

The Faith Of Abraham

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[0 : 00] We're looking at Hebrews chapter 11 today, as we have been the last two and will be for the next few. And so I'm just anxious that you should read with me Hebrews chapter 11, verses 8 to 12.

And this concerns Abraham. Maybe it would be helpful if before I read this to you, even I described the terrible condition of my own life.

Last night we had a vestry meeting and a hundred issues came up and things had to be dealt with and there's problems of whether all the money that's required can be obtained.

And it's a problem of whether we can get the leadership that's required. And it's a problem of whether we can handle all the property we have. And then I'm under a certain amount of stress just at home because of, you know, I'm not getting along well with my wife and my children are disobeying me and various things like that.

Children aren't doing what they should. And the bank manager's mad at me and the doctor wants to see me and the dentist has called me. And, you know, my life is just a jumble of all those kinds of things that happen to me.

[1 : 41] And then I come here and in the perfect tranquility of this lovely setting, I tell you how to live the Christian life that's over here. And I tell you about faith and I tell you about prayer and I tell you about steadfastness, you might say, and I might tell you about courage and I might tell you about life after death and the hope that is ours in Christ and so on.

But in my own life, I feel, well, these are the things that have me by the, you know, by the, they've got me in my guts, all these things that I have to worry about.

And all these things I long for and believe in and trust about. And but it's very much easier to come in touch with this world over here, the next crisis, the next demand, the next issue in my life that has to be faced, the next person I have to see.

And all those things just crowd and crowd in on you all the time and demand all your time and all your energy. So when it comes to this side of things, you're all messed up and not really in a position to do very much about it.

And so we are, you know, as, as Soren Kierkegaard described us, sort of geese that get together once a day to talk about flying, but none of them ever get off the ground.

[3 : 16] And Christians that come together to talk about, about our spiritual life. But most of us are so trapped over here that we never have a chance to do anything about it.

So what we're going to try and do today is look at Abraham and see how he handled it. And there are certain hallmarks of faith, which I think come out in these verses, which might be a help to us in relating this side of our life to this side of our life.

So with that little introduction, let's move from this side with all our cares and concerns to this side and pray for a moment.

And then we'll talk about Hebrews chapter 11. Our God, you are the one who knows all the circumstances of our lives.

You know the stresses we are under. We don't even know what's going to happen in the next minute, let alone in the next year or the next 10 years of our lives.

[4 : 24] We don't know where we're going. And we haven't any way of being able to tell. We can think about it, but we don't really know.

And we're reading this story today because we want very much to know. We want to know and understand who you are and what your purpose is and how we relate to you and what it means to live in that relationship to you.

So grant to us to see the things that can't be seen, to hear the things that can't be heard, and in fact, to do the things that can't be done.

And help us to see in Abraham a kind of pattern or paradigm of our lives by which we can go even from this half hour spent together with a new awareness of how you and your grace work in all the circumstances of our lives to accomplish your eternal purpose in the midst of our very temporal existence.

We ask this in Jesus Christ's name. Amen. Well, now we're at Hebrews chapter 11, verse 8, and I read to you these verses.

[6 : 00] By faith, Abraham, when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out not knowing where he was to go.

By faith, he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

So, what I would like to do is call this little talk, you know, I think there's a book by somebody fairly important about sand and stars.

[7 : 26] Can you read that? Doesn't matter. Sand and stars. There's a, you know, there's a kind of macrocosm and microcosm.

I once had a Bible class teacher who told me that man, in terms of his basic dimensions, was exactly halfway between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

You know, he's halfway between the unlimited dimensions of space and the infinitesimally small dimensions of atoms and things like that.

That man stands almost exactly halfway between. And I suspect that when, when the writer is talking about sand and stars, sky and sea, he's talking about a god to whom one is much the same as the other.

A god who is not a god measured in time and space, but an eternal god. And you can find the universe in a handful of sand, all that there is to know, as you can find the universe in a telescope full of stars.

