<u>Knowing Our World by Faith (Heb. 11.3)</u>
Westminsterreformedchurch.org
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3-29-2009

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible

Introduction

As we have said, Hebrews chapter 11 takes the encouragement of chapter 10 (cf. 10.32 & 39) and raises it to the mountain tops. In 11.1-2, the pastor to the Hebrews has two encouragements. The first is the objective nature of faith as God's gift and the second is the commendation that we receive from the Lord by faith (those are both meaningful encouragements). Now, in 11.3, he encourages us by citing the fact that faith opens a wide door to knowledge of the world in which we live. My title therefore is "Knowing Our World by Faith." It is encouraging to realize that by faith we have knowledge of the universe. The outline has two points: by faith we know the origin and by faith we know the nature of our world.

1A. By faith we know the origin of our world

Note how the writer states this fact. He does not tell us, in so many words, that God created the world. He does not say that the world was created by God; instead, he says that it was created by the word of God: **By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God** (11.3a). The universe came into being by the word of God. Of course, that means that God is the Creator who put the world in place by His word. There are two things to stress here.

1) Thus, the world does not have its origin in any way in itself.

That is the point of 11.3b: **so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible**. You cannot study the properties of matter in order to determine the dynamics of creation. You cannot work backward from the properties and processes of the created order to understand creation as to its workings or its properties. The properties of matter came to be by creation; they did not exist prior to creation.

The unseen in view in 11.3b involves a state of affairs in which there was nothing existing other than God. There is a depth here according to Colossians: **For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities- all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together** (3.16-17).

We know that the universe does not have its origin in things beyond the naked eye. God created even the things only discernible by enhancing our vision with the tools of science (such as the "unseen" ameba or the protons and electrons of the atom). Creation is by His word and it did not use anything of the created order in the initial creation (later, He created by using existing things He previously created).

2) Thus, we know the origin of the world by faith that rests on the word of God.

The writer directs us back to Genesis: "God said and it was so." We know (grasp and understand by faith) that God created the universe (all things other than Himself) by His word. The unseen, what is not empirical, not testable and measurable by the tools of science is what brought the universe into existence. The unseen is the creative self-revealing God; God creating by His word.

Important point: the visible, what we see, smell, touch, taste, and hear (with the hidden and unseen qualities they possess) is not ultimate reality. It is created reality. By faith we understand that what is unseen takes precedence over the visible. So faith looks to God's word to learn that God created by His word.

2A. By faith we know the nature of our world

Let us take note again that the writer does not speak directly of God as the Creator. Instead, he speaks of creation by the word of God: **By faith we understand that the universe was created by**

the word of God (11.3a). In other words, he is telling us that the world is the product of God's creative breath (Ps. 33.6, **By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host**). Therefore, the world with its diversity, interconnectedness, harmony, and order is the speech product of Almighty God ("framed" indicates this interconnectedness).

The facts are His words, the expressions of His thoughts, and the product of His creative breath. Consider how Psalm 19 makes this point: **The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. 2 Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. 3 There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. 4 Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun, 5 which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat** (1-6). We have a number of points here.

a) The products of God's speaking, the heavens and the sky, for example, make declarations and proclamations (v. 1).

b) The created order has historical unfolding and the things and events of creation history are speech. Coupled with Genesis 1, we know that these things and events are the products of God's speaking. In other words, they are His utterances. The universe in its framing, orderliness, and interconnectedness is God's voice that is heard universally: to all the earth and to the end of the world. All people in fact hear the voice of God; His speaking rings in their ears.

c) As His speech, the world of things and events is His revelation of knowledge. He is revealing Himself to us through the things His made and providentially controls. As Psalm 33 states it there is a connection between creation by His word and the unfolding of His plan: **9 For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. 10 The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. 11 The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations** (vs. 9-10).

d) Finally, and remarkably, the larger point here is that His speech in the created order is a warm invitation to fellowship with Him by sharing in His thoughts. The Psalm indicates this by its reference to the sun. In the rising and encircling of the earth by the sun, the speech of God warms everything it shines upon (nothing is hidden from its heat). The sun, moon, stars, the animals, trees, valleys, springs, and mountains all declare His glory (cf. Ps. 104). They are all His declaration of His glory that extends a warm welcome to fellowship with Him and to think His thoughts after Him.

The realities of things and events are God's thoughts expressed in speech.

Created things are real but they (the created visible reality of things outside of us and objective to us) are thoughts. They are the thoughts of God expressed by His word and expressions of His word. Created reality is divine speech.

Conclusion

We have more information about faith. It is information that is part of the package of encouragement to faith. Faith is trust, trusting the Lord, depending on Him, submitting to Him and thus obeying the will of God (10.36, with confident endurance; hence, it involves entrusting yourself to Him and committing yourself to Him and to obedience). There is encouragement from the fact that faith is how we come to understand the origin and nature of the universe.

1) We have knowledge; we have understanding of the world in which we live by faith.

Faith yields knowledge. It yields this kind of knowledge, a worldly knowledge, and knowledge of this empirical, factual, sensual, sense-perceived universe from the expanse of space to the dirt of earth. We gain, by faith (trust in God's word, trust in God, trusting Him and entrusting ourselves to Him to do His will and endure in faithfulness) knowledge of the world that we grasp by the five senses (taste, touch, smell, hear, and see).

What we "see" (11.3b) is part for the whole of our perception of the world.

Just to gain knowledge is a positive encouragement. It is encouraging to know that faith is the way to a fundamental understanding of our everyday experience in this world of objects we perceive by our senses.

