, did not stagger — giving glory to God. To be established in believing is to give God the greatest glory possible. Every staggering thought that rises from this root of unbelief robs God of His glory.

First, it robs Him of the glory of His truth. He who does not believe has made God a liar, because he does not believe His testimony (1 John 5:10). Whatever pretenses people offer — and most of the time we offer very fine-sounding ones for our unbelief — the bottom of it all is the questioning of God's truth in our false hearts.

Second, it robs Him of the glory of His faithfulness in the fulfillment of His promises. If we confess our sins, He is faithful to forgive us our sins (1 John 1:9). He has engaged His faithfulness in the business of forgiving iniquities. Whoever calls that faithfulness into question is calling God's faithfulness itself into question.

Third, it robs Him of the glory of His grace. In short, if a man wanted to place himself in universal opposition to God, he could think of no more efficient way than this. This, then, is the fruit and the gain of all our staggering: we rob God of His glory and our own souls of mercy.

Fifth application: be ashamed of and humbled for all your staggering at the promises of God, along with all the worldly reasonings and schemes that flow from it. For the most part, we live on successes, not promises. Unless we see and feel the evidence of victories, we will not believe. God's engagement is almost entirely for-

gotten in our affairs. We travel on without Christ, like His mother, supposing Him to be somewhere in the crowd — but we must go back and find Him where we left Him, or all our pressing forward will be to no purpose.

When Job, after all his complaining, had seen the end of the Lord, he cried out, 'Now I abhor myself in dust and ashes.' You have seen the end of the Lord in many of His promises. Oh that this might move you to abhor yourselves in dust and ashes for all your fleshly fears and corrupt reasonings in your staggering.

When David had received his promised mercy, he was especially ashamed of every thought of unbelief he had harbored while waiting for it: 'I said in my alarm,' he confesses, 'that all men are liars' — and now he was humbled for it. Is it true gratitude to simply forget our provoking thoughts of unbelief once the mercy has arrived? May the Lord press this home on your spirits and give it its proper effect.

First, if there are any counsels, designs, or schemes currently underway among us that are rooted in our staggering at the promise we are under, oh let them be brought immediately to nothing. Let no one be so foolish as to think that unbelief can be a foundation for peaceful dwellings. You are careful to avoid everything that might dishonor you as rulers of so great a nation — be far more careful about what dishonors you as believers. That is your greatest title; that is your highest privilege. Search your own thoughts, and if any scheme or compromise is found taking root that was seeded by staggering at the promise, tear it up and cast it out before it is too late.

Second, commit your hearts against all such ways in the future. Say to God: 'How faithful You are in all Your ways! How able to fulfill all Your promises! How completely You have established Your word in heaven and earth! Who would not put their trust in You? We desire to be ashamed that we ever admitted, even for a moment, the slightest staggering at the steadfastness of Your word.'

Third, act as people grounded on unshakable things — people who are not moved at all by the greatest apparent opposition. He who believes will not act in panic. Do not be hasty in your decisions when under pressure. Wait for the fulfillment of the vision, for it will come. As long as you are in the way of God and doing the work of God, do not let even your desires become too anxious for visible supports and reinforcements. Why is there such bleating among us after the compliance of this or that faction of men — men who perhaps pride themselves on the very unbelief they see in our actions — as though we were proclaiming that without such and such parties we cannot be kept safe in the things of God? I beg you: let us live above these things, which are unworthy of the great name that is called upon us.

Oh that by these and similar ways we might demonstrate our self-condemnation and our hatred for all that distrust and staggering at the word of God which, arising from unbelief, has had such deplorable effects on all our counsels and undertakings.

The End.

THANKS FOR READING



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