[8 : 58] And the eternal god is greater than and smaller than and more than, all of that. He is something totally other than anything that can be measured in terms of time and space.

Tom Harper wrote in the province in an article recently that seven new galaxies have been found out in space and therefore we have to change our view of God.

I don't think we do. I mean, I think we have to recognize there is a sense in which I don't think we have to pay too much attention to that because God is infinitely greater than the greatest there is and infinitely smaller than the smallest there is that he is, he is God, which is infinitely different from any of that.

And so you have this peculiar description of God and how the stars and the sand, both in a sense, can be used to measure the infinite reality of his purpose towards us.

You can't imagine counting all the grains of sand in one handful, nor can you ever imagine counting all the stars in all the galaxies, in all the unlimited reality of space.

[10 : 31] So you have a tremendous picture of God in sand and stars that is here and I think that's important. Well, then you move on from that to verse one, which says, by faith Abraham, when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance, he went out not knowing where he was to go.

And what I think is, is, is, is, is, important about this is that you have the infinite and eternal God and then you have Abraham with two arms.

You know, just to get perspective, this is Abraham. Abraham. In the whole span of history, he lived a hundred years. In the whole of space, he occupied the tip of a blade of grass, so to speak.

Infinitely small. But somehow, he's saying that this infinitely small creature related to an infinitely great God and in a very personal way.

And that underlies the whole reality. And I think it's what makes our faith seem so ridiculous to people. To think that there can be some kind of communication between these and this, this faith

communication is, this faith communication is the basis of our lives.

[12:19] Yeah, I mean, you know, for instance, that most people regard themselves to be of infinite capacity and God to be infinitely remote and infinitely small.

But that's not the way it is. And we are reminded of that. That God, by faith, Abraham, when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance, he went out.

not knowing where he was to go. He was surrounded by a little circle of friends, a little city way off in Ur of the Chaldees, which is in between the Tigris and the Mesopotamia.

What's the Tigris and the Euphrates River? And this one man heard a call from God and he left that place and went on a long journey.

The long journey that he went on and this is the, that's the Gulf of Persia. And that's the Red Sea. And this is Egypt and the Nile River.

[13:33] And then this is, this land here, which is the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

And then way over here comes up the, the Euphrates River and over here is the Tigris River and in a little town over here was a man who heard the call of God and he went out not knowing where he was going and ended up here.

And that was, that was what this call was by Faith Abraham when he was called to go to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance.

Remember, he went there and not in his lifetime and not in his child's lifetime and not in his grandchild's lifetime and not for 400 years after that was the promise fulfilled for which he left this town here.

So it wasn't as though he was to go down to the bank and they'll give you a million dollars. He was given a promise which took generations to fulfill and he went into that place and he went because he was called by God to receive an inheritance.

[14:51] And he didn't know where it was. He didn't know anything in terms of time and space. All he knew is that he was called to go and that he would end up in a place that he didn't know and he would be a stranger there.

And so it says in verse 9, By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign land living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

That's his son and his grandson. And they too, it says, are heirs of the promise. And so what he did was he left the city and he went and lived as a nomad in a tent with his flocks and his servants and they moved all around in this land wherever the cattle needed to find pasture to graze.

and he wandered over this land which had been promised to him but which as yet did not belong to him. Remember they say that the only thing that Abraham ever owned was a place to bury his wife. So that was the, that was the condition he was in. And it says, he looked forward to the city which had foundations whose builder and maker is God.

[16:14] You have this, this man wandering around in the wilderness with a vision of a city. It's a, it's a strange picture isn't it?

That he had the vision of a city long before there was anything but a collection of tents in a desert wilderness. But he was looking for a city whose maker and builder was God.

and he had by him a wife who was Sarah. And it says, by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive even when she was past the age since she considered him faithful who had promised.

And sometimes people come to me and say their biological clock is running out. There isn't much time left for them to be a mother and bear children and things like that.

