

FAITH THAT PLEASES GOD

SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON

By Steve Zeisler

My neighbor across the street graduated from Stanford in 1976. His class had its ten-year reunion this weekend. On Friday we were talking about his plans: a tailgate party, a football game, a large gathering of his whole class, a small gathering of good friends. He told me that he looked forward to finding out how life had treated old friends with whom he had lost touch. As we talked, I began thinking about words like alma mater (which means, “mother of the soul”), homecoming, etc. The longer I thought about that the more I realized that a class reunion raised issues that are properly raised by Christians. What is the source from which we find direction for life? What is the “home” from which we have been given a purpose and a sense of what is valuable? What mothering has our soul been given so that we have understanding and capacity to make our way in life?

We have considered such themes in our studies in the book of Hebrews. Today we have reached the greatly loved eleventh chapter of the letter. Three verses from chapter 10 set the context for this extended discussion of the nature of faith:

Remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. (Hebrews 10:32-34)

The author is saying, “Remember the early days, when your spiritual possession in Christ was so valuable you were joyfully willing to set aside the things that this world promises.” But in the intervening years these early recipients of the letter faced temptation and pressure to devalue the possession that once had meant so much to them. They began to ask what they were really committed to, to rethink their goals and purposes in life and look to things that paid off in this world. They had succumbed to temptation and pressure and were losing their way.

Having raised that issue, the writer now turns in this glorious chapter to the importance of Christian faith the means by which we overcome temptation and pressure. He urges his readers to capture again a life that is centered on things yet future, on things that cannot be seen, and on the certainty of the promises of God. As we study this section we may find ourselves asking, from what source have we learned the things that are important to us? Who has taught us? Are there certain things for which we will set aside everything else in order to acquire them? What is our destination?

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a

rewarder of those who seek Him. By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. (Hebrews 11:1-12)

Hebrews 11:1 gives a very succinct definition of faith. Christians are charged to live by faith, to choose faith as the means by which to make their way through life. This is the option that Scripture holds before us, and we must choose it over all others. Thus, a clear and succinct definition of the word is welcome, and we have it in these words: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

There are two points, essentially, being made in that verse. The first is that the future is more important than the present. Faith is the assurance of things "hoped" for. For Christians, the word "hope" does not imply contingency—something that may or may not happen. Yesterday I hoped the Stanford football team would beat USC, but I was disappointed. Christian hope is not like that in any sense. It is something we know for sure will be fulfilled. The only difficulty lies in the fact that it is yet future to us. But by faith we apprehend what is in the future. Thus, the substance of our choices and our understanding is dominated by things that have not yet occurred.

Our world today is caught up in a love affair with youth. People do all kinds of things to themselves in an effort to look younger, to regain what time has taken away. By so doing they are demonstrating a fear of what is to come. Christians, on the other hand, are committed to the proposition that the most important things for them are yet future.

Secondly, Hebrews 11:1 holds that the invisible things are more important than the things that are seen. What is the difference between a house and a home? True, both are physical structures, buildings in which people reside. But there are vast differences between them. A house may be a cold, foreboding structure, without welcome, laughter or joy. The residents may be uneasy with each other and lack commitment to each other. That building may be a house, but it is not a home. Yet another building, which is similar in structure to the house, can be called a home because in it is living a committed, loving family. In that home joy and hospitality are expressed toward visitors, but from the outside these are invisible qualities; they cannot be measured or seen.

So while both buildings look alike, what is going on inside them is what transforms one from a house into a home.

In a much more profound way, the Scriptures declare that it is the invisible things, the things we cannot touch or control that make life worth living. And these values come from a God whom we cannot touch, yet who is utterly sovereign and powerful and loving. It is his presence and purpose in our lives that ought to be supremely important even though they remain unseen and intangible.

The apostle Peter described what makes a woman attractive in these words from his letter, "Your adornment must not be merely external braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 3:3-4). What God

cares about is not the way we look, not the external, visible things. The human heart at its best level does not care about the way things appear. It is the unseen things that are supremely important.

