

April 25, 2010
Real Life Hasn't Begun Yet
Hebrews 11:1-16

This coming June, I have the opportunity to go on a short term mission trip to Lebanon. Canadian Baptist Ministries has two field staff working in Lebanon. We will be joining the Middle East Conference that they sponsor every year. These are always framed as a Muslim/Christian dialogue and have gone a long way in building bridges. We're also going to be doing some community development work and seeing some of the possibilities for theological education at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (the only evangelical seminary in the Middle East). It's all very exciting and interesting - but also a bit overwhelming. I've never been to Lebanon before. What do I take? What kind of money do they use? Where will we stay? I've been emailing and asking anyone I know who has been there before. They all rave about how beautiful Lebanon is, how friendly the people are, etc. I know it will be great, but I want to know a bit more. I'm sure there are some essentials I need to take ...

As we have been thinking about Easter we have been reminded about what the future holds for us and for the church. It's a glorious future in God's presence. But there are some essentials for the journey. Probably not a toothbrush, extra socks, and American dollars. We do need faith. In the journey from here to there, hundreds, thousands, millions of people stand as witnesses of God's grace and show us that faith is the key we need for the journey to come ...

What is 'faith'? None of us has ever seen God! How do we know He really exists? By faith! "*Faith,*" says, Hebrews 11:1, "*is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" At first glance that may seem a bit unsatisfying. What does it mean?

Be sure of what you hope for

Sometime our hopes amount to rather vague wishful thinking:

- "I hope it doesn't rain for my golf game on Saturday;" or
- "I hope the material I don't understand is not on the final exam."

That sort of "wishful-thinking-kind-of-hope" is not what this verse is talking about!

Preceding Hebrews 11 are several chapters that describe Jesus' great sacrifice for our sins. They speak about how Jesus came as God's perfect gift for us; how He offered His life in our place to secure our salvation; how He died for our sins. Our hope for the forgiveness of our sins is assured because of Jesus' death on the cross in our place. Our hope is in the promise of God, that "*we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*" (Hebrews 10:10).

Hebrews 11:1 is talking about hope based on the rock solid character of God, knowing what we know about God from the testimony of Scripture, the facts of history, and the personal experiences of people through the ages and today. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for -

we accept the forgiveness of our sins and the holiness of *God on faith* - at one level we cannot absolutely, definitively prove it. But all the overwhelming evidence points to it.

A few years ago we were hiking in Jasper National Park. We went on a hike called the Valley of the Five Lakes. The *Day Hikers Guide* told us there were five lakes. The signs said there were five lakes. We hiked and hiked. No lakes. But people coming the other way assured us the lakes were there, just over the next ridge. It was that assurance of things hoped for ... we couldn't see the lakes yet, but we knew they were there (books/signs/people) ... that kept us going! And there they were Emerald green jewels sparkling in the morning light.

In our Christian lives, we have the promises of God in Scripture that God created us and loves us. We have the incontrovertible historical facts that Jesus died upon a Roman cross for our sins and rose triumphantly from the grave. And we have the exultant testimony of the changed lives of millions of people through the ages to bear witness to the fact that the Holy Spirit of God is alive and at work in our world today!

Rather than spend pages trying to define faith, the author of Hebrews gives us case study after case study. A picture says a thousand words is the author's rationale - of course we have to unpack the stories (the writer just gives us the titles).

Faith isn't wishful thinking - it's the personal experience of the power of God at work in your life, forgiving the sins of your past, renewing your life in the present, and creating a wonderful future!

Do you struggle with that? Does it not seem particularly "real" in your experience? Talk with people. In particular, talk with people who have been walking with God longer than you have. Take an older person out for coffee. Ask them to share their story with you. The picture of their journey with God may be more helpful to you than arguments, proofs, or sermons!

Be certain of what you do not see

In these days of virtual reality, you cannot necessarily believe everything you see. Technological "wizards" can create images in movies and television that make you believe the imaginary or the impossible is real. One of the downsides of "Avatar" is that the imaginary world it creates is so spectacular and wonderful that teens are actually going into depression because our own world just doesn't match up! We know that Pandora is computer generated and the world of "Star Trek" is all special effects. They are not real. There is not evidence for those worlds at all

Yet there really is a spiritual world that does coexist, superimposed upon our own. We don't necessarily see it; but it is very, very real! And we see it breaking into our own experience in all sorts of curious ways (if we choose to notice them).

