

Hebrews 11:8-22

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[0 : 00] Amen. Just a brief prayer as we make our way.

Father, because your love is better than life, our lips will praise you. And though we are budded mist, and though we are grass that fades, as we come to your word, which stands forever, and desire to hear your voice, so help us to this end.

Amen. In July of 2005, Kyle MacDonald began a quest for a home. It was in the most unusual of manners.

He began with a small red paper clip, and through 14 online trades over the course of a year, he ended up with a house.

His first trade began with a red paper clip and was exchanged for a fish-shaped pen, followed by the pen being traded for a hand-sculpted doorknob.

[1 : 16] The doorknob was then exchanged for one of those Coleman camping stoves with fuel included. Eleven trades later, he ended up with a two-story farmhouse.

MacDonald was inspired by a popular childhood game, namely, bigger, better. In this game, you begin with a small object, and the goal through a sequence of trades is to obtain something bigger and better.

Starting with something insignificant, you want to exchange it for something of larger size or quality. In my final years as an undergraduate in college, I volunteered at a small church in which we commenced to play this game.

Of course, it was guys versus girls, and we went to a nearby Christian college, Westmont College, and played this game throughout the dormitories. Each group started with a stapler, just a plain black stapler, and we were given a two-hour time limit in which the winning team came back with a boombox.

Now, if you don't know what a boombox is, you can Google it. It may be in some museums by now, but it was bigger and better than the stapler. I share this with you because if you followed our series up to this point, the writer of this letter to the Hebrews is obsessed with showing the listener, or us the reader, that there is something both bigger and better for them.

[2 : 51] Though the writer is not necessarily referring to something of physical size that is bigger, but the writer is presenting something bigger in terms of scope and duration, better in terms of quality and effectiveness.

The writer has done this with a number of things. The priesthood, the covenant, the tabernacle, and we'll see the writer continues to show us this morning that in Christ, all of God's promises can be said to be bigger and better.

Before them was a better hope, chapter 7, verse 19. Before them was a better covenant, chapter 7, verse 22. Before them were better promises, chapter 8, verse 6.

Before them was a better sacrifice, namely Christ, in chapter 9, verse 23. And beginning in chapter 10, verse 34, beginning, there is a better possession in Christ.

Chapter 11 is not only a list of those who have manifested faith and endured, but chapter 11 is the writer's demonstration that before them lay something better, namely a better country, chapter 11, verse 16, culminating in a better life, chapter 11, verse 35.

[4 : 17] And lastly, almost to encapsulate it all, just saying something better, in chapter 11, verse 40. There is something better, regardless of whatever you find on earth, what is promised in Christ, the Scriptures will affirm, is better.

Is better. If the writer were playing the game bigger and better, this is the case being made. As the local congregation is struggling, they've endured a hard struggle through sufferings.

They've been publicly exposed to reproach and affliction. They've had their property plundered. And the question they're asking is, is it worth it? Will it be worth it? Is it time to abandon ship? Was it time to throw in the towel? Was it time to raise the white flag? Was it time to give up and give in? And the writer comes in with this answer. And the answer is no. Never.

Do not give up. Do not give in. Put the flag down. Stay on the ship. Why? Because in Christ, you have a better possession.

[5 : 25] Well, the failure of the book, titled Your Best Life Now, is that it is a lie to the believer. The Christian life is not best now.

What you experience in this life as a Christian is the worst it will ever be. Hear that again. And what you experience in this life as a Christian is the worst it will ever be.

It's only your best life now if you choose to live life without Christ. Without Christ. Sadly, this is the best you'll ever get.

Hebrews 11 is a portrait gallery. Interestingly, filled with Old Testament characters. The sacrificial system has been superseded by the one and for all sacrifice of Christ.

The priesthood had been superseded by the priesthood of Christ. Yet the writer does something very bizarre. The writer links the readers of this letter to the believers from long ago.

[6 : 32] Even though the writer has overturned the sacrificial cultic system, the writer is linking us to the people of God from the beginning. What the writer is saying is faith has been the mark of the redeemed community from the beginning.

It's not a new religious system that is taking place or arising out of the finished work of Christ. It has always been there. The author's aim and my aim this morning is to shed light on the answer to the question, what does biblical faith that endures look like?

What does biblical faith that endures look like? Our passage this morning is largely focused on one individual, namely Abraham. For he is the father of all those who have faith, a la Romans chapter 4. He is the model of faith. The passage revolves around two promises given to him, namely one in Genesis chapter 12 and reaffirmed in Genesis chapter 15.

