

Hebrews 11:8-22 “Faith and the Promised Inheritance”
Genesis 50
Psalm 105

May 9, 2021

Do you remember the story of Joseph?

His brothers didn't like him very much,
so they tied him up and sold him into slavery.
(And you think your brothers and sisters are hard to live with?!)
But then the king set him free and made him lord of his house,
ruler over all his possessions.
Joseph was given authority over the whole land of Egypt.

You might think that Joseph had “arrived.”
He could have whatever he wanted.
You name it, Joseph got it.
And yet what did Joseph want?

Joseph wanted to be buried in the promised land.
He had risen to power in Egypt.
He had turned Egypt from the land of slavery and death
to a land of life and blessing.
But this wasn't his home.
He was looking for a heavenly country—
a better inheritance than the most powerful realm in all the world.

And he says to his brothers,
“I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land
to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Joseph understood that the promises to Abraham Isaac and Jacob
were more important than anything in the world.

His own bitterness toward his brothers was healed –
not because he “got over it” – but because he came to see that what they meant for evil,
God intended for good.

He began to see that what happened to him was a part of God's purposes
in bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

We sing about this in Psalm 105 –
which recounts the story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – and Joseph –
reminding us that God is faithful to his promises!

Sing Psalm 105
Read Hebrews 11

What does faith look like?

We saw last time that faith is the eye of the soul.
By faith we see that which is unseen.
So faith is a sort of spiritual vision,
that enables you to see beyond the testimony of your senses.

But what does faith look like?

Our text today helps us to understand what faith looks like.
Faith looks like Abraham.

Verses 8-22 consists of three parts,
verses 8-12 starts off, "By faith Abraham,"
verses 17-22 open the same way, "By faith Abraham,"
and in the middle comes the central section (verses 13-16)
about the heavenly country that we seek by faith.

1. Abraham: Faith and the Promised Inheritance (11:8-12)

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

What does the faith of Abraham look like?

"By faith Abraham obeyed"
Saving faith is an obedient faith.

Our Confession helps us understand faith better.

The principal acts of saving faith are
"accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification,
sanctification, and eternal life."

But it also says that saving faith responds to God's word by
"yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings,
and embracing the promises of God for this life,
and that which is to come." (14.2)

And in support of this, the Confession cites Hebrews 11:13!

By faith we obey God.

Last week I told you that if you want to please God,
then you should *not* focus on “doing your duty.”

That’s important!

You will never be good enough to please God!

God does not take pleasure in a works mentality.

When your *focus* is on “doing your duty”
then you will never do well enough.

But when your focus is looking forward, like Abraham,
then you will obey God’s commands

And if you noticed how our confession puts it,
it is *not* the case that first you believe, and then you obey.

No, that’s not how it works.

Rather, it is faith itself that “yields obedience.”

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to out to a place
that he was to receive as an inheritance.”

A saving faith is a living and active faith.

To put it simply, faith responds to the grace and call of God
in whatever manner is appropriate.

Precisely because you *believe* what God has said,
therefore the response of faith is to *do* what God has said.

Abraham is a good case study of this.

And our text gives three examples of Abraham’s faith.

The first two in verses 8-12 deal with the two primary benefits
of God’s promise to Abraham: land and seed.

First, Abraham was called to go to a place he would receive—someday.

“By faith (v9) he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land,
living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.”

Abraham’s life was an unsettled life.

The very place that was to be his inheritance was a “foreign land” to him.

And so Abraham lived as a migrant nomad,
together with Isaac and Jacob,
who were also heirs of the same promise.

What has God promised to Jesus for his inheritance?

The whole earth.
That means that all of creation is *our* inheritance in Christ!
Like Abraham – we are called to live by faith in a world that seems very foreign!
and yet is the Promised Land.
God’s purpose is to transform all creation –
but every time Israel got focused on the inheritance rather than on God himself,
the result was *not so good!*
And Hebrews says that the same is true for us.

What does it mean to live by faith?

(v10) It means to be looking forward “to the city that has foundations,
whose designer and builder is God.”

Again we see that faith is a sort of spiritual vision.

Faith enables you to see that our present sufferings cannot be compared
with the future glory.

“This light momentary affliction” Paul says “is preparing for us
an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” (2 Cor 4:17)

Remember this!

It’s not that there is this temporary suffering (yuck) –
so just put up with it because something better is coming!

No, all of scripture unites in the testimony that this affliction
is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory.

My African-American friends have taught me much regarding this.

