

Seeing Him Who is Invisible

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 0 0] And now we are turning to our Bible reading to Hebrews chapter 11 once again. We're going to read from verse 23 of that chapter until verse 3 of chapter 12.

In verses 1 to 22, the author swept effectively through the book of Genesis, and now he continues the story in verse 23.

Chapter 11, verse 23. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents because they saw that the child was beautiful and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.

[1 : 1 2] By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood so that the destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

Now what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release. They might rise again to a better life.

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were killed with the sword.

[2 : 3 7] They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, whom the world was not worthy, wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

That is the word of the Lord, and may he bless it to our hearts and to our minds. And now, could I ask you to turn to that passage we've just read on page 1008.

I don't think I gave the number of the page when we read it, but that's the page it's on, page 1008.

And as we think about looking together at this passage, let's pray.

[4 : 1 1] God, our Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our hearts and minds, and open our hearts and minds to your word, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. One of my favorite types of reading is biography.

I love reading political biographies, literary biographies, all kinds of biographies, including Christian ones. But I have to say there is a type of Christian biography which fills me with abject despair.

The type of biography where the people appear to have no sins, wrestle with no temptations, spend three hours in prayer.

When my mind wanders after about three minutes, they go through life with a kind of sickly, tricky piety that seems utterly removed from the kind of life I live.

[5 : 26] Now, I know you can say that just shows my spiritual immaturity, my lack of real engagement. But I'd be surprised if many of you here don't feel the same thing when you read that kind of hagiography.

These are not people living in the real world. These are kind of plaster-cast saints, figures in stained-glass windows who don't have to face the problems that you and I face.

I'm so glad the Bible is not like that. You see, if you take the list of people here, these people here, well, their sins and faults are not mentioned, but if you read the stories about it, you find that every one of them made significant failures, even Moses and David.

You might even say especially Moses and David. See, the trouble about that kind of biography, that kind of Christian celebrity culture, is that the writers, while they do believe in salvation by grace through faith, obviously believe that sanctification is by works, and that the only way we can please God is if we live a life like that.

Now, if that were the case, come back to our chapter, Moses might just make it. What about Rahab, the prostitute? What about Samson?

[6 : 52] What about Jephthah? You see what I'm getting at? All these people did not reach the finishing post, they did not reach the goal, because they were marvelous people, they reached the goal, because they were people of faith, people in whose lives grace was at work.

When you stand in glory, and if you see a guru of this world next to you, you ask yourself, why is he here? Well, he's here for the same reason, exactly the same reason as you and I, not because he was a celebrity on earth, but because a person of faith, who made it by grace through faith.

And that's the way I want us to approach this chapter, because we have both great names and unknown figures, and we need to learn from both.

Hugely significant names, less well-known people, indeed nameless people, we need to learn from them all. The one thing which unites them is faith.

And the emphasis again, as we saw last week, is on forwards and upwards. Not continually looking back, casting glances over our shoulder, but forward and upward.

[8 : 11] And I think the key to this is a phrase used of Moses in verse 27, which is our title for this evening. By faith, Moses left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king.

He endured us, seeing him who is invisible. Seeing him who is invisible. The invisible God and the visible problems.

And that's what the life of faith is about, isn't it? The life of faith is about looking beyond the visible problems to the invisible God. So let's look at how this section develops.

And first of all, we have what you might call faith in the great moments. Verses 23 to 31. There is no greater moment in Israel's history and no more significant festival in Israel's worship than the Exodus.

And as the author turns from Abraham to Moses, he's not just talking about the Red Sea.

Remember when we talk about the Exodus, it's not just the literal crossing of the sea.

[9 : 16] It's the whole story from the beginning of the book of Exodus right up into Joshua and indeed beyond into the book of Judges. That great movement by which God took his people from Egypt and brought them into the land he had promised to Abraham.

Now our author has already expanded on the theme of the Exodus in chapters 3 and 4. There it was largely warning. Here it is largely encouragement.

As I've said before, both are needed. We need warning to prevent us from being complacent. And we need encouragement to give us strength to keep on going. And here we come to the greatest figure in the Old Testament.

I've often said there is no authority in the Old Testament that bypasses or supersedes that of Moses. I want to underline that. But at the same time, these verses show what you might call the radical democracy of faith.

