

A Revealed Order of Reality

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The “roll call of the faithful” in Hebrews chapter eleven shows us how real people, in real events, responded in ways that showed their underlying concept of what was real. People decide on what is real and what is simply speculation and show that in their subsequent actions. For a Christian, this underlying concept can't be derived from any resources he or she might have. This must be, and has been, revealed by God.

The people in Hebrews 11 considered that what was real, important, and powerful was beyond what they and others could see. The radius of reality was actually larger for them than the visible. Thus they show us that faith is not restricting—to the contrary, it expands one's world.

If one thinks of one's own experience as a bubble next to a balloon, what one would have to do would be to drag that bubble into the larger balloon.

What happens to the person who does not base faith on what God has revealed in the Bible? He or she will base it on one or all of the following: what you see, what you experience, your surroundings, what others say, and what comes from within you. How limiting this is, considering God's knowledge of your situation is eternal, with infinite foreknowledge and view of the future, in place for eternity.

(God has proved that He deserves our trust in His assessment of reality when He raised Jesus from the dead. The Resurrection proves that God is what He's always says He is, and that He knows everything.)

Everyone has faith in something—even if it is only faith in such “sure things” as the rising of the sun tomorrow morning. But in Hebrews 11 we learn that “without faith it is impossible to please God,” and that is a specific kind of faith. It is the evidence of things unseen and that which is hoped for, and 2) it is what others learned and how they gained the approval of God.

This approval isn't from being a good person, nor even from good deeds—even sacrificial deeds—that serve others. God does not grant His blanket approval because a person has and demonstrates genuine love for others, nor through church membership, nor only through Biblical baptism, nor Bible study and prayer. All of these are good things – but faith trumps them all.

How does one have “amazing” faith? In the Bible, Jesus was only amazed – the Greek word *ethaumasen*—by one thing. It was faith that “wowed” Him – the astonishing faith of the Centurion in Luke 7:9, and the crushing lack of faith He found in His own hometown (Mark 6:4-6.)

In Hebrews chapter 11, we learn in verse 2 that a word – something literally unseen and of no physical substance – actually created all physical matter: What is seen is not made out of what we can see. Thus there is a supernatural basis for every physical object God made, from the rocks and water and plants to the very air.

Indeed, this assertion underlies the whole book of Hebrews. Even the treasures of the temple that the Old Testament Jews treasured so highly, the writer of Hebrews shows, were just “visual aids” to a higher lesson, and that lesson was that Jesus Christ is God. The gold and silver and even the massive stones of the temple were only temporary, of relatively little value, and often even deceptive

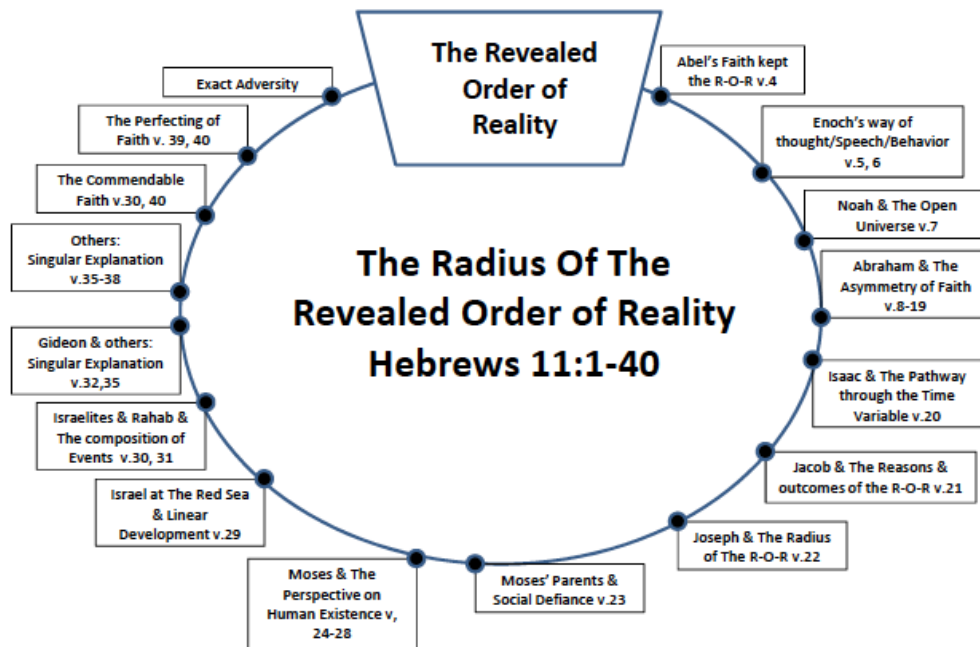
when not viewed for their eternal significance, for they were ever and always only copies and shadows of unseen, eternal realities.

