FAITH AS A GRAIN OF MUSTARD SEED.

ST. MATTHEW XVII. 20.

THAT Mount Hermon, with all its snows, streams, crags, and cedar forests, should bow and remove at the command of faith is a wonderful, and to many an incredible, promise. Yet it does not stand alone. It is repeated in various forms. When his disciples marvelled because the fig tree instantly withered away at the word of Christ, He answered and said unto them (Matt. xxi. 21): "Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do what is done to the fig tree, but even if ye shall say unto this mountain (*i.e.* Moriah, the holy mount on which the temple stood), Be thou taken up and cast into the sea, it shall be done." So again, when the apostles prayed, "Lord, increase our faith," He replied (Luke xvii. 6), "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye would say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou rooted up, and be thou planted in the sea; and it would have obeyed you." Even St. Paul assumes that both he and his converts might have "faith so as to remove mountains," and speaks of this wonderful power as a very little thing compared with the gracious activities and benignities of love (1 Cor. xiii. 2). And when once we observe how this great promise is woven into the very structure of the New Testament, taking many forms, but remaining substantially the same, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for those who hold the New Testament to be in any sense the word of God, to admit that it is simply a bold hyperbole, which it would be absurd to take as more or other than a mere figure of speech.

How then may we so approach it and so read it as to prove its literal truth, and to reconcile it with the dictates of reason and the facts of human experience?

There are many ways in which we may so approach and so interpret it.

1. First of all, we may dwell on the indubitable fact that all the marvels, all the apparent impossibilities, which men have wrought, have been wrought by the energy of faith. It is by his faith in the laws of nature and in his interpretation of these laws, that the man of science has achieved the marvels which have altered the whole form and tone of modern life. It is by his faith both in the courage of his soldiers and in his own power of handling them, *i.e.* his system of tactics, that every great captain has won his victories, often snatching them from the very mouth of defeat. It is by his faith in men and in his reading of the laws of social and political science, that every great statesmen learns how to take occasion by the hand and to make the bounds of freedom broader yet. It is by his faith in great religious principles and truths that every successful reformer of the Church, *e.g.* Luther, has purged the Church from its accretions of error and superstition, elevated and liberalised at once her creed, her ritual, and her morality, in the teeth of both priestly and imperial power. By faith the early Church put a new heart into the decrepit Roman empire. By faith the Reformers put a new heart into the northern kingdoms of Europe, and suppressed some at least of the most flagrant vices and superstitions even of the southern kingdoms who rejected their teaching.

Did not *they* remove whole mountains of tyranny and oppression under which the nations were groaning? Nay; even in apostolic times, was there not a very close and literal fulfilment of one of the forms of this great promise? The will of man is harder to bend than any natural force. The Jewish temple, with its services and sacrifices, seemed far more firmly established than the rock on which it stood; for it was founded on the word of God. Yet even to this sacred mountain of law and custom, tradition and worship,

sustained by the will of the most obstinate of races, the Christian disciples uttered the command of faith, Be thou removed, and it did remove; nor has it yet gone back to its place.

2. There is another way by which we may approach this promise, and read it in harmony with the teachings of reason and experience. The Bible everywhere proclaims that, in the intention of God, man is the lord of this lower world; that he was made to have dominion over all the works of God's hand, to hold all things under his feet. It admits indeed that man has fallen from his pride of place, forfeited his inheritance by violating the conditions on which it was held; so that as yet "we see not all things put under him." But it affirms that when, and in proportion as, he is redeemed from the bondage of sin by the grace of God, when he becomes perfect, when he has fully recovered the image and likeness in which he was made, his inheritance will be restored, and all things will obey and serve him.

Does not reason curiously confirm the teaching of the Bible? In the partial dominion over the forces and laws of the natural world which men have slowly and laboriously acquired, do we not find the proof that his Maker intended man to rule? In the limits and imperfections of his dominion, have we not the confession that because of his sin and weakness he has not yet attained his true place and dignity, and is not already perfect? Does not reason itself teach and assure us that when he is perfect—perfect in wisdom and strength and love—he may be safely endowed with a power with which as yet he could not be trusted; and that he will then be "crowned with glory and honour," and rise to that dominion over all things for which he was created and made?

But if there ever was a perfect Man upon the earth, was it not reasonable that all things should do *his* bidding, and hearken to the voice of his word? In proportion as his

disciples grew up into Him, *i.e.* shared his perfection, was it not reasonable that they should share his power?

