

HEBREWS 37
(Hebrews 11:8-19)

THE OPERATION OF FAITH IN ABRAHAM
By Ron Harvey
(May 6, 2012)

INTRODUCTION

We have made our way through Hebrews and we are in the faith chapter – Hebrews 11.

Now chapter 11 of Hebrews gives us a series of examples of those great saints of the past who put their faith in what God said. They didn't have some nebulous, empty, dreamy, wishful kind of faith, but they believed something very specific. They believed what God told them.

In verse 4 we have the example of **Abel**. God told Abel to bring a sacrifice, and not just any kind of sacrifice, but a bleeding sacrifice. You see, God told him something very specific and Abel believed God and Abel thus obeyed God and brought a sacrifice from his flock. And Abel was declared righteous because he believed God.

In verse 5 we see that **Enoch** believed God. Now God apparently spoke to Enoch and told him that one day he would take him directly to heaven. God said, "You are not going to die but you will be changed" - the Bible calls it being translated. So God told Enoch something very specific. And Enoch believed God because it says,

By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death. (v.5)

Then, we saw in verse 7 that **Noah** believed God. Now God came to Noah one day and warned Noah of a great, worldwide flood that would destroy every creature that walks on dry ground. And God told Noah to build an enormous ark for the saving of him and his household. And Noah believed this very specific word of God.

Look at verse 7. He was moved with fear. And he was moved with fear because he simply believed what God told him. That is why it says, "By faith Noah . . . prepared an ark.

Now this morning we are going to consider the operation of faith in the life of Abraham. And you will see in verse 8 that faith was also the chief characteristic of Abraham.

By faith Abraham . . . obeyed.

Now this morning we are going to see four things about true godly faith as illustrated by the example of Abraham. We are going to see that,

- I. True godly faith is a faith that obeys.
- II. True godly faith is a faith that patiently sojourns in a strange land.
- III. True godly faith seeks a heavenly country.
- IV. True godly faith is a faith that prevails

Now we have seen in the last two messages that faith is not conjuring up some vision of something that we want and believing that it will come to pass. This is what many people believe faith is. They might buy a lottery ticket and believe with all their heart that God will cause the right numbers to come up and they will win millions of dollars. But that kind of faith is not godly faith at all. That kind of faith is nothing more than wishful thinking. That kind of faith is empty faith. And the thing that makes such a faith empty is that there is no promise of God behind such a faith. God never promised to make us lottery winners. And therefore that kind of faith is a faith without substance.

And faith is not some power within us that dictates to God what shall be done and that compels God to act in some way or another. Many people think they have some spiritual magic wand called faith and that by waving this wand of faith they can bring anything to pass.

But I hope we have learned that true, godly faith is based solidly on the sure Word of God. It is believing what God has said. Whatever it is that God has said, it is our duty to believe it and it is to our duty to act on it.

Now we consider first that,

I. True godly faith is a faith that obeys.

Notice the language in verse 8. "By faith Abraham . . . obeyed."

You will notice here that Abraham's faith was not an inactive faith. It was not a motionless faith. But it was an obedient faith. This is the only kind of real faith. And it says that by faith Abraham obeyed.

Now Abraham lived in a place that the Bible calls the Ur of the Chaldees. It was a land to the east of the land of Canaan. Most commentators think it was near Babylon which is somewhere around present day Iraq. It was a godless land. It was an idolatrous land. And Abraham lived there with his father and his family. And the Scriptures tell us that Abraham's father was an idolator. He worshipped other gods rather than the true God.

A. Now we should notice here that Abraham's faith and obedience was due to the call of God.

By faith Abraham, when he was called . . . (v.8)

God came calling on Abraham. Abraham was going about his own business. He was probably worshipping other gods just like his father. All he knew was his own country, his own family and his own gods. And he didn't know the true God. And then, God called on him.

Now this is a beautiful and clear example of how spiritual salvation is initiated. Whenever God saves anyone it is because he comes with a call.

Example: Consider the example of Saul of Tarsus. He was on a murderous rampage against Christians and he was on the road to Damascus to round up some more of them and to take them to prison and to persecute them. Paul had no inclination at all to become a Christian himself. But God came calling on Saul that day and by power and purpose God changed his heart so that the hater of Christians became a Christian himself.

Now God is not obligated to call on us. God doesn't owe us a call. God isn't obligated by some supposed rule of fairness to call on everyone. And when God came to Ur of the Chaldees that day he didn't call on

everyone in the city. Rather, he called on one man – Abraham. Now why didn't God call on others? Why didn't God call everyone in Ur of the Chaldees? We don't know.

But, look what abundant mercy he showed to Abraham! Out of all the heathen in the land, he made a call on Abraham. And this is how Abraham came to know God. And this is how all the elect come to know God. God comes calling on his people. He comes seeking them. He finds them in a strange and distant land of sin. He finds them in the midst of all of their worldly entanglements. And when the gospel of Christ is the farthest thing from their minds, He finds them and he calls them to follow him.

Now don't think this is just a request that God made to Abraham. God didn't just make Abraham a general offer in hopes that Abraham would accept the offer.

