

DRAWING NEAR TO GOD

SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH

By Steve Zeisler

We're studying Hebrews 11 in this series. I mentioned in the first message (Discovery Paper 5240) that the individuals mentioned in this chapter, which make up a great company, are pictured as cheering for us as we run a race. The race that we run in our time, they have run before us.

One of the best-loved photographs from the *Life* magazine era shows John Kennedy Jr. as a toddler playing under President Kennedy's Oval Office desk while his father works. Senators, tycoons, heads of state, and others had to wait for an appointment with the president, or were denied entrée altogether. But ordinary rules don't apply to a son or a daughter, do they? A child has unique access to his or her father. That idea is in many ways at the heart of the Biblical story. The great message that has been proclaimed through the ages is the invitation of our heavenly Father to his children to draw near to him.

That's a remarkable assertion when you think of it, isn't it? Consider how many petty bureaucrats, in their pomp, haughtiness, and self-proclaimed importance, have made it very difficult for ordinary people to have access to them. There are long queues, red tape, the requirement of written permission, electronic barriers. And yet the Sovereign of the universe welcomes his children, delights in them, wants them to play under his desk if they like.

Some scholars suggest that the central theme of the book of Hebrews is captured in a single Greek word: *proserchomai*. It's used seven times in the book, and it means to draw near. In Hebrews it's always used of approaching God or the place of his holiness.

The central section of this book dwells on the idea of priesthood and argues for our Savior's role as a high priest who escorts us into the presence of his Father. But the invitation is extended even more broadly. God wants his children near him. Notice the prominence of the word *proserchomai*, translated "comes," in Hebrews 11:6:

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.

This verse tells us that God expects to be pleased with our lives. That thought should overwhelm us. Given all that might draw God's attention, why should he care about us? Why should he want to be pleased with us? Why should he long to reward us? Why are we so special to him? And yet we are.

Further, the central gift that he gives to those who draw near to him is himself. There are simple requirements of faith, but the idea is that the best gift he can give us is the opportunity for us to be where he is, to draw near to him. It's hard to say anything more remarkable, and yet it is proclaimed everywhere in the Scriptures and throughout the history of the people of faith.

Three individuals are highlighted in the beginning of the long list of people in chapter 11. We can learn from their examples of drawing near to God, their receiving life from God, their faith. Then we'll come back to some of the implications of verse 6.

Believing God without revelation

Verses 4-7:

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.

These three men made God central in their lives, drew near to God, and received life from him. Abel, Enoch, and Noah occupied a significant time in the history of the human race: the era preceding the giving of the Law or the making of a covenant. Our age is similar to theirs.

Abel, Enoch, and Noah had no spoken or written revelation. In the next two messages we'll see faith choices made in response to God's declared purpose, and the anticipation of promised rewards, by those who knew themselves to be the people of God. Abraham, Sarah, and those following had a specific word from God to which they responded. But Abel, Enoch, and Noah lived in an earlier time. A great many people in our time also know nothing about revelation from God. It was once common for educated people in our culture to know at least an outline of the message of the Bible, but no longer.

In early adolescence I was given a lecture by my parents. One of the points they made was that I should be a gentleman. By that they meant being humble rather than arrogant, courageous rather than cowardly, not overwhelmed with greed or lust for power or out-of-control sexual behavior. At that time my parents were not church people, and they didn't quote the Bible. But they had a general awareness of what was in it. And they had a very clear sense of what a person like me growing up in a family like ours should be like. They were clear that there was a God out there. The universe had a moral order to it, and I needed to make choices based on the moral order.

But think of what it's like for adolescents being raised today. It's a very different world, isn't it? I was told, "Cheaters never prosper." You can't say that anymore without being laughed out of

the room. Cheaters always prosper in the world we live, don't they? The idea that people should have some limit on how much they let greed govern their affairs is met with the strong opinion exactly to the contrary: greed is good and its flame ought to always be fanned. There is no sure guide to what is good or bad, right or wrong. So in a sense, people who grow up in this world are very much like those very ancient people who sought to obey their consciences without the moral direction of God's formal commandments.

We'll look briefly at Abel, Enoch, and Noah, who lived in a chaotic world yet found nearness to God. My hope is that we will pray more faithfully for people we know who want to know God's truth and long for his help.

A work, a search, and a stand of faith

Let's look at these three. The first story is that of Abel and Cain, the two sons of Adam and Eve. It is a mysterious narrative found in Genesis 4:1-8. What the struggle of Cain and Abel reveals about the human condition has frequently been the subject of art and literature, whether religious or not. It's one of the archetypal stories that resonate in every culture.

