

Faith

Hebrews 11:1–12:2

A sermon by Peter Budd

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Introduction

Are you familiar with Magic-Eye images?

You should all have been given one as you came into church.

You can find Magic-Eye images on the internet at www.magiceye.com

On the piece of paper, there's a rather confused-looking, 2-dimensional pattern.

But, if you hold the paper a certain distance away, and look through the picture – focussing at a distance, rather than focussing on the paper – another image slowly forms and takes on solidity: a 3-dimensional image.

Not everyone manages to see the 3D image – my wife has never managed it – but most people should be able to see it, with practice.

Of course, there's nothing really magic about a Magic-Eye image.

It takes skilful people, and a complex computer algorithm, to hide a stereogram – a 3D image – within a 2D pattern.

The information needed to construct the 3D image is embedded in the apparent confusion of the 2D pattern.

But we don't see it, so long as we focus just on the piece of paper.

We have to focus on the distance, before our brains can bring together the information on the paper.

It's not about using our imagination.

It's not like looking up at the clouds and imagining what we see in the shapes there.

Because a particular image – a specific picture – has been designed and encoded within the pattern.

We all see essentially the same thing, if we see anything at all.

It's objective, not subjective.

This morning, we're thinking about faith.

In Cheadle Hulme, we've recently had a week of events under the banner "Faith in Focus".

But what is this thing called faith?

We're going to look at some of the things the Bible says about faith.

And we may find that faith has something in common with our Magic-Eye image.

Sermon

One problem with a word like “faith” is that people have very different ideas about what it means.

It gets used in a great variety of ways.

And so we need to be clear about the sort of faith we read about in the Bible.

And how it may differ from some common ideas about faith.

One idea people have about faith, is that it’s an irrational belief.

That it’s about accepting things that can’t be proved.

That it has no logical basis.

That it’s purely subjective.

People talk about “blind faith”.

At first sight, Hebrews ch. 11 may seem to go along with that idea.

In the New International Version of the Bible, it begins: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

If we don’t look too closely, we may think this is defining faith as:

Being sure of what is no more than wishful thinking.

Being certain about what we have no evidence for.

But when we look into this further, we realise it’s saying something very different.

The King James version puts it like this:

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Faith – Biblical faith, Christian faith – is something of substance, something solid and tangible.

It’s the objective evidence in the here and now, of a bigger picture that goes beyond the here and now.

Like the Magic-Eye image we looked at earlier.

Faith is in some ways like the information encoded in the 2D pattern, that enables us to see a clear 3D image.

Our focus has to be right, before we can see the bigger picture.

But once we see it, there’s no doubting it.

At first, we may look and look and see nothing but confusion in the world around us.

Some people, in this postmodern age, say “there’s no such thing as a bigger picture”, and so look no further.

But faith is the pattern within the apparent confusion.

By faith we see what lies beyond the trivial detail.

We may need time, patience and practice for the image to solidify and take form.

We have to take care not to imagine things that aren’t there.

But once we see the bigger picture, we wonder how we ever missed it before.

Verse 3 of Hebrews ch. 11 puts this in a cosmic context.

“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command”

As a scientist, I find the Universe absolutely fascinating.

My work is about exploring its possibilities, at the level of molecules and macromolecules.

And the scientific method is incredibly successful when it comes to understanding the mechanisms at work within our Universe of space and time.

But as a Christian, I find an added dimension.

When I consider the Universe, I can't help but see it as the product of God's imagination.

That doesn't mean I need to use God as an explanation to plug any temporary gaps in our scientific understanding.

It's what we know that points to God; not what we don't know.

But all I learn about the Universe, points me to something beyond the Universe.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, he put it like this (Rom. 1:20):

“For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

That doesn't mean we can learn everything about God simply by studying the world around us.

But there's enough evidence out there for us, at the very least, to take the concept of God seriously.

At least, to look further.

At least, to look for the bigger picture.

Seeing the bigger picture doesn't come by working through any single, simplistic argument. We see the bigger picture when all the multifarious little bits of evidence fuse together to form a consistent image.

We need to use a faculty we all have – the faculty of seeing things as a whole.

Like how we can instantly recognise a face, without really being aware of the details that make it up.

Faith – Biblical faith, Christian faith – is solid evidence in the here and now, of something beyond the here and now.

Faith is far more than mere belief.

We all have beliefs.

To take a very basic example, we may believe there's a God.

Or we may believe there is no God.

Or we may believe we can't know whether or not there's a God.

Everyone believes something.

