

We Walk By Faith
Hebrews 11 1-3, 8-16
8/7/2016

Have you seen the new glass skywalk in Central China? Here it is.

Picture 1

Some people walk across it with no problem or fear.

Picture 2

Others have a bit more trouble trusting the glass bridge.

Picture 3

Last October, a floor panel in the glass walkway cracked. The skywalk is suspended some 325 feet above the canyon floor. Think about the height of 10 feet. Think about the height of a high diving board. It's high. Now think three ... hundred ... and twenty-five feet above the canyon floor, and you're standing on a plate of glass suspended in midair, as it were, and the glass suddenly CRACKS! To say that this freaked everyone out is an understatement. Terror among the tourists!!! That was the screaming headline on media sites.

Hearing that news is enough to send a chill up the spine of even the most intrepid among us; this is a narrow, 1,300-foot-long glass-bottomed walkway, part of which is wrapped high in the air across a cliff face and part of which is suspended between two canyon walls in Yuntai Mountain Scenic Park in Henan province, China.

According to witnesses, when the crack happened, there was a sudden loud bang and a tremor beneath the feet of bridge crossers who weren't even near the shattered section. People started screaming and running to the ends of the bridge.

The good news is that the cracked panel did not give way and no one was hurt, but the bridge was immediately closed for repairs. Park officials say there never was any danger, as the crack, probably caused by an object a visitor dropped, was only in the top layer of the panel -- and the panes are

reportedly designed to carry 1,700 pounds -- but people on the walkway when the shattering occurred weren't comforted.

Walking on Glass

Even before the crack, people were uneasy crossing the bridge -- a bridge of nothing. A bridge of air. The glass creates an illusion that you're walking in space with nothing to support you. Yet, you don't fall. Gravity is thwarted by a pane of glass beneath your feet.

The whole idea is to let visitors see the depths below them, and for those who try it, it takes a lot of courage to venture out. Some people got on their hands and knees and crawled across. Others grabbed the side cables and shuffled their grasp of the cables as they inched across. Some others walked confidently -- but fast, preferring to get across as soon as possible. Sort of describes how many of us shuffle along in our faith walk, doesn't it?

Here in the United States, we have our own glass-bottomed attraction, the famous Skywalk bridge in the Grand Canyon National Park. Visitors can walk out on a glass-bottomed platform that juts out into thin air more than 700 feet above the canyon floor. It's beautiful and terrifying at the same time. In your mind, you know the glass will support you, and that the structure is completely safe. But your gut doesn't quite embrace what the mind believes. Tourists report that their heart rates go up. Some sweat a bit. And many try not to look down at their feet, which seem to be suspended in midair.

Still, most people have faith. They walk out on the glass and enjoy the remarkable vistas created by God.

Glass-bottomed bridges are a good metaphor for faith.

Glass-bottomed bridges are a good metaphor for faith. Faith is "the conviction of things not seen," our text says, and walking on glass means we're not seeing that which supports us. What we are seeing are the dangers below, and they can be terrifying. We grasp the "cables" that give us comfort (God's word) or perhaps we crawl on our knees (prayer).

Looking down can be terrifying

Our faith in Christ is like that, isn't it? Especially these days when what we can see beneath our faith can make us wonder just how substantial such trust is. For example, we look down and see many other people who seem quite content to carry on with life without commitment to any being higher than themselves, and they appear to be getting along all right. Perhaps it crosses our minds that by trying to live righteously, we're missing out on something.

We can also "see" the arguments of atheism that have grown more vociferous in recent years, and which today are put forward by some eloquent spokespersons. Those arguments can be persuasive, and perhaps it crosses our mind that we are being naïve to ignore them.

We can see our doubts as well. They sometimes dance before our eyes when we're struggling to walk by faith.

What's more, we can view certain Christian doctrines -- such as the idea that Christ was raised from the dead, that God's kingdom will come and those who receive Christ will have eternal life -- and realize that we can't prove such things. The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, voiced how such a line of thought goes: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). Or, as The Message paraphrases those last words, "If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot."

And one more thing we sometimes see: that a significant chunk of the culture doesn't value lives lived in faith. Secularism, political activism, humanitarianism and even materialism seem to be more valued, if sometimes criticized, approaches to life. But, living a life based on faith, and a meaningful adherence to a faith-based lifestyle which includes obedience to a sacred and divine word -- not so much. Not too many people into living by faith. And one gets the sense that such people, people of faith, are not even particularly admired. Instead, they're often likely to be misunderstood, pitied or ridiculed.