Philosophers struggle in debate regarding knowledge of the real world. It is a serious and unresolved problem of philosophy. Do we know the world in which we live? Do we know what it is (this is a metaphysical question: what underlies and goes with the world we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch?). Do our senses deceive us? Beyond the veil of sense perception, are there a real objects and what might they be? The debate is endless. They have no final answer.

By contrast, the Christian, by faith knows the Creator and His creation. He made the world, He knows the world, and He gave us the capacity to understand His world as His image bearers.

2) It is an encouragement to refocus the promises of God

Realization is not yet while the promises remain invisible to us; they are unseen (yet unrealized). God gives us knowledge of future fulfillment of His promises in a way that is analogous to how He gives us knowledge of past enactment in creation. By trusting Him, submitting to Him, we see and understand the origin and nature of the universe in all of its order, harmony, fitted-ness, and interconnections. By trusting Him and submitting to Him, we know the reality of the promises; we know of their reliability and certainty; we know that it is impossible for God to lie and so we know that He will fulfill all the promises that remain yet unseen by us. The city we look for is not of this world or of this world's making. We look for the consummate city, the city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11.10).

3) It encourages faith to understand that the world does not have its origin in itself.

Its origin is in God by His word. God who is not seen and the action of creation that He only observed are facts invisible to us (not seen by us), but we know Him and the reality of His creative word by faith. Ultimately, it is by faith in His self-revealing word that we have in Scripture. No doubt Adam knew what Moses knew about the creation of the world in six days; both of them knew this fact by God's self-revelation before that revelation was codified in Holy Scripture. If we listen to what God has to say and trust Him by entrusting ourselves to Him, we gain this true knowledge about the world.

4) Our faith is encouraged by knowing the power of God

Knowing that the universe in all its intricacy, complexity, and magnitude is the product of the word of God (of God by His word) reveals to us the power of His word. This directs us straightway to the power of His word that saves by keeping His promises. Thus, salvation is to the uttermost (Heb. 7.25). He is able to save us through all time and all circumstances. The word cuts deep in grace and carries sinners with omnipotent power to the goal of the heavenly city. In turn, because we lay hold of this power for what it is by faith, we are greatly encouraged to trust Him, learn of Him, and live for Him all the days of our journey to city of the great king.

5) Faith is encouraged by privilege

Knowing that the universe is in its essential make up a word from God as the product of His speech (the words, the communication of His speaking and the realization of His thinking) means of course that by faith we have the privilege of thinking God's thoughts after Him. We have the privilege of doing this consciously and in intimate fellowship with our heavenly Father and Creator of all things.

He invites us to fellowship with Him by all the facts surrounding us in our world of experience. The facts are not just there like a pile of stones left by someone who is no longer there. The stones are a sign; they speak for the person who put them there, but the person is long dead and gone. The facts of our world are signs. They are messages from the Creator. They are communication from God, *but not in an abstract or impersonal way*. He makes Himself known to us through the created world. He is there because He is everywhere. As the omnipresent Lord of heaven and earth, He is there speaking to us and sharing with us of His thoughts. He invites us

to fellowship with Him in His thoughts. We have the privilege, by faith, to think His thoughts after Him in His presence, in personal fellowship with Him *because Jesus tore down the barrier of our sins that separated us from God*. By faith in Christ, we have fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We have no true knowledge without faith. Without submission to God, without entrusting ourselves to Him, without love for God, the goal of glorifying God, and the standard of the will of God, all the knowledge that people attain in the sciences is not true knowledge. It is knowledge in quotes ("knowledge"), but not true knowledge because knowledge is not an intellectual thing in some isolated way. Instead, knowledge is a larger whole; it is a matter of receiving communication from God in fellowship with Him to use it for His glory out of love for Him.

6) Faith is encouraged by delight

By faith, we understand why we delight in a sunrise, science, and sensory experience. It is because in submission to God we participate in His delight in what He created. He said "let it be," it came to be, and He said, "very good." As His image bearers, we share in His thoughts and we partake of His delight. Faith opens the door of knowledge; it is central in understanding who we are, why we exist, what's wrong with the world, what is the remedy, and where is the world going. God reveals Himself in the creation and in His redemptive word. By the work of our great high priest we understand the world of things, history, and ourselves. We know God better and better as faith grows and we understand ourselves better and better. In turn, we learn how to glorify and enjoy Him now on the way to the "forever" of glory.

We know His majesty . Thus we know the majesty; power, wisdom, and the goodness of God (cf. the food chain and the ecological cycle as well as the comfort of shade trees, the beauty of the star, sun, and moon). So Romans 1.20: the world furnishes us with clear evidence of His eternal wisdom, goodness, and power so that "he in a manner becomes visible in his works" (Calvin, Hebrews, 266).

The created world is a "mirror of divinity" that leaves man without excuse, and that displays the glory of God. As Calvin put it, "Now the faithful, to whom he has given eyes, see sparks of his glory, as it were, glittering in every created thing. The world was no doubt made that it might be the theatre of the divine glory" (*Hebrews*, 266).

In the end, the author spreads a huge canvas before us and with a broad brush paints the blue sky, the sun, and the earth. In other words, he begins this great faith chapter by directing our thoughts to the wonder of general revelation as the context for dealing with matters of redemptive revelation. Thus, he looks at the world that surrounds us and in which we live and carry on our lives. He wants us to look at it with him and to learn that the world "reeks" with God's promises. That fact is a great encouragement to persevering faith.

May we fall down before the majesty of our God and Creator of the heavens and the earth and all their host; may the Holy Spirit fill us with a sense of awe mixed with joy and gratitude in knowing that the facts and events of our world are divine utterances that communicate the glory of God's goodness, love, and wisdom; and may the Spirit keep us close to Christ who is the redemptive speech of God for our eternal salvation. To the triune God be all glory, amen.