If we will be men and women of faith, the challenge for us is to increasingly reject the values that are based only on tangible, visible, momentary things and choose, instead, a course in life which is informed by our hope in the future, by an invisible God who is with us every moment.

Hebrews 11:6 tells us what pleases God: "...without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." The beginning of a life of faith is a fairly simple thing. It does not require cleaning up your bad habits, years of study, or being born into the right family. The life of faith begins with two simple, fundamental requirements: recognition that God exists, and recognition that he is worth knowing; he rewards those who seek him, he answers their initiative. That is the starting point for the life of faith, for that which pleases God. We do not get it all at once. Faith is something that grows. It is begun simply and it becomes the way by which we please God, by which we learn to know what is valuable and what is not.

Now let us consider the five examples of that kind of faith that are given in the first 12 verses. Hebrews 11 is a short course in Old Testament history and theology, a magnificent march through many of the accounts of the Old Testament, each of which illustrates the importance of the life of faith. Five of these accounts are before us now. They are: the creation, the story of Cain and Abel, the stories of Enoch, of Noah, and of Abraham and Sarah.

The more I have considered these examples, the more convinced I am that what the author of Hebrews did—especially in these opening introductory discussions of Old Testament history—was raise five concerns of the human heart that are true for every one of us. He is making reference to questions that reverberate in every single human mind, when we allow them to do so. Christians and non-Christians alike call out for answers in these areas. What we learn here is that the life of faith—a life that trusts a living God, that is empowered by him and seeks him and follows him—is a life that answers the needs of all human hearts.

Take the story of creation. Hebrews 11:3 says, "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are invisible." The physical universe was called into place by the word of God. Prior to everything that is known in creation—the laws, the substance of the physical universe, etc.—prior to all those things was the triune God—immutable, invisible, eternal. His word created all that can be seen. The writer of Hebrews has stated several times throughout this book that the first things are the most Important things. The older things are superior to the newer things. So the invisible, eternal nature of God, which existed before anything physical existed, and spoke into being that which is visible, is pre-eminent.

Recently, the Nobel Prizes for 1986 were awarded to brilliant men and women in physics and chemistry and other scientific pursuits. Some of them have spent their lives investigating the remarkable properties of the tiny particles that make up atoms, how they interact with each other, etc. Rich and prestigious Nobel Prizes are given each year to those who discover what the visible world is like. But the Nobel Committee does not award a prize in godliness.

However, those who know God, those who have studied and learned of him, those who have walked with him and sensed his Spirit in their lives—they know the greatest truth. They know the One who is invisible and eternal and who preceded the created world. They have studied what is really worth knowing in life, and if anybody should be commended it is those who have grown in knowledge of God and obedience to him.

When the creation is mentioned, the question of origins, of purpose arises. The question, How did we become the way we are—is one of the most frequently asked of all questions. Christians and non-Christians alike want an answer to that. But it is only men and women with faith in God who arrive at answers to that gripping question of the heart. They know God and thus they come to understand their origins.

We find the second example presented in this list of the men of old who gained approval in Hebrews 11:4, in the story of Adam's sons. Two brothers, Cain and Abel, interacted with the created world and each produced something as a result of his efforts. Each brought what he had produced to God, and God said to Abel, "I accept your sacrifice," but to Cain he said, "I reject yours" (cf Genesis 4:3-5). The difference, as we are told here in Hebrews (it is less apparent in Genesis), was that Abel produced his offering by faith and Cain did not. Cain set out on his own, by the strength of his own hand, apart from God, to do what he did, and his offering was rejected. But because Abel humbly trusted God in his work, his sacrifice was accepted. Abel had trusted the Lord for what he did and Cain had not.

