

Hebrews 11:1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 December 2007

Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 00] I would like you to turn back to the passage that we read from the letter to the Hebrews, and looking particularly at words that were found in chapter 11, that's on page 1209 of the Pew Bible.

Hebrews 11 verse 1, Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see.

I want to begin this morning by retelling a story I told the children a few months ago. It's the story of the warehouse people of an entire community, it's a modern parable really, an entire community that lived its life inside a giant warehouse.

This community was born there, they lived there, and had everything that they required within that warehouse. It was a warehouse which had no doors, but it did have windows, however the windows were caked with dirt and grime and dust, because they had never been cleaned.

So no one bothered to look out through these windows. They didn't need to because they felt that everything they required they had already in the warehouse.

[1 : 33] But one day, a boy and a girl, in their curiosity, pushed a chair below one of these windows, and stood in the chair and began to clean away the grime and to look outside.

When they looked through the now clear window pane, they saw people walking in a street outside, and they called others to come over and to look out and to see this world which they didn't know existed before.

And as they looked at the people, they began to think that these people are crazy, because they were looking up, they were pointing. And they looked, the children looked up, and all they saw was a roof.

They didn't realize that the people outside were pointing to an airplane or to a bird or to a cloud. And so they came to the conclusion that these people really were half mad, and it wasn't worthwhile looking at them anymore.

So they lived within the warehouse. They lived totally unaware of the world outside.

[2 : 51] But then one day somebody cut a door, and the whole community was able to come out and to discover a new world. In many ways, that is a parable of the world in which many people live today.

The secularized world, which has cut God out, which has cut eternity out, the kind of world that Richard Dawkins and others are promoting today, is a closed world, a world which is like a warehouse.

Now God has opened a door, and that's what we celebrate at Christmas. God has opened a door in this world through which we may enter into another world, the eternal world, the spiritual world.

We, today, are gathered here in this place in order that we might make contact with that world through the door that God has opened up through the gift of his Son.

And in the great events of the life of Jesus Christ, in his birth, in his ministry, in his death, in his resurrection, in his ascension, God has opened that door.

[4 : 15] He has opened that door through Christ. Sometimes theologians speak of the Christ event, the coming of Christ, not just his birth, but the whole ministry, all that Christ did on earth.

That is what we celebrate. And it's important for us to remember that. And that is through that gift of Christ that we are able to enter into the wider world that God has created, the wider universe of which we are a part.

Now this letter to the Hebrews is a document that distinguishes between the physical world of space and time and this unseen world of eternal reality.

It's an invisible world from which Jesus came and to which he returned. We see this particularly in some references which I'm going to quote now from this letter, first in chapter 8, the first two verses. The point of what we are saying, says the writer, is this, we do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.

[5 : 35] Now here he is saying, he said, there is the temple on earth, but there is also a true tabernacle, a true temple in heaven. Again, in chapter 9, at verse 11, we read these words, when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not part of this creation.

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood having obtained eternal redemption.

In other words, when, what the writer is saying is that when Jesus fulfilled his ministry on earth, he entered into the presence of God in this invisible world that the writer is alluding to here.

And further on in that chapter, in verse 23, he says, it was necessary then for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves were with better sacrifices than these.

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one. He entered heaven itself now to appear for us in God's presence.

[7 : 00] And so, these references make clear that the person who wrote this letter is a conscious of the fact that there is another world that is an unseen world, that is an eternal world from which Christ has come and to which Christ has returned and into which we may also enter because of what Christ has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection.

Now, insofar, although Christmas today is largely secularized, insofar as it does focus on the birth and the coming of Jesus, it is a reminder of this unseen world.

A world that exists beyond space and time. A world of angels and archangels. A world of a devil and of demons. There is, according to the Bible, a parallel universe.

A spiritual universe that is there. And that the creation that God has made is not only the physical, tangible world in which we live and which scientists can explore.

There is, in and under and through and beyond it, a spiritual world. A spiritual universe. By faith, the writer says, we understand that the universe was formed at God's command.

[8 : 28] And the word translated there, universe, is literally plural. It is worlds or ages. And so, the whole concept is not simply a concept of a universe of space and time.

It is much broader than that. The whole concept of creation in the scriptures is of something which is much larger, much grander than the physical universe in which we know and in which we live.

So, there is more than the physical universe that astronomers study. Now, what the writer tells us here is that faith is being certain of this.

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. The word certain here is a word which was used in the ancient world for proof.

Faith is proof. The old King James Version would speak of evidence. Faith is the evidence of things unseen. Faith is proof of the things that are unseen.

