

# By Faith We See God

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Hebrews 11:1-7

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Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen. For by this the ancients received attestation. By faith we understand that the aeons were fashioned by God's word, so that from things invisible what is seen has come to be.

It was the twilight hour as I sat in the historic church in Rhode Island where I served while in seminary. The church was two hours from where I lived so on Sunday I'd camp out. I helped with worship in the morning and led a youth group in the evening. It was not yet time for the youth, and I was somewhere between study, prayer and sleep when I was startled by a knock on the back door. I opened the door to a scruffy man whose eyes were wide with wonder. "Can I help you?" I asked, thinking I'd soon be pulling a few dollars out of my wallet.

He began to tell me his story. His story is akin to those we hear often around here where we see over 200 twelve steppers each week. He said that he'd been a drunk for some time. This evening, as he was about to reach for his bottle, he looked up and saw a candle light in the church window. And he remembered. Something deep called out and took hold of him.

"Is someone in the church?", he asked me with an unexpected intensity. He was desperate to know if his vision could be explained away by something I knew and he didn't. "No," I said. "No one is here besides me." I felt no fear in revealing I was alone. Something held me still.

He sunk down, sat on the stairs outside. I sat with him. With tears in his eyes he kept repeating the vision...I saw candle light...I saw the window light up. When I was little...

He talked awhile about his childhood church, his life, his stuff. He promised himself that night, with me bearing witness, to start on the path towards sobriety. Then he got up and walked away. I sought out the meeting the next week and there I saw him talking with a group of men outside, waiting for the meeting to begin. I like to think he continued on.

When he left that night we met, the presence of his soul's encounter, lingered. It was palpable goodness, grace, and hope. It carried me through the night.

The next day, I felt afraid. The emotion of the encounter soaked through my being. I'll never forget the intensity of

the man's face that grasped me that night as he took hold of my arm seeking to know what was real. I'll not forget the desperation in his face as he told me about the light he saw in the church.

He had been given a chance to live again.

The day after, my morning classes finished, I sat in the common room, with wet eyes. I wondered-- Did I dream the encounter? Was it real?

As the man had come, I too had come, face to face with the miraculous. Is it real? Does God really work that way? Did such an encounter provide proof of God to a seminary student longing to be able to tell others God was real?

Oh, I could explain away the light in the window. It was twilight, a last glimmer of the falling sun perhaps. It could have been an imagined light, a memory from his childhood, creating a vision. Or perhaps it was a hallucination of a man who still had alcohol or something else coursing through his veins.

Still, as the encounter soaked further in, my tears dried out, sobriety returned, and the miracle remained. Whatever he saw that night, it gave him a chance for new life, it led him to the door of the church. The miracle continued to unfold in the lack of fear I felt when I stood with him. The miracle culminated when, for a little time, a broken man and a broken woman, strangers, sat down together on the steps of a church and asked: What is it, O God, you are saying to me?

Miracles lead us to believe again in the promises of God, like the promise that God will act in our history to reveal what is good and right. Like the promise that God speaks to each of us who seek to know God's will. Like the promise that, when we are lost and broken, God will make, for us, a way to step back towards wholeness. Like the promise that the church will be a light to all, a place that calls people into a community where they can be loved and freed. Miracles lead to faith.

Faith in Hebrews is not the opposite of doubt nor is it the opposite of fear, though both definitions have their place. Neither is faith simply a belief in God's existence. In Hebrews, faith is the belief that God will keep God's promises. And the faith is patient, is strong enough, to allow for the fulfillment to occur after our time, beyond this life.

One verse, 2 translations, 1 paraphrase:

Dean of Yale Divinity School and New Testament scholar, Harold Attridge: Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen.

KJV: Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Eugene Peterson's, *The Message*: The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see.

Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the substance of things hoped for, and the firm foundation that makes life worth living.

For the man I met, what made life worth living, was the reality that God cared enough about him to reach out in grace and offer another way.

It is a promise kept in scripture: Jesus stops again and again for the one in need of healing, heals, shows the way, and allows those who are healed to choose to follow. Think of the lepers who come to Jesus. He heals all ten of them, but only one finds his way back to give him thanks and, if I may conjecture, to follow him further on the way.

For me what made my call worth pursuing was seeing that God does break into our world, into lives of despair, and leads people, one by one, into hope.

