

Hebrews 11:8-12/16

Intro – people of faith in Hebrews 11

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Abraham

- It was through Abraham that God gave the covenant of grace
- In the OT he was the first person to be specifically commended for his faith. In Genesis 15:6 we read: “Abram believed God, and God credited it to him as righteousness.”
- Paul gives Abraham the title “Father of all who believe” Romans 4:11

We are going to look at some of what Hebrews 11 says about Abraham and what he did “by faith” (VIDEO)

Faith obeying God’s call

Genesis 12 tells us that God’s call came to Abraham like this:

“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”

And Abraham’s response, as we read in Hebrews 11, is that he *“obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”*

You notice that it is God who takes the initiative and Abraham who responds.

Abraham was not singled out because he had faith. In the book of Joshua (24:2-3), God himself describes how it all happened:

“I took your father Abraham from beyond the river and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants.”

At every step of the way it is God who takes the initiative by his grace and Abraham who responds by faith.

James Montgomery Boice applies this principle to every Christian:

“In the way God called Abraham, God calls all who become his children. God comes to us when we are hopelessly lost in sin and without knowledge of him. This is a universal fact in the spiritual biography of Christians. And our response is nothing more than belief in God and in his promises.”

The life of faith begins when God reveals himself to us and we respond. That could happen as we read the Bible or hear the word preached. Or it could be through the witness of a friend. In Abraham's case, God appeared to him directly, as Stephen tells us in Acts 7:2. As faith responds to grace, life has to change. Abraham was not called to accept some new philosophy, but to obey God's call and follow him. Astonishingly, he did not even know where he was going. He did not have a vision of where he would be in 50 or even in 5 years time. Once again we see the Biblical principle that God reveals his will to us one step at a time. As we take a step of faith in obedience, then we see what the next step will be.

Faith believing God's promise

The call to faith is followed by the life of faith. We find this in verse 9:

“By faith Abraham made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and

Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.”

In fits and starts Abraham finally arrived in the land of Canaan, which God had promised that he would possess. But when he got there he discovered that it was occupied by the Canaanites. So by faith he lived there, not as the owner, but as “*stranger in a foreign country*”, a resident alien.

Abraham's position in Canaan gives us a clear picture of what it is like to live by faith. Like Abraham, we have great promises from God, many of which have not yet been fulfilled. This shows us the already/ not yet character of the life of faith. We possess God's promises already, but many of them are not yet fulfilled. This is what Hebrews 11 emphasised from the beginning, that “*Faith is being certain of things not seen.*”

Abraham had to live by God's promise since he did not possess the reality. Even when Sarah died, he had to buy a plot of land to bury her.

He did not receive all the promises in tangible form, but his trust was in God nevertheless. Abraham's situation as a pilgrim passing through is very similar to images of the Christian life which come to us from Peter and from Paul. Peter addresses his first letter to "*God's elect, strangers in the world*". And Paul writes in Philippians 3:20 "*Our citizenship is in heaven*". We recognise this every time we pray "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" Our long-term interests are not centred here. Our permanent home is elsewhere. In practical terms, this should mean that we do not make earthly things our top priority. This is a constant temptation for us as we live in a materialistic society and the temptation is always there for us to fit in and follow suit. Jesus himself warned us repeatedly about the subtle way in which the love of money and possessions blinds us toward God and toward our fellow human beings. In other words it prevents us from doing the 2 things which are

most important, loving God and loving the people around us.

Faith seeing beyond

Verse 10 then gives us one of the most inspirational statements about the life of faith. "*For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*"

Imagine how often Abraham must have looked out of his tent at some nearby Canaanite city. He must have thought how much easier and more comfortable it would have been to settle down there in peace. But our text tells us that he lifted up his eyes to a better if more distant city. Abraham must have longed to have foundations under his feet, but he chose a city with eternal foundations, not one which would pass away. He had an eternal perspective; he considered the present in the light of the future. And if we are going to persevere in the Christian life, that is what we must do. We must keep our eyes on that city, because that is our destination, our true home.

Abraham's great sorrow

The problem of course is that, before we get there, we face a journey through life which brings us trials, difficulties and temptations.

"In this world you will have trouble", is how Jesus himself put it.

Faith in Jesus is not like faith in our favourite football team. Faith in our team tends to grow when things are going well and we are on a winning streak. What makes the Christian faith different is that the object of our faith, the Lord Jesus, is always worthy of our trust. And sometimes it is in time of difficulty that our faith grows best.

In verse 11 we touch upon what must have been the greatest sorrow of Abraham's life, his lack of a son. Genesis 15 tells us the story in more detail. In verse 1 God comes to Abraham and gives him tremendous words of encouragement:

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward,"

Imagine hearing those words from God!

However, Abram was less than chuffed and he complained to God:

"O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless?"

Abram's heart is breaking because of the one thing which is dear to him which he does not have. Three things are worth noting about this.

Firstly that Abram is so utterly human

Secondly that God puts up with his complaint

Thirdly that Abram at least is honest. Like the writers of the psalms he does not try to hide his feelings from his God.

