
Growing in Faith through Genesis

Hebrews 11:1-22

What an amazing time we have had studying Genesis together. I sense from many of you that it has been a mutual delight, mine in the preparing and preaching and yours in the discovering and doing. This morning once again, I want to preach through Genesis. Not from Genesis itself, but rather by preaching from Hebrews 11.

The word “faith” does not occur in Genesis. The word “believe” as it relates to God occurs one time and that in Genesis 15:6. “And he [Abraham] believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.” The word “please” or its forms is only used one time in reference to God and that in Genesis 8:21, “And the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma [of Noah’s sacrifice], the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground...’”

Yet, we have 22 verses of Hebrews 11 that will insist people did what they did *by faith* and that it was *pleasing* to the Lord. For example, Abel offers a better sacrifice, Enoch pleases God in His walk and Noah builds an ark. Now I want to show you how important it is that we know our Old Testaments and that we always go back to look at texts that are quoted by New Testament writers. Do you know the surprising thing when you go back to these accounts in Genesis? *Not one of them mentions faith.*

Now that is a problem. How does the author of Hebrews know these men did what they did by faith? Remember, he is not arguing for the nature of faith from these texts. He is not saying, “Because I find faith mentioned in these stories, therefore faith must be the way they please God.” His argument is just the opposite. He sees faith in the stories, not because it is mentioned, but because these men did please God. There is no other way to please Him than by faith. Look at Hebrews 11:6, “And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

Listen to the Divine logic here:

- *ASSERTION*: Only when we believe God in an obeying way do we please God. Faith is the only way to please God.
- *OBSERVATION*: Enoch pleased God because God took him up to heaven.
- *CONCLUSION*: Enoch had faith.

Therefore, these saints in Genesis do what they do by faith. Why? Because that is the only way to please God. Verses 1-2 prepare us to see this in them:

They have *confidence* in what they believe God for and thus they have hope.

They are *convinced* of what is not seen and thus they hope in God.

They are *commended* through their faith and thus they wait for God

Faith Accepts God's Word Implicitly (v.3)

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Faith is how we understand what the Bible tells us. Hebrews shows that it is by faith that we understand. It is neither a blind leap nor some mystical thing arising from nowhere – rather, it is an understanding of what the Bible says. Here, the Bible says that God created all that is made by His very own speaking. This is something we can only know from the Bible. Yet not everyone who reads or even knows the Bible, believes in an understanding way this truth. What is the difference between those who do and those who don't? The gift of faith by God. It is not because they are more intellectual or less sinful. It is sheer grace giving faith so that by it, we understand.

Faith helps us draw conclusions from that understanding. Genuine faith is assured of and convinced by the Genesis record that God created everything. Since all that is seen was created by all that is unseen, then the unseen is real. You must never equate unseen with unreal. That is doubt. Faith affirms the unseen is real. So, God exists. God made. God promises. In His promises, God describes what I cannot see and what I do not yet have and yet it is real and will come to pass.

And it is so real, that you sense its flavor, its smell, its taste right now. This not because you dream it up or conjure it up by human effort or imagination or technique. But rather you read it in God's Word. You believe it because of God. Then what the Word of God speaks of is real – broken like sweet bread and poured out like refreshing water and the spiritual taste of your heart is awakened. All that God promises and gives, you are expecting now with confidence and assurance.

By faith we believe that God created everything by His Word.

Faith Comes to God Acceptably (v.4)

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

Abel offers a better sacrifice. He sacrifices a lamb and does so by faith – that is his offering of the lamb has in it the essence of his hope and is the evidence what is not seen. When Abel brings his sacrifice, he knows for sure that what he is doing is pointing forward to something unseen to come later. He does not expect this lamb to save. He is utterly convinced with an unshakable assurance that God will send a Lamb. On that and with this lamb, he sets his hope. So, Abel comes to worship God in God's way. He brings a sacrifice. He knows that he will only be accepted because of God's own provision of sacrifice. His faith alone brings into his soul the testimony affirming that he stands righteous in God's sight.

How is it that Abel still speaks? He speaks through the Word. We read his story in the Word. We believe it is true. We see the story line leading us to Jesus, the Lamb who came to take away the sins of the world. We see Him crucified and resurrected. And it is real in our souls – so real we rest on and hope in that work alone for the saving of our souls. Genuine faith then conveys to our souls a sense of assurance and confidence that we are saved now and will be saved in the Day of Judgment. We have understood that the Word is still speaking in the Scriptures.