From this point of view the miracles of the New Testament—which not only affirms Christ to be *the* Son of man, in whose image we are to be reconstituted, but also to be the Son of God—are as credible to reason as they are dear to faith; for all things are possible to God, and therefore nothing can be impossible to as many as are made "partakers of his divine nature." Shall not man, then, who at the first was "made but a little lower than God," when he is raised to be "one with the Father," become the servant and minister of his will, and be clothed with his authority because he is under his authority, just as every magistrate, soldier, sailor, the moment he receives his commission, is clothed with the authority of England and armed with her power?

3. There is still another way—the way of the mustard seed,[1] by which we may approach and vindicate this great promise; for it is to the faith which resembles "a grain of mustard seed" that the promise is made, both in Matthew xvii. 20 and Luke xvii. 6. Must there not, then, be something in the nature and activity of such a seed which, duly considered, will illustrate the Promise?

As the mustard is one of the smallest of seeds, no doubt our Lord meant us to imply from his comparison how much even a little faith will do, if only it be alive. *If only it be alive;* for no doubt He also meant to remind us that it is only a living faith, however small, which will work wonders because of its vital hold on the Everlasting Strength.

So much lies on the very surface of the passage. But we must try to get below the surface and ascertain what the real point of the comparison is.

[1] I am indebted for this suggestion to the writer of a book already commended in this Magazine: *viz. The Gospel of Divine Humanity*, p. 107.

The mustard seed is one of the tiniest of seeds, although in the fierce heat of the Jordan valley it will grow up into a herb as high as a man on horseback, and throw out sprays on which the birds of the air perch and feed, attracted by its pungent fruit. Take such a seed into your hand and consider it, and you will find it hard, round, dry, and apparently dead and inert. Put it under a microscope and dissect it; and, small as it is, you will find that it contains a germ far smaller than itself in which its whole potency is summed up. Born in the air, nourished by the sunshine and the dew, it yet cannot live and appropriate their virtues while it remains in them, so long as it lies in the pod or continues above the ground. But bury it in the soil, and soon a process of dissolution and disintegration sets in which is also a process of vitality and growth. Its main bulk rots, but rots only that it may feed the tiny germ of quickened life which resides within it; for even a seed must lose itself to find itself, must die that it may live. Through death it rises into a new life, pushes its way through what compared to itself in size and weight are *whole mountains* of obstruction and resistance, piercing clod after clod, and compelling each to yield its virtues and to minister to its needs; until, at last, it rises into that fellowship with the air and the sunshine and the dew for which it yearned and was designed. "The mountains of earth are dead in comparison with its life." Hence it commands them to be removed, and they obey. So astonishing is the vital energy of even the smallest seeds that "mushroom spores, which singly are almost invisible," have been known to lift large paving stones an inch or two from the earth in the course of a single night.

Which things are a parable, or may be parabolised. For, in like manner, man was born for fellowship with God and with all the gracious forces and influences of Heaven. Even in his lowest estate, even when dead in trespasses and sins,

he feels at times that he was meant to live, and testifies in a thousand different ways that he aspires after the life which springs from communion with the upper world and the Lord of that world. But, before he can live, he must die—die to self, die to sin, losing that he may find himself. And so to him, too, there comes a moment when he sinks as into a great darkness, into the darkness and pain and travail of repentance; when he is convinced of his own sinfulness and nothingness, but when he is also convinced of righteousness; when his old, feeble, and intermittent aspirations after a higher better life become inspirations to endeavour after that life. Faith is quickened within him—faith in God, and in the life that springs from fellowship with God as the only true and proper life for man. He gropes after the light, without which he cannot truly live. Many obstructions, whole mountains of obstruction, lie in his way. The old self, with its habits and lusts, must die, before the new self, created after God in holiness and righteousness, can truly and freely live: and this old self dies hard. The world around him, and all the ties that bind him to the world and its ways, resist the upspringing life: and these too are hard to overcome, hard to impossibility unless the power of an endless life has been released within him. The new world, the new life, after which he aspires and to which he tends, will often grow dubious to him, or seem unattractive, or look to be beyond his reach, unless faith, the eye and the hand of the soul, come to his aid; unless, that is, he already feels the secret influence of the sunshine and the air, into the open influence and open possession of which he has not yet attained. But if this germ of living power has been released by the quickening breath of the Divine Spirit, that new world, with its new and higher ways of life, will grow ever more attractive to him, and exert a more constraining influence upon him. In the strength of faith he will bid these mountains remove,

and they will obey him. He will pierce through clod after clod of resistance, compel them to minister to his nourishment, assimilate all in them that will serve his turn, until he, too, springs up into the heavenly light and air, grows and thrives in them, and, being in the kingdom of heaven, brings forth fruit unto God.