[9 : 39] Now, faith, what the writer says, is proof. This word, as I have said, was used in ancient Greek culture for the proof or demonstration of something which is under dispute.

Now, the writer does not say that faith has proof, but he says that faith is proof. Faith is proof. In other words, we discover this new world, this other world, through faith.

Augustine, the great theologian of the early church, or one of the great theologians of the early church, wrote, Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe in order to understand.

And so, it is through faith that we go through the door. It is by faith that we enter into this awareness of this unseen world.

So, let me recap. There is a tangible world that scientists explore, but there is also an intangible world beyond the reach of science and of human reason.

[10 : 48] And there is something in the human makeup that almost senses that this is true. We see this in the great interest in intergalactic fiction, Star Trek and lots of other films and novels that specialize in that area.

There is a hunger, there is almost something in our DNA that acknowledges that there is more to the universe than what we can see, what we can touch, and what we can feel.

Now, as I have said, at this time of year when people do focus, at least to some extent, on the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, this is an opportunity for us to join this cloud of witnesses who witness to the coming of Jesus in advance.

It's an opportunity for us to witness to the significance of his coming and the significance of his mission here on earth. It's an opportunity to invite others to discover the true spiritual world that Trekkies and others hanker after.

because this world is discovered by faith. That's what the writer says. It is by faith. Faith is the proof. Faith is the evidence. Faith is the path to certainty concerning this other world.

[12:23] Now, this is possible. Let me emphasize again because God has opened a door. God has broken into the warehouse. He's cut a door and he's done it through his son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He's opened that door but he invites us to enter it by faith and he invites those of us who do so to invite others. In fact, he commands us to invite others also to enter in.

Now, this is a time of year when we have an opportunity to do that. We have an opportunity at all times but perhaps particularly at a time like this or at Easter or some other time.

we have an opportunity to invite people to discover this unseen world that the writer here speaks of. This world into which Jesus has entered and opened a door for us to follow.

So, as we look out on the beauty of creation, as we gaze at the stars on a clear and frosty night, let's remember that not only has God by his command created and is continuing to sustain these heavenly bodies and this creation but that in, through and under this physical universe that is a spiritual universe and that by faith you can discover this and become certain of it.

[13:49] By faith, one translation says, by faith we come to know that the unseen things really do exist. Now, the writer to the Hebrews was very much aware of this because he was aware of the fact that although people like Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abram and the others that he lists in chapter 11 were long dead, he believed that they were there still alive, not here in this world but in that unseen world and that they constituted a cloud of witnesses that were in fact an encouragement to the writer's generation to follow in their footsteps and in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are surrounded, he says in verse 12, verse 1, by such a great cloud of witnesses. And he tells them also in that chapter that as a Christian community when they come together and worship as we are seeking to do today, they, as it were, enter into contact with that world.

He says, you have come to Mount Zion to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.

So we have the privilege and the opportunity this morning of living in two worlds and being conscious of that, that when we come together in worship, we come together not only in a building, we come together not only in this physical universe, but we also join with the people of God down through the ages in a mysterious way, we enter into the communion of saints that binds all the people of God together.

So that's the, I think, the first thing that the writer of the Hebrews says about faith. Faith is certain of the things we do not see.

[16:03] Now, what he does here is he's defining or describing faith in terms of two of its principal properties, one of which we've just noted and that is this ability, God-given ability to see the unseen, to be certain of what we do not see.

But he also speaks of faith concerning, as assurance concerning the future. Not simply certainty concerning the unseen, but assurance concerning the future.

There's a focus not only on the world that is unseen and invisible, but also upon the world which is yet to be, the world which is not yet, the world of the future.

A focus on things that are not seen and things that are future. Two areas of life where many people who don't have faith are very uneasy and even fearful.

Now Hebrews tells us, as we've seen, that God opens a door into the warehouse. But he also erects a signpost that points forward to a new age, to a new order, to a new era.

[17:22] So, at this time of year, we give God thanks not only for opening a door, but for erecting a signpost and pointing to this new order which is to come.

The focus here is on the unseen, but is also on the future. There's references in the letter to the Hebrews and the world to come.

In chapter 2, verse 5, there is a presentation of what the writer describes as the everlasting Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God in the future.

He speaks of an eternal inheritance that God has promised in chapter 9 and in chapter 12 of a future kingdom that cannot be shaken. So, the writer to the Hebrews is concerned that we would focus our attention not only on the unseen world of spiritual reality, but also the future world that is to come.