By faith we come to God through the sacrifices He accepts, that is His Son, Jesus Christ.

Faith Walks with God Commendably (v.5-6)

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

By faith, Enoch pleased God. How did he please God? Genesis 6:21-24 says that Enoch walked with God. God publicly commended Enoch's pleasing walk by taking him out of the world, but not through death. Now again notice, by faith Enoch's walk with God had in it both the essence of pleasing God and the evidence that pleasing God is worthwhile. His walk with God had the fragrance of heaven and proved that God was real. It pleased God and delighted Him. So, God rewarded Enoch's faith by taking him directly to paradise.

Imagine having the kind of communion and fellowship and walk with God that has in it here on earth the essence of heaven. How amazing it is to know, to have an unshakable assurance that we are living in such a way that it brings pleasure to God. When we live like this, we show that pleasing God is better than anything else. God encourages this in others by putting His stamp of approval on it.

Enoch encourages us to believe God's promise to take us to be with Himself. We often think of this as going to heaven. That is also how the Bible frames it. But from the Bible and hopefully for us, we recognize that the reason heaven attracts us and draws us to be pleasing to God is because God is there. By faith, following Enoch's example, we believe that we will be with God for eternity.

By faith we walk with God so as to be pleasing to Him while we look forward in hope to being with Him.

Faith Fears God Reverently (v.7)

⁷ By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

The faith of a believer affects him in his whole person.

Mind – Noah was warned. He heard God's Word.

Affections – Noah was moved with fear. What he heard guided his affections.

Will – He built a boat. His belief in what God said caused him to work.

Noah was warned about something he had never seen – a flood and possibly even, rain. He believed God about what he could not see and bowed in holy fear before the promises and the power of God and built a boat. Noah's obedient faith was a witness. Noah preached and proclaimed and warned. What he said was backed up by how he lived. He was utterly convinced that God was going to do what He said He would and had an unshakable assurance that this boat he was building was how God would deliver him and his family.

Noah's boat building faith and world warning witness had in it the essence of God's holy and soon coming wrath. It smelled of judgment waiting in the oven. It stood off the page of the chaos and evil around him as evidence that God existed and that all the world must answer to Him. What he did showed that he was an heir of righteousness.

By faith we revere God so as to do the hard work He requires.

Faith Obeys God Immediately (v.8)

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.

The Word of God came to Abraham, telling him to leave the land he is in and to travel to a destination that would be identified later. By faith, Abraham obeyed and went, going to what was promised not knowing where it was.

This is the kind of call every person who becomes a Christian receives. The Word of God (now located in the Scriptures), tells us to leave our sins, our security, our safety, our wealth, our pleasures and to begin a risky, dangerous, hard, and joyful journey to another land. It is a place we do not know where it is, what it really looks like and getting there will eventually require dying. But it is the land where God is, where we will see and dwell with God, the land where all that He promises to us will be fulfilled. And so, by faith, we believe and obey. We forsake houses and lands, if necessary, family and friends. By believing in an obeying way, we head heavenward. And we patiently persevere and do not go back.

By faith we are poised to obey God without hesitation no matter how hard it is.

Faith Sojourns Here Anticipatively (v.9-10)

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.

Abraham arrived and lived as a stranger and an alien in the very land he was promised. He was an example of the temporary nature of living in the land by living in tents. After all, this was the Promised Land, but not yet. Do you see? Though he was an heir and owner, he was living in between the promise and the fulfillment. He lived it and so did his sons.

And so do we. We, like Abraham, are living in between the promise and fulfillment. This life we live now by faith, we live here constantly in transition, never really being settled down and at home. We, if you will, spiritually live in tents. We are sojourners, aliens, away from home. And we must pass this way of living on to our sons and daughters, to the next generation of believers.

What is it that drives this kind of living? Abraham lived his whole life, moving about in Israel, quietly marking off his heritage and the boundaries of his promise, *while his gaze was fixed on the city God designs and builds*. He lives in obedience between the promise and the fulfillment because the eyes of his faith can see what God has promised and is still yet preparing. Because he is looking forward, he is neither distracted by the present nor tempted to return to what he has left behind.

Here is the lesson the author intends for us. Those whose faith leaves and lives with a strong sense of being a pilgrim will fix the gaze of their souls on their Redeemer and His heavenly reward. We are looking forward by faith to the fulfillment God has promised. We will persevere with grace enabled patience in the temptations to sin and the testing of suffering. What we have left behind we will not go back to. And what surrounds us now will not distract us. We will live now with our eyes set on Christ and our hearts fixed on heaven.