No, God came with a different kind of a call. God came with an effectual call. God came with the kind of a call that has power in it. God came with a call that melted the stony heart of Abraham and moved him to obey.

Remember, this is what God did with Noah in verse 7. God came to Noah and it says Noah was moved with fear.

In our natural condition, if God does not come to us with an effectual call then we would never be moved away from our sin. And we know it's true. The sin nature is too powerful. Its grip on us is too great. And besides that the Scriptures define our natural condition as being dead spiritually.

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.
Ephesians 2:1

And so, it requires much more than a general invitation for us to be moved out of our natural state. It requires a call full of the sovereign power of God.

If God merely issued a general call to the world, but he did not move you to action, then you would never follow him. Your heart is too dark. Your heart is too hard. Your sin is too deep. And there is no spiritual life in you. But if God by his sheer mercy and sovereign purpose has chosen you from

all eternity to be his people, then he comes to you and powerfully and effectively calls you away from the only world that you ever knew. He calls you out of that world of sin and degradation, from which you would have never been moved. And he draws you to himself and you find yourself believing Him and obeying Him.

Listen to Jesus.

No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

John 6:44

This is the kind of call that God brought to Abraham. It was a compelling call. It was a drawing call.

Now you might think that God came to Abraham because Abraham must have been a very righteous man. But I suggest to you that God was not moved in the least by any goodness in Abraham. He was not moved by Abraham's works or by any good disposition in Abraham whatsoever, for it appears that Abraham was an idolater in an idolatrous land. But by his sovereign good pleasure and in an act of pure grace toward Abraham, God effectively called him and our text says "By faith Abraham obeyed."

B. Abraham's call involved a getting out of something and a going to something.

It says in verse 8 "He was called to go out of a certain place and to go into a certain place.

Now this was the first thing that God told Abraham – "Get out." You see, Abraham was living a life of idolatry. He was living his life right in the middle of great sin. And God told him to get out of there.

This is always the case when God calls you.

Example: When God came to Saul, Saul was a devout Jew. His religion was Judaism. And he was rising to the top of the ranks in Judaism. But then God called Saul and God told Saul to get out. Get out of that old religion. There is a new a better way in Christ. That's what the book of Hebrews is all about. And that's what Saul was

called to do.

Example: When the Jews were in slavery in Egypt, God sent Moses and told the people to get out of Egypt and go to a land that I will show you.

And I dare say that if you get a call from God you will be commanded to get out. You must leave that old way of sin behind. You can't take it with you. You must forsake it altogether and leave it behind. And you must never go back. This is what the call of God bids you to do.

And it says in verse 8 that Abraham was called to go out.

But notice that God told Abraham to go to another place. Now Abraham had never seen this new place. He had no idea what it was like. In fact, when he left, he didn't know where he was going.

And he went out, not knowing whither he went. (v.8)

And here is the first point this morning: Godly faith is the kind of faith that obeys God.

God told Abraham to leave his country and his kindred and to go to a land that Abraham knew nothing of. And Abraham believed God and therefore he packed up and he left.

Now remember, Noah believed God and as a result, he picked up his hammer and built an ark. And Abraham believed God and he picked up his belongings and left his homeland.

And here is the principle: A godly faith is always accompanied by obedience.

A hypocrite is a man who says, "I have faith, but who has no works. But a man who has true faith, has works that prove his faith.

Example: The weatherman man tells you that a tornado is coming in five minutes. If you believe the weatherman, you go get in the storm cellar.

Example: The newsman tells you that a dangerous, escaped convict was last seen in your neighborhood. If you believe your newsman, you lock your doors.

And if you believe the testimony of God, then you obey.

And by faith Abraham obeyed God.

There is no such thing as true faith without obedience. Many, many people convince themselves that they are going to heaven. And they claim to have faith. But when you look at their life, you notice that there has been no resulting change. Their life is not a life of obedience, but rather, it remains a life of disobedience. And Jesus will say unto them,

Depart from me, I never knew you. (Matthew 7:23)

What if Abraham had said, “Yes, I believe, but I don’t think I will leave Ur. I like it here in Ur. I like the safety of my family and friends. And I don’t like the idea of striking out to some unknown place.” Now that is no faith at all. If Abraham had disobeyed God that would have shown that he did not believe God.

A saving kind of faith is always an obedient kind of faith. A person who believes God, orders his life in a different way. The old way of life is abandoned and a new way of life is adopted.

So, true godly faith is a faith that obeys God. But secondly,

II. True godly faith is a faith that patiently sojourns in this world.

By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob . . .

Now this is one of the most basic and important principles in all of God’s Word. And I wish we all could master it. I wish I could somehow make our young people understand it more fully. But it has taken me 60 years and I’m still trying to learn it.

But the principle is that this world is not our permanent home. Now it says in verse 9,

By faith, Abraham sojourned in the land of promise.

Now God told Abraham to get out of Ur and go to the land of Canaan. Now you would have thought that once Abraham got to that land of promise, that is, the land of Canaan, that he would have settled down, that he would have put roots down there, that he would have made the land of Canaan his country.