In this story an issue is being raised that is important to everyone. We cannot escape it. The question is one of productiveness, of accomplishment. Everybody was born into this world having a desire to accomplish something. We all want to leave our mark, to have our lives amount to something. We are made in the image of our creative God. He is a master maker and producer and we, in his image, long to be productive ourselves. Cain and Abel did what God commanded of humanity, that they should go out and subdue the earth, giving it order and making it productive for them. They both did what they were made to do, except one of them did it by faith and one of them did it without reference to God at all. Eventually the one who had rejected God became a murderer, and lost his way.

The desire to be productive is natural to all of us. The choice we have to make is whether we will live by faith in our desire. What mark do you want to leave in life? One of the Greek philosophers said that before death everybody should write a book, build a house and father a child. Everybody ought to make a mark. Everybody ought to do something— work with their hands, with their minds, and interact with other human beings. God created us to have dominion over the world. We are creative because we are made in his image. Some would create works of art; others found businesses, or raise children, or serve in government. All of us, without having to try at all, have been given the inner longing to do something that is worth doing.

Abel trusted God and Cain did not. We have the same choice. Do we do all we are doing by the power and wisdom of God? Do we long for his approval, his presence? Do we reject the opportunities and the offers that would steer us away from him? The desire to be productive requires that we live by faith in carrying out those desires.

The first issue was origins, the second concerned productivity. Now, thirdly, in the case of Enoch, the question that arises concerns the longing for answers with regard to mortality, with birth and death. What is the purpose of human life? Why do things deteriorate and die? Here again, who has not at some point in his life wondered at the cycle of life and death? At the end of each year we usually see in cartoons the old year depicted in the form of a doddering old man, and the new year portrayed by a brand new baby born into the world. We always wonder at that cycle. We are told very little about Enoch in the Old Testament. Consider this reference from Genesis:

Enoch lived sixty-five years, and became the father of Methuselah. Then Enoch walked with God three hundred years after he became the father of Methuselah, and he had other sons and daughters. So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. (Genesis 5:21-24)

Enoch walked with God and kept on walking and never died. He had discovered in his search for the answers about birth and death such an intimacy with God that the Lord deemed it appropriate to continue the walk into eternity, without Enoch's having to suffer physical death.

What began Enoch's search, evidently, was the birth of his first son, which occurred when Enoch was sixty-five years old. Something in the birth of Methuselah made Enoch seek answers to the mysterious cycle of human life and death. Something about seeing his own son born into the world, and his realization that God had used him in the process of creating another human being, was instrumental in his seeking the living God. For the next three hundred years he talked with God, walked with him and learned of him and eventually went into his presence.

I have spoken with many fathers who were present at the birth of their children. Most count that experience as one of the most remarkable occasions they can remember. They were overwhelmed at the realization that they played a part in the birth of the next generation. Evidently some of those emotions motivated Enoch to become a seeker of an answer all of us want to know. What is the story of human mortality and why is it so? As a result of that, by faith, Enoch the seeker walked with God. His life is a stirring example of what it can mean to ask the natural human questions and find their answers in a relationship with the Lord.

The fourth of these Old Testament individuals who is brought before us is Noah. Noah lived in the most wicked generation mankind has ever known, so wicked that God regretted the fact that he had ever created human beings, and he determined to destroy that wickedness. But Noah was a righteous man. Peter called him "a preacher of righteousness." It was Noah's life and Noah's response to God that showed his contemporaries what they had become. It was Noah who made salvation possible for his family. It was Noah who condemned the sin of his generation, and it was Noah who shone as a beacon against wickedness in his world.

It is natural for Christians and non-Christians alike to hope for the eradication of evil, to long to be part of the fight against what is ugly and sinful in the world. The Saturday morning television cartoons for children have a panoply of beautiful, muscular heroes who fight against the despicably evil forces arrayed against them. Children love the idea that good should fight against evil and that good should triumph. There is something terrible about a degraded humanity and we ought to do something about it. That is a natural human desire.

