

Living in the Future

“let us live up to what we have already attained” (Philippians 3:16).

Every dispensation or era of history had adumbrations of the future by which the people who were faithful to God were expected to live. In the Garden after the Fall, God gave statements and promises regarding the future, and that first couple believed what He said and lived on the basis of them. They wouldn't experience in their lives what God promised regarding the future, but they were nevertheless expected to live as if that future were for them a present reality. The same expectation holds for everyone else in the Old Testament.

That's the argument of Hebrews Chapter 11. **“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”** (verse 1). Let's rephrase that: Faith is being certain that what God has said in Scripture regarding the future is true and is going to happen, and then living our lives on the basis of that truth. Faith not only looks forward into the future, believing and expecting that what God has said will happen, but *living based on that expectation*.

God spoke to Abraham and made promises to him regarding the future. Abraham not only believed what God said, he acted on those promises as if they were true right then in his life. How else could he have done what's in Genesis chapter 22? If God made promises regarding the future, they *had* to be fulfilled, so if Isaac were slain, those promises (somehow) would still come true. Abraham's life, James writes (Chapter 2), is to be an example to all of us who are Abraham's seed (spiritual or literal). James also in that chapter mentions Rahab. She understood that the Israelites had a super-powerful God and were going to conquer the land and dwell in it. So she wanted to be part of it. She acted—with extreme risk to her life—on her belief in what was to happen in the future. James compellingly uses Abraham and Rahab as models of belief (Chapter 2) because if we believe something, something for example that God has said about the future, we have to do something about it. If we don't, either we don't really believe it to be true, or we don't care. Beliefs, in the Bible, are to change us in some appropriate way. Beliefs are powerful.

How could Job maintain his stance despite the onslaught of his supposed three friends? The text suggests that he knew the ultimate outcome of human suffering was future vindication (see Chapter 28, a poem at the very center of the book). God's wisdom, goodness and justice would see to that. Job had little revelation regarding the future, but he had sufficient awareness of the future to be able to preserve faith in God despite suffering from Satan and from his friends.

Jonah knew the future, after all he was a prophet. What God had revealed to him regarding the future was painfully real, that Assyria would one day come and take into captivity the Northern Kingdom. So he purposely ran in the opposite direction from Assyria in a vain attempt to alter the flow of history. Not the wisest move, OK, but he acted (dramatically) on what he knew the future held.

How could Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego so courageously say to the king (Daniel 3:16-18), “Even if you kill us in the fire, we will be faithful to God, and we will not worship the image you set up”? What were they thinking? Did they have some kind of martyr complex? No. They knew a future truth (stated explicitly in Daniel 12:1-2), and they based their life on that reality. A resurrection to everlasting life awaited those who were faithful to God in this life. They believed that truth and lived it (and were willing to die for it).

The text (probably deliberately) avoids mention of eschatologic promises, but Esther and Mordecai surely knew of God's promises to restore the Nation of Israel from exile one future day. Those promises were there in Moses and in the prophets. Those risks they took, based on faith in a God who is sovereign and who controls all history, therefore must have been because they knew God had great purposes for Israel in the future. Likewise, Ezra and Nehemiah.

When Jesus came, He obediently submitted to a humiliating and agonizing death on a cross in full confidence of the promise of a resurrection and the vindication, blessings and triumphs that that resurrection made possible. Going to Jerusalem, He knew all that the future held, and He acted on the truthfulness, on the reality, of that knowledge.

How could Stephen (Acts Chapter 7) say things so convicting to the unbelieving Jewish leaders? He surely knew they'd do to him what they did to Jesus, that is, kill him. He knew a future reality was being with Jesus (the essence of the Gospel), so he lived—and died—on the basis of that future truth (see 7:59). Death isn't the end. It's the transport to something far greater and more exalted, our heavenly existence. We don't live in fear of death, we live now in joyful anticipation of what's on the other side of death, our glorious future. So if we believe that truth, we can take huge risks if being faithful to God demands it.