Abram's situation is made more poignant by his name which means "father of many".

Donald Barnhouse imagines a scene where Abram meets one of the many passing merchants:

In the evening time the merchants would have come to Abram's tent to pay their respects. The questions would have followed a set pattern:

"How old are you? Who are you? How long have you been here? When the trader had

introduced himself, Abram would have been forced to name himself: “Abram, father of many”.

It must have happened a hundred times, a thousand times, and each time more galling than the time before. “O, father of many, congratulations! And how many sons do you have?” And the answer was always so humiliating to Abram: “None”. And many a time there must have been a half-concealed snort of humour at the name and the lack of children to go with the name. Abram must have steeled himself for the question and the reply, and have hated the situation with great bitterness.

We know what it is like to be in Abram’s shoes whenever there is a have-not that could make us sour. It could be the lack of a partner, lack of children, lack of success, money or good looks that makes us cry to God:

“What can you give me since I do not have this!”

God responded to Abram in 2 ways. Firstly he renewed the promise. And then he appealed to another of Abram’s senses by taking him out under the night sky (and remember there were no city lights to dim the view), and saying to Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. I find the sight of the sky at night awesome, but unlike Abram I’ve never had a personal tour of the heavens from the maker. Abram must have been overwhelmed. It certainly renewed his faith. If God can put all of that into place, then maybe he can also fulfil his promises in my life

The God of promises

Promises are an important part of the way God relates to his children here on earth. If you look at the history of the Israelites in the OT, they were always a people looking beyond the horizon for a promise yet to be fulfilled. In slavery in Egypt they looked for salvation; in their journey across the desert they longed for entry into the Promised Land; in exile they longed for deliverance; at all times they

awaited the arrival of the Messiah. And as NT believers we look for the fulfilment of God's promises too.

God is constantly at work in our lives trying to get us to raise our aspirations. On our own, we might aspire to some happy relationships; God wants us to have a relationship with his Son. On our own, we might want earthly success; he plans for us heavenly glory. On our own we would settle for health and wealth, he promises us life everlasting.

And so it was with Abram. He wanted a son, God planned for him to be the father of a nation. No doubt Abram's ambitions were shaped by the society around him. He wanted to be respected by the other caravan leaders; he wanted to fit in and to feel good. And that was fine as far as it went. But it fell far short of what God intended for him.

And in pursuit of his objectives in Abram's life, God was repeatedly calling Abram, cajoling him onwards, preventing him from settling down and becoming too comfortable.

The faith that waits

When we read the record of God's dealings with Abram, there is perhaps a danger that we make it sound easy for him. We forget that there were apparently long gaps between the times when God spoke to him, and he didn't exactly have a big prayer support group. The years of waiting proved hard.

Sarah in particular found it difficult to wait for God to act. She encouraged Abram to sleep with her maidservant Hagar, who gave birth to a son, Ishmael. The result was conflict between Sarah and Hagar, battling for pride of place in the family.

The problem with Sarah's suggestion and Abraham's action was that they tried to hurry God's promise along to fulfilment by using human power. Abraham was weary of waiting, his wife's discouragement wore away at his resolve, and so he gave up the idea of waiting any longer for the impossible (such an old woman becoming a mother) and took Hagar to his bed.

The Bible is full of exhortation for us to wait on the Lord. Psalm 130 puts it like this:

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning.”

Waiting on God is something which those who walk closely with God have to learn. Spurgeon, writing of the need to hush the spirit and be silent before the Lord, says this:

“Time is nothing to God. Let it be nothing to thee, God is worth waiting for ... Wait in obedience as a servant, in hope as an heir, in expectation as a believer.”

To wait on God is to trust him; it is to commit ourselves to his power, his wisdom and his goodness, knowing that he is faithful. Note that little phrase that Abraham *“considered him faithful who had made the promise.”* Despite his lapses, Abraham gives us a great example of waiting on the Lord in faith.

Names and promises

In OT times names were very important. In the earlier part of Abraham’s life he was actually called Abram, father of many. God changed it to Abraham, father of a nation, and that was before he and Sarah had any children. That was the total commitment which God demanded from Abraham. Sarah had started out with the name Sarai, but God changed her name to Sarah, meaning princess, because she too believed and she too was part of the promise, a mother of nations.

Abraham and Sarah were so human, they both laughed when God insisted that, yes, they would have a son. How wonderful that when Isaac was born they called him Isaac, which means laughter. No longer the laughter which says “You cannot be serious”, but laughter and tears of joy at the power and faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God.

Let us learn to live on the promises we have in Scripture. If I can paraphrase the words of a man of old, Jeremiah Burroughs:

Every time you read the Scriptures, and there meet a promise, you should lay your hand upon it and say: This is part of my inheritance. It is mine, and I am to live upon it.

Perhaps the most wonderful promise for God's people is this:

"I will be your God and you will be my people."

The most wonderful promise from God is the promise of Himself

(In this series on Hebrews 11 I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Richard Phillips and his excellent book on this chapter called "Faith Victorious")