

# Hebrews 11:8-16

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[ 0 : 00 ] After 11 verses 8 through 16, if you're looking in one of the pew Bibles, that is on page 1007. Hebrews 11, starting at verse 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. 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. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder 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 many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

[ 1 : 19 ] 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.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 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.

Would you pray with me? Lord Jesus, you said to your disciples, peace I give to you, my own peace I leave with you.

Look not upon our sins, but upon the faith of your church that you have given us. And give to us the peace and unity of that heavenly city, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign now and forever.

[ 2 : 28 ] Amen. Well, this morning's passage is about living in this present world as foreigners. So this week I decided to do a little survey of some of you who are literally foreigners, who were born and raised in other countries, but now live here in the United States, to help us begin to grasp the concept and the experience of living as a foreigner.

And with your permission, I will share some of the questions and answers. So first I asked, what was most challenging to you when you first left your home country? Here are some of the answers. The stressful uncertainty of my future life here compared to all that I left behind. Family, friends, job, land, house in my home country.

The language. We had all learned English in school, but English here sounded so very different. Everyone spoke in fast-forward mode, and nobody spoke the same way as anyone else. The perception that we were aliens, by the U.S. government definition, who may be subjected to vigorous checks to ensure that we are not a threat. The feeling that we are not welcome.

[ 3 : 42 ] Feeling alone. Not having anyone near you who really cares about you. Finally, understanding culturally appropriate behavior and conversation.

I became overly self-conscious for the fear of offending anyone. The second question I asked was, what has been hard about remaining here in the U.S. as a foreigner? Feeling torn between life here and life back home.

Knowing that I need to stay here in order to provide for people back home. Learning about all the differing written and at least as many unwritten laws of society.

Dealing with people who are unfriendly to people who have a certain skin color or who speak with an accent. It took some time for us to find the right church and to feel that we are really part of the family.

Living as a foreigner can be confusing, difficult, tiring. But it can also be an extraordinarily valuable experience that God uses.

[ 4 : 47 ] Consider just for a minute how many books in the Bible were written by or about people who were living as foreigners. Far from their homeland.

Just a few. The book of Numbers describes Israel's 40-year-long journey through the desert. The book of Ruth is about a Moabite widow who immigrates with her mother-in-law to Israel.

Jeremiah wrote to the Israelites who were exiled to Babylon. Ezekiel and Daniel wrote from Babylon as exiles. 1 and 2 Kings was compiled to address the question, why did the exile happen in the first place?

Esther shows God's provision for the Jewish foreigners in Persia. And so on and so forth. In the New Testament, several of Paul's letters were written from prison. Peter was written to exiled Christians.

And Revelation was written by John when he was literally in exile on the island of Patmos. God has chosen to carry out much of his plan for the world through people living in foreign lands.

[ 5 : 52 ] But the main point of this passage is not that everybody should go travel the world. But that faith means choosing to live wherever we are.

Whether it's in your home country where you were born or in another country. Choosing to live in this present world as a foreigner. Because we look forward to a future heavenly homeland.

And in this passage, the author points us to the example of Abraham as someone who did just that. And he shows us three aspects of Abraham's faith.

One from the beginning of Abraham's life with God. One from the middle. And one from the end. So we'll look at these three pictures of faith from the life of Abraham in turn.

As we see what it means to live in this world as a foreigner. So first, verse 8 and 9 show us that faith means obeying God's call into an uncertain future.

[ 6 : 53 ] 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. This was the beginning of Abraham's journey of living by faith in God.

God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12 came out of the blue. With no apparent warning. God said to him, leave your country, your people, and your father's household.

Until God called him, Abraham's life was defined by those very things. His family, his tribe, his homeland. And those were the major sources of identity and security in the ancient world.

But God called him to leave those things behind. And God didn't give Abraham a detailed itinerary for the rest of his life.

God simply said, go to the land that I will show you. It seems that God didn't even tell him exactly where he was going until he got there. When he finally got to Canaan, in Genesis 12, verse 7, God tells him, to your offspring I will give this land.

[ 8 : 04 ] Now at that time, Abraham wasn't alone. He was caring for his wife Sarah, his aging father, and his nephew Lot, as well as a whole bunch of associated household servants.

And he took everyone and everything that belonged to him. He didn't leave anything behind, sort of just in case he decided to return one day. He took everything and everyone that belonged to him.

And he went in obedience to the call of God. And the author of Hebrews says, that is faith.

Following God's call into an uncertain future.

Now what might this look like for us? Well, it does not mean that uncertainty about future plans is always, by definition, a good thing.

It's not saying that we shouldn't bother to plan for the future, but just live moment by moment and trust that everything will work itself out somehow. Sometimes that can be simply a form of laziness, or wishful thinking, or avoiding reality.

[ 9 : 09 ] But faith in God is not avoiding reality. Faith in God means facing reality. And part of the reality is that we are finite creatures who are not ultimately in control of our future.

However responsibly we plan and prepare, God does call us to be responsible managers of what he gives us. He does call us to save money.

A proverb points us to the ants who gather little pieces of food and bring them to their storehouse. Like the squirrels store up for the winter.