Frequently children are asked what they want to be when they grow up. We all want to be something, to make a mark of some kind on the world, to accomplish something. Abel and Cain each chose a means of accomplishment. One was a farmer, and the other raised livestock. The tension and competition between these brothers tells a truth about life: families are often sources of painful experiences for people. Siblings compete with one another, hurt one another, sometimes even murder one another. Parents are unable to pass on what they have learned about making wise choices in life. These outcomes seen in the story of Cain and Abel are common human experiences.

We're not told much in Genesis about why the actions of each man were regarded differently by God. But we do know something about the heart attitude that led to their actions. Abel pleased God by his faith and drew near to God. Abel's world had God's approval, and he speaks still, even though he has been dead for an extraordinarily long time.

The story of Abel raises the question, What do you want to accomplish in life? How will you accomplish it alongside a sibling who is perhaps competing with you? How will you be who you ought to be, choose what you ought to choose? Abel opened his heart to God, drew near to God, and received God's blessing.

Enoch's story (Genesis 5:21-24) is different, although it is also an archetype that has resonated throughout time. We're told very little about him except for this: he had a son, and then he began a journey with God. For three hundred years he walked with God, and then God took him home. Enoch didn't even cross the boundary of death, he just went on a journey with God from this world into the next one.

The metaphor of a journey is a common one, isn't it? We want to discover what we don't yet know, go places we haven't yet been. The human heart is interested in uncovering new things, living a life of adventure, finding new opportunities. Importantly, Enoch walked with God rather

than making discoveries by himself. God as his Companion made sense of life for him, and his life became so beautiful and so full that he eventually found himself in God's eternal presence.

Not too long ago I ran into the father of a young man my son Jeff played sports with growing up. I asked him how his son was, and he said his son had gone off to an elite school on the East Coast but had dropped out after a year. He'd started and stopped out of three different colleges since then, lived in different cities, tried different jobs, had relationships that didn't last. He is traveling around Thailand now looking for something that he hasn't found yet. It seems as if the answers he's gotten haven't satisfied him, so he keeps seeking some new place or new discovery that will make his life meaningful. Unlike Enoch, this young man hasn't discovered that he can make his way in life as a child of God, and take on life with God's insight and wisdom and direction and approval. I hope the wandering will lead to the discovery of the love of God.

Noah's story, told in Genesis 6:5-10:29, is longer and more detailed than the Abel and Enoch texts. Noah is a fascinating figure. He too has been the focus of a great deal of literature, art, lengthy reflection, and historic observation. Noah's story has a bit of a different point to it than the other two. For Noah the issue was integrity, standing for something true that he would defend with his life, even if everything around him contradicted it. His is a story of strength and moral courage. It too is therefore a universal story. Everybody ultimately wants to be a person of moral courage, to stand for what is worthy, to be unbowed in the face of pressure, unwilling to sell out what really matters. Noah was ridiculed decade after decade by the people around him who wanted nothing to do with God, who lived only for personal pleasure. He was different.

These three men represent what people really want—to make honorable choices, to take a journey that's worthwhile, to stand for something true. God's presence produces such lives. And we who live in a post-Christian world have a lot to say to our contemporaries. God still wants to be known by people. He still extends the invitation. He still rewards those who seek him, still wants to be pleased with our lives. He hasn't changed.

Let's return to verse 6 and our consideration of drawing near or coming to God (*proserchomai*).

How to draw near to God

Too many genuine children of God let feelings of guilt keep them from enjoying life with their Father. And on every side there are lost souls who wish to hear the good news of God's invitation to know him.

Verse 6 says, "He who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." The requirements to either reconnect with God or connect with him for the first time are very minimal, aren't they? There is no standard of performance. It doesn't say that the one who would draw near to God must go through a catechism, or repair what is broken. It doesn't say that one has to be rich or accomplished or know the right people. It doesn't say that one has to join any organization in particular. The requirements are very uncomplicated. The one who would draw near to God must believe simply that God exists as a living Person who cares about the hearts of people in this world. And one must seek him, believing he will grasp one's outstretched hand.

We began this study considering a picture of a father and son—President John F. Kennedy and his son John Jr. I want to conclude with another picture, also of a father and son. It's Rembrandt's painting of the return of the prodigal son to his father (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus' parable is, of course, a deep and remarkable story on many levels. Henri Nouwen spent long hours meditating on the great artist's masterpiece and went on to write a book about what he had learned from his contemplation (1).

In Jesus' story the son humiliates his father, then trashes his own life after taking his inheritance and going to a far country. The father, without attention to his reputation, waits for the son's return, and then when he at last appears, lavishes love on him, restoring him to the place of honored son.

Jesus' parable as well as the stories of Abel, Enoch, and Noah all should persuade us to take the next step on the journey of faith, to believe that God's heart is to reward, not punish those who seek him.

“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.”

Notes

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, © 1994, Doubleday, New York, NY.

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