Well, Sarah's biological clock had run out years and years ago and all she had was a barren womb and a promise from God.

[17:33] And that's what she had to live with. And she lived with it, tried to get around the problem the problem if you remember. But that was all she had.

And she considered him faithful who had promised. Another sort of picture of an infinitely small person with an infinitely great God.

And then it goes on and concludes this paragraph in the RSV with verse 12. Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead even as his wife was in terms of giving birth to a child, to those two were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

Well, there is in that, I think, something which I want you to see. And I, the reason I put that picture at the front, I don't, I'm not sure that I even know how to illustrate this for you, but what it does sort of say is that there is a call from God.

That's what the whole story starts with, you see. by faith Abraham when he was called obeyed and went out.

[19 : 12] And there's two words here and one of them is obeyed and one of them is went out. I mean, that's, those are the way it's, those are the words in which it's translated.

Now, what, the difference between these two is that this means an eternal God was calling a mortal man.

This is a present, indicative, active, participle which suggests that God goes on calling and calling and calling and calling.

Not repeated calls, but that the call is, the call of God is a kind of eternal reality. And this is a point in time response.

So that you get an eternal call over here and then you get a point in time response.

[20 : 19] Do you see what I mean by that? Like, a lot of people think that God's call is a point in time and then we make a lifelong response to it.

But the way it's described here is that God is calling, that's who he is, calling to us, and we who are creatures of time are within time making a response.

I'll come back to that, but I want you to see that that's what happens. You have that lovely St.

Andrew's Day hymn, you know, Jesus calls us, or the tumult.

Or you have the story in Isaiah of this people who sat in darkness, he has called into the light. That somehow God is calling us, and that's why I started here, he's calling us from this to this, from, you know, the crisis and temporality of our earthly life over to this, to the eternal reality of his purpose for us and in us.

The eternal call of God to the time, the in-time response of man. well, that's, that's what happens.

[21 : 54] Remember, earlier in this, in this chapter, it talked about seeing what was invisible, that the conviction of things not seen.

And I think that it's also hearing what is inaudible. What this suggests to me, and I find it very powerful and not a little disturbing to me, to my own life, is that God is calling me.

me. And that calling is not a point-in-time call like the telephone ringing, you know, God's on the line, but that it's just a condition of the whole of my life.

It's a condition of every minute of my life. It's a condition of every circumstance of my life. God is calling me.

at this age, at this time, in this situation. Wherever I am, whatever I am, whoever I am, I am subject to the call of God.

[23 : 19] And the whole idea of my life is to be in the place where I can respond to that call of God.

That God is calling me, and I need to be able to respond to that. And part of the whole purpose of our sort of care for one another is that you hear your friend is in trouble, you go and knock on the door, and you go in, and you sit down over a cup of tea, and they give you the story of this side of their life, you know, whatever it may be.

But what you do is try and bring them in touch with the fact that in that very situation, God is calling them to respond to him.

And that's what the picture, I think, of Abraham is here, the man who responded to God's call. And that's what we are to do, no matter what happens to us, no matter what circumstances overtake us, no matter how our life may be compounded with tragedy, the fact is that God is calling us, and in that circumstance we are to hear the call of God, whatever it is.

And because what we do is we hear that call of God, and in the circumstance we obey, and we go out, we do whatever it is that we find God calling us to.

[25 : 03] Do I confuse you by all that, or do you think you're beginning to get hold of what I mean by that? A lot of people, I think, think of the call of God as something that may have happened to them between the ages of 17 and 18, and they missed it, and they've gone on living without him ever since.

But this suggests that in every circumstance of our life, God is calling us, and we are to respond.

Well, let me just sort of go through some themes then that are in this chapter, because I want just to share them with you, and then I'm going to develop them a little bit further into what I think are

hallmarks of our relationship to God.

Do you see that there is powerlessness and potency? That is, the powerlessness of Abraham and Sarah to have a child, and in their powerlessness, they are able to receive power.

