

Hebrews 11:8-19

Living by Faith

By faith Abraham... v. 8

We have seen in the course of our studies of this epistle that the Hebrews were facing the challenge of living by faith. *For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry*, Paul writes in 10:37 *Now the just shall live by faith*. That's a very simple precept and we all know that it's true. But we also know that living by faith becomes a challenge to the believer when the circumstances of life, which are things seen, convey harsh and stern realities while the things believed by faith, which are things unseen, become more abstract and theoretical issues.

And yet it can be done. Paul himself was a striking example of what it meant to live by faith. He could refer to his own numerous afflictions as *light afflictions* which were working for him a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory while he looked not at the things which were seen but at the things which were unseen (2Cor. 4:17). And Paul was not a unique or even rare example of one who lived by faith. This 11th chapter of Hebrews catalogs many more who lived by faith and goes so far as to make some broad generalizations about all those who live by faith. It's as important to note in this 11th chapter of Hebrews those that are unnamed as much as those that are named.

In an earlier study of the WCF in the chapter on faith I referenced Heb 11:13 which tells us *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of [them], and embraced [them], and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth*. This verse provides us a very good definition of true saving faith. There is a cognizant element to faith – *they saw the promises*. There is a persuasive element to faith *they were persuaded of the promises*. And there is a volitional element to faith. In an act of the will we read that *they embraced the promises*. And there is a confessional aspect to faith *they confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth*.

Notice if you will that this verse gives us a generalization about faith. *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off...* What is being discussed in this verse pertains to all that live by faith. And so we've been making our way through this 11th chapter of Hebrews in order to answer a very simple but profound and important question which is simply: What does it mean to live by faith?

We come to consider today how Abraham answers that question for us. We read in v. 8 *By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went*. Abraham is a key figure on the subject of faith. It is said of him first that he believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Abraham and David are key figures used by Paul to teach the doctrine of justification by faith.

Believers are said to be children of Abraham in Gal. 3:7 which means then that Abraham is the father of the faithful. *Abraham rejoiced to see my day* Christ says of him in Jn. 8:56 *and he saw it and was glad*. By looking at these New Testament references to Abraham we're able to see that he believed in Christ, that he understood something of the doctrine of justification by faith. We see in Heb. 11 that he looked forward to heaven and that he believed in God's power to raise the dead.

He certainly stands out, therefore, along with his wife Sarah, as one who can teach us much on the subject of faith. Let's look then more closely at this important character of the Old Testament this morning by considering:

The Lessons that Abraham Teaches Us on the Subject of Faith

I. The Lesson on the World

Look at vv. 8-10 with me: *By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.*⁹ *By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise:*¹⁰ *For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.*

This is a rather strange situation when you think about it. Abraham was given the promise of the land of Canaan and yet he lived in it like a stranger. He *sojourned* in it the text says. The word *sojourned* only occurs twice in the New Testament. It's a verb form for the phrase *be a stranger*.

Albert Barnes makes an interesting observation in his commentary. He writes: The land of Canaan that had been promised to him and his posterity, he resided there as if he were a stranger and sojourner. He had no possessions there which he did not procure by honest purchase; he owned no land except the small piece which he bought for a burial-place. In all respects he lived there as if he had no peculiar right in the soil; as if he never expected to own it; as if he were in a country wholly owned by others. To all intents and purposes he was a stranger. Yet he seems to have lived in the confident and quiet expectation that that land would, at some period, come into the possession of his posterity. It was a strong instance of faith that he should cherish this belief for so long a time, when he was a stranger there — when he gained no right in the soil, except in the small piece that was purchased as a burial-place for his wife — and when he saw old age coming on, and still the whole land in the possession of others.

I have often been struck by the words of Paul pertaining to Abraham in Rom. 4 where he writes in v. 13 *For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, [was] not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.* Underscore that phrase *heir of the world* that it is much more encompassing than to say he was to be heir of a portion of the Middle-East. And when you view Abraham as being an heir of the world then you can appreciate that this is an inheritance that we, as Christians,

will share with him. *Blessed are the meek*, Christ says in the beatitudes, *for they shall inherit the earth*. And yet, like Abraham, we have no possessions in this world outside of what we're able to purchase along the way. The inhabitants of this world don't yield to us as if we're anybody special. Like Abraham we are strangers and sojourners in this world. And yet again, like Abraham, we recognize a certain claim to this world in the sense that it will be Christ's followers, in the end (for those are the ones who are the meek) who will inherit the earth.