There will be a new order in which God will renew the universe and God will create a new heavens and a new earth. And that is the vision of the word of God.

[18 : 44] That is the vision of the letter to the Hebrews. and faith is the assurance that that will, that vision will become a reality.

So, faith is being sure of what we hope for. Now, it's interesting that the word that the writer uses here is the word which was often used in the Greek language for reality.

faith is the reality of things hoped for. And he's not saying that faith is wishful thinking. On the contrary, he's saying faith is the reality.

There's no, there's no fuzziness about, about, about what he's saying here. Faith on the one hand is the, the, the certainty of the unseen world.

It is also the, the reality of a new world which is yet to come. Now, how can the writer speak of a world which has not yet been recreated as a reality?

[19 : 51] How can he do that? Well, this is, again, part of the, of, of, of the wonder of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What, in fact, I think, is behind the, the, the thinking of the writers of the Hebrews is that, it's that, in a sense, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's, perhaps he's reflecting on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, on, although the phrase justification by faith doesn't occur in the letter to the Hebrews, the idea of being, of being counted as righteous does, it comes out in this chapter 11.

And, what, Paul explains that in greater detail in his letter to the Romans and he says that when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, when we trust in him, God declares us to be righteous in his sight. God counts us as just, even though we're sinners and we are, even though we do not deserve it and we don't, God declares us to be righteous. He, he, he sees us in the righteousness, the goodness, the perfection of Jesus Christ and he accepts us in him.

Now, what in effect happens when God justifies a sinner is that God anticipates the day of judgment. God brings forward, if you like, an element of the last day of that final, that new order into the present and God acquits us now.

[21 : 29] So, there's a sense in which what will happen then is brought forward into the present so that the future is a reality for the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This future order is an order into which we have already entered because God has justified us and when God justifies us, he's acting as a judge as well as a saviour.

He's acquitting us. He's accepting us and he is assuring us. That's why the writer to the Hebrews can be so strong in his language here. He's assuring us.

It's the assurance. It's the reality of what we hope for. That reality of what we hope for has already been experienced in terms of being justified by faith through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. So, this word which in Greek philosophy often was used to describe reality, this Greek word, was used in the common language of the ordinary person.

[22 : 35] Sometimes, it was sometimes used of title deeds. Title deeds for a property. Now, if you buy a piece of land or you buy a house, then you don't really own it until you get the title deeds.

You're not the legal owner. I remember years ago, a friend of mine in Glasgow, he bought a house and the lawyer paid the money before he got the title deeds and this friend had a terrible problem. A huge problem being able to establish his right to ownership of the property. He had the house but he didn't have the title deeds. Now, what the writer to the Hebrews here is saying is that faith gives us the title deeds to our inheritance in the new order.

We have the title deeds. We have not yet entered fully into it. We've not yet, if you like, entered into the new house but we have the title deeds and because we have the title deeds we can be sure.

We can have assurance is what the writer to the Hebrews says here. And so this time of year is an opportunity for us to tell the world about the good news of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 50] Why Jesus came? He came in order to save and to seek those who are lost. He came in order to redeem not just his people but to redeem the universe and to create a new heavens and a new earth.

He came to enable all of us to enter into this spiritual universe, this spiritual world and to experience eternity in the fullest sense of the term by receiving eternal life.

When we celebrate, when we think of the first coming of Jesus, we must always think that the first coming will lead to the second coming and that the second coming he will establish this new order, the new heavens and the new earth.

And so, we may say Christmas is a door but Christmas is also a signpost. It points to that new order.

It points to that second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. And so there is this serious element to the gospel, a very serious element to the gospel of which we read in the tenth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews.

[25 : 07] He speaks about a fearful expectation of judgment and of a raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. There is a very serious, a very solemn element to the gospel.

And we don't do ourselves no favors and do others no favors if we neglect that. And we do have to be faithful and to remind people that there will be a day of judgment.

There will be a day when all of us will stand before the tribunal of Christ and give an account of how we have lived. And Christmas points forward to that. It points forward, tells us not only the good news, but it tells us the bad news, which in fact the good news have come to counteract.

But we must remember that. We must realize that there is a solemn element here and that we have an opportunity when we live in this world of space and time.

We have an opportunity to be put right with God, which we will not have if we miss this opportunity once we pass the last frontier of death.

[26 : 18] We have an opportunity here and now. And that's why the gospel is urgent. The gospel, as someone has said, is good news only if it arrives in time.

And it's so important that it will arrive in time. And that's why all of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ are called upon to be witnesses to tell others this good news.

