

Hebrews: The Assurance of Things Unseen

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Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, your Word is alive and active, cutting more incisively than a two-edged sword: seeking out where soul is divided from spirit, discerning even the secret thoughts and intentions of the heart. May it be so with us this morning, individually and as a church. Amen.

Background

Hebrews is one of the most encouraging books of the Bible. I can personally vouch for this: pouring over these 13 chapters of Hebrews this last week lifted my faith and sent my spirits soaring in a time of real need.

The book of Hebrews mentions faith more than any other book in the New Testament. In fact, Hebrews chapter 11 alone mentions faith 24 times.

This famous chapter we're about to hear from contains The Hall of Faith—which includes some of the most lofty and eloquent words in all of the Scripture about the ancient heroes and heroines of the faith. We're to emulate these legendary inductees to the Hall of Faith, recounting and observing their deep trust in God in the face of near-death experiences, disappointment, and uncertainty.

Something that sets these giants of the faith apart was their 20/20 spiritual perception to see the future with the eyes of faith and act faithfully with that knowledge. Their living example encourages us to keep believing and keep moving toward that heavenly country on our pilgrimage of faith. And with the ears of faith, we also hear the Great Cloud of Witnesses cheering us on—all believers through the ages who have finished their earthly pilgrimage.

The author of Hebrews doesn't so much give us a Webster's Dictionary definition of faith, as describes what faith looks like in action. Faith is a verb, and it involves endurance, trust, and obedience. Faith isn't just an intellectual thing. Faith is a gift. A gift to be opened. Faith is something to be practiced. To be enacted. Faith is a courageous leap into the unknown.

Faith possesses in the present what God has promised for the future. Faith savors that little taste of heaven on earth, even when life is hurting like hell. Faith is the confidence that God's redemptive purposes will be carried out—come heaven or high water.

When we step out in faith, the unseen becomes seen. The invisible, visible. The act of faith helps make the future, present. And so we walk by faith, not by sight. We believe that what is promised will eventually come to pass—even if it's ultimately in the next life.

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Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from selected verses from Hebrews 11.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:1-3, 13-16 (NKJV)

(1-3) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony. By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

(13-16) These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Hebrews: The Assurance of Things Unseen

The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is the fourth most-translated book in the world—translated into more than 250 languages. Selling over 140 million copies, it's one of the best-selling books of all time. Netflix came out with a movie of it a few years ago.

There's a famous scene where a fox meets the young prince during his travels on Earth. At this point, the Little Prince is lost in the desert—exhausted, defeated, and feeling insignificant. He scales a large mountain and sees the vast landscape before him. He cries out and hears only the echo of his voice. The Little Prince finally lays down and weeps—bitterly crying tears of hopelessness and loneliness.

But then a fox comes along and the two strike up a friendship. The fox's presence and wise words are a great source of comfort for the Little Prince. But eventually the two part ways. Before saying good-bye, the fox offered the gift of a secret to the boy. The essence of the story can be found in the words uttered by the fox:

*One sees clearly only with the heart.
What is essential is invisible to the eyes.*

That's exactly what Hebrews is talking about—seeing with the heart. The conviction of things unseen.

Faith helps us get a grip on things we can't see. Faith is both realistic and hopeful at the same time—even when things are just plain lousy. This is possible because faith is the opposite of control. Faith

frees us up to give up control—and to trust. To give God the remote control of our lives and entrust our circumstances, our lives, and other's lives to God.

Faith trusts that God will work things out for the good—even if they're very different than what we initially envisaged.

Faith has an "as if" and a "nevertheless" component to it.

Faith lives as if the things hoped for are real. This doesn't mean faith is naïve or fanciful. Faith isn't living life with rose-colored glasses. Instead, faith honestly assesses life's challenges.

But it doesn't stop there. Faith then says, "nevertheless, despite all that's going on, I'm trusting in God." I'm living "as if" the unseen is seen.

Current research in the cognitive sciences seems to back this up. It appears that our brains are hard-wired for faith. The way the brain works, doing comes before thinking, and doing becomes being.

