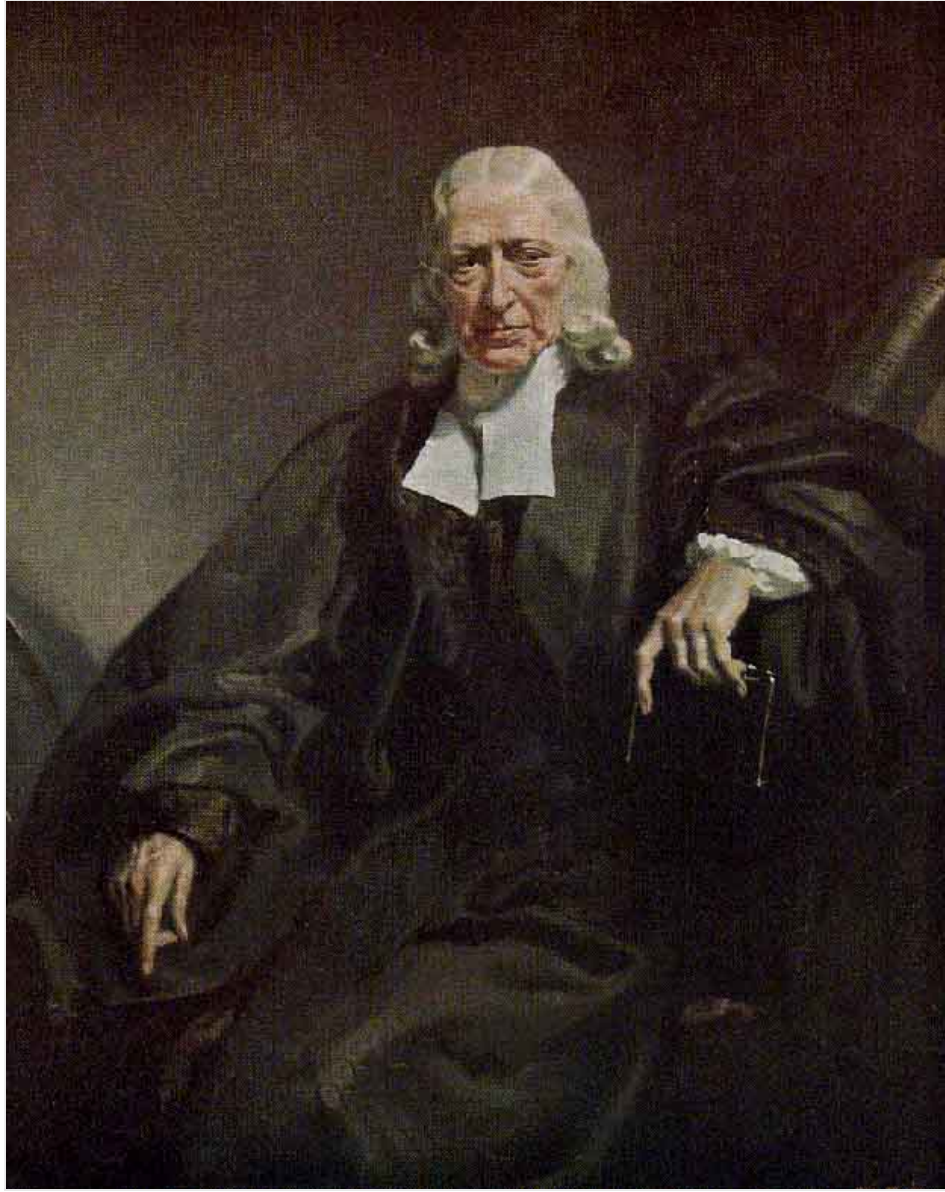


On Faith – John Wesley 1791 (Last Sermon)

“Now faith is the evidence of things not seen.” [Heb. 11:1](#).



1. Many times have I thought, many times have I spoke, many times have I wrote upon these words; and yet there appears to be a depth in them which I am in no wise able to fathom. Faith is, in one sense of the word, a divine conviction of God and of the things of God; in another, (nearly related to, yet not altogether the same,) it is a divine conviction of the invisible and eternal world. In this sense I would now consider, –

2. I am now an immortal spirit, strangely connected with a little portion of earth; but this is only for a while: In a short time I am to quit this tenement of clay, and to remove into another state,

Which the living know not, And the dead cannot, or they may not tell!