But it says, *“He sojourned in the land of promise.”*

Now the word sojourn means “a short stay.” So, the idea is that Abraham went to the land of Canaan only for a short stay. The whole time he was in the land of Canaan, he acted like a visitor or a stranger in the land. It says he sojourned there as in a strange country.

Now isn't it odd that God called Abraham to this land and yet Abraham never put his roots down there. Abraham never built him a home there. It says he dwelled in tabernacles.

And that's because the land of Canaan never was the real land of promise. The land of Canaan is a part of this world. The land of Canaan was merely a type of a better land.

And Abraham never put his roots down in Canaan. He “short stayed” there. And he lived like a nomad in tents because he had his eye on his real home.

Now all the cities in Canaan were built by men. But look in verse 10. Abraham looked for the city whose builder and maker is God.

And Canaan was an earthly country. But in verse 16, Abraham desired a better country, that is, a heavenly.

And here is the lesson for us. We are to live our lives in this world as though we are here for a short stay. We are not to take root here. We are not to live as though this world is our final destination. We are strangers here. Others live their lives as though this world is everything. We should live our lives as though this world is comparatively nothing.

Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth.
Colossians 3:2

Let me tell you about Abraham. He never owned a foot of ground in Canaan except when his wife Sarah died he purchased a cave where he buried her. And Abraham paid full price for that land. But none of this distressed Abraham, because he always considered himself a sojourner there anyway.

And as God's people our homeland is heaven. We are just passing through this world. If I do not achieve worldly success here, I am not too disappointed. If someone steals all my possessions, I have not lost much. If my life is lived in poverty or in sickness and poor health, it is no great encumbrance because we are "short staying" here anyway. We are just passing through this world to a better place which is our real home.

Abraham held the things of this life loosely, not attaching too much value to them because his real treasure was and is in heaven.

III. True godly faith looks for a better country.

None of these great saints of God mentioned here in Hebrews 11 appeared to have received the promises of God when they died. It says,

These all died in faith, not having received the promises,
Hebrews 11:13

And so they lived their entire lives not seeing the promises of God, but believing the promises of God. And this is the nature of faith. Faith is believing what God has promised though you cannot presently see it. And Abraham believed that God had a better country in store for him because God had promised it.

Now let me take a few minutes and take a look by faith at this better country.

A. The country that Abraham looked for was heaven. (v.16)

Now the Scriptures don't give us many specifics about this place. And we have many questions about this place. But one thing we know from our

text is that,

B. The country that Abraham looked for was a better country.

That is, it is better than anything this world has to offer. Now if the Scriptures told us no more than that, by faith we can look forward to it with great anticipation. It is a better place.

C. The country that Abraham looked for is described as a prepared city.

For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (v.10)

But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. (v.16)

Now there are very beautiful cities in this world, but can you possibly imagine a city made by God? God is the builder of this city. He is the maker of it. And he has carefully prepared it for those of faith.

If you want to read about this city in earthly terms, read Revelation 21 and 22. It is beautiful beyond imagination. It is pictured as having golden streets. The walls and gates of the city are made of precious stones and there is a crystal clear river of water flowing through the city. It is magnificent in every way.

But our text tells us something else about this country or city that Abraham looked for.

D. Abraham looked for a city that has foundations. (v.10)

Now in this life, Abraham never had a home with a foundation. He lived in moveable tents. He never laid a foundation in Canaan. But he looked for a city which has foundations.

Abraham, you can finally make your home in that heavenly city. That city is a permanent place. It is an eternal place. God has laid the

foundations of this city and they shall not be moved.

E. Abraham looked for a city where he would have the eternal approval of God himself.

Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. (v.16)

This will be the most wonderful feature of this city. For God will not be ashamed of the inhabitants thereof. The very fact that God has built Abraham a city is testimony that Abraham is fully accepted there and welcomed there through faith.

How wonderful to know that the God of the universe accepts us and that he builds us an everlasting city to demonstrate for all time that he has cast our sins away in Christ and that we are in his eternal care.

F. Abraham looked for a city where he would enjoy forever the personal presence of God himself.

Now our text merely implies that there is a personal relationship in this city between Abraham and God. It says that God will not be ashamed to be called their God.

But I am reminded of the words of Jesus when he told the disciples:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.
John 14:3

God is the maker of this city. God has prepared this city. And it appears that Jesus himself will live in this city. Jesus will be there in his resurrected body. And we will be there in our resurrected bodies. And we will personally enjoy the presence of Jesus forever.

Now if this city is grand enough for the King himself, surely it will exceed our wildest expectations.

God came calling on Abraham one day and by faith Abraham obeyed and he left his homeland to go to another land. And by faith Abraham merely sojourned in the land of Canaan. By faith, he was a pilgrim and a

stranger in this world. And by faith he looked for a city which hath foundations, that is a heavenly city.

That heavenly city is only available for those who have the faith of Abraham. It is a saving faith that counts the things of this world as nothing compared to the great promise of that better country to come.