As we'll see at the end of the Moses section, Rahab the prostitute is mentioned. So, it's faith of this great figure but not just this great figure.

[10:29] First of all, there's the faith of his parents. Verse 23, they saw that the child was beautiful. Now all parents think their children are beautiful and certainly all grandparents do.

but I think it's a bit more than that. The word can also mean striking, special. The inner conviction, I think, that God had a destiny for this child.

Now in a real sense, all parents, particularly Christian parents, as they look at their children, hope and pray and long that God will indeed fulfill that destiny.

They were, we are told, not afraid of the king's edict. The story in Exodus 1, the king said all the baby boys were to be destroyed so that eventually, of course, the nation would die out.

Not that they didn't feel afraid. That's not what, that's not what the verse means, either here or about Moses. It means that in spite of feeling afraid, they went ahead and did the right thing.

[11:35] Because feelings can be very deceptive. I think of it, they hid him for three months. Hiding a baby for three months, every cry, every knock at the door, every noise, you'd be terrified all the time, all through these long three months that the child was going to be discovered.

And then, of course, the amazing story of how, when Moses was placed in the basket in the Nile, interestingly, the word for basket used there is the word used for ark in the Noah story.

Once again, God preserving his people through the floods and the bringing up at Pharaoh's court. Now, the whole story is compressed here, but at the very heart of it is faith.

These unknown people, significant only in human terms because of their son, but nevertheless, hugely important, shining as bright lights in the city of God because of their faith.

And it shows the importance of parents' faith, doesn't it? Now, as parents, we cannot guarantee our children will grow up to love the Lord, but we can surround them by love, by faith, and by prayer.

[12:49] And then, the faith of Moses himself, rejecting the glittering prizes of earth for more substantial ones. Verse 25, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

Now, you see the point that's being made here. It's not that Moses felt no temptation. After all, sin and godlessness do have their pleasures, their transitory pleasures, and Moses must have been tempted.

He'd been tempted all the time. First of all, leaving Pharaoh's palace. And then, in the 30 years, sorry, 40 years in the desert, then leading out of Egypt.

Now, you notice there's no mention here of the killing of the Egyptian. Not because our author doesn't know about it, but because our author is saying the essential fact about Moses' life is he was a man of faith.

The real emphasis on the Exodus, he was not afraid of the anger of the king. Why is he not afraid of the anger of the king? Because he had seen a greater king.

[14:00] The king who met him in the bush. The king who was to lead him and his people through the desert. But I think, in many ways, the most interesting phrase of all used of Moses is in verse 26.

He considered the reproach of Christ. The faith of the Old Testament believers was the faith that we profess, the faith of Christ.

Christ. They didn't have the whole revelation that we had. Nevertheless, the revelation given to him was the same as given to us. Do you remember the huge foundational importance of Moses?

If the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses, had not been written, there would be nothing for the prophets and wise men to say. Because if the events in these books had not happened, the creation, the Exodus, and so on, there would have been no gospel.

Just as in the New Testament, if the events described in the gospels hadn't happened, there would be no letters, no teaching, because these are the significant events.

[15:07] And we must honor Moses as the one who received that first revelation. At the same time as realizing that like us, he was not saved by that, he was saved by faith.

And then the Passover. The reproach of Christ is continued by the reference to the Passover. By faith, he kept the Passover. Verse 28. Passover, which points to Christ.

Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 5. Christ, our Passover, a sacrifice for us. And the Baptist says, see, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Passover Lamb.

That's a destroying angel passed through Egypt on that fateful night. and saw the sprinkled blood of those who were willing to risk everything on the grace and the promise of God.

That night, as they took food for the road, as they ate the sacrificial lamb, in organic unity with us as we meet around the Lord's table. As we meet around the Lord's table, we look back to the Passover, where God's first people, so to speak, celebrated by the roadside, the journey.

[16:23] And then on to the conquest of walls of Jericho and the faith of Rahab. Rahab, the prostitute. I think he deliberately mentions that, doesn't he, to emphasize the point.

The vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives. And this is the case here. Picture of the Gentiles, the nations, who be gathered into God's family.

No one is outside the grace of God. No one. No one has stooped too low or gone too far if they will exercise faith.

So we have faith in the great moments of history. There's no greater moment than this in the Old Testament, pointing forward to that greatest of all moments, the cross and the resurrection.