So there's that contrast between their potency, which was God-given, and their powerlessness, which was the circumstance of their life. Their circumstance was powerlessness.

[26 : 24] Into that, God spoke a potency which he gave them that they became the parents of a family which outnumbers the stars in the sky and the sand by the sea.

There is in this another thing, which is that they went from a known home to a distant promise.

That was the nature of their life, was to travel from a known home, which was right here, to a distant promise which concerned this land here, and which didn't affect just them, but affected countless generations of people and still does.

From that sort of known security, from the Shaughnessy syndrome of a house with high hedges around it, and this is where I belong.

Where we belong is in touch with the promise of God. And that we need always to remember, that that's where we live.

[27 : 34] And then you go from a movable tent to an established city. And that's one of the characteristics of this story.

You see, Abraham, a sojourner, he left this home and traveled here and was, for the rest of his life, committed to living in tents and moving with the needs of the cattle which belonged to him.

The story goes from a single child to countless descendants. So that if you look at that conception that takes place in these verses, that tiny act within the whole drama of history and the consequences of it in the children that have been born to the child of that union.

And it's perhaps a help for you to see the infinite significance of a single life.

And you are that single life. And then it talks about you see a single life over against the whole of history.

[29 : 09] Abraham was called, Abraham obeyed, Abraham went out, Abraham bore a child, Abraham died. But in that man's life is the microcosm, if you want, of the whole span of history.

Man responding to God and being brought to the place where God can pour out the promises on him in accordance with God's covenanted promise in the beginning.

it's a very powerful picture that you go from a man who didn't know where he was going, but he knew who he was obeying.

And that's a much better basis to live life on than the person who says, I know where I'm going. but doesn't know who he's obeying. So, those are the things, and I've reduced them to this, and this you may find slightly repetitive, but let me just put down for you these things which I think come out of this story and which may be a help to you in sort of understanding what our faith is.

There is an eternal call, which is from God who is eternal, and an in-time response.

[30 : 54] That's why in a sense we can stop and pray wherever we are and whatever we're doing, because we know that God's call is here and now, and that we are capable of responding to it, right here and right now.

In fact, that's how we are to live our lives in immediate response to the continuing and eternal reality of God. and that the second thing is about our lives is we don't if you want, we don't choose the land, we obey the call.

Now, you know, lots of people came because they heard there was gold in the Yukon, and they said, that's where I'm going to go.

That wasn't what Abraham did. That tends to be a paradigm of our lives. We go to where the gold is and hope that we can get a sizable share of it.

But what Abraham was doing was going where he was called to. And he didn't choose where he was going, he obeyed the call to go there.

[32 : 30] And the next sort of great principle of our lives, our spiritual lives, is that we live in a tent, and this we need to be reminded of, that we live in a tent, but look for a city.

You know, this vast metropolis of Vancouver in which we now live is a tent. It's an impermanent place where we are sojourning during the few years of our life.

It is our tent. The city we're looking for is a particular city whose maker, whose architect and builder is God. It's an eternal thing that caught as we are in time and the temporalities of our earthly life, we are looking for that city.

city. We live in a tent, but look for a city. We are powerless, which is the condition of our life, but we have, I don't know why I'm writing this out for you, but maybe it gives you time to think about it. we are powerless, but we have a promise. Now, if you have all sorts of people in our society will tell you that the one thing people are looking for is power, and that building up power is what we have our lives for.

[34 : 21] What he knew was that he was powerless, but he had a promise. Powerless in terms of ourselves, but having a promise in terms of God's purpose towards us.

Then there is this quality, and I just give you this as the last one, and it's that the present reality reality is not based on past attainment, but on future promise.