The promises were twofold, namely that he would have an heir and from that heir he would be the father of an innumerable multitude. Secondly, he would enter a land that was prosperous, fruitful, and plentiful for his, for experiencing peace and prosperity in many ways hearkening back to the Garden of Eden.

[7 : 50] These promises are reintroduced in our passage over several times. The promise of land and the promise of descendants.

Three things I would like us to see pertaining to this faith this morning. Firstly, faith is anchored in divine promise. Faith is anchored in divine promise.

Contrary to popular belief, faith is not something mustered up from within. It is not something that takes shape mysteriously in the pit of your stomach. It is not whimsical and it is not blind.

It is anchored in divine promise. Genesis 12 reads, Now the Lord said to Abraham, Abram at the time, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you. And it continues, So Abram went as the Lord told him. Biblical faith is tethered to a revealed promise, revealed word.

[8 : 54] Faith is dependent on an object, namely that object God. Faith emerges, this is very important, from what God has spoken. Abraham was acting upon a divine call.

You see that in verse 8. Abraham obeyed when he was called to a place of inheritance. The text refers to it as the land of promise.

It was there that he was sent to live along with Isaac and Jacob, his sons, heirs of the same promise. We can't overlook the source of this promise, for this is where Abraham's confidence rested.

A promise is only as certain as the promise maker. A child's promise, though endearing, does not bear the weight of a spouse's promise. If you work for a large company, a co-worker's promise does not even, does not hold the same water as the CEO's promise.

promise. One's confidence in a given promise is directly related to the resources and the ability of the promise maker. Here we are given some insight on the ability of the divine promise maker.

[10 : 07] What resources does God have at his disposal to maintain his promise? What we see in this passage is he has control over both birth and death.

What's staggering is even the promise made to Sarah herself. Sarah, the one who laughed, remember, in disbelief. At the age of 65, when the Lord appears to Abraham and says, hey, you're going to have, you and Sarah are going to have a kid.

And to that, Sarah actually laughs, probably in disbelief, probably out of, or the scriptures actually tell us, out of fear. So much so, she gave her servant to Abraham to bear a child in order to help God meet his promise.

What's staggering is this, the promise would even be kept in spite of her actions, in spite of her feebleness, in spite of her doubt, in spite of her human efforts to help God fulfill this promise.

The Bible tells us Sarah exercised faith considering him faithful who had promised. Chapter 11, verse 11. This is the commendation Sarah received because of her confidence in the promise maker.

[11 : 23] Because she considered him faithful, she received power to conceive. See, the promise made by the promise maker generates faith, not because of the scale of the promise, but because of the strength of the one making the promise.

See, the extravagance of the promise does not entice you and I to faith. It actually stirs us to generate doubt. However, if the promise maker is the one who has all the resources of heaven and earth at his disposal, the validity of the promise is far more certain.

This is crucial to grasp. The quality of the promise maker is everything. This is what enables Abraham to do what he does in Genesis 22. Sarah considered God faithful and received the son. Abraham considered God faithful, able to keep the son to the point of even resurrecting him back from the dead if need be. Here you have the character of the promise maker the Bible attests to. Because God gave him, God will keep him. It's quite a predicament if you think about it. God had told Abraham all the promises are bound up in your son Isaac.

[12 : 42] And the instruction is now to bind Isaac, to take him and to sacrifice him to the Lord. The predicament is huge. Yet, the Bible tells us Abraham did not waver in faith.

He understood that the promise maker was able to overcome even death itself. The promise maker has authority over both life and death in this case.

It's astounding. The bookends of the human life, two things you and I have absolutely no control over, the promise maker governs with ease, with complete authority.

This is the power of God, the promise maker. You may search the world and seek a better one. It will not be found in a spouse, child, or lover.

It will not be found in a particular degree, accomplishment, or career. You cannot do better. You will not do better. The promise maker in the Bible is simply better.

[13 : 43] God in Christ is both bigger and better. This is biblical faith, always sourced in divine initiative, divine promise, divinely revealed word.

Incidentally, I think this is why Paul writes, faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of Christ. And the question that I always ask myself is, how do I increase my faith?

How do I grow in my faith? And I think part of that answer is found in that verse. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of Christ. Yeah, maybe believing faith, absolutely.

But I think how you and I grow in faith, grow to be exemplars of faith, is by submitting ourselves to hearing the word of Christ.

