Sermon Notes Written by Phil Bryson 2024

# Sermon Notes Written by Phil Bryson

**Hebrews 11:1-13 & Psalm 121 (references taken from NRSV)**

**Introduction**

‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ (Heb. 11:1)

Faith is linked with that which is not seen, here at the start of our passage from Hebrews 11. In doing so, sight loss and faith are being intrinsically linked together, sight loss is here being depicted as the epitome of faith. God is unseen, and therefore in a sense all people encounter God and God’s promises from the perspective akin to sight loss. Both our passages are addressing encountering God in this way, and both celebrate this sight loss enriched faith. We’ll look at each of these passages in turn to explore this theme of journeying in faith – faith without seeing.

**Hebrews 11:1-13**

Hebrews as an epistle, explicitly and repeatedly draws on the Old Testament scriptures in the light of the Good News of Jesus. Hebrews 11 is no exception. This is a chapter that is often referred to as a Hall of Fame of faith, bringing in many examples of heroes of the faith from the Old Testament as examples of people of faith to inspire and encourage the church. As Christians we have faith in a God that we cannot see, we have faith in God’s promises of future hope that are beyond the sight of current experience. In this first section of Hebrews 11, people of faith from the Book of Genesis. Their faith is summed up with the words:

‘All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.’ (v. 13)

Ultimately, the promises and their faith are fulfilled in Jesus. These people lived long before the Word of God became flesh in Jesus. From their perspective the coming of Jesus was something barely known, barely discernible, barely visible. They might not have seen or understood all of God’s purposes, but they had faith in God and God’s promises even if their fulfilment was unseen by them. The promise of Christ’s return, of a world made new, of no more pain or death, of eternal life may be beyond what we can see, but like these heroes of the faith from the passage, we can have faith even though we don’t see.

At a more immediate level, the passage speaks of our being able to please God because we are able to have faith in God’s existence and a desire to seek God (v. 6). So we can be encouraged in our faith both in future promises and in the present, that though God is not visible, as we know as people with sight loss, belief is not dependent on what is seen otherwise what we would believe in would be very limited. Belief is far greater than what can be seen for reality is far greater than what can be seen. To reduce reality to what is visible would be to distort and minimize reality beyond recognition, even if based on the visual capabilities of the strongest sighted of creatures, like birds of prey. So, if reality and therefore belief are far more that what is visible, as we with sight loss know very well, then God who is infinitely vaster than the entirety of the universe throughout all time and space should not be reduced in our understanding to what is visible. God the author of reality is far beyond what can simply be seen, and yet we can seek and draw near to God and come into fellowship with him by faith as the heroes of the faith have without the need for seeing.

This passage shows that God made promises that they had faith in relating to their own lives that were beyond what they could see. For Noah the warning of a flood that had no visible evidence of occurring. For Abraham, the promise of child from Sarah, a promise beyond sight, a promise that was laughable given their age. In both cases they had faith in what could not be seen, and God’s promises came to pass. We are therefore encouraged to hold onto God in our lives, to journey in faith with God asking God to help us trust his promises that cannot be seen.

**Psalm 121**

This theme of journeying in faith is true in our other passage, Psalm 121 as well. This is in a section in the psalms called the Psalms of Ascent, Psalms 120-134. These are psalms that were traditionally sung as part of a pilgrimage as people ascended to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage journey to celebrate festivals. The arrangement of the psalms is important as they have been compiled and arranged to provide a particular flow. Psalm 121’s place is important. The following psalm, Psalm 122, opens with these words:

‘I was glad when they said to me,
    ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’

Our feet are standing
    within your gates, O Jerusalem.’ (vv. 1-2)

This would seem like the ideal psalm to open the section dedicated to the Psalms of Ascent. It sets the scene of having journeyed to the temple in Jerusalem. But instead, the first psalm in this section is Psalm 120, a lament psalm. Lament is the most common form of psalm, an opportunity for God’s people as part of their praise to express their pain, grief, frustration, desolation, and anger. For God’s people to cry out to God for help. Psalm 120 speaks of the psalmist being confronted by those who want war despite the psalmist wanting peace, the psalm speaks of those who spread lies and are making life difficult. We too can face real difficulties in life, some of which are caused by other people. This can be genuinely hurtful, and the psalms do not attempt to dismiss the severity of the hurt that can be endured in life.

Our passage then, Psalm 121, is placed where it is because it follows on well from Psalm 120 because it acts as a response. In the light of suffering caused by others, where does our help come from? It comes from God. When the psalmist makes a reference to looking to the hills (v. 1), this is using a metaphor. The psalmist isn’t literally looking into the hills and seeing God there waving to them! The psalmist is declaring faith God who cannot be seen. Faith in God, that leads to the pronouncements of faith of the protection God will bring. This is not faith that pretends that troubles don’t exist, nor is it faith that seeks to minimise the pain of suffering.

Rather this is faith that acknowledges the experience of suffering and recognises that in the midst of this it is God who is with us protecting us through the raging storms of life. So, the Psalms of Ascent have been arranged by acknowledging our troubles and following this up with a declaration of faith in the unseen God in the midst of trouble and with a declaration of faith like this it is then possible to celebrate the journey to festival in Jerusalem.

**Conclusion**

## Faith is a journey, like the journey through life that the heroes of faith traversed, like the journey of ascent of the pilgrims of old to Jerusalem. God is unseen, and those of us with sight loss know that belief is greater than what is visible, and so God and his promises, whilst unseen, is the source of all reality and hope and one in whom we can put our faith and trust and hope, one who is with us in the midst of trouble, one who guides us through life in faith to a glorious eternal life in peace. Amen