By faith we live here in this world as pilgrims and aliens, looking forward to our heavenly home.

Faith Experiences Promises Presently (v.11-12)

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.

Sarah's faith is grounded in the character of God. She heard the promise of her having a son. She carefully evaluated the faithfulness of God. She believed God and received the power to open her womb and bear a child. As is evident all through the Bible, the enabling power of God, that is, His grace, flows through faith to people.

Her consideration of the faithfulness of God is being highlighted. She studied and weighed the integrity of the God who made the promise (and yes, laughed at her own age and inability). But her belief was not just a fantasy wish, nor did it create the reality hoped for. It had content – you will bear a son. It had an object – a promising God who is truthful and faithful. It carefully weighed the impossibility of her situation and the greatness of her God, then believing that God was real and rewarded, she was intimate with her husband and got pregnant.

Here is the grand thing about this kind of faith – it may receive what is promised in the moment *and* it may bring immeasurable results later. Through this faith in the faithful God who promised came first a son, Isaac and then, many sons. But greatest of all, later came the Son of God who is the fulfillment of what God promised. (Galatians 3:15-18). Even in this we have an already and not yet. Abraham and Sarah believe and receive a son, but not yet, not the Son who would be born thousands of years later.

By faith we can experience the power and faithfulness of God as He fulfills what He has promised.

Faith Holds Fast Patiently (v.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.

Our writer pauses at the center of this section to teach us something startling about faith. Most of these people in Genesis died without getting what they believed God for. Yet, their faith was real and it was rewarded. This will shake many Christians today. We assume that if we don't get what was promised now, then something is faulty with our faith. Not so. Listen to what kind of faith these all died in.

It is a faith that can wait till after death for the fullness of what is promised (v.13). It knows that we are living between the promise and the fulfillment and perseveres until the fulfillment actually happens.

It is a faith that sees what God promises from a long way off. It welcomes it, or greets it from afar. Faith is like knowing your loved one is coming and you long for it and wait for it and welcome it and all of that makes the way you live now sweeter and better and fuller. But she is not home yet.

It is a faith that is seeking what is promised. Faith desires what is promised. So often our trouble is that we don't really care about that which God has promised: we don't long for it and hunger for it, so we don't have it.

It is a faith that talks about these things so that there is real clarity about them in our souls. Faith confessed and discussed and lived profoundly shapes us for heavenly mindedness and earthly usefulness.

It is a faith that presses forward even when opportunities are there to return to the past way of living. Faith keeps firm grip and ever upward climbing the heavenward cast anchor.

In gathering together, we are to stir up this kind of faith. We are to speak about God, His person, perfections and promises so that we see them in our souls. We welcome them even when we know they are afar off. We do this together because we are pilgrims and are living in spiritual tents. Then there will come that day when we will arrive at the homeland and all will be fulfilled.

So, God is not ashamed to be called their God. When we don't bank our hope in God's promises and live as though we need everything now and are not longing for heaven then we embarrass God. We bring Him shame. But when we live committed to God's promises, confessing that we are just passing through, that we are hungering and thirsting for our heavenly home, then we bring pleasure to God.

By faith we can be commended even when, in this life, we do not receive what is promised.

Faith Passes Tests Submissively (v.17-19)

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.

Now, we need to think carefully about the testing of Abraham. By faith, when tested, Abraham obeyed. So, what was this really a test of?

It was a test of Abraham's *treasure*.

Would he sacrifice what was nearest and dearest to his heart? Here is what God is testing: where is Abraham's greatest treasure – is it God or is it Isaac? We all know child centered homes and people. Their children are their greatest treasures. It is evident because of what they will sacrifice and give up for their sake. It is evident from the trade-offs and compromises they make. It is evident from the emotions that boil up when their child is hurt, or challenged, or thwarted in some way. Family and children can be enormous treasures and they can become disobedience fueling idols. Yet here Abraham moves with a sense of sure poise. He simply rises up to obey God. So will we obey God when what we really treasure is being tested? Will we make the right choices that at times will look simply like having certain priorities?

It was a test of Abraham's *trust*.

Would he sacrifice what was clearly the promised one that God had given? Remember, Isaac is not just any child. He is the promised son. He is the one that he and Sarah had waited long years for. He is the direct result of the miraculous intervention of God through Abraham and Sarah's faith. Sometimes faith is a matter of trusting in God, and sometimes it is a matter of trusting God.