What then, does Abraham teach us pertaining to our faith? He teaches us to keep a loose grip on the things of this world. He teaches us not to set our affections on the things of this world. We begin to see a pattern emerging in Hebrews 11 in this respect. We considered in our last study how Noah condemned the world by building the ark. Now we see regarding Abraham that he was a stranger and sojourner in the world.

And the way to keep the world in the right perspective is to learn the lesson Abraham teaches us on the right expectations in this world. Abraham's expectation is given to us in verse 10 *For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker [is] God*. Abraham knew that this world was to undergo a complete and thorough transformation. Old things would pass away and all things would become new.

Peter tells us in his second epistle that our expectation is the same and that it's based on the same promise. 2Pe 3:13 *Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness*. I cannot deny that when I think of all the misery that this present world affords this expectation of new heavens and a new earth comforts and thrills my soul.

No more will we be called upon to pray for babies that are born with cancer that have to undergo such trauma to be healed. No more will nation rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. No more will we have to live with the constant reminder that this present world is under a curse and the evidence of that curse is apparent when we read or hear in the news of floods and storms, hurricanes and forest fires. All of the current hype that is prevalent on the subject of global warming should serve to remind us that this present world is passing and a new world is coming.

And when that new world arrives then will we, as Christians, be perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God forever. Then will we praise God as we ought – then will we know holiness as we ought – then will we know communion with our God as we ought and then will sin be once and for all left behind us and the saints of God will be perfectly united in the fear of God and love of Christ.

What does Abraham's faith teach us then? It teaches us to be a forward looking people. That in itself sets us apart from the world. How many are there in the world and especially is this true of baby-boomers, they are so fond of reminiscing on the past as if to suggest that there use to be the good old days. I view those days myself as being days of sin and misery and there's nothing about them that I glory in. Indeed I thank God that he saved me from those "good old days."

So Abraham's faith teaches us to look forward to a better world to come. It also teaches us to keep a loose grip on the things of this world. Listen to the words of Ps 62:10 *Trust not in oppression, and become not vain in robbery: if riches increase, set not your heart [upon them]*. If the things of this world seem terrible, keep in mind that for the believer this is all the misery that we're ever going to know. And if the things of this world seem glamorous and appealing, keep in mind that earthly treasures are corruptible and transient and only what we do for Christ will have lasting value.

So we have this lesson on the world taught to us by Abraham's faith. Would you consider with me next that we also have:

II. A Lesson in Theology

Reference is made to Sara, Abraham's wife in v. 11. Notice what it says: *Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised*. Notice this theological statement – *she judged him faithful who had promised*. She believed, in other words, in a covenant keeping God who is faithful to his word.

This theological aspect of Sara's faith was something that she had in common with her husband, Abraham. Listen to the words of Rom. 4:20-22 Making reference to Abraham it says that *He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;*²¹ *And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.*²² *And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness*. Isn't this tantamount to saying that Abraham judged God to be faithful also? What he has promised he is able to perform.

When I noticed this statement about Sara and then compared it to the statement about Abraham in Romans 4 it occurred to me that this is the kind of theology that every married couple needs to have in common. Here is something that is foundational to a successful and happy marriage – husband and wife both believe in the faithfulness of God.

And it's important that both husband and wife believe this so when one of them wavers the other can take up the slack, so to speak. And if you've read the narrative in the book of Genesis about Abraham and Sara then you know that there were times when each one of them wavered. There was even a time when they both wavered. I'm reminded of the time when Sara gave her handmaid to Abraham that he might have children by her. They felt in that instant that God needed a little help in order to keep his promise.

Then there was that occasion when the angels visited Abraham, in Gen. 18, shortly before they embarked on their mission to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Sara laughed at the notion that she would ever bear a child. She was beyond child-bearing years. And yet our text in Heb. 11 tells us, nevertheless, that she judged him faithful who had promised. And so while Abraham and Sara judged him to be faithful and believed that God was able to perform what he promised, there were, nevertheless, times when doubts gripped their hearts.

This is why I say that it's so important for the husband and the wife to believe in the faithfulness of God. They are able, then, to encourage each other. They are able to minister and uphold each other. They are able to lift each other up when one or the other of them falls prey to doubts and fears.

Let me say also while I'm on this point that in spite of how popular the notion of faith has become in our culture today, the value of a man or woman's faith can only be measured by the object of their faith. I'm aware that there are studies that show certain psychological benefits to having faith in anything or in any God. The important thing in our culture today is only that you have faith – it doesn't matter all that much what you believe in as long as you have faith in something.