Read thus, read as a parable of spiritual growth and conquest, this great promise may seem, at first and to some, much less great and wonderful than when we read it, a few paragraphs back, in a more literal sense. But what children we must be, and must have determined to remain, if, on reflection, we do not see that this inward wonder infinitely transcends all outward wonders both in magnitude and value. If I *had* the faith that removes mountains; if *i.e.* all the forces of nature were as pliant to my will as some of them already are to the hand of him who has mastered their secret and knows how to set them in motion, and yet had not the faith which walks by love,—what should I be the better for that, or the better off? I might be only the worse for it, and use my power for my own harm or to harm others.

Which, after all, is the nobler aim and attainment—to be a magician and compel all things to serve my will, or to be a good man and delight to do the will of God, the only perfect Will?

The question admits of but one answer. To be good is better than to be wise, as to be wise is better than to be strong. The mere might which we are all tempted to deem so magnificent an endowment, the mere power to control outward forces and events, is nothing when compared with a wise and understanding heart or a rectified and obedient will,—such a heart and such a will as, through the grace of God, are open to us all.

And, therefore, the main question for each one of us is: "Have I received this grace, and not received it in vain?

Has my faith in God become vital, is it growing like a grain of mustard seed? Is it penetrating, overcoming, converting to its own use, the mountains of hindrance and obstruction which it has to encounter in my own nature and conditions, in my natural temperament, inherited proclivities, acquired habits? Is it convicting me of sin; *i.e.* of sinful tempers, lusts, ambitions, ways of thought and action, and compelling me to renounce them? Is it convincing me of righteousness; *i.e.* leading me to recognize the true ideal of life as set forth in the person and history of the Perfect Man, and constraining me to pursue that ideal and make it my own?" If it is, then it is a genuine and vital faith, a faith that works the only wonders which are of any real value to us. It is conducting us into that fellowship with God, the Sun of the soul, and with all the gracious influences of the heavenly or spiritual world, for which we were created and made. It is slowly raising us through that death to self and selfish aims by which alone we can nourish and reach the true life of the spirit within us, that life of service which yet is freedom, of labour which yet is rest, of abasement which yet is exaltation.

Viewed in this light, approached by the way of the mustard seed, this great Promise yields us the very assurance and encouragement we most deeply need. It comes to us as we lie buried in the earth, with the old life painfully dying and the new life painfully struggling to the birth, all its power and joy absorbed as in pangs of travail, and it assures us that *these* are the very conditions by which alone we can rise into the light and warmth, the freedom and blessedness, after which we aspire, the very pressures, distractions, struggles, endeavours through which we are to be made partakers of the divine nature and the divine peace. It will not suffer us to find omens of defeat in them, as we are apt to do, nor food for despair. It tells us that our faith, if it is to prove itself alive and to become

perfect, *must* remove mountains; and it encourages us with the hope that, if our faith be vital and growing, every mountain to which we say, "Remove hence," will remove, and that "nothing shall be impossible" to us, however impossible it may seem.

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FAITH NOT MERE ASSENT.

THE present inquiry relates not to faith as a general principle, but to that special exercise of it known as saving faith, faith in the gospel, or faith in Jesus Christ. It is the faith which is effectual to salvation in its widest sense, by which we are both justified and sanctified—the initial, determining, and formative principle of the whole Christian life. Now the question is, Is the faith on which such momentous issues hang merely an intellectual act? or is it also emotional and moral?—merely the assent of the understanding to certain propositions, or, in addition to this, the trust of the heart, or, as we prefer to put it, the self-surrendering trust of heart and will, in a personal Saviour?

The question may not be one of such living interest at the present time as it possessed a generation or century ago, but it is by no means a dead controversy, or a question of barren metaphysics, or a mere dispute about words. Touching, as it does, the apple of the spiritual eye, it has a vital and abiding interest both for theology and for practical religion. Not that a correct theory of faith is essential to the possession of a real or even of a strong faith. To assume that it is would be an aggravated form of one of the worst vices of the intellectual theory of religion, which it is our object to impugn. To walk, we do not require to