Hearing the word of Christ. Since biblical faith is anchored in divine promise, the faithful respond. Secondly, faith is manifest in divine action.

[14 : 52] If faith is anchored in divine promise, then faith is manifest in divine action. Faith is, you can see it. To borrow the language from the next book of the Bible, faith works.

It acts. It manifests itself in tangible ways. It's not passive. It is a response that has been, to what has been disclosed in divine promise. It's shown by action.

The word heard is internalized, but then it's externalized through what we do. Since God promised, Abraham responds. His response is encapsulated in two things.

Namely, or actually encapsulated in his obedience to two things. The first is this, his departure from home to an unknown destination.

The destination was not important, was not as important as to his departing. He was not to be concerned of where he was going, where he was headed, what he was going to be doing.

[15 : 54] God was most concerned in that he went. He was, there was no, go was the command, there was no map, no guide, no itinerary.

He was to leave his home, his family, representative of all that was familiar, what was secure, what was stable. Now this was not a forced displacement as a result of war or famine or sociological phenomena.

It was not leaving for a prestigious education or economic push and pull factors. This migration was something of an entirely different sort. Namely, God told him to go.

His leaving home resulted in a change of status and probably a loss of rights. He became a stranger, a foreigner, an exile, an alien of sorts. He was a sojourner, a nomad, one who lived in tents, one never at home.

He was obedient, secondly, seen in verse 17, in the offering of his son, the text makes it clear that his son was not the son who came from Hagar, but was from Isaac, this was Isaac, his only son, in whom all the divine promises were bound up.

[17:05] If you read Genesis chapter 22, it's so matter-of-fact, it's so bizarre. Why would God require that which is the dearest to me?

I'm sure he was thinking, what kind of God would lay hold of my one and only son and take him from me? One writer puts it so helpfully, when Abraham obeyed God's mandate to leave, he simply gave up his past.

But when God summoned him to Mount Moriah to deliver his own son to God, he was asked to surrender his future as well. past and future was what the creator God was asking of Abraham. In other words, was the divine promise enough to live on? The writer of Hebrews gives us insight into what Abraham had been boldly thinking. If God promised, since God promised, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as innumerable as the sand on the seashore, then if Isaac's life ends on Mount Moriah, God would bring him back to life.

God was surely making keeping his promise difficult, but God would keep his promise. This is the embodiment of faith. It's the acronym I learned in Sunday school.

[18:28] Faith. Forgetting. Forsaking. All. I. Trust. Him. Forsaking. All. I. Trust. Him. Faith is that which holds to obedience, knowing the loving nature of the Father.

Faith is that which says, I will obey regardless of the outcome, because my Heavenly Father has promised better. I obey because I know the heart of my Master.

Faith is not only visible on these occasions in Abraham's life, but they are evident in his children and his children's children. The Bible is certain to record this for us.

By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. It's staggering to consider the transmission of faith between Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, Jacob to Joseph, and so on and so forth.

[19:35] At the end of each life, the most important thing is that they clung to the divine promises in such a manner that they wanted to communicate that the most important thing to be passed down was the divine promise.

I'm sure, I mean, Abraham was wealthy. I'm sure Isaac inherited plenty of goods, material wealth. I'm sure he, you know, his mom might have passed down to his wife, these are the family recipes. Don't forget them. These are important. I'm sure there were sayings or stories that were passed down. But of all the things that were to be the most important, pass down the divine promise. As I am dying, know this. As I am leaning on my staff, know this. Joseph, telling his brothers, I am about to be buried.

And yes, maybe I get buried in a pyramid. But if I'm in a pyramid, take out my bones and take me to the land that God has promised. The most important thing as a parent, and I have been the beneficiary of this, is not, here is your inheritance.

[20:54] This is your house. Take this car. These are your recipes. The most important thing, don't forget your faith.

Bound up in the divine promises of Christ. You see, I'm the beneficiary of parents who have prioritized this.

I'm sure many in this room are the same. I have not always welcomed it. I recall great moments of frustration. My parents, my dad especially, would gather up the four kids on a weeknight, and we would do a family devotional, exhausted from football practice, overwhelmed by the amount of homework, tired from not sleeping enough.

my dad would sit us around the table, and we would go at it again. I'm not always welcomed that. I remember the, his disapproval when he said, you will not participate in that tournament on Sunday. You will not play in that game. I don't care if you start. I don't care if you're the most valuable player. It is the Lord's day.