What did it mean for Abraham

when he heard that his descendants would be slaves for 400 years?

What did it mean for Isaac and Jacob

to hear that the Promised Land would remain a promise for their whole lives.

“Listen, son, this land will be yours someday – 400 years after you are dead.”

It’s hard to argue with Esau,

who sold his birthright for a pot of stew!

That pot of stew was worth more than Esau’s inheritance until long after he was dead!

God was teaching his people to plan for a distant future –

a future that will only come long after they are dead!

But verse 10 makes clear that Abraham was “looking forward to the city that has foundations,
whose designer and builder is God.”

Abraham’s faith was in Christ.

Not that Abraham understood everything.

But Abraham’s faith was an eschatological faith–

he believed that God would do what he promised:
he was looking for that which was secured
by the death of Christ as the mediator of the new covenant.

And likewise, by faith Sarah received power to conceive, even when she was past age,
since she considered him faithful who had promised. (v11)

Sure – when she first heard the promise, she laughed!
But when she *considered* who it was who had promised,
she believed –
and so *by faith* she received power to conceive.

And thus we see that *Sarah's faith* was necessary for *Abraham* to receive the promise:
“Therefore (v12) from one man, and him as good as dead,
was born descendants as many as the stars of heaven
and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Without Sarah's faith, we would not remember Abraham!

We very rarely catch a glimpse of the ‘what if’s.’
But occasionally we do.
After Solomon turned away from the LORD,
God told Jeroboam, son of Nebat, in 1 Kings 11,
that if Jeroboam was faithful in walking before God as David did,
then God would give to Jeroboam a “sure house, as I built for David.”
Jeroboam did *not* walk faithfully,
and so God took the northern kingdom away from Jeroboam.

So are there times when our disobedience cuts off fruitful paths that we could have walked?
Of course!
Sin has consequences.
The wages of sin is death!
But even more importantly, repentance leads to life!
As we've been seeing in the Isaiah series in the evening service,
repentance means that the promised disaster won't happen yet!
As long as there is life, there is hope!

That's why faith trembles at the threatenings,
and that's why faith *obeys* the commands of God!

Faith is not blind.
Faith sees the disaster that is coming –
but faith recognizes that God is the one who governs all things.

Faith does not look at circumstances.
Faith looks at the promises of God.
Is God faithful?
Then walk by faith!

2. Faith and the Heavenly City (11:13-16)

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

And Hebrews tells us that these all died in faith.

Verses 13-16 serve as the central statement of this section.
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—and in them all the heirs of the promises—
died in faith.

They had not received the things promised.

They lived in the promised land, but they lived there as strangers and exiles.
But they were not just exiles in the promised land,
they were exiles on the earth.

Hebrews understands that they were not merely looking for a piece of real estate,
they were looking for a heavenly country.

Abraham understood that the promise of the land
was about the restoration of the rule of God over his people
“In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”

How could Abraham take that as a narrow promise?!
As though God’s purposes were only about one family?

Verse 15 points out that faith is always juxtaposed with shrinking back.

Shrinking back (as we heard at the end of chapter 10:38-39) is always a danger.

Those who are called to live by faith are called to live contrary to their eyes.

When Abraham looked around the land of Canaan
he saw lots of reasons not to believe.

He saw many powerful rulers.

He saw wickedness increasing in the land.

These people are *never* going to believe God and obey him!

It would have been easy for him to return to Ur or Haran—
he had opportunity to return.

Hebrews is pointing out that faith, by its very nature, exists in the context of testing.

When you look around – what do you see?
You see many powerful rulers –
you see wickedness increasing in the land!

These people are *never* going to believe God and obey him!

It is so tempting to “go back” – return to our old way of living –
it just doesn’t seem like this “Christian” thing is going to work...

What keeps you going when your faith is tested?
When you look around you and see the triumph of the wicked,
how do you hold fast to the confession of your hope?

It is only because you desire a better country!
You see, by faith, the heavenly city that God has established in Jesus.
In the end, that is the difference between those who persevere in faith until the end,
and those who shrink back and are destroyed.
Those who shrink back are, in the end, blind to that heavenly city.

They cannot see any end to the miseries of this life.

But those who have faith endure through various trials.
Yes, you may be tempted sometimes to throw away your confidence–
and return to your former way of life–
but in the end you see Jesus.