What kind of existence shall I then enter upon, when my spirit has launched out of the body? How shall I feel myself, — perceive my own being? How shall I discern the things that are round about me, either material or spiritual objects? When my eyes no longer transmit the rays of light, how will the naked spirit see? When the organs of hearing are moldered into dust, in what manner shall I hear? When the brain is of no farther use, what means of thinking shall I have? When my whole body is resolved into senseless earth, what means shall I have of gaining knowledge?

3. How strange, how incomprehensible, are the means whereby I shall then take knowledge even of the material world! Will things appear then as they do now, — of the same size, shape, and color? Or will they be altered in any, or all these respects? How will the sun, moon, and stars appear? the sublunary heavens? the planetary heavens? the region of the fixed stars? — how the fields of ether, which we may conceive to be millions of miles beyond them? Of all this we know nothing yet. And, indeed, we need to know nothing.

4. What then can we know of those innumerable objects which properly belong to the invisible world; which mortal “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into our heart to conceive?” What a scene will then be opened, when the regions of Hades are displayed without a covering! Our English translators seem to have been much at a loss for a word to render this. Indeed, two hundred years ago, it was tolerably expressed by the word hell, which then signified much the same with the word Hades, namely, the invisible world. Accordingly, by Christ descending into hell, they meant, his body remained in the grave, his soul remained in Hades, (which is the receptacle of separate spirits,) from death to the resurrection. Here we cannot doubt but the spirits of the righteous are inexpressibly happy. They are, as St. Paul expresses it, “with the Lord,” favored with so intimate a communion with him as “is far better” than whatever the chief of the Apostles experienced while in this world. On the other hand, we learn from our Lord’s own account of Dives and Lazarus, that the rich man, from the moment he left the world, entered into a state of torment. And “there is a great gulf fixed” in Hades, between the place of the holy and that of unholy spirits, which it is impossible for either the one or the other to pass over. Indeed, a gentleman of great learning, the Honorable Mr. [Alexander] Campbell, in his account of the Middle State, published not many years ago, seems to suppose that wicked souls may amend in Hades, and then remove to a happier mansion. He has great hopes that “the rich man,” mentioned by our Lord, in particular, might be purified by that penal fire, till, in process of time, he might be qualified for a better abode. But who can reconcile this with Abraham’s assertion that none can pass over the “great gulf?”

5. I cannot therefore but think, that all those who are with the rich man in the unhappy division of Hades, will remain there, howling and blaspheming, cursing God and looking upwards, till they are cast into “the everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.” And, on the other hand, can we reasonably doubt but that those who are now in paradise, in Abraham’s bosom, — all those holy souls who have been discharged from the body, from the beginning of the world unto this day, — will be continually ripening for heaven; will be perpetually holier and happier, till they are received into “the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world?”

6. But who can inform us in what part of the universe Hades is situated, — this abode of both happy and unhappy spirits, till they are re-united to their bodies? It has not pleased God to reveal anything concerning it in the Holy Scripture; and, consequently, it is not possible for us to form any judgment, or even conjecture, about it. Neither are we informed, how either one or the other are employed, during the time of their abode there. Yet may we not probably suppose that the Governor of the world

may sometimes permit wicked souls “to do his gloomy errands in the deep;” or, perhaps, in conjunction with evil angels, to inflict vengeance on wicked men? Or will many of them be shut up in the chains of darkness, unto the great judgment of the great day? In the mean time, may we not probably suppose, that the spirits of the just, though generally lodged in paradise, yet may sometimes, in conjunction with the holy angels, minister to the heirs of salvation? May they not

Sometimes, on errands of love, Revisit their brethren below?

It is a pleasing thought, that some of these human spirits, attending us with, or in the room of, angels, are of the number of those that were dear to us while they were in the body. So that there is no absurdity in the question:

Have ye your own flesh forgot,
By a common ransom bought?
Can death’s interposing tide
Spirits one in Christ divide?