In other words, you don't change your character and conduct by thinking differently; you change your character and conduct by acting differently. Action comes before thought:

- You want to feel sad? Turn your mouth down.
- You want to feel upset? Frown.
- You want to feel happy? Smile
- You want to feel determined? Clench your fists.

There's something to be said for the motto,
"fake it till you make it."

But as Christians we say,
"faith it till you make it, and then keep on faithing."

Our actions create our feelings.

Shakespeare was right. Over 500 years ago he wrote in Hamlet,
"Assume a virtue if you have it not. ... For use almost can change the stamp of nature."

In other words: "It's easier to act yourself into a new way of feeling than to feel yourself into a new way of acting."

In chapter 11, the author of Hebrews lists a litany of those throughout biblical history who have lived "by faith." Because they never stopped believing, God's promises became present and real to them in this world.

"By faith Abraham obeyed" and left his old homeland and set out for an unknown place.

"By faith" Abraham and his family stayed in this land even when they had to live as temporary, tent-dwelling foreigners.

“By faith” Abraham and Sarah believed God’s promise of a child in their advanced years, and lived with the sure hope of descendants that would be “as many as the stars of heaven.”

Living life according to faith in God’s presence and promises means we’re not in control, but we’re in God’s care.

One of my all-time favorite novels is Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe. When the shipwrecked Crusoe starts assessing his situation, he begins to despair. He was utterly alone with virtually no chance of anyone finding him and returning him to civilization.

Finally, in order to avoid sliding into paralyzing self-pity and hopelessness Crusoe began “to set the good against the evil, that I might have something to distinguish my case from worse.”

The stranded man began to make a careful list of “goods” and “evils” that he faced. This is from the book:

Evil: I am cast upon a horrible, desolate island, void of all hope of recovery.

Good: But I am alive; and not drowned as all my ship’s company were.

Evil: I am singled out and separated, as it were, from all the world, to be miserable.

Good: But I am singled out, too, from all the ship’s crew, to be spared from death; and He that miraculously saved me from death can deliver me from this condition.

Evil: I am divided from mankind—a solitaire; one banished from human society.

Good: But I am not starved, and perishing on a barren place, affording no sustenance.

Evil: I have no clothes to cover me.

Good: But I am in a hot climate, where, if I had clothes, I could hardly wear them.

Evil: I am without any defense or means to resist any violence of man or beast.

Good: But I am cast on an island where I see no wild beasts to hurt me, as I saw on the coast of Africa; and what if I had been shipwrecked there?

Evil: I have no soul to speak to or relieve me.

Good: But God wonderfully sent the ship in near enough to the shore, that I have got out as many necessary things as will either supply my wants or enable me to supply myself, even as long as I live.

Immanuel, faith is not a magic formula or a magic wand for making problems vanish. Faith is surrendering to the providences and promises of God. Faith is living a life where you’re not in control, but you’re in God’s loving hands.

Hope is closely tied to faith. Hope gives us boldness in the present to keep moving ahead into the future, rather than stopping or going back. As Winston Churchill said, “If you’re going through hell, don’t stop!”

Hope sees God’s promises—even if they remain at a distance, and keeps going towards them.

Medieval pilgrims who traveled the long road from France to the Cathedral of St. James in Spain would constantly scan the horizon as they reached the last leg of the extended journey, hoping to see in the distance the cathedral towers that marked their destination. The first one to see it traditionally would yell out, "MY JOY!"

Immanuel, we're all pilgrims on a pilgrimage. Sometimes we get homesick for our old, comfortable ways of living. We get tired. Sometimes we lose our focus, our desire, or even our way. But we resist those urges to give up. We don't retreat or go back—we carry on—even when we're not "feeling it."

We keep doing it—trusting that our feelings will follow after our faith. Instead of living in the past, we search the horizon. We move forward into the future. We scan the distance for our heavenly city, that God has prepared for us. And we look to Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith to lead us and carry us home.

And all the while, we remain alert and poised as we look ahead, ready at any moment to shout out, "MY JOY!" when we see the City of God.

Amen.

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