

Faith Sees the Invisible

Hebrews 11:23-31

John Breon

We've heard a description of faith as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we don't see. We've learned that without faith it's impossible to please God because whoever comes to God must believe that God exists and rewards those who seek him. We've seen various examples of people who lived by faith.

Now we come to Moses and the Israelites as examples of living by faith. Moses stands out as a great leader, one of the Old Testament's major figures. But all the people at the time of the exodus exercised faith. They shared Moses' vision, observed the Passover, and went through the sea on dry ground. The next generation of Israelites encircled Jericho and took the city when God caused its walls to fall down.

Let's keep in mind the faith of all the Israelites, but let's focus on Moses. I once heard an outline of this passage that said Moses *chose the imperishable, saw the invisible, and did the impossible* (Oral Roberts, sometime around 1983). Let's unpack those phrases and see what it meant for Moses to do those things and what it means to us as we live by faith.

By faith, Moses *chose the imperishable*. He rejected what doesn't last and gave himself to what does last. He was committed to things that are lasting and enduring.

When Moses was born, his parents saw that he was a beautiful child. There was something extraordinary about him. So, by faith, they protected his life. The king of Egypt had given the command to kill Hebrew baby boys. By faith Moses' parents didn't fear the king's command but protected Moses and later put him in a basket in the river. Then the daughter of the king found him and adopted him. So Moses grew up as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

But by faith, Moses refused to identify with his adopted royal family. Instead, he chose to identify with his biological family, the Hebrew people. He chose mistreatment with God's people instead of enjoying sin for a season. "For Moses it would have been sin to remain in his privileged

position in Egypt, since God had a work for him to do" (Donald Hagner, *Hebrews. A Good News Commentary*).

Sin deceives. It makes promises it can't keep. It may seem for a while that sin pays off, but the pleasures it gives are temporary, fleeting. It promises life but delivers death. It promises pleasure but in the end brings pain. It promises achievement and status, but it robs us of true honor and glory.

There are some things more important than satisfying our desires. There are riches that are more lasting than material wealth. There's honor that's greater than social status. There's fulfillment that's far beyond our ambitions.

Moses "thought it was better to suffer for the sake of the Messiah than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the great reward that God would give him" (verse 26, *New Living Translation*).

How could Moses suffer for the sake of Christ? He lived centuries before Jesus' life and ministry in the flesh. But we see that Moses experienced the same kind of reproach Jesus the Messiah later experienced. Both were rejected as prophets standing on God's side, boldly proclaiming the word of the Lord against an ungodly generation (George Guthrie, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews*).

The writer points out all this to encourage the people who first read and heard this book of Hebrews. He reminds them that Moses chose to identify with God's people and to suffer hardship, persecution, and reproach instead of enjoying the wealth of Egypt. The first readers of Hebrews were facing hardship, persecution, and reproach as followers of Jesus. This writer wants to persuade them that following Jesus is worth it. It's worth whatever it takes. Living by faith in God through Jesus connects us to God's eternal life. It guides us through life now and prepares us for life in the fullness of God's coming kingdom.

There's an old saying:

"Only one life, 'twill soon be past. Only what's done for Christ will last."

I read a story about leaving position and status to serve the purposes of God. Julius Hickerson was a promising young doctor who could have enjoyed a comfortable life in the United States, but he felt God's call to serve as a missionary in Columbia, ministering to souls as well as bodies. His friends and associates thought he was crazy to give up his potential position and earnings. He must have wondered if they were right when, after two years, he could see few visible results of his labor. His work ended in tragedy when he was killed in a plane crash attempting to take supplies to a remote village.

But in the wreckage, some natives found a well-marked Bible in their language, and they began to read it. They told others what they had read, and before long churches were started. The Southern Baptists, unaware of what had happened, sent a missionary into the area, and he discovered the place fully evangelized. When the missionary asked how it had happened, the natives showed him a Bible. On the inside cover was a name—Julius Hickerson (Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* 124-25).

Moses not only chose the imperishable, but he also *saw the invisible*. The writer here says that Moses endured or persevered because he *saw him who is invisible*. Moses kept his eyes on the one who's invisible. He "endured as seeing Him who is unseen" (*New American Standard Version*). Remember, faith is "assurance about what we do not see" (verse 1).

By faith Moses left Egypt, leading the Israelites out in the Exodus. Like his parents, Moses didn't fear the king's anger. Forty years earlier, he had feared the king's anger and fled Egypt. Now he goes out as God's instrument to deliver God's people from slavery. By faith Moses perseveres in the mission God gave him.

The writer of Hebrews talks a lot about endurance, perseverance, hanging in there, keeping on with Jesus. He wants the people hearing this message to endure, not to give up on their faith in Christ.

Moses is an example of that. He "persevered because he paid attention to the unseen God rather than to a visible king" (Guthrie). He didn't focus on Pharaoh's anger, but on God's mercy. "He looked to the

invisible, living and faithful God and was given the strength to endure” (Raymond Brown, *Christ Above All*).

I know all that’s easier said than done. How do we have a relationship with God when we can’t see God? Skeptics mock faith in the invisible God. I remember a friend of mine telling about his family having a guest for dinner. Before they ate, my friend’s dad prayed. The visitor said, “Jack, are you still talking to your plate?”