The Book of Revelation was penned in part to assure believers during that terrible period of God's outpoured wrath that being faithful even to the point of death means participating later in a future existence in something far greater.

We live today in light of the future. God has made many statements and promises regarding the future, expecting us not only to believe what He said, but to live as if they right now are true. After all, if something is true, it is eternally true, which means it's true at any point in time.

On what moral basis did God mandate the destruction of the Canaanites during the period of the Conquest? The answer is, future judgment is an eternal truth, which means it can be applied retroactively in time. God is going to judge, *severely* judge, all ungodly humanity in the future. That truth therefore is eternally true, so it was the moral basis for the judgment at the Flood and at the Conquest.

Paul understood from the writing prophets that it was God's will that in the eschaton, that is, in the (yet) future age, the Millennial Kingdom, Gentiles would be saved and worship God. It was God's will, therefore, that the Gospel should be presented to the Gentile nations so that they could respond with faith in Jesus and be saved just as Christian Jews in Judea were being saved by faith in their Messiah. So Paul devoted his life and ministry to reaching out to the Gentiles. And that's the church's mission, now, during this present church age. Doing evangelism isn't merely obeying a command, although it certainly is that. It's more: we're actually living out an aspect of the future, now, in the present.

Paul also understood that at some point in the future we are to be glorified and completely sanctified. Our sin nature would be removed from us, and we would be just like Jesus. Therefore, Paul argues in several places, that truth obtains *now*. We are to live holy lives now, imitating the Person of Jesus. We're to make a future truth a present reality.

Likewise, in the future Millennium, we'll be serving Christ in some way, participating in His rule of the Kingdom. Therefore, Paul argues that we're to be doing that *now*. We're to be serving Christ now in this Church age, because that future reality determines our present reality, how we live today.

In the eternal state, when we're in heaven, we'll be participating in some way in the Godhead. We'll be participating in the joy and the love of the Persons of the Godhead. Therefore, Paul argues, we're to be living lives of joy and love *now*. What adoption means is, the adopted son transfers loyalty to, and assumes the values and concerns of, his adoptive father. A son is to reflect the person of his father and carry out his father's will. That's our responsibility now. The church is the Bride of Christ, but right now only betrothed. In the future, when we're in heaven, the currently betrothed bride will be united to Christ. But being betrothed carries with it the requirement of being pure and loyal, and living in anticipation of life with her husband. That's our responsibility now.

In Christ, God has lavished the most wonderful spiritual blessings upon us (what we have "attained"), so Paul says in Philippians 3:16 that we're to live our lives on the basis of all those great promises. That's why in Ephesians he can make the astonishing statement that we already are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (2:6). We won't actually be in the heavenlies until some point in the future; for right now, we're here on earth. Yet that promise is real to us now because it's an eternally true truth.

In our future heavenly existence, believers from all nations, races, tribes and ethnic groups will be lovingly united in our worship of the Lamb. Therefore, Paul argues, there should be unity of all believers now, in this Church Age. Knowing this future *but eternal* truth should cause us to place our arms around brothers in Christ to serve and worship together regardless of social status or skin color.

In the Millennial Kingdom righteousness will fill the earth as the waters cover the seas. But we're to live out the features of the coming Kingdom now (see Romans 14:17, where Paul applies the prophetic vision of the future to the Christian life). So righteousness is to characterize our present lives. Faith is not just an attitude, a mental assent to something God said, but living in a way that's appropriate to our belief.

One day coming soon, Christ will return to rescue His people Israel from all their enemies intent on annihilating them. His Return will also bring to earth the promised Millennial Kingdom, when all creation will enjoy its rest; peace will finally pervade all creation. We should intently, supremely desire that. More to the point: it means that the focus of our political interests should be Israel. And that our attitude toward Israel – and toward Jews in particular wherever they are – should be love, because God's attitude toward them is enduring, faithful love.