But, be this as it may, it is certain human spirits swiftly increase in knowledge, in holiness, and in happiness; conversing with all the wise and holy souls that lived in all ages and nations from the beginning of the world; with angels and archangels, to whom the children of men are no more than infants; and above all, with the eternal Son of God, “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” And let it be especially considered, whatever they learn they will retain for ever. For they forget nothing. To forget is only incident to spirits that are clothed with flesh and blood.

7. But how will this material universe appear to a disembodied spirit? Who can tell whether any of these objects that surround us will appear the same as they do now? And if we know so little of these, what can we now know concerning objects of a quite different nature? concerning the spiritual world? It seems it will not be possible for us to discern them at all, till we are furnished with senses of a different nature, which are not yet opened in our souls. These may enable us both to penetrate the inmost substance of things, whereof we now discern only the surface; and to discern innumerable things, of the very existence whereof we have not now the least perception. What astonishing scenes will then discover themselves to our newly-opening senses! Probably fields of ether, not only ten fold, but ten thousand fold, “the length of this terrain.” And with what variety of furniture, animate and inanimate! How many orders of beings, not discovered by organs of flesh and blood! perhaps thrones, dominions, principedoms, virtues, powers! — whether of those that retain their first habitations and primeval strength, or of those that, rebelling against their Creator, have been cast out of heaven! And shall we not then, as far as angel’s ken, survey the bounds of creation, and see every place where the Almighty

Stopp’d his rapid wheels, and said, – “This be thy just circumference, O world?”

Yea, shall we not be able to move, quick as thought, through the wide realms of uncreated night? Above all, the moment we step into eternity, shall we not feel ourselves swallowed up of Him who is in this and every place, — who filleth heaven and earth? It is only the veil of flesh and blood which now hinders us from perceiving, that the great Creator cannot but fill the whole immensity of space. He is every moment above us, beneath us, and on every side. Indeed, in this dark abode, this land of shadows, this region of sin and death, the thick cloud which is interposed between conceals him from our sight. But the veil will disappear; and he will appear in unclouded majesty, “God over all, blessed for ever!”

8. How variously are the children of men employed in this world! In treading over “the paths they trod six thousand years before!” But who knows how we shall be employed after we enter that visible world? A little of it we may conceive, and that without any doubt, provided we keep to what God himself has revealed in his word, and what he works in the hearts of his children. Let us consider, First, what may be the employment of unholy spirits from death to the resurrection. We cannot doubt but the moment they leave the body, they find themselves surrounded by spirits of their own kind, probably human as well as diabolical. What power God may permit these to exercise over them, we do not distinctly know. But it is not improbable, he may suffer Satan to employ them, as he does his own angels, in inflicting death, or evils of various kinds, on the men that know not God: For this end they may raise storms by sea or by land; they may shoot meteors through the air; they may occasion earthquakes; and, in numberless ways, afflict those whom they are not suffered to destroy. Where they are not permitted to take away life, they may inflict various diseases; and many of these, which we judge to be natural, are undoubtedly diabolical. I believe this is frequently the case with lunatics. It is observable, that many of those mentioned in Scripture, who are called lunatics by one of the Evangelists, are termed demoniacs by another. One of the most eminent Physicians I ever knew, particularly in cases of insanity, the late Dr. [Thomas] Deacon, was clearly of opinion that this was the case with many, if not most, lunatics. And it is no valid objection to this, that these diseases are so often cured by natural means; for a wound inflicted by an evil spirit might be cured as any other, unless that spirit was permitted to repeat the blow.

9. May not some of these evil spirits be likewise employed, in conjunction with evil angels, in tempting wicked men to sin, and in procuring occasions for them? yea, and in tempting good men to sin, even after they have escaped the corruption that is in the world? Herein, doubtless, they put forth all their strength; and greatly glory if they conquer. A passage in an ancient author may greatly illustrate this: (Although I apprehend, he did not intend that we should take it literally:) “Satan summoned his powers, and examined what mischief each of them had done. One said, ‘I have set a house on fire, and destroyed all its inhabitants.’ Another said, ‘I have raised a storm at sea, and sunk a ship; and all on board perished in the waters.’ Satan answered, ‘Perhaps those that were burnt or drowned were saved.’ A third said, ‘I have been forty years tempting a holy man to commit adultery; and I have left him asleep in his sin.’ Hearing this, Satan rose to do him honor; and all hell resounded with his praise.”

