

“Seen v. Unseen”
Exodus 1:17 & Hebrews 11
January 16, 2005
Dr. Jerry Nelson

After studying Exodus 2 and giving to the secretaries, early this past week, a different sermon title for the bulletin, I changed focus.

Something from last week’s text and sermon was still on my mind and, from what I heard, was still on the minds of others.

Thus I want to revisit something of last week.

Please stand for the reading of God’s word:

Exodus 1:17 “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do...”

Hebrews 11:1-16, 23-27

HEB 11:1 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and **certain of what we do not see.** ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

HEB 11:3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that **what is seen was not made out of what was visible.**

HEB 11:4 By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

HEB 11:5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. ⁶ **And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.**

HEB 11:7 By faith Noah, when warned about **things not yet seen,** in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

HEB 11:8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, **even though he did not know where he was going.** ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in

tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For **he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

^{HEB 11:11} By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

^{HEB 11:13} All these people were still living by faith when they died. **They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.** ¹⁴ **People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.** ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ **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.**

Look ahead to verse 23

^{HEB 11:23} By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were **not afraid of the king's edict.**

^{HEB 11:24} By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. ²⁶ **He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.** ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; **he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.**

May God add his blessing to the reading of his holy and inspired word.

Pray: God give us eyes to see and ears to see what you have for us today.

Every day and in countless ways we make decisions, large and small, based on what we truly believe about life.

What I have in mind specifically is whether we believe this life is all there is or we truly believe also in a life hereafter.

More specifically, even if we say we believe in a life hereafter, we make decisions based on **which life we consider more real and more important to our welfare**, the life we now live or the one yet to come.

To me, one of the most powerful stories in the Bible is when God told Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God.

The tension between the seen and the unseen was palpable.

Which was stronger to Abraham – what he could see or what he couldn't?

Which was more believable, the life he enjoyed with Isaac alive with him or the life he couldn't see if he obeyed God?

Could Abraham trust God even when every appearance was that obedience would result in the greatest loss imaginable?

Was the “seen” reward of disobedience (Isaac alive) greater than the unseen reward of obedience?

Our human nature and the culture in which we live continually tell us, “What you see is what you get.”

Last week from Exodus 1 we saw the sovereign hand of God working all of history toward his desired goal.

We observed God's actions during a period of over 500 years setting the stage for the exodus of Israel from Egyptian slavery.

The prophecy and promise given to Abraham 500 years earlier was being carried out in detail.

Thus we can trust that same God today.

One of the points that I tried to make last week was that we are all part of something far bigger than our individual lives here on earth.

We are part of God's overall plan to bring salvation to the world.

One of the things that captured my attention as I studied Exodus 1 was not the people we hear about by name in the Bible but the ones we don't.

As we reflected on the history covered in that first chapter, we realized that tens of thousands of Israelites died in Egypt during the 400 years after Abraham.

For probably 250 of those years they were in slavery – the harshest slavery imaginable.

Those tens of thousands died never experiencing for themselves the fulfillment of the promise that would eventually come.

We also know that at one point the Pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew baby boys should be thrown into the river to be killed.

And while we know that one of them, Moses, escaped that fate and went on to be the great deliverer of Israel, undoubtedly many baby boys drowned.

So when Moses puts 500 years of history in front of me in Exodus 1 and then I add to that what I know of the 3500 years since, I realize I am but a small part in God's sovereign work in the world.

And so last week I asked the questions:

- Is my role in God's plan simply 15 minutes of life before I'm drowned in the Nile?
- Is my role suffering for a lifetime in the slave-quarries of Egypt?
- Is my role to be a John the Baptist, a Robert Murray McChayne, or a Jim Elliott whose lights shine brightly but are snuffed out before 30 years of age.
- Is my role to live long and prosperously?

When I read Exodus I come to understand that it is not just about me here and now, it is about God.

History doesn't revolve around me but around God.

What I learn is that God isn't part of my story, I'm part of his.

But what does that make of me?

- Do I simply become a minor cog in the machine of history?
- Am I merely a pawn on God's great chessboard?
- How does my life have any value and how can it be said that God loves me if my life lasts only 15 minutes before drowning or I spend 50 years suffering in the slave-quarries of Egypt?

I believe those questions demonstrate the great tension we live with between the seen and the unseen.

We believe in God but we find it hard to trust him.

And I believe the reason is because **what we can see**, that is, our present circumstances, **is far more real to us than what we can't see**, that is, God's planned future for us.

Most of us are pragmatists – maybe all of us.

The question we ask is, "Does it work?"

For Christians the questions becomes more specific:

- "Does obeying God work?"
- "Is it worth it to be a Christian?"

Thus:

- If being charitable results in God's material blessing on my life then it "works."
- If remaining faithful to my marriage vows will make me happier in the long run, then it "works."
- If being a "good" Christian by reading my Bible, going to church and serving others in some capacity will mean that God will keep me prospering, then it "works."
- If when I'm sick or without a job I try to be a better Christian and I get well or get a job, then it "works."

