

“Faith In Motion”

Billy Graham’s oldest daughter, was quoted in this month’s issue of Christianity Today as offering the opinion that: sometimes it seems like preachers want to put their hands over God’s mouth: Judging from the context in which she said it, I think she meant that if a preacher is not careful they can follow the reading of their sermon text with a sermon that does little or nothing to explore the text. In other words, they may not always explore the biblical text, because, in point of fact, that is not really what they want to talk about. I hope every honest preacher would cringe at that statement, because I don’t want to be the only one who has to admit that over the course of my pastoral career there have no doubt been times when I have walked dangerously close to that line myself. It happens when we are so anxious to tell you our opinion that by the end of the sermon it is hard to remember what the text was, and even harder to figure out how that ties in with anything we just said.

And I think I tuned-in to what Billy Graham's daughter said, because on my study leave last week I had just read an excellent commentary on the gospel of Matthew, which the author prefaced by saying, "I have tried to avoid forcing the texts to say what I want them to say....

To be asked to comment on the word of God is a daunting task. It does not get more serious than that. What I have written cannot be my theology. What I have written, I hope will be read as the theology of the church. Indeed, I hope I have never written my theology..."

Now, that said, I'm not sure any of us can be entirely unbiased as we interact with the word of God, but hearing what it says, and then articulating what we hear is both the challenge and the discipline for every Christian who opens the Bible. It is not just preachers and teachers who need to be careful on this score. What we need to avoid like the plague is our tendency to form an opinion and then skim through the Bible to find to verse that backs it up. That is precisely how cults and heresies are created. Someone disappears into a room alone with their Bible, and emerges with a whole new theology based on one verse, like the one about handling poisonous snakes or some such obscure reference to something they already had an opinion about before they even looked through a Bible. What we want to be,

are careful students of the entire word of God, who come to the text eager to be always learning more, and committed to living out those things which it clearly teaches.

With that in mind, lets go back to our text, taking it verse by verse, and just see what God is telling us through his word in Hebrews 11:8-16. We begin with verse 8 of Chapter 11: “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.”

Folks, the first thing we want to notice is that this verse picks up in the middle of an entire chapter which rehearses a whole history of role models who stand out like beacons of light throughout the Old Testament. And what do each of them model? They model what we can only call “faith in motion”. The author of Hebrews wants us to see in example after example, that faith in God is never limited to simply believing that something about God is true. I could stand here in this pulpit for the rest of my life telling you honestly that I believe everything the Bible teaches is true. But faith is about more than agreeing to a set of intellectual propositions. You know and I know that faith is a synonym for trust. And it always implies our

willingness to act on that trust. Faith, if you will, is trust-in-action. When I say I have faith in you, it means that I proceed to live my life with a constant confidence that you will be true to your word and character. And that, says the author of Hebrews, is the quality of faith Abraham exercised toward God. How do we know that? We know it by Abraham's actions in response to God's commands. We read in Genesis 12:1-3, that when Abram was living in Haran, God said to him, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to there land I will show you." And though Abram was seventy-five years old, though he may have been in the middle of what he felt was a well-deserved retirement, he packed up every thing he had and headed out of town. Even more remarkably, he had no idea where or how far God would lead him. And keep in mind, this was in an era and a culture, where, if you so much as disappeared over the horizon, the people of your village would hold funeral services for you. They assumed they would never see you again. So for Abraham to simply leave the only world he had ever known for a destination unknown must have seemed preposterous. But Abraham trusted God. And he put that trust in motion. And that, says the author of Hebrews, is faith. My faith is indicated not only by what I

say I believe, but by the life I live in response to the One in whom I believe. The scripture says, “By faith Abraham, when called ... obeyed and went. And, you see, where I think we get into trouble is when we treat faith and obedience as though they are two unrelated options. If I said, “I am a man of deep and abiding faith. The scripture says ‘I am saved, by faith, not by works, lest any one should boast,’ so I don’t have to do anything God says”; you would rightly respond, “Wait a minute, Brent! Who are you kidding? You can’t do a disconnect between the faith you profess and the way you live your life. Not only does that massively compromise your credibility as a witness to Jesus Christ, but it means you feel no compunction to live with integrity to the words of your own mouth. That is utter hypocrisy.”