God does call us to seek out wise counsel when we make our plans. But he also tells us to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will do this or do that.

I remember myself wrestling with this reality during my senior year in college. I was looking for a job all year. I sent out many applications.

[10:08] I received no job offers. It was one of the first times in my life when I didn't really know what was coming next. And I found great comfort that year in reading about Abraham, who had walked with God into a future that was far more uncertain than mine.

And Jesus' words, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything else will be added to you as well, reminded me to focus on pleasing God in the present rather than spending my best energy worrying about what I could not control about the future.

So faith means facing the inevitable uncertainties of life and entrusting them to God. But it's also more than that. For Abraham, faith did not simply mean facing the inevitable uncertainties of life, but it also meant embracing particular uncertainties that resulted from obeying God's word.

Now, God does not call every one of us to literally leave our family and our homeland. But many times, God orchestrates the circumstances of our lives so that in order to obey his word, we must let go of something before we know exactly how the future will work out.

For some of you, this has meant, or this might mean, going to your supervisor at work and raising a concern or even saying, I can't participate in something that I am convinced is unethical.

[11:40] Even if it's an awkward conversation, even if you're the only person on your team with such a concern, even if it jeopardizes your chances of being promoted. For some of you, this has meant choosing to walk away from a dating relationship that compromises your loyalty to Jesus.

When you don't see any alternative marriage prospects on the horizon, trusting that it's better to walk closely with Jesus and be single than to pursue marriage or stay in a long-term dating relationship and drift apart from Jesus.

Now we can face the inevitable uncertainties of life and we can even embrace the particular uncertainties that might flow from obedience to Christ because in Christ, we have something more certain than anything else in this world.

The reason Abraham could follow God's call into an uncertain future was because God's call came with a certain promise of great blessing. And the Apostle Paul says God's promise is guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring, not only to Abraham's physical descendants, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham.

Now what exactly does God promise? Well, God promised that Abraham's family would become a great people. And when you become a Christian, you become part of this great family of God.

[13:09] You have a father in heaven. You have brothers and sisters in the church. You are not alone. God promised to provide a land for Abraham's descendants and God promises us an eternal home, as verse 10 says, in the city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

God promised to protect Abraham from his enemies. He said, whoever blesses you, I will bless. Whoever curses you, I will curse. And Jesus promised his disciples, I will never leave you. I will never forsake you.

God promised that Abraham's descendants would convey his blessing to all the families of the earth. And in Jesus Christ, we are now recipients and channels of that very blessing that God has promised.

So we can follow God's call into an uncertain future because God has promised us his sure and certain blessings in Jesus Christ. So that's the first thing.

Faith means obeying God's call into an uncertain future. The second thing we see in verse 11 and 12 is that faith means considering God faithful in the midst of impossible situations.

[14:19] This was the main challenge that Abraham and Sarah faced in the middle of their life. To consider God faithful even when they did not see the fulfillment of his promises.

Abraham was 75 years old or around there when God first promised that he would have many descendants. But for the next 25 years, nothing seemed to happen.

They just got older and older and kept celebrating birthdays. And their birthdays weren't so exciting to celebrate anymore as they got older. And Sarah didn't get pregnant.

But verse 11 says, by faith, Sarah received power to conceive. Even when she was past the age since she considered him faithful who had promised. Now there is some uncertainty as to how we should translate this verse.

If you have an NIV, the old NIV, or if you have an NRSV, verse 11 is translated with Abraham as the subject. Something like, by faith, Abraham, even though he was past the age and Sarah was

barren, was enabled to become a father.

[15:23] There are reasonable arguments for either translation. I'd be happy to go into the details afterwards. But in this case, it actually matters very little which translation is correct. Because both Abraham and Sarah were facing the exact same impossible situation together.

Both of them were completely infertile. Totally unable to generate life. Verse 11 says, Sarah was past the age. Verse 12 says, Abraham was as good as dead.

And yet, it says they considered God faithful who had promised them a son. Even though the promise was given 25 years ago and hadn't yet been fulfilled.

Now you might also ask, well did Abraham and Sarah really consider God faithful? I mean if you read Genesis, when God told Abraham in Genesis 17 that he would have another son at the age of 100.

Abraham fell down on his face and laughed. And in the next chapter, when Sarah, who was 90, heard the same news, she laughed too. And God said to Sarah, why did you laugh?

[16:33] And she said, oh no, I didn't laugh. And God said, oh yes you did. I heard you. So did they really have faith, you might wonder?

Well the point of this is, neither Abraham nor Sarah were perfect examples of complete trust in God at every moment of their lives.

Earlier on, Genesis 16, Sarah got fed up with waiting. And she told Abraham, go use a surrogate. Go sleep with Hagar. And out of fear and frustration and desperation, Abraham did just that.

Both Abraham and Sarah had moments, even seasons, of doubt, distrust, and disobedience to God. But in the long run, they persevered in trusting God's promises.

They fell down many times. But they got back up again. And continued to look to the God who had called them and who had made promises to them.

[17:37] And the writer of Hebrews says, that is faith. Faith does not mean that you never fail or you never doubt. But faith does mean that when you fail, you turn back to God and repent.