We judge whether it "works" or not based solely on what we can experience, **here and now**.

We can't imagine a 15-minute life having any value because we see it only from the perspective of this life.

We can't imagine a 50-year life of suffering being worth it because we judge life to be good or bad based solely on the present.

Look with me again at two Hebrew midwives named Shiphrah and Puah.

Here is what it says of them:

Exodus 1:17 “The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do...”

I suppose you remember that they had been commanded by the king to kill all newborn Hebrew baby boys.

This wasn't America with civil liberties and legal due process.

This was a despot of the most evil kind and the midwives were part of the very people he was attempting to eliminate.

In that king's mind, what value do you suppose their lives had?

Do you think the midwives knew that? Of course!

What does the text say? They “feared God.”

Apparently their awe of the God they could **not** see was greater than their awe of the king they could.

The book of Hebrews, drawing specific attention to Exodus 1 and 2, gives us a fuller understanding of the thinking of these people of faith.

I think these midwives, like Moses, saw a future that was more real to them than the present.

- The unseen was a more powerful motivation than the seen.
- They were convinced enough that even if their lives were meant by God to be only a few years here on earth, it would be worth it.
- They were in God's hands and they trusted him.
- The “unseen” future was more real and attractiver than the “seen” present.

Let's look at those Hebrews passages we read earlier.

Hebrews 11:1-2 “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

“Hope” here is not as in “I sure hope so” or “wishful thinking.”

Hope is God's promise – faith is being sure of what God has promised and being certain of what we do not see.”

Faith is when the unseen becomes more real than the seen.

Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

The essence of faith is a confidence in the existence of God and in his faithfulness to his promise to reward those who seek him.

And the confidence in God is that the reward will come **whether I see it now or not.**

This is what God demonstrates over and over again in this 11th chapter of Hebrews.

Hebrews 11:7 “By faith Noah, when warned about **things not yet seen**, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.”

Hebrews 11:8 “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, **even though he did not know where he was going.**”

Hebrews 11:9 “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For **he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**”

Hebrews 11:13-16 “All these people were still living by faith when they died. **They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.** ¹⁴ **People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.** ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ **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.

Moses' parents were like the midwives before them:

Hebrews 11:23 "By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were **not afraid of the king's edict.**

And most of us know the story we will look at next week wherein Moses chooses to identify with his own people rather than a privileged life.

Hebrews 11:26-27 "**He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.** By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; **he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.**

Oh, Hebrews 11 goes on to give many more illustrations to make the point but notice the last phrase of verse 27:

Hebrews 11:27 "**he (Moses) persevered because he saw him who is invisible.**

Which is more real to you, the seen or the unseen?

We tend to grasp for the here and now because we are tempted to think this is all we can count on.

Talking to Tom Bayless about it this week, he used an interesting word picture.

It is like we are hanging on to a trinket of this life in an small-mouthed jar, refusing to let go so we can reach to take hold of the hand of the Lord.

We judge God's love for us based on what we experience in the present more than on what he has in store for us in the future.

We don't like a 15-minute life or a 50-year life of suffering because we aren't convinced there is a future we can count on!

We see the present and fear that is all there is.

George Guthrie wrote, “During the nighttime awakenings, at this stage in my life, I am tempted to hear the call of various fears: The fear that something might happen to Pat or one of the children; fear that something might happen to me, preventing me from being there for my family, fear that I might not be able to follow through on a project; fear of evil people who might (wish to harm us); fear of mid-life (or old age); and so on. There is much of which to be afraid in this dark and morbid world. One session of the evening news provides ample evidence that the world has much harm to offer us as people. These fears call me to shrink back from life and, at times, from the Lifegiver. As people of faith we must not answer that call.” (Guthrie, Hebrews, 394)

We complain or cry about the present when God’s eye is on the future he has for us.

As I said last week, we judge God’s love based on the present, God judges it based on the future.

God sees the future and is using the present to shape us for it.

Is that not very much like parenting?

- We make our children eat food good for them.
- We make them sit at a piano and practice.
- We correct their speech, we teach them manners, and we make them do homework.

From their limited perspective it is often drudgery and nonsense.

They are even convinced at times that we make them do these things because we don’t like them – as they will sometimes tell us.

But what do you, as the parent, see that they don’t?

- You see them ten and twenty years later.
- You see them healthy instead of sickly.
- You see them as talented, educated, courteous, successful adults.

You don’t struggle with them to do their homework because you hate them, or because you need it, but because you love them and have a future in mind for them.

Now the future that God is bringing to pass for his people, for you, is of his design not ours.

And he knew from before the creation of the world, what part he would have each of us play in that plan.

My part may only be 15 minutes or it may be much longer.