Hear this, all ye that imagine you cannot fall from grace!

10. Ought not we then to be perpetually on our guard against those subtle enemies? Though we see them not, —

A constant watch they keep;
They eye us night and day;
And never slumber, never sleep,
Lest they should lose their prey.

Herein they join with “the rulers of the darkness,” the intellectual darkness, “of this world,” — the ignorance, wickedness, and misery diffused through it, — to hinder all good, and promote all evil! To this end they are continually “working with energy in the children of disobedience.” Yea, sometimes they work by them those lying wonders that might almost deceive even the children of God.

11. But meantime, how may we conceive the inhabitants of the other part of Hades, the souls of the righteous, to be employed? It has been positively affirmed by some philosophical men, that spirits have no place. But they do not observe, that if it were so, they must be omnipresent, — an attribute which cannot be allowed to any but the Almighty Spirit. The abode of these blessed spirits the ancient Jews were used to term Paradise, — the same name which our Lord gave it, telling the penitent thief, “This day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” Yet in what part of the universe this is situated who can tell, or even conjecture, since it has not pleased God to reveal anything concerning it? But we have no reason to think they are confined to this place; or, indeed, to any other. May we not rather say, that, “servants of his,” as well as the holy angels, they “do his pleasure;” whether among the inhabitants of earth, or in any other part of his dominions? And as we easily believe that they are swifter than the light; even as swift as thought; they are well able to traverse the whole universe in the twinkling of an eye, either to execute the divine commands, or to contemplate the works of God. What a field is here opened before them! And how immensely may they increase in knowledge, while they survey his works of creation or providence, or his manifold wisdom in the Church! What depth of wisdom, of power, and of goodness do they discover in his methods of “bringing many sons to glory!” Especially while they converse on any of these subjects, with the illustrious dead of ancient days! with Adam, first of men; with Noah, who saw both the primeval and the ruined world; with Abraham, the friend of God; with Moses, who was favored to speak with God, as it were, “face to face;” with Job, perfected by sufferings; with Samuel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Daniel, and all the Prophets; with the Apostles, the noble army of Martyrs, and all the saints who have lived and died to the present day; with our elder brethren, the holy angels, cherubim, seraphim, and all the companies of heaven; above all the name of creature owns, with Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant! Meantime, how will they advance in holiness; in the whole image of God, wherein they were created; in the love of God and man; gratitude to their Creator, and benevolence to all their fellow-creatures! Yet it does not follow, (what some earnestly maintain,) that this general benevolence will at all interfere with that peculiar affection which God himself

implants for our relations, friends, and benefactors. O no! had you stood by his bed-side, when that dying saint was crying out, “I have a father and a mother gone to heaven;” (to paradise, the receptacle of happy spirits;) “I have ten brothers and sisters gone to heaven; and now I am going to them that am the eleventh! Blessed be God that I was born!” would you have replied, “What, if you are going to them? They will be no more to you than any other persons; for you will not know them.” Not know them! Nay, does not all that is in you recoil at that thought? Indeed, skeptics may ask, “How do disembodied spirits know each other?” I answer plainly, I cannot tell: But I am certain that they do. This is as plainly proved from one passage of Scripture as it could be from a thousand. Did not Abraham and Lazarus know each other in Hades, even afar off? even though they were fixed on different sides of the “great gulf?” Can we doubt, then, whether the souls that are together in paradise shall know one another? The Scripture, therefore, clearly decides this question. And so does the very reason of the thing; for we know, every holy temper which we carry with us into paradise will remain in us for ever. But such is gratitude to our benefactors. This, therefore, will remain for ever. And this implies, that the knowledge of our benefactors will remain, without which it cannot exist.