That they may indeed be delivered from the judgment which all of us deserve. And that they may receive the grace of God which has been poured out in the face of Jesus Christ.

Now faith is possible because God has opened a door and because God has put up a signpost. He invites us to believe with the shepherds and with the wise men.

He invites us to go through the door into an eternal world. He invites us to follow the signpost that points to the new world order which the book of Revelation describes in symbolic form.

[27 : 21] invites us to enter the true new age. There's a lot of interest today in the new age but the new age today is really a pale imitation of the new age in scripture.

The new age as it is commonly understood today is so called after the age of Aquarius which was calculated by ancient astrologers to begin around the year 2600 B-A-A-A-D.

but modern astrologers I understand have recalculated this estimate and they reckon that the age of Aquarius began in the 15th century.

Now all of that is based upon astrology which is no factual basis. But the new age today is a term which is shorthand for people who are interested in spirituality.

But it's a spirituality that is focused on the self and on aligning oneself with the flow of the universe.

But it does illustrate a spiritual hunger. And when we meet people who are new agers and there are many new agers that we perhaps we rub shoulders with them without realizing it who are interested in the spirituality but it's the spirituality of the self.

[28 : 41] It's something looking into themselves. It's an opportunity is it not for us to tell them about the true new age. To tell them about Jesus. And to tell them that our salvation comes not from within ourselves but from outside.

And that's the message of Christmas. God salvation has come from outside. Salvation has come from God. It has come from the eternal world. It has come to us from outside because we cannot. We are unable to save ourselves. New Agers are conscious of the fact that they are on a journey. All of us are on a journey. One of the most popular ideas in contemporary spirituality is that we are

journeying.

And that is true. This is a biblical idea that we are on a journey. All of us are on a journey. But it's a journey through time into eternity. And the question I want to ask you today is we come to another milestone where are you going?

Where is your journey taking you? Where are you going? Sometimes when we say goodbye to people we say may God go with you.

[30 : 04] Now those of you who may have been in the Spanish world will know that their idiom is different from ours. They say may you go with God. And so often our understanding is that we want God to come with us.

We want to go our own way and we want God to bless us. But our own way is wrong. We find it very difficult to accept that. There's a way that seems right to human beings as the psalmist but at the end thereof is the way of death.

we are in the broad way that leads to destruction. We need to be delivered out of that broad way and we can only do that when we go with God.

And so if your attitude in life is God come with me I want to say to you today you've got to change and say you go with God.

God's way is the way of salvation. Jesus said I am the way, the truth and the life. It is through him and only through him that we may come to God.

[31 : 19] So where are we going? If we have followed the Lord Jesus Christ are we moving forward? The writer of the Hebrews was concerned that the people, the church to which he was writing about which we know very little, almost nothing in terms of where it was or who the people in that church were.

He was concerned that they were beginning to slow down. They were beginning to lose momentum and he was afraid that they were beginning to shrink back and he warns them.

He warns them of the danger of shrinking back and even turning away. He urges them and he urges us to persevere, to press on. We see that at the end of chapter 10 where he says do not throw away your confidence.

Do not throw it away. It will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God you will receive what he has promised.

And so he urges us not to slow down, not to lose momentum, but to press on, to run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith.

[32 : 40] So as we at this time of year remember particularly the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us remember that the birth of Jesus can only be understood and made sense of if we look at it in the totality of the mission of Jesus.

Jesus and that mission is a mission to bring us into a new relationship with God and to make us citizens of a new order a new world which he will return to establish here in the universe in which we live.

May all of us be ready for that day. We do not know when it will be it's important that we be ready for it and live each day as if it were that day.

Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father we come before you this morning to thank you for giving us the Lord Jesus Christ. We bless and we praise you for him.

We thank you for all that he has done for us. And we ask Heavenly Father that you will enable us to receive him as your gift to us and to know him as our Lord and as our Savior.

[33 : 51] And may we follow him. May we follow him with perseverance. May we follow him with faith and with eagerness. Grant oh God that you will enable us to respond today to your word.

Help us oh Lord our God not to let it bounce off us. Help us to take seriously what you are saying to us. Help us to receive and to hear what you are doing what you are saying to us.

Grant oh God that we may trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and be justified in your sight. Be declared righteous by you. Become receive the title deeds of the kingdom of God.

We ask this in Jesus name and for his sake. Amen. son of son of son. And see how he died.

He prayed without having conversation and seu Dzi■kuj■ and man profession The song of the child and ■■■■■ dan ■ ac