It too is a promise kept in scripture. I think of the woman who committed adultery who stands surrounded by people with stones ready to throw and kill her. Jesus stops the throwing of the stones, he speaks to her, and sends her on her way, giving her a chance for new life.

Now, *Hebrews* refers to a different set of stories found in the saving work of God in the Old Testament: the stories of Abel and Enoch and Noah. Abel, who offered God the better sacrifice, is killed by Cain. Enoch's claim to fame is he never died; he was simply lifted into heaven. And, Noah is the one who built the ark. The common thread is that, while each takes a step God has called them to take by faith, none of them has all their dreams come true on earth. Abel gets killed by Cain, Enoch loses his mortal life, and Noah survives the apocalypse of a flood that covers all the land.

Before we move on, note that the book of *Hebrews* is written to first century Christians in a world that is, at best, dubious of their faith and, at worst, violently hostile towards it. These stories are shared in order to encourage people who are being abused in all kinds of ways to continue to believe in Jesus, the Christ. They remind them and us that the end we see here on earth is not the end of the story of God and God's people.

By faith, each man who is listed was able to respond to God in a way others could not. What they did mattered. They are remembered.

So preaches the author of *Hebrews*. You can argue your own interpretation of each story later, perhaps in Laura's class. For now, hear this, each person took a step down a path no one else travelled because they had been shown something, seen something, told something...not by a learned man or a wise woman...but by faith.

Faith is a teacher that reveals what is real, what is the essence of our truest hopes. Faith allows us to move according to a vision of God, for in a very real way, faith allows us to see God.

I asked my Bible Study on Wednesday about miracles. We were studying the end of chapter 9 in *Acts* where there are two miracles that bring people into the faith. In *Acts*, half the time people become Christians because of a miracle and half the time because of the proclamation of Jesus. Being a Bible Study of our church, we were free to express discomfort at the idea of miracles, especially if miracles are only aimed at bringing people into the faith. It is manipulation akin to fabled charlatan healing services. We have been trained well by the more cynical stories of our time, in which every healer is shown to be a charlatan, to want to distance ourselves. Still, Luke has much more in mind in that passage. Luke's goal isn't to manipulate people into faith. Luke's purpose is to express how the Holy Spirit is at work. It is miraculous work that moves people to join the disciples in their belief.

Faith, itself, is miraculous.

Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things unseen. Faith is the miracle that allows us to hear, to see, to experience, to know God on earth. Faith is the tether that doesn't allow us to lose hope even when the things of this world are not yet in accord with God, even when our very belief puts our lives in danger.

*Hebrews* goes on...By faith we understand that the aeons were fashioned by God's word, so that from things invisible what is seen has come to be.

From the very creation God has authored what is real from stuff we cannot see. By faith we understand God continues this act of creation in us...that things not yet known to us will not only be made known, but made known to us as manifestations of God's creative work. We remember that out of nothing we could see God fashioned the world and all that is in it.

Often I hear *Hebrews* hope expressed by people of faith, declaring their trust when something has gone wrong.

"God is teaching me something through this experience."

“God means for this relationship to take a different path.”

“God never gives me more than I can handle.”

“God has a reason, I just don’t know what it is.”

I confess, at times, when I hear these things said, I bristle at what feels like an insult to God—as if God deals out trouble in bits that we can handle or provides difficult in our to teach us a lesson. However, despite my inner scream, God holds me still as God did that night. God quiets me, makes me wait, gives me a chance to ponder, to soak it all in, to see the miracle. Each expression comes from a person feeling the pain of this world who, by faith, dare to hope that God will give the pain meaning.

“My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?” shouts Jesus from the cross... then silence...3 days, 3 nights, silence...then the triumph.

Hebrews faith is the trust that pain can lead to a victory. It is the faith that allows us to remain in the silence believing that one day the voice will break through, insight will be gained, if we stay awake.

And maybe, that insight will allow us to take a step back from the hopes and dreams or our own design, and perceive, instead, the miracles God has given us in our lives...miracles that we felt we deserved...miracles we took for granted.

As night swallows the day, a light appears in the church window, and suddenly a man can see...proof God cares for me!

By faith, he saw the miracle.

By faith, he took the first step.

By faith, each one of us can knock on the door.