Noah is given as an example of somebody who by faith engaged in the battle. By faith he shone as a beacon in his generation. By faith he had something to say to a wicked world. By faith he provided salvation for his family. By faith he became involved in standing against wickedness.

Such a life ought to be true of Christians. Evangelical Christians have probably recovered more willingness in the last ten or fifteen years to get involved in resisting wickedness in the world than had been the case for some generations. While not all of that involvement is wise or proper, much of it is. The sense that we can do something and say something and somehow stand against the trashing of human life and the exaltation of depravity is commendable. But it is not going to be proper if we leave God out of the process, if our values are only earthly, if we are doing it for our best interests. Unless we fight the battle by faith, we have lost everything that is worth fighting for. The desire is proper. The desire is universal. The question is, by what means do we seek to accomplish our ends?

The fifth illustration given us is the story of Abraham's family. Abraham and Sarah departed a land where they were comfortable and went to an unknown place. Against all odds they trusted God for a family. By faith they began the process of finding a home, building a family, creating a community and putting down roots.

Again, we discover in the life of this family a human need that is universal. Everyone is born with a desire for a home, a desire to be part of a community of people who care about one another. Community, rootedness, home, family, shared life—we were made to long for those things. We cannot live without them, save in a stunted and deprived way. Christians and non-Christians alike long for what God gave Abraham and Sarah. Many of us, however, will seek to find rootedness, family and community and leave God out of the picture. If we do, we will fail.

It is by faith that Abraham and Sarah took off on their adventure. Ultimately they realized that, whatever they experienced along the way, what they really longed to have was “a city that had foundations whose architect and builder is God.”

The same desire for a home is expressed in Psalm 107:

Oh give thanks to the LORD,
for He is good,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
Whom He has redeemed from
the hand of the adversary
And gathered from the lands,
From the east and from the west,
From the north and from the south.
They wandered in the wilderness in a desert region;
They did not find a way to an inhabited city.
They were hungry and thirsty;
Their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble;
He delivered them out of their distresses.
He led them also by a straight way,
To go to an inhabited city.
Let them give thanks to the LORD for
His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!
For He has satisfied the thirsty soul,
And the hungry soul He has filled
with what is good. (Psalm 107:1-9)

God has placed within us a desire to be part of a community. But he and he alone is the one who can meet that desire. Ultimately, in seeking it from him, we find that what we really want is his presence. The only inhabited city that is ultimately satisfying to us is the one that is not built in this world.

Let me review briefly. The creation account of the Bible answers our need to know about our origins and purpose. “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God.”

What about productiveness? What about the question of dominion? It is by faith that Abel’s having dominion over the earth accomplished something. “He obtained the testimony,” it says. He received the commendation that he was righteous, substantial, worth something.

What about the question of life and death and why we are subject to these things? In answering that question, Enoch sought God's face. And he walked more and more with God so that he went past death.

What about the fight against evil, the desire to stand against human degradation? It was by faith that Noah spoke the word of God in his generation and was provided a means of salvation for his family.

What about a home, the desire of every heart to belong somewhere? Ultimately the home we are looking for is the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God himself.

We are all familiar with the phrase, "You bet your life." It is a way of giving a rather graphic affirmative in response to a question. The comedian Groucho Marx once named a zany television game show *You Bet Your Life*. In his hands it became a funny notion. But, as a matter of fact, betting your life is serious business. Every single one of us will bet our lives on something. We cannot escape doing so. We will bet our lives on the wisdom of our alma mater, the "mother of our soul," on the wisdom of the world, the financial page, on old wives' tales, or something else.

Or we will bet our lives by faith on the authority, the power and the love of Jesus Christ. If we make that bet, if we begin trusting him, and are willing to face whatever life throws at us, having no values but his and no power but his, we become part of that extraordinary group of people that chapter Hebrews 11 exalts, people of whom it will finally be said, "the world is not worthy." Realizing that at some time—in some way—you are going to bet your life. I urge you to be men and women of faith.

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