12. And how much will that add to the happiness of those spirits which are already discharged from the body, that they are permitted to minister to those whom they have left behind! An indisputable proof of this we have in the twenty-second chapter of the Revelation. When the Apostle fell down to worship the glorious spirit which he seems to have mistaken for Christ, he told him plainly, “I am of thy fellow-servants, the Prophets;” [[Rev. 22](#)] not God, not an angel, not a human spirit. And in how many ways may they “minister to the heirs of salvation!” Sometimes by counteracting wicked spirits whom we cannot resist, because we cannot see them; sometimes by preventing our being hurt by men, or beasts, or inanimate creatures. How often may it please God to answer the prayer of good Bishop Ken! –

O may thine angels, while I sleep,
Around my bed their vigils keep;
Their love angelical instil;
Stop all the avenues [consequence] of ill!
May they celestial joys rehearse,
And thought to thought with me converse;
Or, in my stead, the whole night long,
Sing to my God a grateful song!

And may not the Father of spirits allot this office jointly to angels, and human spirits waiting to be made perfect?

13. It may indeed be objected that God has no need of any subordinate agents, of either angelical or human spirits, to guard his children in their waking or sleeping hours; seeing “He that keeps Israel doth neither slumber nor sleep.” And certainly, he is able to preserve them by his own immediate power; yea, and he is able, by his own immediate power, without any instruments at all, to supply the

wants of all his creatures both in heaven and earth. But it is, and ever was, his pleasure, not to work by his own immediate power only, but chiefly by subordinate means, from the beginning of the world. And how wonderfully is his wisdom displayed in adjusting all these to each other! So that we may well cry out, “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all.”

14. This we know, concerning the whole frame and arrangement of the visible world. But how exceeding little do we now know concerning the invisible! And we should have known still less of it, had it not pleased the Author of both worlds to give us more than natural light, to give us “his word to be a lantern to our feet, and a light in all our paths.” And holy men of old, being assisted by his Spirit, have discovered many particulars of which otherwise we should have had no conception.

15. And without revelation, how little certainty of invisible things did the wisest of men obtain! The small glimmerings of light which they had were merely conjectural. At best they were only a faint, dim twilight, delivered from uncertain tradition; and so obscured by heathen fables, that it was but one degree better than utter darkness.

16. How uncertain the best of these conjectures was, may easily be gathered from their own accounts. The most finished of all these accounts, is that of the great Roman poet. Where observe how warily he begins, with that apologetic preface, — *— Sit mihi fas audita loqui —* “May I be allowed to tell what I have heard?” And, in the conclusion, lest anyone should imagine he believed any of these accounts, he sends the relater of them out of Hades by the ivory gate, through which, he had just informed us, that only dreams and shadows pass, — a very plain intimation, that all which has gone before, is to be looked upon as a dream!

17. How little regard they had for all these conjectures, with regard to the invisible world, clearly appears from the words of his brother poet; who affirms, without any scruple, —

*Esse aliquos manes, et subterranea regna
Nec pueri credunt.*

“That there are ghosts, or realms below, not even a man [boy] of them now believes.” So little could even the most improved reason discover concerning the invisible and eternal world! The greater cause have we to praise the Father of Lights, who hath opened the eyes of our understanding, to discern those things which could not be seen by eyes of flesh and blood; that He who of old time shined out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, and enlightened us with the light of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ, “the author and finisher of our faith;” “by whom he made the worlds;” by whom he now sustains whatever he hath made; for,

Till nature shall her Judge survey, The King Messiah reigns.

These things we have believed upon the testimony of God, the Creator of all things, visible and invisible; by this testimony we already know the things that now exist, though not yet seen, as well as

those that will exist in their season, until this visible world will pass away, and the Son of Man shall come in his glory.

18. Upon the whole, what thanks ought we to render to God, who has vouchsafed this “evidence of things unseen” to the poor inhabitants of earth, who otherwise must have remained in utter darkness concerning them! How invaluable a gift is even this imperfect light, to the benighted sons of men! What a relief is it to the defects of our senses, and consequently, of our understanding; which can give us no information of anything, but what is first presented by the senses! But hereby a new set of senses (so to speak) is opened in our souls; and, by this means,

The things unknown to feeble sense,
Unseen by reason’s glimmering ray,
With strong, commanding evidence,
Their heavenly origin display.
Faith lends its realizing light:
The clouds disperse, the shadows fly;
The’ Invisible appears in sight,
And GOD is seen by mortal eye!

London, Jan. 17, 1791 [probably Wesley's last sermon]