I had a friend who collected military paraphernalia. One night he was giving us a tour of his collection. He was showing us his night vision binoculars. We pulled back the curtains in his

apartment and looked out into a busy city street. Without his night vision binoculars we saw a certain, obscure and fuzzy overview of nightlife in downtown Vancouver. With his night vision binoculars, however, we could see an incredibly detailed exposé of absolutely everything and anything that was happening that night in Marpole, Vancouver!

Using the binoculars we could have described all sorts of things that were happening. We saw cats tearing apart a garbage can. We saw a couple of kids doing something in the shadows, dropping a piece of paper. Another observer (with unaided vision) could have scoffed, saying, "If I can't see it, I won't believe it - it can't be true!" But just because he couldn't see it, wouldn't have made it untrue, would it? It would just have meant that he wasn't able to see it because he didn't have the benefit of night vision binoculars. But he would have still seen the effects of what we saw ... in the morning, the garbage was strewn across the lane; there were scuff marks and the discarded paper where the kids were.

As Christians, by *faith* we have the gift of night vision binoculars. We see through the darkness around us in a way others don't. We see that Jesus is the light of the light of the world, and that His truth shines as light in the darkness. We see through all the muddle and confusion of our culture. We see clearly that the most important things are crystal clear: (1) to love God with all our hearts minds souls and strengths and (2) love our neighbours as ourselves. Are those things *really* the most important things in life? People who do not believe will ask us that? Just because they can't see the truth, however, does not make it any less true, does it? They don't have the benefit of our eyes of faith.

We see that when Jesus calls us to the lights to the world, it means that we need to make God-honoring decisions based on unseen principles and realities. People may look at us and shake their heads at some of the decisions we make but we know they are the right choices.

- They may look at our decision to attend church on a beautiful summer Sundays ...why? Because we want to praise the Creator of beautiful summer Sunday mornings!
- People may look at our decision to value our faith and family over financial and career advancement ... why? Because we know that the Lord honours those who honour Him!
- People may look at our decision to put our faith in Jesus Christ ... why? Because we have that assurance in what we hope for and certainty in what we do not see!

The spiritual world is very real, very present. Very much a certain thing. By faith we see it. We experience it. We live it.

From a distance

We are "right-here/right-now" people! The wonderful thing about faith is we have the assurance - based on the cross - of our salvation. Right here, right now! We see the spiritual world around us through eyes of faith. Right here, right now!

And yet this is only a foreshadowing of something much, much greater. C.S. Lewis referred to life in this world as the "shadowlands." "Real life," he said, "hasn't begun yet." In other words,

there is coming a time when the spiritual world that we see only vaguely now, through eyes of faith, will be intensely real. Paul writes, *"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall face to face ..."* (1 Corinthians 13:12). Faith waits for that time when we shall see face to face. Faith is about far more than life here and now ... it is about looking forward to something so much more ...

Look back at Hebrews 11. The writer says, *"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what do not see. This what the ancients were commended for."* He then goes on to list several ancients of the faith. Follow down through to 11:13: *"All these people were still living by faith when they died."* They were sure of what they hoped for - salvation in God's love; certain of what they did not see - God's perfect rule and law in the universe.

"They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance." In other words, in their earthly lives things did not work out perfectly. Their sins were forgiven, but they still aged, got sick, and died ... but they still held on to their faith! They saw that God's way, the way they had to walk, may mean hardship, ridicule, persecution, misunderstanding. They saw few tangible rewards for their choices (read Hebrews 11:35-38). But they made those choices to follow God, regardless.

Read on! *"And they admitted they were strangers and aliens on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left they would have the opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."*

They admitted they were strangers and aliens on earth ... One of the qualities of people who see through the darkness ... who see the light ... is that we see that we are (in the words of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon) "resident aliens" on this earth - this really isn't our home. The New Living Translation puts it this way: *"we are no more than foreigners or nomads here on earth."* We're *"looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland."* Faith is recognizing the truth that real life hasn't begun yet. Our certain hope is our sins are forgiven - but we look forward to a time when shall be in the very presence our Saviour, Jesus Christ! We are certain of the truth of the rule and reign of God, right here/right now - but we look forward to one day, some day living in His perfect presence forever!

What would it mean to look at life that way? What if it's not all about here and now? What if real life hasn't begun yet? Can you keep the destination in mind? What sacrifices can you make for the journey. How do you see the bumps along the way differently? Can you see the long term gain of making the tough ethical choices today? How can you life more generously?

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