It may be a lead role of prominence or a never-noticed role of apparent insignificance but it is his plan for my life and for my future.

We are not pawns in God's hand.

We are priceless human beings whom he created and died for to bring to himself.

All of Scripture looks forward.

It looks forward to what God sees for us.

1 Corinthians 2:9 "No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love him" --

But don't just think of heaven as just a larger, better, version of what we think is attractive now.

Heaven is not just delayed selfish gratification.

- We're tempted to think, "I may not have much of a house now, but just wait until you see my mansion in heaven."
- "I love to ski and I can hardly wait to ski in heaven."
- "I have been sick my whole life, but in heaven, my body will be whole and healthy."

What is ahead is not primarily about physical comfort and psychological satisfaction but about being with God.

The future is not mainly tangible but relational – it is not health, wealth, and fun but it is about fullness, sufficiency and joy in the presence of Jesus.

That has been God's plan from the beginning:

Over 400 times through the Bible God's great goal for us is said to be an intimate relationship with him.

He says it in Genesis 17:7 "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you...to be your God.

He says it again 500 years later in Exodus 6:7 "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.

He says it again 900 years later to Jeremiah 30:22 "So you will be my people, and I will be your God.' "

He repeats it again 600 years later, Hebrews 8:10 "I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Jesus said, John 14:1-3 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

The Apostle John was allowed to see into the future and he wrote, Revelation 22:3-4 "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

How profound it is to know we are loved by God.

"A wonderful story is told of a wealthy Scottish nobleman, richly attired, who was riding his magnificent horse and came beside a poor peasant, dressed in rags, who was kneeling in the mud and praying.

"You must be close to God", the nobleman scoffed.

"Aye", the peasant responded with unmistakable bliss, "He is very fond of me!" (Dawn, Royal Waste of Time, 24)

And so again I say the Scripture teaches that I dare to trust God because in his sovereign plan, whether my life is short or long, hard or easy, his loving purpose will not fail – I will be with him forever.

The “unseen” becomes even more powerful than the “seen.”

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

How do we develop a vision for the future that God has for us that can become clearer and more powerful in our thinking and living than anything the world offers us here and now?

We must spend time with God.

He has taken great pains to show himself to us in ways that will build our trust.

He is presented as Father, husband, older brother, mother, friend, shepherd, and much more.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same."

We must not make this world our home, it isn't.

John Wesley was shown around a vast plantation by a proud landowner.

They rode their horses all day and saw only a fraction of the estate.

When they sat down to dinner the man said eagerly, "Well, Mr. Wesley, what do you think?"

Wesley pondered the question, then replied, "I think you're going to have a hard time leaving all this." (From Randy Alcorn, "Eternal Perspective"

<http://www.epm.org/randysbio.html>)

Novelist, Randy Alcorn, tells of the beautiful painting by Ron DiCianni. It's entitled Safely Home.

Alcorn says of the painting:

It portrays a man on his knees.

- His clothing is worn and tattered.
- He's walked down a long strip of blood-red entry-carpet that has led him to the foot of a throne.
- The man's arms dangle at his side.
- He appears both exhausted and relieved, overcome with emotion.
- His head rests on the chest of one kneeling down to him, holding him tight in a loving embrace.

The one hugging him has stepped down off the throne.

It's the King, the Creator of the universe, who is also, incredibly, a man. King Jesus.

A few feet to the right are open shackles lying on the palace floor.

- The man had been a prisoner on earth.
- He'd suffered terribly at the hands of those who despised him because they despised his King.

In his right hand, hanging limply to the ground, is a beautiful gold crown.

- The man is a martyr.
- He has lived out Revelation 2:10-he's been faithful unto death, and his Lord has given him the crown of life.

To many people today, the single most important thing is the preservation of their life on earth.

To this man, obeying his Lord was more important than prolonging his earthly life.

In the background of Safely Home stands an angel, reverently watching, holding out in his arms a white robe.

The angel is the man's guardian.

In the stonework on both sides of the carpet walkway you can see the continents of earth below.

Several things strike me in this painting.

- One is heaven's view of earth below.
- Another is the look on the man's face, at long last freed from pain and persecution.
- But what really strikes me is the look on the face of King Jesus. He, too, is full of emotion. His face radiates compassion and approval. His nail-scarred hands, drawing the martyr to Himself, are silent testimony to the extent of His love.

The artist could have named the painting Well Done or Overcomer or No Longer a Stranger or something else.

But he named it Safely Home.

The evil that pursued him in the Shadowlands can no longer touch him.

He's forever beyond its reach, for between evil and the man stands the Lord of the Cosmos, the one who embraces him and says, ("You're home)! (From Randy Alcorn "Eternal Perspective")

Exodus 1:17 "The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do..."

Hebrews 11:27 Moses "persevered because he saw him who is invisible."