On the other hand, there are people who will bust a gut working to obey God, but you get the distinct impression that their obedience is motivated more by fear than faith. In point of fact, they don’t trust God at all. They don’t appear to believe God is either good or loving. So they mind their P’s and Q’s, they do what they’re supposed to do, but you get the feeling they do it to keep God off their back. If they obey God, it is mainly because they don’t want to get in trouble. They may even hate authority figures, and God is the biggest authority

figure of all so they do what they gotta do to stay out of his way. That is what I would call wanting to obey God in the worst possible way. I suggest God doesn't want our resentful and cringing obedience any more than he would thrill to our flowery speeches about faith when we have no intention of following through. We can't hallow his name with hollow words. So what's the alternative? The writer of Hebrews shows us by multiple examples that the spiritually healthy alternative is trust wed to obedience – faith in motion. What God wants is our joyfully yielded cooperation in grateful response to his unexplainable grace. What God loves is when we obey him because we trust in who he is. Not because we understand everything that happens. Not because his will always coincides with our own. Not because we are guaranteed success, safety or power. We do what he asks us to do, precisely because he is the one doing the asking; and we trust him. Our faith is translated into action. He calls and we respond. He commands and we obey, because we love him. And we love him because he first loved us; and because he put his love in motion by coming to us in Jesus.

Verse 9: “By faith (Abraham) 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.” What does that tell us? First of all, it reminds us that God has no interest in sending us on wild goose chases. Abraham obeyed God’s call on his life and not surprisingly he wound up in the land he was promised; what we might call a place of fulfillment. God’s promises were as true as the ground on which Abraham stood. But notice, secondly, that neither Abraham nor his offspring ever thought of Canaan as their ultimate and final home. They lived in tents as strangers in a foreign land because they recognized that their real home would only and always be with God. And so, likewise, we love this place, but we carry a deep, intuitive awareness that we are not home yet.

Verse 10: “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.” When I was on Study Leave I read an eye-opening book by N.T. Wright called, **“Surprised by Hope”**. In it he makes a brilliant biblical case that it is probably truer to say that heaven’s going to come to us, rather than us going (let’s say) 50,000 miles into space to get to heaven. What the Bible says in

Revelation 20 and 21 is that God promises a renewed earth and sky, and the descent of Gods heavenly Jerusalem, his dwelling place, his holy city taking up permanent residence on what will be a wonderfully restored earth, pristine as on the dawn of creation. Then, in similarly renewed and resurrected physical bodies, we will enjoy endless tangible life in his presence, and not live as disembodied spirits in some formless cloudbank in some other galaxy. In other words, rather than fantasizing about some goofy Hollywood version of what heaven's supposed to be like, Abraham looked toward the day when God's dwelling place would be with men: a city, not a cloud; holy, not hokey.

Verse 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.” Folks, by the law of probabilities, Abraham and Sarah becoming parents was about as likely as needing a birthing room in a geriatric ward. But when we take God's promises seriously, we are not playing the odds or counting on a lucky break. What we are counting on is the character and truth of God. And that's no gamble at all. If the only question is

whether God will fulfill what he has promised, then there is no question.

Verse 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.” You see, when our relationship with Jesus Christ challenges us to put our faith in motion, and as followers of his, to do everything that he has commanded, we are not breaking bold, new ground in the trust department. In point of fact, we are looking back at a long and consistent history of God’s faithfulness to his people; a real-world history of promises made and kept, of prophecies spoken and fulfilled. Stepping out in faith in God, is not gambling, it’s good sense, based on his proven track record.

Verse 13: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the thing promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from as distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.” Let me ask you: how could it be otherwise? C.S. Lewis once asked, “How and why would we ever want to settle for mud pies, when we know about and have had a taste

of lemon meringue and banana cream?” The way it is going to be in God’s full-established kingdom isn’t the way we experience our life right now. In a sinful and fallen world that is a given. But who could deny that in our best moments in worship, in our richest experiences of life together, we have experienced a preview of coming attractions? I remember going on a “Walk To Emmaus” weekend where I could not hold back my tears of joy, because I knew I was experiencing a foretaste of life in God’s kingdom. That is reality. And we are not too thick witted to get a sense of it now.

Verse 14: “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.” Folks, what country could we ever be happy to live in forever except the one in which every knee will bend and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and where he will reign forever and ever? Any place before we get to that place, will be a place to serve, suffer, live, love and die; but it won’t be home, until he comes to make that place his own; and therefore, our home.

Verse 15: “If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.” Brothers and sisters in Christ,

if we want to go back to Egypt (so to speak), there is no one and no way to stop us. God never blocks the exits on the way to the future he has for us. We are free to leave any time we choose. But the question is, who would want to? And what was there about my life before I met Christ, that I would love more than I love him? I could go back, but I can't imagine why I would.

Verse 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." Folks, I will only and always be a forgiven sinner. I've got no bragging rights, but it would kill me if I thought that my indifference would cause God to be ashamed to be called my God. I will never get it just right, but I want to live responsively to God. Like Jean Pierre de Caussade, I want to live so that "my soul, light as a feather, fluid as water, innocent as a child, responds to every movement of (God's) grace like a floating balloon." I want to put my faith in motion. How about you? There's no time like the present. Amen? Amen.