

September 14, 2008

“The Race / The Promise”

As we continue our journey exploring the spiritual race of faith that we are called to run, I would like to first retrace our steps. We began with an exploration of faith and what it is. It is the assurance of what is hoped for; which is heaven; it is the certainty of what is not seen; which is God and His promises. It is what gives us the understanding that God is creator of all. And finally, it is faith that the ancients were commended for.

This is what Hebrews 11 is all about. It's a list of the ancients or the great pillars of faith found in scripture. The first pillar that we looked at was Abel who gave his first fruits to the Lord and died as a result of it. We also looked at five missionaries to Ecuador, one of whom was Jim Elliott, who gave their lives as an offering for the sake of bringing the gospel to the Waodani Tribe. Last week it was Noah, a senior citizen who was called to build an ark. An ark; something which he didn't know; because of something he hadn't seen; which was rain. Rain that would fall and destroy all living creatures that had the breath of life in it. His contemporary senior citizen of faith was Polycarp of Smyrna, who faithfully served the Lord even at the age of 86; even when it meant death.

Today we look at one of the biggest figures of the Bible. Abraham, who also happens to take up the largest portion of Hebrews 11. How was Abraham's faith displayed? First of all when we look at Hebrews 11, verse 8, we see “by faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.” You know the story, its right there in Genesis, Chapter 12. Abram was living in Heron, and God said, “Leave your country, your people, and fathers household and go to the land I will show you.” Why should Abraham do this? Well God made it very clear, we see in Genesis 12, verses 2 & 3, God makes a promise. He says, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse and all peoples will be blessed through you.” So Abram who was 75 years old, packed up and left, he “lived like a stranger in a foreign country.” Not many people are willing to pack up and move at the age of 75. Yet Abraham did because he had faith and he was certain

of what he hadn't seen, the promised land, and the promise of offspring and descendants, which is the second mark of Abraham's faith. As a result of his faith, he did become a father. Though, as the writer to the Hebrews said, "he was as good as dead." It was by faith that Abraham looked forward to, "a better country, a heavenly one." This is the assurance that we too are to have. Finally, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son. This was the ultimate test of faith. Consider what God had promised and Abraham had faithfully believed; leave the land; I will bless you; I will give you a son; through him your descendants will outnumber the stars of the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore and through your descendants, all nations will be blessed by the coming messiah. Of course, all this hinges on one specific thing; that he would have a son. It is difficult to have descendants if that son is dead. But Abraham showed where his love truly was and that he loved God above all else. Abraham also showed phenomenal faith. He knew God had promised these things, and he knew God would fulfill them. How could this be, if Isaac was dead? The answer is in Hebrews 11:19. "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead." In other words, Abraham's logic was that God had promised him a son through Sarah and since God had promised that the blessing would come through this son, if Abraham killed him, God would bring him back to life. Now that is faith!

Ghorban Dordi Touranie had a similar faith. He was born in Iran and raised in a good Muslim family. He was married and began a family but he left Iran to seek a better job in Turkmenistan. On the surface it looked like it was a terrible move. Ghorban got in a heated argument and killed someone with a knife. He was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison where he became known as the evil prisoner. However in that same prison, there was a Russian who was incarcerated because of his Christian faith. This Christian befriended Ghorban and was transferred to his cell. He shared the message of the Bible with Ghorban who didn't want anything to do with it. As time went by, Ghorban became impressed though with his cellmate. Not only did his cellmate speak of love and forgiveness, he lived it, and was a man of peace in prison. Ghorban finally confessed his sins and turned to God for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. He asked the warden if he could hold devotions and evangelistic meetings. The warden, amazed at the changes in Ghorban's life said, "because the God you worship has changed your life in such a dramatic way, I will give you permission."

When Ghorban was released, he went back to Iran to share the good news with his family. Only his wife would believe. His own brother slashed him in the face with a knife because of this witness. Ghorban attended a Bible training program to become more equipped as an evangelist, a teacher and a pastor. And for seven years, he labored in God's vineyards in Iran and baptized many a convert. Many times he was threatened by Islamic religious leaders, but he continued to preach. In mid November of 2005, he was invited to a meeting of local religious leaders to share his faith and answer questions that some of them had. Excited about the prospect of being able to share his faith with these religious leaders and answer their questions, he gladly went. He was disappointed however, when he realized that all they wanted to do, was tell him to return to the Islamic faith and stop his preaching. Ghorban's response was simple, "I am not going to deny Jesus." A week went by and he got a call from one of those leaders who said that over the course of that week he had been moved by what Ghorban had said. He wanted to meet privately with Ghorban, much like Nicodemus had met with Jesus at night. He too was afraid of the religious leaders. They decided to meet in a park after the sun had gone down. Ghorban went to that park excited again, but again became disappointed. The cleric never showed. And so Ghorban began the walk home. As he approached his house, three men jumped out of a parked car and grabbed him. One thrust a knife in his back, another thrust a knife into his stomach, while the third, slashed his throat. People heard the commotion and they began streaming out of their houses. The three men standing over Ghorban's body yelled to all of them and said, "this is the punishment of those who become infidels and reject Islam." They then climbed into their car and sped away. Ghorban's wife hearing the commotion outside also came out of her house and pushed her way through the crowd that had assembled. Kneeling down beside her dead husband, she looked at the crowd and said, "Oh people, remember that Ghorban is a Christian Martyr who laid down his life for the sake of Christ." She did not want Ghorban's death to be the last message. She did not want the threat of Islam to be the last message. She was willing to be a stranger among all those people, completely different from all of them. A single Christian, to share the good news of Jesus just as her husband had with all of those individuals surrounding her.

Abraham was called to live as a stranger in the land that was promised to him. Ghorban Dordi Touranie was called to be a stranger in his homeland for the sake of Christ. Both left what was comfortable because of God's call. It is my prayer that the next time we see a neighbor, a friend, or a family member, that we know is not saved, that we also heed God's call to go and make disciples of all nations. That we will leave our comfort zone, and follow God's call to share His Word.

In our Savior's name, Amen