But if we're to turn belief into a solid, objective, certain faith:

We need to validate what we believe.

Check our beliefs against the evidence.

And put our beliefs to practical test.

We're all capable of deceiving ourselves.

Of imagining things that aren't real.

So, if we're wise, we'll test what we believe.

Real faith will withstand scrutiny.

Real faith is strengthened by putting it into practice.

But what evidence do we use to test our beliefs?

One strand of evidence is mentioned at the beginning of Hebrews ch. 12:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...”

The witnesses are all the people mentioned in ch. 11.

People who could testify to the reality of God in their lives.

Marching through the pages of the Bible, we find person after person – demonstrating faith for us.

People who lived at another time and within another culture, and yet who, when we read their stories, we find shared our own weaknesses and worries.
But were commended for their faith.

But exactly what were they commended for, according to Hebrews ch. 11?
They were commended for looking beyond the here and now.

Seeing something of the bigger picture.

But more than that, in every case, faith manifested itself in action.

They responded in some way to God.

Abel (v. 4) recognised God as worthy of honour, and responded with a worthy sacrifice.

Enoch (v. 5) responded to God by living in a way that pleased Him.

He “walked with God”, as it says in Genesis 5:24.

Noah (v. 7) responded to God’s warning, by building an ark.

Abraham (v. 8) responded to God’s call, by setting out for another country.

And so it goes on...

True faith begins with God.

And leads to a response in us.

It begins with God.

Sometimes people say “if only I had more faith.”

Jesus’ disciples once asked him:

“Increase our faith!” (Luke 17:5)

And Jesus replied:

“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it will obey you.” (Luke 17:6)

The efficacy of faith doesn’t depend on us, but on God.

And God is totally, utterly, completely reliable.

All we need is just enough faith, for us to respond.

Just enough, for us to trust God.

What’s important is not how much faith we have.

But how we act on what faith we do have.

How we respond to what we know of God.

And the irony is, the more we learn to trust God...

The more we find He’s absolutely trustworthy.

The more we find our faith confirmed.

Of course, trusting God doesn’t mean we get an easy life.

On the contrary, the people the writer to the Hebrews talks about had to face all kinds of horrendous situations.

And the people he was writing to, were themselves experiencing hardship.

God doesn’t promise us an easy life.

But He will give us a worthwhile life.

True faith begins with God.

But we need to hear His voice.

To recognise the pattern of his interaction with us.

To see something of the bigger picture of what He offers us.

That's faith.

But to see the bigger picture, our focus has to be right.

Like the Magic-Eye image we looked at earlier.

Magic-Eye images are designed to be seen when we focus at a distance.

When our eyes are looking approximately parallel.

What should be our focus, if we're to make sense of the world around us?

If we're to see the bigger picture.

Verse 2 of Hebrews ch. 12 has the answer:

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith”

Jesus: the author of our faith.

Jesus writes the pattern into the Universe.

Into human history.

Into our lives.

He is the perfect example of faith.

And He, through the cross, opens the way to God for us.

Jesus: the perfecter of our faith.

Jesus brings faith to completion.

He won for us a place with God.

If we only respond.

Jesus is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. (Rev. 22:13)

He's there, according to the New Testament, at the creation of all things.

All things were created by him and for him. (Col. 1:16)

He's there at the centre of human history.

Flesh and blood; the living, breathing, tangible presence of God on our Earth.

The image of the invisible God. (Col. 1:15)

He's there, enduring the cross.

A sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

He's there in the life beyond this existence.

Preparing a place for those who follow Him. (John 14:2)

He's here now, reaching into each of our lives.

Encouraging a response.

But what sort of response?

There are some things we all need to do.

And some things that are special for each one of us, unique to each individual.

One step we all need to take:

And something we need reminding of all too often.

Is something there's a hint of in the first verse of Hebrews ch. 12:

“let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles,
and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

We have to turn away from all the wrong things in our lives that separate us from God.

And turn in the direction that God leads.

That process of turning is called repentance.

And, as the Apostle Paul told the Athenians:

“now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” (Acts 17:30)

That means acknowledging the wrong things within us.

Seeking God’s forgiveness.

Accepting His love.

And trusting Him, as our lives take on a new direction.

A new life, knowing God.

Our eyes fixed on Jesus.

We all need to take that step.

And after that?

Well, that’s a great adventure.

There are challenges.

There are difficulties.

But as we run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

As long as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.

We find the bigger picture becomes clearer.

We realise we can be sure of things beyond the here and now.

We find ourselves changing.

And we discover what makes our life truly worthwhile.

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