You know, that's what this event points to. Then, 32 to 40, faith as the story continues. I realize that's a pathetically weak heading, so if any of you can give me a better one at the end of the service, I'll be only too happy to receive.

[17:32] Anyway, faith as the story continues. Now, of course, as the story continues, there were masses of great moments. Point I'm making is that our author is deliberately not mentioning these great moments.

and I think this gives us a clue on how we've got to treat this chapter. Now, it is not wrong to treat this chapter verse by verse in detail, obviously.

On the other hand, since our author chooses to sweep through the book of Judges and only mentioning a few names and indeed sweep through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, then I think that gives us a clue.

it would be perfectly acceptable, as I say, to take this chapter and preach on the verse 32, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah.

If you're going to do that, can I suggest you do what Edward did some time ago and preach a series on the book of Judges because that's where we find the stories of these people.

[18:36] Our author is using them as illustrations and if you have that series or any part of it or if you know the book of Judges, you will know that these people were distinctly dodgy, to use a theological phrase.

Samson, my goodness me, the story of Samson doesn't sound like the Vicarage Tea Party at all. And the story of Jephthah and his crazy vow and all the rest of it.

You see, here's a point that's being made. At the end of the story, when their lives came to an end, when they stood before the Lord, what mattered was that they had had faith.

Oh, they got many things wrong as we get many things wrong. They got it badly wrong. Think of David. Think of 2 Samuel 11 and 12, Bathsheba and Uriah.

Even Samuel is not perfect. And the prophets. All of these people, they are, these are people who are people of faith. I want just to mention one or two things about this section.

[19:42] First of all, their faith was deeply personal, but it also impacted powerfully on the world. Verses 32 and following. Verse 33, who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions.

And we can think of many examples. Stop the mouths of lions is clearly a reference to Daniel. I would imagine conquered kingdoms to David, forced justice, David and Solomon and so on, obtained promises, the lives of the prophets, and strong out of weakness, put foreign armies to flight.

Verse 35, women receive back their dead by resurrection. Clearly here are the stories of Elijah and Elisha and the raising of the widow's sons.

He chooses not to give the details. The point he is making is this, surely. These were people of real vision. These were people who saw him who was invisible and because of that they were totally effective in this visible, mortal life.

That absurd phrase, too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. Tell me, have you ever met anyone like that in your life? I most certainly haven't.

[21:01] It's certainly not my problem. My problem's the opposite. I'm so earthly minded most of the time and I'm very little heavenly use. The point is to see him who is invisible, to have the goal in view, is the way to be most effective in this world.

And here you can think of many, many examples in contemporary and in church history of these things that have happened. The way in which, after all, hospitals, schools, so many of our social services come from the Christian gospel, from Christian missionaries.

All the kind of things that people are now trying to say are oppressive. These all came from people of faith. The second thing is faith believed in the promises.

They, that God had made promises. Verse 35, that they might rise again to a better life. As I said last week when I talk about Abraham and Isaac, the Old Testament believers did believe in the world to come.

They didn't have a clear idea of what it was like, but they most certainly believed in it. And, then we, and then we have verse 36, mocking, flogging, even chains and imprisonment.

[22 : 19] Many commentators think probably rightly that Jeremiah probably fits very, very easily into this verse. And then these, these dreadful verse, verse 37, they were sawn in two.

It's an old tradition that this was the fate that the prophet Isaiah suffered, preaching during the sympathetic reign of Hezekiah and living on into the terrible godless reign of Manasseh.

And he was, the old man here, sawn in two as a reward for his faithfulness. And then the author goes on. He goes on into Maccabean times, the times foretold in Daniel, particularly Daniel 7 and 8, when people in the second century BC resisted godless attempts to turn the people away from their faith.

So, you see, he's going right on up to his own time. of whom the world, verse 31, in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

So, faith is not simply personal, but impacts on the world. Faith believes in the promises, but then in verses 39 and 40, faith unites the whole story.

[23 : 38] And this shows both the forward-looking nature of the Old Testament and its organic link with the New Testament. We are told they should not be made perfect.

Don't misunderstand that word. That means that the whole family of God could not be complete until the last days, the days in which we live.