The book of Hebrews is about human experience, but not the way most people think about it. It is about how Jesus Christ came from a world beyond human experience to tell you that your life isn't just about your own experience. He became like humans so that we can rely on His assessments and sympathy, taking on birth, pain, and death. Now He offers to us His experience: power, resurrection, and eternal life.

God wants us to know what He knows to be real, so that we can confidently and joyfully go to jail for it, give up our lives for it if necessary. As we begin looking at each of the personalities listed in Hebrews chapter 11, we will notice that they never thought of “balance,” nor did they try to give equal weight to the seen and the unseen. It was as if their assessments were like a flexible water balloon, and their mental task was to continually squeeze their attentions away from one handful of the balloon – the seen side—over to the unseen side. They did this first and foremost by language use that was asymmetrical and that showed where they put their emphasis. A good example of this is the response by Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego in Daniel 3:16-18. When they were warned that their actions could cause their death, they responded in a way that showed they knew the greater weight of the unseen.

Another way of considering such a reaction is to say that the three young men did what all faithful Christians must do: They can acknowledge the existence of a difficult situation, but must speak of it in “contradiction language,” where they must elevate the promise above its contradiction. A Christian puts his or her situation, his or her contradiction into a revealed order of reality – where greater weight is always placed on the unseen rather than the seen.

This image illustrates that revealed order of reality, as exemplified in the lives of the



people of Hebrews 11. It begins at the upper right hand corner and proceeds counter clockwise.

Abel’s Faith kept the Revealed Order of Reality (verse 4):

Cain, the murderous brother of Abel, operated on the seen, exclusively. From his assessment, one sacrifice was as good as another. He began with what he had at hand—the fruit, quite literally, of how he spent his time, energy and focus.

If someone were to say, “That’s not fair,” – would not such a person be doing what Cain did, starting from his own experience and not from the words and the nature of God, who is fairness personified? A person regards something as fair or not fair, according to his or her basis for judgment. God told Cain in Genesis 4 that he could do what was right. But even as we look at the story of Cain, we ourselves are tempted to assess it on what we

think, instead of conceding that God told Cain he was capable of doing what was “right”—which means he must have known what it was, and went against it.

Abel, on the other hand, still speaks about this situation through the Bible, even though he is dead. We see that being alive isn't a requirement for having your present actions bring about good results in the future. Each of us, like Abel, will depart this life. What is left on earth—the record and influence of our present actions, can nonetheless continue to influence people. Think of it—when Abel was alive, he interacted with a very small group of people, but now, thousands of years later, his actions still encourage and instruct millions!

What some people might think is essential for influence – being alive – is no obstacle to a God who will continue to inspire others with the actions of someone long departed. He doesn't need the equivalent of 1600 hours of wage-earning of a working man to feed a multitude, He can use a little boy's lunch. He doesn't need raw materials of any sort to create a universe. He doesn't need a fertile man and woman to create an Isaac. And as Abel shows, you don't have to be alive to speak.

Enoch's Way of Thought, Speech and Behavior (verses 5-6)

Enoch, similarly, teaches us about what he regarded as “real.” He pleased God – what an accomplishment—not just by his behavior and language, but showing that what he thought preceded and formed his speech and behavior. In the end, he was taken up to the part of reality where his mind had been anchored all along.

This account comes directly before the statement that “without faith it is impossible to please God”—which shows that believers must have a deliberate mental ordering of reality. The requirements for faith are 1) to come to Him 2) to believe that He exists and 3) to know, as the Greek of Hebrews 11:6 says, that He will *become a*

rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him. He did this rewarding up against the “reality” of people like sterile Abraham and infertile Sarah, making them the parents of a great nation.

Enoch pleased an invisible God by operating on His invisible realities – and God rewarded him by giving him rewards that have endured long past his lifetime.

Noah and the Open Universe

Noah lived in a world that didn’t acknowledge the reality of God. It was a kind of a closed system in which people believed in cause and effect, and thought they knew how the world “worked.”