That is the present reality of our life. life, and it's not based on past attainment, we're going to run out of space, but future promise.

future promise. And that, again, you see, is a hallmark of the life of faith, faith, and that because most of us, we like to live in a little study where we have our diplomas, and our plaques, and our degrees, and our achievements, and our trophies all around us to show what we have done, and we draw some reassurance out of that.

there was a picture, which I can illustrate to you, of St. Paul's Cathedral, and a beautiful and magnificent sculpture there.

[36 : 23] And down in this corner was a little man in a wheelchair. And this was a sculpture by Henry Moore, and this was Henry Moore.

It was a very dramatic picture, you know. And this was the great achievement of his life, but this was the present reality, an old man so crippled he could only be taken there in a wheelchair to look at something he had done.

It was a very powerful picture. And that tends to be, and I'm not saying this of Henry Moore, but just that this illustrates it, that we so often look to our past attainments, the things we have done, rather than to recognize that we are called to faith in an eternal promise and purpose of God which is infinitely greater.

God's God's God's life.

But the way we live is in terms of the future promise of God towards us. and that was how Abraham lived his life and those were the, in a sense, the marks that we see here of his life.

[38 : 05] Can I just leave you then with one verse which I think summarizes all this. I'll use Henry Moore's sculpture to tell you what it is. It's Romans 8.30 and Romans 8.30 says this and it's, I think it's an important verse but it helps to summarize what I've been talking about.

those whom he predestined he also called, sorry, I can even go back further than that.

Those whom, in verse 29, those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.

And those whom he predestined he called and those whom he called he justified and those whom he justified he glorified. Now, the reason I take that verse to summarize is because it says that God foreknew should we put an E in there?

I don't know whether we will or not. Then he predestined and I'm not going to go into the doctrine of predestination for the moment. Then he called.

[39 : 38] Then he justified. Then he glorified. And this is here the moment of response.

And that's how, this is the point at which we live our lives in relationship to God. Because, you see, God has foreknown us. He has predestined us to be conformed to the image of his son.

He then calls us and having called us, he justifies us and having justifies us, he glorifies us. So long before you're conscious of God's purpose, his purpose is already underway, you get this contact with his eternal purpose and in encountering in the reality of your present experience, God's call, and God goes on in the basis of your response to justify you and to bring you into his presence. So that's the purpose of God, and this is the moment of your response. I don't want to overwhelm you by the reality of the eternal, infinite, holy, just God, and the meaninglessness of your or my personal situation on this 28th day of January in the year of our Lord 1987, in which God is most certainly calling us to respond.

What I would like to remind you, though, is, and I find this very important to me, and I hope to you, that God calls us where we are right now.

[41 : 41] He doesn't say, go over there and I'll call you, or go up there and I'll call you. His call is an eternally present call to us in the circumstances of our lives, that we might have the faith to hear

and to respond to that call in from where we are right now.

With the flu, tired, sick, in crisis, whatever it may be, God calls us to respond to him from where we are right now.

And that is to bring us in, in a sense, to what you might call the production line of his purpose.

His purpose started long before we were aware of it towards us. His purpose is one in which it is established what he wants us to be, that is, conformed to the image of his Son.

He calls us, he justifies us, and he glorifies us. So it's a very powerful picture of what living by faith is all about, isn't it? It means in the sense, in the fraction of a moment of time, which is the whole of our lives, that we are to hear God's call, and to admit into our lives his purpose.

[43 : 17] If you want to know one last picture of faith, I'm getting wound up here, but I better, I'll quit right after this. This is a field, see, like this, and in this corner is a gate, right there.

And this field has you at the center of it, and all around it there are, if you want, people trying to get in.

It's sort of as though, and you finally just open the gate. That's what faith is, just opening the gate, just letting down the barrier so that God can come in, stopping the process of resisting the eternal and loving God, who respects you, and will not kick the door down, or break his way into your life, but that you will just be open to him in the circumstance in which you find yourself right now.

And the ministry that we can have one to another is in love and care for one another, to encourage one another, to let down the barrier, to allow God, the eternal God, with his eternal purpose towards us, to break in on our lives.

Amen.