So, as people of faith, sometimes we feel like Peter walking on water; sometimes we feel like Peter sinking in the waves. Faith, sometimes, can feel like following the unseen into the unknown.

Faith is a way of looking beyond appearances

Our text from Hebrews speaks of what we see and what we don't: "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible" (v. 3).

We should take comfort and hope from the fact that we can be so easily misled by what we see. We can misunderstand the nature of almost anything and any person when we are working from just the externals. Conclusions based on external information or impressions will more often prove wrong than right and can lead us to invest ourselves in that which has no real substance.

We can also take some comfort and hope from the fact that faith is a way of seeing which looks beyond appearances. Abraham is a case in point: He "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (v. 10). Abraham wasn't looking with his physical eyes, of course, but with the eyes of faith.

In other words, faith is not something we somehow drum up with gumption and by stifling the clamor of doubts and other voices. Rather, faith is a way of seeing that what's under our feet, though it appears transparent, is actually the solid rock of Christ.

Faith Hall of Fame

One of the means the writer of Hebrews uses to drive home his argument for faith is to give a lengthy list of examples -- a "hall of fame" as it were -- of people from Israel's history who, through faith, acted in ways that showed they trusted God. They did this without really understanding that their actions were generated by great faith. They simply believed, trusted God and got on with it.

They didn't temporize, agonize or rationalize. They simply got it done.

Noah builds the ark. Abraham leaves for a new country. Moses leads Israel out of bondage. Rahab shelters some Hebrew spies. David kills a giant. Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Samson, Gideon, Samuel -- same thing. No big deal.

The New Interpreter's Bible, reflecting on Hebrews 11, explains: "The use of a life or an act as an example must always be a reflection on a life or an act that was not intended to be an example but had its own reasons, its own integrity. No one in the list of exemplars of faith lived his or her life as an example to anyone; their having done so would have disqualified them as good examples. It is because they lived out of their own faith without an eye for an audience that they are examples to us".

Many could be added to such a list, including persons in our own lives and time. While their stature and significance might not appear as great as those listed in Hebrews, they have impacted lives. A parent or grandparent, a neighbor, a teacher, a Boy Scout merit badge advisor, a business owner or manager, a babysitter, a coach, a pastor--the list could go on and on. All are persons who have changed us because they lived out their faith in the everyday encounters with others and the circumstances faced in life.

Stan Purdum, author of *New Mercies I See, He Walked in Galilee* and others, tells the story of Don and his wife Nancy. Several years ago, having no children of their own, they decided to adopt, and over the course of time, they welcomed three children into their home. These were kids from some other countries where the future otherwise would likely have been bleak for them.

Then, sometime later, Nancy experienced a mental collapse and entered a dark period of her own. Although she eventually recovered, she was not the same woman. She could no longer handle crowds and her emotional life remains precarious. Periodically, she has to return to the hospital to get herself stabilized again. Thus, most of the parenting falls on Don.

"At the time of my last contact with Don and Nancy," Purdum says, "their two older children had done well, and were typical teenagers, but the third child, Michael, who came to Don and Nancy's home at age 2½, brought very tough challenges. As he grew, he did not bond with his adoptive parents, seemed not to be guided by conscience, and had no concern about consequences of his actions. Eventually, his behavior became so bad

that Don and Nancy had to have Michael institutionalized, and, by the time I met Don, Michael was living with a professional parent. But still, Don visited him every Saturday." Purdum continues:

"How do you keep hope in God alive?' I asked Don one day.

"I don't know. I guess play the cards I was dealt,' he said quietly.

"Obviously, Don's not a complainer, but that was not really his whole answer. In his Sunday school class, he occasionally shared his worry and concern with a few of us. People in the class prayed for Don and his situation. People offered words of support. In short, Don didn't keep his faith alive all by himself. The church community rallied around him and helped him nourish his faith. It's not the only factor, but it is one that helps Don to not give up his faith ... that keeps him believing that his life, and Nancy's life, and his children's lives -- including Michael's -- are in God's hands."

That's walking on glass, fully conscious of the dangers below, but believing that God will not let us down. And over the centuries, millions of people have discovered that faith is enough, that it is the tangible surface of the path of life.

Today's scripture from Chapter 11 is possibly the best known of this letter to the Hebrew's texts. Whether sermon or not, it extols the virtue of faith and indeed defines faith as both assurance and conviction.

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

New Revised Standard Version:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we

understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.