Into this closed system come the words of God:

Build an ark (according to My words)

Rain will come (even though others couldn’t conceive of such a thing)

Noah saw the universe not as a closed system, but an open one that God could change. Not only that, he believed God could actually predict those changes. As a result of God’s words, the world did change: Every living thing on it died, except those on the ark.

We see from this that faith can condemn, or it can save.

Abraham and the Asymmetry of Faith

In verse 9, Abraham is called to go to a place that was, at the time, invisible to him. And even when he got to the land that he owned, he lived as a resident legal alien in it. The tents he carried around and erected to live in were symbols of a lack of permanence. He was continually looking for something else, something he regarded as more real, a city whose foundations were in the invisible, whose architect and builder was an invisible God.

All his life, Abraham lived in the midst of contradictions to the promises of God to him. He acknowledged what the world “was” when he “faced the fact that his body was as good as dead.” But the radius of revealed reality reached out and pulled him in to something more real. And the evidence of that is in the fact that now, thousands of years later, his descendants truly are countless as grains of sand.

He knew that the “reality,” the very measurability, of the passage of time cannot affect the radius of revealed reality. Thus when he was miraculously given a son, and understood the significance of that son, he considered that even putting that child to death would not remove him from the radius of revealed reality if God commanded it. God was bound by His nature to protect what He promised to protect, and in the words of Romans 8:28, to work everything – all of visible reality—together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (and is not purpose itself an embodiment of revealed reality?)

Isaac and the Pathway through the Time Variable (verse 20)

In verse 20, we see how Isaac considered that the passage of time could not be considered a variable nor a factor in his life. There was a pathway through time, and God would not only reveal it, but accompany Isaac and his descendants through it.

God, who stands outside time, wants His people to consider that how they measure time ultimately cannot affect the purposes of God. That doesn't mean we don't struggle with it – as the prophet said, “How long, oh God?” It does affect us, though, and Jesus recognized that by telling us to pray and not give up, like the widow without resources who nonetheless was able to sway the unjust judge who withheld justice from her.

God allowed Isaac to see beyond his own time-span of life, centuries far into the future, to see what would happen to his

descendants through Jacob and Esau. Similarly, we can see the future through the prophecies of the Bible, most especially in the book of Revelation.

Jacob and the Reasons and Outcomes of the Revealed Order of Reality (verse 21)

The patriarch Jacob blessed his grandsons. In fact, the very existence of those grandsons—born to a son, Joseph, whom Jacob believed to be dead – was a symbol of the actions of a God who operated mightily outside the bounds of what Jacob believed to be true and real. For all of the years that his son was in slavery, in jail, or in power in a foreign country, Jacob believed he was in a grave somewhere.

Joseph and the Radius of the Revealed Order of Reality (verse 22)

When Joseph, as his father had done, looked into the future to forecast the protection of his people over centuries of slavery, he knew that the passage of time would not dim the promises of God. No matter how people might perceive those promises, they could not weaken with time – they could only grow closer. He knew the radius of that revealed order of reality would stretch long beyond his lifetime, and as a symbol of his faith in those promises and the God who backed them up, Joseph asked that his body be preserved and kept for centuries as a visible symbol to the people of a coming day when Joseph’s body would return along with them to the land God gave them. Rescue was coming, he knew – not from anything he could observe over the 400 years, but because of the promise of God who dwells outside of time and supervises it.

Moses’ Parents and Social Defiance (verse 23)

Everything about the way that the parents of Moses handled their perilous condition shows great asymmetry: They weighed the commandments of God against the seen, the laws, the danger, the threats, and what they must have seen happen to the male

newborns of their neighbors. They trusted in a revealed order of reality, one in which God's commands and His position outside of time and space meant He could control both time and space. And who would have predicted the outcome? Who, not believing in the power of God, would have foreseen that a child could take an infant in a basket, push it toward the governmental center that had decreed death for such a child, and that then the mistress of that very household would adopt the child into the family of the man who wanted to kill him?

Moses and the Perspective on Human Existence (verses 24-28)

In these verses we see that Moses refused to perpetuate the seen—he didn't stay in the household of oppression, and willingly chose unpleasant experiences when he could have lived in ease. He weighed disgrace for his Lord against all the riches of Egypt—and was able to make this assessment because “he was looking forward to his reward” (v.26.) In fact, he made his decisions and then took action because of what was invisible (v. 27); and God gave him the ability to persevere because of that kind of faith.