But we don’t have to be skeptics to admit that it can be tough to relate to the invisible God. Philip Yancey wrote a book about this. It’s entitled *Reaching for the Invisible God*. He asks how we sustain a relationship with a being so different from any other, someone we can’t perceive with our five senses. Yancey admits that God’s invisibility guarantees that we’ll experience times of doubt. He explains that doubt always goes side-by-side with faith, because if we were absolutely certain we wouldn’t need faith (15, 37, 41).

Your questions, your struggles with faith or to have faith are o.k. By allowing room for faith, God also allows room for doubt. “Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me” (Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* 91).

Now, don’t wallow in doubt. God does reveal himself. God does make himself known. Faith is trust, confidence, assurance, evidence. It’s how we perceive spiritual reality, including the invisible God. By faith, Moses kept his eyes on the invisible God and he endured, he kept going. God fulfilled his purpose in Moses. God wants to do that with us.

Philip Yancey gives this description of faith:

Faith means striking out, with no clear end in sight and perhaps even no clear view of the next step. It means following, trusting, holding out a hand to an invisible Guide. ...faith is reason gone courageous—not the opposite of reason...but something more than reason and never satisfied by reason alone. (Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* 47)

I've been listening to a song by Andrew Peterson this week that helps celebrate this faith:

I give you praise,
O great invisible God,
for the moon in the space of a dark night,
for the smile on a face in the sunlight.
I give you praise,
O great invisible God,
for the sound of the storm on the window,
for the morning adorned with a new snow,
for the tears on the face of the old man
made clean by the grace of the good Lamb.
Invisible God

And oh, I long to see your face,
Invisible, invisible God.
All the works that you have made are clearly seen and plain as day,
So mighty and tender.
O Lord, let me remember
that I see you everywhere,
Invisible God,
in the seed that descends to the old earth
and arises again with a new birth;
in the sinner who sinks in the river
and emerges again, delivered.
Invisible God

And oh, I long to see your face,
Invisible, invisible God.
All the works that you have made are clearly seen and plain as day,
so mighty and tender.
O Lord, let me remember,

Your power eternal, your nature divine.
All creation tells the tale that love is real and so alive.
I feel you, I hear you,
Great God Unseen
I see you in the long, cold death that the winter brings
And the sweet resurrection spring.
Invisible God
(Andrew Peterson, "Invisible God," *Resurrection Letters Volume II*)

Moses chose the imperishable and committed to what lasts. He saw the invisible God and endured. And *Moses did the impossible*. I'd rather say that he experienced what seemed impossible.

Moses saw God do a lot of things that would be impossible for humans alone. But the writer of Hebrews focuses on the Passover and Exodus. God brought his people out of Egyptian slavery. The night they left was Passover night, when the people put lamb's blood on their doorposts so the destroyer wouldn't touch their children. That was an act of faith in God the redeemer and the future he promised (Tom Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone*). Hebrews has talked earlier about the importance of blood. This earlier reference isn't to Passover but to sacrifices made in the temple.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:13-14)

The next humanly impossible event is Israel going through the Red Sea on dry ground. That story is originally told in Exodus 13 and 14, but it's repeated and referenced all through the Bible. The Exodus, Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the miracle of the sea being parted, is the big story of the Old Testament. They were always looking back to it to show how God set them free and did mighty wonders on their behalf.

Not only Moses, but by faith *the people* passed through the sea. Moses trusted God to make a way where there was no way and to take them through. When God told them to “move on” (Ex 14:15), they did move on, and that was an act of faith. Through their act of obedient faith the people were enabled to cross the Red Sea. Recalling that event would encourage the first-century Christians who first heard the message of Hebrews. By faith they could triumph over their difficulties and discover that the obstacles they faced were opportunities to prove the faithfulness of God’s word and the greatness of God’s power (Brown).

Do you face something that seems impossible? There’s no humanly possible way it can change. You’ve done all you know to do and it’s not enough. You need a miracle. God cares about you. God will make a way where there is no way. The Lord will come through. God will either heal you or give you strength to endure. God will give you wisdom to make right decisions. God will give you insights into how to relate to people in a healthy way. God will give opportunities to earn money you need. And sometimes God seems to delight in providing what we need in surprising ways. Where you’re anxious, God will give peace. Where you’re weak, God will show his power. He asks us to trust him and move on, go with him and let him lead. And we’ll see the salvation and deliverance of the Lord.

There came a time when the invisible God made himself visible. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Jesus said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

Jesus embodied and announced the imperishable, unshakable kingdom of God. He offers for us to experience God’s eternal kind of life.

Jesus did many things that seemed impossible: healing all kinds of sickness, feeding huge crowds with a few loaves of bread and some fish, walking on water.

Jesus fulfilled what the Passover was about. His blood shed on the cross covers us and protects us from destruction. He gave his life for us and his blood cleanses us from sin, from acts that lead to death.

Then came what seemed most impossible. God raised Jesus from the dead. The one who died was alive again. He was raised and glorified. His body was transformed. And he's the first of many God will raise up like that. Through faith in him, we walk in newness of life now and someday we'll experience a resurrection like his.

Now, we face some important questions. Will we have the kind of faith Moses and the Israelites, and all these other faithful people, had? Are we committed to the eternal, to doing what lasts? Are we persevering, enduring, hanging in there because by faith we see the invisible God? Are we looking to God and trusting him to do what we can't do by ourselves?