Let me illustrate. Think of approaching a strange dog, a big, fearsome, growling dog. Do you trust that dog? It is in this sense that I think we often fail. We say we trust in God so we believe in Him – but we are not so sure that all points, we trust Him, we believe that He knows what He is doing. So, does Abraham trust God? Abraham's obedience by faith is visible, is displayed through the

test. Even more, the test is the opportunity for faith's obedience. We will all be tested and tried. Our character, our likeness to Christ is shaped by the sharp application of the chisel of testing under the hammer of hardship. But it is guided by the Master Craftsman who is lovingly working to produce magnificent works of grace.

He had God's promise and God's precept. The only thing that Abraham could figure out was that God would have to raise Isaac from the dead. His faith, his belief had God's promise of Isaac. And his faith had God's command to sacrifice him. So his faith reasoned based on the faithfulness of God, on His integrity and His covenant keeping character. Since this son (not another one) was the son of promise and obedience would end that life, then faith rested in the life giving, resurrecting power of God.

By faith we can pass the tests and trials God brings to examine and expose our hearts.

Faith Comes to Death Gloriously (v.20-22)

Finally, in Genesis we see faith in the face of impending death.

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.

All three of these people do what they do on their deathbeds because they have heard, believed, and embraced God's promises. Faith here is not being tested, but is banking on the facts of God's promises to say and do things that please God.

Isaac blessed seeing the person who would inherit the land.

The blessing he inherited from Abraham he passed on to Jacob. His focus is on the *great provision* of God (Genesis 27:27-29). By faith, this dim sighted, near death patriarch, being deceived by a sinful son, serves God's hidden purposes, and blesses the younger instead of the older. His blessing is simply a transmission of God's promise to Abraham to his son. He does so because he believes what God has said. What he says in the blessing highlights that God is one who provides.

Jacob blessed seeing the blessing that would come in the land.

In Joseph's place, he blesses his two sons, Ephraim, and Manasseh. His focus is on the *sure protection* of God (Genesis 48:15-16). God has been His shepherd and his sustainer his whole life. Believing that God is like this and will keep his promises, he anticipates the fulfillment and blesses accordingly.

Joseph left instructions seeing that they actually would enter the land.

His focus is on the *delivering promises* of God (Genesis 50:24-25). Here, Joseph's faith believes that Egypt is not the homeland. He is so convinced of what God has promised and so confident that God will bring it to pass that he makes them promise to carry his bones out and to bury them in Canaan. So in the face of death, God's promises are so real that he binds future generations to a promise of their own.

By faith we can come to the end of our lives and face death with hope and assurance.

Reflect and Respond

The faith of these people in Genesis shows why it pleases God. First, faith believes God exists. Second, faith believes that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Because faith is these two things, it pleases God. He doesn't say why this is so. He just says it is. There is something about the nature of God that makes this obvious.

What pleases God is when we show by our life that God *exists* and that He is *excellent*. Our believing obedience displays how *real* God is and how *rewarding* He is. God is like this: it brings Him pleasure when we trust Him and when we treasure Him.

Here for me is one of the most important lessons about faith. The nature of faith and the vitality of faith are rooted in what God is like, not in what we are like. Faith is what it is because of what and who God is. The more you know what God is like, the more conformed to His greatness will be your faith. Your trusting obedience will have in it the essence of God's promises and the evidence that He is real and He is rewarding.

The faith of these men and women in Genesis instructs us and illustrates for us that:

By faith we believe that God created everything by His Word.

By faith we come to God through the sacrifices He accepts, that is His Son, Jesus Christ.

By faith we walk with God so as to be pleasing to Him while we look forward in hope to being with Him.

By faith we revere God so as to do the hard work He requires.

By faith we are poised to obey God without hesitation no matter how hard it is.

By faith we live here in this world as pilgrims and aliens, looking forward to our heavenly home.

By faith we can experience the power and faithfulness of God as He fulfills what He has promised.

By faith we can be commended even when, in this life, we do not receive what is promised.

By faith we can pass the tests and trials God brings to examine and expose our hearts.

By faith we can come to the end of our lives and face death with hope and assurance.

May God give us a commended faith, one that shows that God exists and that He is excellent. May we be a people who worship, walk, and work by faith.

May God give us a commended faith, one that will believe in an obeying way *even if we don't receive what is promised until after we die*. Then we will be the kind of people God is not embarrassed over, is not ashamed to be called, their God.

