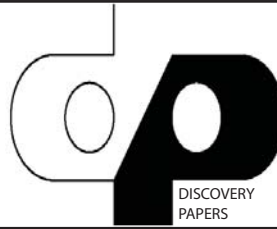


THE EYES OF FAITH

SERIES: IMMORTAL. INVISIBLE.



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Hebrews 11:1

On this first Sunday of 2015—a milestone date for me—we begin a sermon series with the goal of enlarging our faith. The milestone? I began life in Christ fifty years ago this week. As an unchurched high school sophomore, I believed the gospel and gave my life to Christ at a Young Life weekend camp in northern Arizona.

In January of 1965, a month before my 16th birthday, I was tempted, confused, socially awkward, lonely, and afraid to fail. It was the mid-sixties and the youth culture in this country was beginning to come unstuck. My new faith filled the empty places and brought me into a loving community, and provided a coherent moral code and godly mentors as guides; ballast for a boat in turbulent water. Simply put, my earliest Christian memories were of my deficit and God's supply; my questions and God's answers.

Over time, however, it became apparent that my questions were not big enough. Following Christ led repeatedly to an awareness that God's ways are not our ways; that profound mysteries don't yield easy solutions; that intractable burdens make us long for deep and enduring change.

Such discoveries are necessary. The Christian faith is not a series of guidelines for getting what you want in life. Consider the familiar comment, "I am glad that Christianity works for you."; as if veganism or stamp collecting might work just as well. Indeed, the apostle Paul makes a striking declaration, If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we of all people most to be pitied (1 Corinthians 15:19). At the heart of our faith are staggering miracles. God became human in Christ and died so that death would die. His resurrection is the first visible display of a new world he has promised to bring about. We are his servants and friends.

This sermon series has a goal and a theme verse. The goal is to expand our faith beyond concerns with "*this life only*" regarding various aspects of the Christian life.

The verse is, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

This short description of what "*faith is*" has two parts. First, we are assured of outcomes that are unseen now because they are future to us—"things hoped for". By faith, we rely on certainties that have not yet arrived.

The second phrase takes note of realities in the present—"things not seen"—that cannot be measured by our senses: the very real presence and purpose of God which we don't see and can't touch.

What does it mean to be sure of what we hope for? The concept in English, "to hope for something", is potentially misleading in this context. Often the word hope suggests uncertainty. We hope the drought ends soon or that our favorite team will win a championship. As used here, however, hope does not imply contingency. The future is certain and we should act on the basis of "future truth" even though we must wait to experience it.

Consider the couple that discovers they are going to have a baby. Financial priorities change. The vacation trip planned for next summer is postponed. Even suffering takes on new meaning. Nausea and extreme fatigue aren't signs that something is wrong, they are evidence of new life. Knowledge of the future shapes our experience in the present.

Some of what scripture tells us about the future is uplifting and beautiful. It can encourage us in the midst of hardship. Consider the end of our story:

Revelation 21:3-4:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with his people. ⁴And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away and he who has seated on the throne said, 'Behold I am making all things new.

But sometimes what we know about the future is meant to challenge, not comfort us. Recall this account:

Luke 21:1-4

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box. ²And he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them, ⁴for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.

Jesus is not engaging in rhetorical flourish here. This is not a sentimental story about the noble poor. Jesus knows that the true day of measurement has not yet come. The widow’s two pennies are “more than all of them” because one day money as we know it will be meaningless. Eternal accounting will be made on the basis of our motives, not our accumulation of transitory wealth.

In addition to taking a stand on “future truth” how do we have faith with regard to “things not seen”? Jesus taught us to pray for the reign of God on earth is as it is now in heaven. We long to see, as angels do, the majesty and beauty of the Lord hidden from us by the blindness of sin.

Psalms gives us language for this kind of prayer—for speaking of invisible realities.

Psalm 139:7-9:

I can never escape from your spirit. I can never get away from your presence. ⁸If I go up to heaven you were there. If I go down to the grave you’re there. ⁹If I ride on the wings of the morning, if I dwell in the furthest ocean, even there your hand will guide me.

God is present when I feel lonely and uncertain. But he is also present when I attempt to indulge in “secret” sin—nothing stays isolated in Las Vegas. I am the object of his attentive concern all of the time. He is always present, and I must hold this conviction by faith, not by sight.

In addition to God giving his personal attention to our thoughts and actions, the divine presence is indirectly made known to us. The speech of God is discernable in creation for those who have ears to hear.

Psalm 19:1-3:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. ²Day to day pours out speech, and night to night

reveals knowledge. ³There is no speech nor are there words whose voice is not heard, their voice goes out through all the earth and their words to the ends of the world.

It is of some value to know how science accounts for the colorful clouds in a sunset. But it is more important to know the divine Artist who creates beauty because he is beautiful in himself and loves to give good gifts to his children. *The heavens declare the glory of God.*

Having considered the description of robust faith described in Hebrews 11:1, I want to suggest three points of application.

The first of these regards freedom from fear. Sin draws power from the fear of the unknown—pitfalls lurking ahead, an opportunity that might be lost forever, dire threats, or an enemy lying in wait. All of these can lead to worry, which banishes hope. The tempter derides today’s efforts at obedience: “You will surely give in to temptation eventually, and might as well succumb now to get it over with”.

Faith responds by grasping God’s promise of good that is yet to come. We are fortified to stand firm and choose love now because of the “assurance of things hoped for”. We do not need to fear the future. We will not miss out on God’s best.

Second, we must refuse to glorify the past. As age advances, it is tempting to try to re-create the good old days (the era with the best worship music, the most inspirational preachers, and coolest Christian celebrities) instead of seeking the mind of the Lord in the present. Some of us at PBC are vulnerable to this kind of thinking because of our participation in the Jesus Movement revival and because of a high profile that came from Ray Stedman’s wide influence among churches all over the world. But the clock is not going to turn back and we must turn our gaze to the true golden age—the kingdom that is yet come.

Third, a word of caution. At times, in the history of both the church and Israel, awareness of God’s mysterious ways has led to arrogance and isolation. The phrase, “You are so heavenly minded, you’re no earthly good.” comes to mind. Prophetic descriptions of the end times become distractions that lead away from love of one’s neighbor in the present. Attention to “spiritual development” can eclipse evangelism and the care for the needy. We mustn’t use God-language to distance ourselves from a rising tide of sorrow that is palpable everywhere today: sexual confusion, irrational violence, youth suicide, family disintegration.

The Bible presents us with a clear vision of the future: a new world that is suffused with the glory of the Lord. Believers who long for such a world will love the Lord and love their neighbors in concert with what is to come —bringing the future into the present. With this in mind, I want to close with a paradoxical description of the life of faith. “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).

We gaze at what is invisible, not as fools, but as those long to know and serve Christ.