Not surprisingly, a child born of such asymmetrical thinking, motivated by such asymmetrical thinking, and protected by such asymmetrical thinking would have himself created and participated in symbols of the revealed order of reality. Thus we read that he relayed, put confidence in, and participated in a symbol that the Egyptian world would have considered useless: the mark of blood on doorposts that caused the destroying angel to turn his sword away to the doorways of the Egyptians.

Israel at the Red Sea and Linear Development (verse 29)

Like the people of Noah's time, the faithless of the time of the Exodus believed in linearity. They believed in straight cause and effect, and that one event triggers another much as dominos fall. But God forced Israel into a straight-forward-only course. In the past, any time a defenseless group of people were hemmed between a big body of water and an overpowering, heavily-armed

enemy, the results were inevitable. But at the Red Sea, God demonstrated that His power over history is anything but linear. In fact, a rule of thumb derived from the way God has acted in the past would be this: God always uses weak and powerless people to accomplish His ends, so that He can get the credit for bringing about results in “hopeless” situations.

The Israelites and Rahab, and the Composition of Events (verses 30-31)

People often think that a certain composition of events will lead to success. One must have money, or influence, or other resources to accomplish something. However, consider the following equation: One prostitute plus one traitorous act plus one lie plus weeks of waiting on a wall that will inevitably fall, plus marching and shouting equals—rescue? That is not the composition of events one would seek for success. But even with this unlikely composition of events, Rahab responded to the revealed order of reality by citing and putting the full weight of her safety and that of her family onto what God had said about the coming conquest of her land. In fact, she was more responsive to the past miraculous deeds of God than the Israelites who actually personally experienced those deeds!

Gideon and Others: The Singular Explanation (verses 32, 35)

Men like Gideon and some of the other people listed here did all their mighty deeds solely through faith. Though they may have had talent, intelligence, and hard work, none of these was a determining factor in the good results that happened. Only their faith made the crucial difference: This was the singular explanation, and the only “tool” of their success.

The Others: The Singular Explanation (verses 35-38)

Similarly, those who had what we might call unpleasant experiences nonetheless always treated their own personal

experiences as of lesser importance than what they were waiting for: an invisible reward.

The Commendable Faith (verse 39)

The kind of faith that God commends, the kind of faith He respects and cherishes, is a faith that therefore redefines what is a “normal” life. Twenty-first century America cannot ever be used to define what is normal. In fact, our lifestyle when contrasted to that of other times and to other places, would definitely be an aberration, not a standard against which other experiences should be evaluated. Historically Christians have been called to show faith in suffering, faith in disappointment, faith in disillusionment, faith as they faced death. All of these people, with pleasant experiences in life and with unpleasant lives as well, knew that being faithful meant that they must put more weight on the invisible than the visible; and that by so doing, they would participate in a reality that took the shape that God wanted it to take.

The Perfecting of Faith (verses 39-40)

The question might be asked, Why are these great people only made perfect along with us? One reason is that our learning from their faith can redeem and add value to what must have seemed to them and observers to be a pointless suffering. By acting in faith, their lives and their deaths counted for something. Through them, we can see the whole noble plan. It is as if they are waiting for us to acknowledge the eternal, timeless value of living in the revealed order of reality.

We have the whole story. We can thank them. Someday we will be able to agree with them that it was all worth it. And even now we can show that we can do what they did ---live faithfully in difficult circumstances—because of their examples. We are in the joint project of making sure that the gates of hell won't prevail against the church, because the plan of God won't work without people. Any reasonable person can understand this: All that goes into the

building of your faith will only be worth it when you can see that your children and your grandchildren and their descendants will follow you in your faith, that you were not the end of the line of faithful people.

Exact Adversity

Later on, in chapter 12 of Hebrews, all of the faithful ones and we as well are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses. And all of us have followed Jesus out in front of us, the great Overcomer of all human experience.

Because God knows each of us intimately, He assures us that we will be treated with precisely whatever is necessary to increase each individual's faith. Just as in exercise we target the weaker muscles, even putting extra stress on them to bring them up to strength, so also adversity in each individual's life will be exact.

In Hebrews 12:2-3, we are told to "consider" Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who endured the cross, and despised its shame. Now that suffering One is no longer suffering, but sitting at the right hand of God.

His message rings out: Don't grow weary! Don't lose heart!