At the end of the day this generic kind of faith amounts to little more than faith in faith. Faith in faith would certainly not do for the Hebrews to whom this letter was written. They were being sorely tried and afflicted. They were being duped into believing that all they needed to do was to place their faith in the obsolete and apostate religion of Judaism. Were they to do so, they might have been able to escape some difficulties in their present lives but there would be nothing left for them but a certain looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.

What they needed, therefore, was the reminder and the encouragement of knowing that their faith was rightly placed in Christ. And by being rightly placed in Christ they were trusting the one who was true to his promises. They were trusting the one who had gone through the same fiery trials they were now going through and had prevailed. They were trusting the one who was seated at the right hand of God having purged their sins. They were trusting the one who had all power and authority committed to him who was faithfully making intercession for them even in the midst of their trials.

Do you begin to see why theology is so important to our faith? The more we learn of our Savior the greater will be our confidence in him. The more we contemplate what he himself endured for our salvation, then the more we'll identify with him in our own sufferings and the more we'll be convinced that he identifies with us in our sufferings.

Abraham and Sara both held exalted views of their God. Indeed we're told something in Heb. 11:19 that we're not told in the narrative of Genesis. We're told that when Abraham's faith was tested by God by the commandment of God to Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, upon the altar, Abraham accounted that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.

It would have seemed to the fleshly eye to have been a nullifying of God's promise to Abraham by having Abraham slay this child of promise that had at last arrived. But Abraham knew that could never be. God would never nullify his promise. And so if Abraham is to slay his son it must mean that God would raise him up even though such a miracle had never taken place at that period of time.

Here is the kind of faith, we need, then – faith that is grounded in the greatness of our God. In a sense we have things easier in our day than Abraham had in his day. We know

that God is all powerful and can raise the dead. We have the testimony of God's word in the Bible. We know that God can make a way in the wilderness for his people to go forward. We know that God can empower his people to do exploits and we know that God can empower his people to overcome the world. The best lesson we can draw from Abraham's faith, therefore, is the lesson that we need to hold our God in the same estimation of his greatness that Abraham held him. To the degree that we recognize our God and our Savior to be great and highly exalted to that same degree we will persevere in our faith even when the waiting time is long and the trials become severe.

So we find in Abraham's faith a lesson pertaining to the world – how we're to regard the world and live in this present world. We also have a theological lesson conveyed to us by Abraham and Sara. Would you consider finally that we also find

III. A Lesson in Obedience

We certainly see very plainly in the example of Abraham that his faith was not an empty or a dead faith. His faith, rather, was very active. So we read in v. 8 that *By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.*

Do you see here the connection between his obedience and his faith? It's very important to know the right connection between these two things. Abraham's obedience sprang from his faith. He did not render obedience in order to gain God's favor, he rendered obedience, rather, because he knew he was the recipient of God's favor. He was not saved by works, in other words, but he was saved by a faith that produced works.

This is why James in his epistle makes reference to Abraham the same way Paul makes reference to him in Romans. *Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone* James writes in 2:17. And in order to prove his point he makes reference to Abraham. *Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?*

This is not to say that faith is the grounds for salvation. Faith is never the grounds for salvation. Christ is the grounds for salvation. Christ's life and death are the meritorious cause for salvation. Faith is the means through which we receive what Christ has done and so if we truly believe in what Christ has done our faith in him will become evident in our lives by what we do and by what we refrain from doing.

And so in the obedience of faith Abraham was willing to go wherever God would lead him even if it meant he was not sure where he was going. And when God called upon him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Abraham obeyed and he obeyed without question or argument about what God was doing.

It's important to understand that this last point we're now considering on the obedience of faith springs from what we've considered already. In other words – it was because of Abraham's view of the world that he was willing to go wherever God directed him to go. Abraham did not keep such a firm grip of his worldly possessions that he considered it

impossible to answer the call of God to depart from his homeland. He had to have understood in his heart that it will profit a man nothing to gain the whole world and lose his own soul.

And it was because of his view of God's faithfulness and God's power that he was able to do whatever God called upon him to do. He knew that God would still be faithful to his promise even after Abraham would slay his son, Isaac. And he knew that God was able to raise the dead and that he would raise up Isaac before he would forfeit his own faithfulness.

This is what makes it so important for the Christian to have the proper view of the world and the proper understanding of God if that Christian would render the right kind of obedience to God. I dare say that our lack of faith very often can be traced to a wrong or inordinate view of the world or it can be traced to a lack of appreciation for some aspect of the character of God.

And so the matter becomes very plain that if we would cultivate our faith then we must increase in our knowledge of God. Contrary to popular belief theology becomes very useful and practical. And if we would cultivate our faith then we must fight against being conformed to this world and we must strive instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.