[22 : 15] In my anger, I despised him for that. I recall never being able to sleep in on a Sunday morning because the duty of my siblings and I, growing up in a small Chinese church in most Asian churches, lunch was always provided.

And my duty, along with my two sisters and my younger brother would kind of just hang out, was to make tea and to make tea for the entire congregation, to set up chairs, to take the rice and wash it and rinse it and throw it in the rice cooker and cook for the couple hundred that assembled there on Sunday morning.

I remember I hated it. Why do I have to give up an hour of my sleep to do something like this? There are others who can do that.

And now I look back and what I used to despise and hate and become frustrated over, those are the things I cling to because I know the Lord will take my parents one day.

But what they have left behind is this, they hold on to that divine promise in Christ. Hold on to that.

[23 : 38] That is the most valuable thing you can preserve and pass down. And here I am, a father of three, usually exhausted at the end of the day, filled with sin and impatience.

And yet, because I have seen the model of my parents, yes, how do I teach my kids to pray? How do I speak patiently to them?

How do I love them? Because on the day I die, my hope, Lord willing, that my three kids will outlive me and they will say, my parents passed down faith.

Parents, we must do this. Children, you sit in this room, teenagers especially, you will probably resonate with what I said earlier.

But know this, your parents love you and the most valuable thing they can give to you is not an inheritance that rivals those of millionaires or billionaires.

[24 : 39] It's not stuff. It's not family recipes. Those are great and all. What they're trying to do is forge in you a faith that endures, that lasts, that perseveres.

Faith is manifest in human action. Lastly, briefly, faith confidently anticipates what is better.

As Christians, we are given the sight to see what is temporarily invisible. As Christians, we are given the sight to see what is temporarily invisible.

To the watching world, we are walking contradictions. We are those the writer would say of Moses, seeing him who is invisible. It's a staggering statement in 11, chapter 13.

All these died in faith, not having received the things promised. Namely, I would say it's the patriarchs, Abraham and his lineage. They all died in faith, not having received the things promised.

[25 : 48] For they desired a better country, a heavenly one. They died in faith simply means at the time of death, they continue to look forward to the fulfillment of God's promises.

promises. The deathbed was not a point of despair or regret. Rather, it was a declaration of continued hope and longing. It's as if, in death, the promise was so certain of the heavenly city that they were saying in their lives that though we die, even God will raise us back up so that we walk through the gates of the heavenly city.

the city prepared by God himself whose foundations, whose designer and builder are God himself. It's anticipatory, longing for something better.

It's not only a longing, it's a reorientation of the life of the Christian to live in such a way that reflects this longing. One commentator writes this, if one would go and enjoy the internal citizenship of this city, one must forgo the benefits of those who are at home in the present world.

See, better than social acceptance, popularity, applause of men, better than a politician's promise, American dream, lover's comfort, better than becoming a mother, father, better than even marriage, better than the single life, better than any degree or certificate of accomplishment, better than any secure employment, better than any lottery jackpot, better than the totality of all human joys.

[27 : 29] The promises of God in Christ are better, are better. May this reality mark us as a congregation, that Christ is better.

May we live and long for that which is better and ultimately best in the Lord Jesus Christ. Three things about biblical faith in summary.

First, biblical faith is anchored in divine promise. Secondly, biblical faith is manifest in human effort, in human doing.

And lastly, biblical faith confidently anticipates that which is better. And this is what we're going to do this morning, isn't it?

This longing will be reiterated again. We'll partake of a meal in which Jesus said, I won't eat of it again until I eat of it in the kingdom.

[28 : 43] And in so taking these elements, the body and the blood of Christ, what you are confidently acknowledging is that there is a future held out for you that is better.

One day we will feast with the Lord himself in the city of the living God in the heavenly Jerusalem and surrounded by innumerable angels in festal gathering to the assembly or the gathering of the church, the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God himself.

That is what we're anticipating. that is what we're looking forward to. A city whose architect is God himself, whose foundations rest on God and his promises.

In Christ Jesus, you will always have that which is better. Let's pray. Father, we come to you and we are grateful because because of your great mercy, you caused us to be born again to a living hope, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for us.

And Father, we thank you because your love is better than life, all of life. We thank you that better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere.

[30 : 29] That we would be better off to be a doorkeeper to the gates of the heavenly city than spend endless days in a palace built by men.

Oh Father, increase our faith. Help us to be those marked by Christ in such a way. Amen.