The end of verse 16 is simply lovely:
Therefore God is not ashamed to be to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

There are few words that mean as much as the words,
“I’m proud of you – I’m proud to be called your father.”
When a child hears that from their father, they are flying high!
And in the same way, there are few words that sting as deeply as,
“I’m ashamed of you – I’m ashamed to be called your father.”

Our postmodern culture wants to say that parents should never say
that they are ashamed of their children.
But that is a bunch of hooley –
and everyone knows it!

“My son is a mass murderer! I’m so proud of him!”

Proverbs 19:26 says “He who does violence to his father and chases away his mother
is a son who brings shame and reproach.”

If we want honor to mean something, then we also need to call shame *shame!*

The child who *always* hears “I’m proud of you” –
and *never* hears “I’m disappointed in you” –
will either grow up with a swelled head,
or else will grow up to think that his parents are obviously lying –
because deep down inside *he knows* that he has acted badly.

And because God himself speaks truth – because he is truth –
we find it all the more surprising that
“God is not ashamed to be called our God”!

God – the holy and righteous God – is not ashamed to be called “their God”?!!

No, he is not!

Why not?

Because they are such a remarkable example of humanity?!!

No.

Because he has prepared for them a city.

We need to teach our children the meaning of honor and shame.

After all, they *already know it!*

They feel keenly that they have fallen short in their actions –
and they understand *very well* that they have acted shamefully.

What they need to understand is *not* that we are proud of them no matter what they do!
That’s hogwash.

God is not proud of us *no matter what we do* –
the only reason why God is not ashamed to be called our God –
is because *he did* what we could not possibly do for ourselves!

“for he has prepared for them a city.”

And therefore we do not teach our children that they *always make us proud!*

They know better than that!

No, we teach our children that Jesus has prepared for us a city –
and therefore God is not ashamed to be called our God –
not because *we* are so wonderful,
but because, by faith, *we see Jesus.*

It is that eschatological aspect of faith–
that forward-looking hope–

that is highlighted in our third section.

3. Abraham: Faith and the Resurrection (11:17-21)

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

When God told Abraham to take his son – his only son – Isaac – whom he loved,
and sacrifice him at Mt. Moriah –
Abraham believed God.

How could Abraham do this?

You gotta understand that Abraham was in a very different place from us!
If I heard a voice saying “sacrifice your son” –
I’d be like, *Get behind me, Satan!*
Cause that’s just *wrong!!*

But Abraham had been told that Isaac would be the one
through whom the inheritance would come.
And Abraham believed God’s promises.
And so when God told him to sacrifice his only son–
the promised seed–the one through whom the inheritance would come!
Abraham believed that God could raise his son from the dead.
And that is what happened, figuratively.
Literally, Isaac never died.
But figuratively, Isaac’s life was forfeited.
Abraham offered his son on the altar,
and God restored him to life,
ransoming Isaac’s life with the life of the ram.

In other words,

faith is all about the resurrection.

When it comes to believing something that runs counter to what we see,
the resurrection is the ultimate in the unbelievable.

By sight, I know that my mother’s body is cold and lifeless.

By sight, I know that my mother’s body lies six feet underground.

I watched as the casket was lowered into the grave sixteen years ago next week.

By sight, I know that even now, my mother’s body is decaying into dust.

So if you want to talk about faith,
talk about the resurrection of the dead.

Conclusion: Faith and Joseph's Bones (v22)

It is this faith in the resurrection that motivated all of the fathers.

How well did they understand this?

We don't know.

But by faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

By faith Jacob blessed the sons of Joseph.

And by faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites
and gave directions concerning his bones.

Why did Joseph insist on being buried in Canaan?

Why did Joseph refuse to be buried in Egypt?

Was it just a nostalgic wish to be buried with his mother?

No.

Joseph understood the promises.

Joseph believed the promises.

God had promised that his blessing would come to all nations
through the promised seed,

as that promised seed dwelt in the promised land.

He wanted his bones to be buried there as a token of the hope of the resurrection.

Life comes to the people of God *here*.

The land was a picture of that heavenly country,

and Joseph wanted to be as close to that heavenly country as he could get!

He had spent his life in the land of slavery and death (Egypt).

His bones would spend his death in the land of life and promise (Canaan).

Joseph knew from Great-Grandpa Abraham that it would be 400 years
before his descendants would return to the promised land.

But that was the thing that mattered most to him.

What does it mean for *you* to live by faith?

It means that you put everything into perspective.

Whether you have a great career—like Joseph in Egypt—

or whether you are a wandering nomad like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
faith reorients your priorities.

By faith we see that we are citizens of a heavenly city.