And indeed, only when the last person is added to the kingdom will the story be complete. So, faith unites all the people of God from the great on of human history, from Abel offering his better sacrifice, through the great and the mundane days of the Old Testament, the great and mundane days of the New Testament, subsequent church history.

Every person of faith belongs to this, belongs to this great time, this great time pilgrimage. God provided something better.

Remember, of course, the word better, favorite word of our author. This means the better sacrifice. Christ actually came in the last days. Remember, that's why Jesus says, John the Baptist never has arisen a greater one than John the Baptist.

[24 : 52] Why did he say that? Because John was the one who was there to point to him. He's here. Behold the Lamb of God. And then he goes on to say, nevertheless, the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Same point our author is making. Not that we are greater or more faithful than John the Baptist. But that we, John the Baptist, lived before the death and resurrection and the sending of the Spirit.

And so on to our third and final movement, Faith fixes its eyes on Jesus. Chapter 12, verses 1 to 3. NIV translation of verse 2, Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus, which I'm using as the title for this whole series.

Therefore, now, you notice the organic connection here, the inspiration to continue the race.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, now, this has grown immeasurably since our author wrote.

2,000 years have passed almost since he wrote and huge millions have been added to that great cloud of witnesses, including many known and loved by us with whom one day we'll be reunited.

[26 : 12] And that's the, this is the inspiration to keep on going. Witnesses. They're witnesses, first of all, proof that the journey can be finished.

They're there. They show. It may be, now, we can't know this. Some commentators think it may mean that to some extent the Lord reveals to them what's happening on earth.

We don't know and we can't know that. But, we can't know what the blessed dead know about life here on earth. But, certainly, we are part of that.

And one day, we ourselves, if the Lord doesn't return in our lifetimes, will join that great cloud of witnesses. But there's also a warning here. Let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.

In other words, we won't run well if we are carrying baggage. Because baggage will hinder us, baggage will slow us down, baggage will maybe make us fall out.

[27 : 18] Now, a weight is not necessarily something bad in itself. It could be something good in itself. It could be a relationship. It could be a job. It could be a hobby. Anything at all that begins to become an obsession, to dominate.

And I think that's what's being talked about here. And the sin which clings to us so closely. Now, there's two ways of taking this. That could mean any sin at all which prevents us from running. But I think in the context of the letter, it's a particular sin. It's what the author calls in chapter 3 a sinful and unbelieving heart which turns away from the living God.

That was why in chapters 3 and 4 the generation that died in the wilderness failed to reach the promised land because of a sinful and unbelieving heart.

But you see how he blends there's encouragement. The great cloud of witnesses, they've made it. And as we run along the arena, which is, it's almost as if they are smiling encouragement upon us as we run saying, we've made it.

[28 : 26] But why did they make it? This is my final point. Looking to Jesus. There is only one to follow. Now, this word looking is an unusual form.

It's the only time this form occurs in the New Testament. It literally means looking away from, towards. Look away from, towards Jesus. And the obvious question is, looking away from what or who?

Now, you could say, if you like, look away from the weights and the sins. That's true enough. But it's rather trite. I want to suggest something else. I think the author is saying, look away from the great cloud of witnesses.

Don't become obsessed with them. Don't run looking over your shoulder. Don't be saying, oh, if one we had lived at such and such a time, it only sounds though we're still around.

If only, if only, if only. Remember the past wasn't all that wonderful. After all, the past gave us the present. And if we keep on looking over our shoulders like Lot's wife, we're not, we're not going to make it.

[29 : 32] They ran well in their day. Be inspired by them. Learn from them. But there's only one to look to. The point is, we look to him not only because he is seated at the right hand of God, but he is alongside to help us.

That's why the author says in verse 3, consider him. Notice in the NIV, the NIV takes that as the first verse of the next section. Remember, the headings are not inspired.

I think it's a kind of transition verse. Consider him. Fix your eyes on him. He is at the goal. By his help, by his grace, we will make it.

As we sang a few moments ago, more happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven. Amen. Let's pray.

God, our Father, as we run the Christian race, we realize how ineffectively we run sometimes, we get distracted, sometimes we even opt out of the race.

[30 : 45] But by your grace, Lord, we ask that you will help us to continue, that we will arrive at the finishing post, and we will only do this, we know, by considering him.

And we thank you for him, Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, and is seated at the right hand of God.

And so, may we run in his strength, and in his name. Amen.