Unbelievers have no knowledge of the future, so they don't know how to live. But we know the future. Our hope in the future is not some vague desire, but a confident expectation that the God who does not (and cannot) lie will make real all that He has promised in His Word. We're waiting for it all to happen, and we take action appropriate to those eternally true truths. *There's nothing passive about being a Christian.*

So for example, we know that there's a literal place called hell. It's where unbelievers, at the end of time, having been raised and judged, spend eternity apart from God in the company of Satan and his hideous demons. Therefore we are moved to reach out to unbelievers with the Gospel so that, by a response of faith, they can be rescued from the ghastly future that we know awaits them.

The most serious aspect of this entire discussion is the warning Paul repeatedly gives that a day is coming when every believer in Christ will have to stand before Him and give an account of our lives. What did we do for Him? What did we do with the Gospel that was entrusted to us? That is called the *bema* judgment, or the Judgment Seat of Christ. Paul warns us of this so that we spend our time here in this life profitably, **"for we are God's fellow workers"** (1 Corinth 3:9a). There's nothing theoretical or vague about the future! Everything in Scripture that deals with the future is truth that we need to know and act on.

But, someone will argue that the present is too powerful. "My life is filled to overflowing with the daily problems I face, and everything I experience is real and compelling, and what's going on crowds out any thoughts of a future that is only abstract in nature." Indeed, the present is real. We need to make the future real too! We do that by living it, and by simplifying our lives and by eschewing everything that is worldly or unprofitable so that we can live it. *Twice*, we read, **"make the most of every opportunity"** (Ephesians 5:16 and Colossians 4:5); this means we need to think carefully—all the time—about what we're doing in light of future realities.

I suggest that we don't spend enough time with God in His Word or in prayer. Or meditating on how the Word applies to our lives. We reveal what we truly love and are passionate about (in other words, what our hearts are like) by the daily choices we make regarding what to do with the life God has given us. **"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord"** (1 Corinth 15:58) isn't addressed to clergy, or to the professionals in the church; it's for everyone. **"Train yourself to be godly"** (1 Timothy 4:7b) means we have to work at it. There's nothing passive about being a follower of Christ.

I think I can hear someone now saying, "Hey wait a minute. I believe in Jesus. All my sins are forgiven, and I have eternal life. I'll be in heaven when I die. I don't need to do anything. My salvation is all because of what Christ did for me. I have my life to live and I don't need all these burdens you're trying to load on me. Go check Ephesians 2:8-9, salvation is a gift." Well, I reply, this would be as if the Israelites in Exodus 15 had said to God, "Hey, thanks for delivering me from Egypt. Now I have my life to live, so don't bother me with your demands or responsibilities." Or like the generation under Joshua that conquered the Land, and then they (really) said: "Hey, thanks for the land. Now I have my life to live so don't bother me . . .," and the tragic, grotesque history narrated in the Book of Judges resulted. Ephesians 2:10, the very next verse, says, **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works."** We're saved *in order* to live according to God's purposes (Philippians 2:13).

Eschatology, the study of future things, is to rule our present lives. Or, let's say it this way: Christianity is eschatology being lived out today. **"Live a life worthy of the calling which you have received"** (Eph 4:1). The "calling" is to something infinitely wonderful waiting for us in the future. We're to live now on the basis of that future reality.

What all this means to us is clear. It means first of all that we need to know what God has promised in Scripture regarding the future. The Word of God is not something we hear in bits and pieces on Sunday mornings. It's there in front of us for us to open and study and to reflect deeply on. The Word of God disciplines us – if we're open to being disciplined by it. And secondly, it's not a book of information, of facts we can know (or not know). It's God speaking truth to us personally so that we can make the Word alive. Jesus is called the Logos. If we're followers of Christ, we too are to be the Word of God personified. We are to live it.

"It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinth 4:2). The "trust" is the Gospel; it's for us to share with others so they too can receive all the blessings of salvation, not hide it away in a corner of our soul. The "trust" is a new life in the Spirit, for us to glorify God. The "trust" is what we've been called to, glory. So with the future glory that's ours in full view . . . Let's be faithful.