And though you may doubt, you ultimately agree with Abraham and Sarah that God is faithful to his promises. Now, maybe some of you are facing seemingly impossible situations where you've waited for a long time, but you do not see the fulfillment of God's promise.

You do not see what you hope for. Maybe like Abraham and Sarah, you feel powerless in the face of infertility. Maybe you long to have children, but it hasn't come to pass.

What does it mean to consider God faithful in the face of an impossible situation? Well, there's much that could be said, but let me say three things. First, let me urge you to pour out your heart before the Lord in prayer.

Set aside an extended time with your spouse to fast and pray together. Call the elders of the church. We would, like it says in James 5, we would love to come and pray with you. You know, I think as 21st century Americans who are very active go-do-it people, we don't tend to do these things well.

[19:00] Praying, fasting, calling on others, waiting on the Lord. Some other Christians in other parts of the world can teach us about these things. But that's where we should start.

By seeking the face of God. Second, seek wise counsel. Not only medically, but also biblically. The world of modern fertility treatments is complicated.

And the medical establishment is not neutral. Most infertility doctors assume a secular worldview that is actually foreign to many of the categories in the Bible.

And the goal is, prioritize effective results above, at almost any cost. Including unborn human lives. So be careful not to act out of fear, frustration, or desperation. Proceed with caution and proceed with counsel. And as you seek counsel, you might consider if God is providentially leading you toward adopting.

[20:03] Adoption is not a second best option if you can't have biological children. Adoption is a uniquely beautiful display of God's electing love.

God's gracious intention to bring people into his family who have no natural connection to him. Who have no natural claim on his love. All of us who are Christians are adopted by God the Father.

If you're considering that, if you even just want to learn more about that, read Russell Moore's book, *Adopted for Life*. It's down on the bookstall. Third, pour out your heart before the Lord in prayer.

Seek wise counsel. And third, seek to rest in God's promises. God has not promised children to every Christian couple. But God has promised that if we abide in Jesus Christ, if we abide in his

word, if we abide in his love, we will bear good fruit that will last.

A few years ago, my wife and I went to a marriage conference led by an older couple who had been married for 40 years. They said we wanted to have children. We pursued medical treatments to the point that our conscience would allow.

[ 21 : 20 ] We were not able to. We considered adoption, but ultimately we felt that God gave us the freedom to minister to other couples and to other people's children. And they did just that throughout their lives.

They sometimes traveled for a year or two at a time to care for aging relatives. They led marriage conferences, traveling many weekends together.

In Isaiah 56, God promises to eunuchs, to people unable to bear children, a name better than sons and daughters. An everlasting name that will not be cut off.

Some of you, God has called you to be single, either for a time or for your whole lives. And though the church has not always recognized that well, that is a high and holy calling.

To live in undivided devotion to the king of kings. And to be a servant free to go wherever he sends you. But maybe you aren't longing for children and unable to have them.

[ 22 : 24 ] Maybe you fear the prospect of having children. Maybe you think, how could I ever become a good parent when my childhood was such a mess? Maybe raising kids seems like the impossible challenge.

Or at least very difficult and disruptive. Perhaps more strategic to avoid it altogether. Now these are very real concerns. When the people of Israel were exiled in Babylon, many of them felt the same way.

The world around us is foreign and hostile. Why would I want to raise kids here? But in Jeremiah 29, God said to the Israelite community who were in exile, he said, build houses, settle down, get married, and have kids.

Multiply there and do not decrease. In other words, their family life was to be part of their distinctive witness to the true and living God in a foreign land.

Now please don't get me wrong here. The number of children you have is not the measure of your maturity in Christ. But children are a good gift from the Lord.

[ 23 : 35 ] They are one of the purposes for which God instituted marriage. And if you have a reasonably stable marriage, if you trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, if you're involved in a supportive church community, you are better prepared to raise kids than most parents in this world.

So do not let fear or inconvenience be the thing that holds you back. Finally, maybe you are a parent and you feel like you are facing an impossible task.

Maybe you're a single parent. Or maybe it feels like you're a single parent at times because your spouse has to work so much. But consider the God who is faithful. God was faithful to Hagar when she was mistreated by Sarah, who was effectively her boss and her landlord at the same time.

She was left to fend for herself and care for her young son in the wilderness. And God came near to her, saw her, and provided for her. Consider that God is faithful.

Whatever the impossible situation you may face, God was faithful to Abraham and Sarah. He will be faithful to you as well.

[ 24 : 48 ] So faith means obeying God's call into an uncertain future because of the certainty of his promises. It means considering God faithful in the midst of impossible situations. And finally, faith means accepting our identity as foreigners in this world.

This is verse 10 and verse 13 through 16. And this is the challenge that Abraham faced throughout his whole life, but especially toward the end. Do you know that during his whole life, Abraham never became a citizen of Canaan?

Even though he lived there for over 50 years. And 50 years after he first moved to Canaan, toward the end of his life in Genesis 23, Abraham said to the inhabitants of the land, he said, I am a foreigner and a stranger among you.

Abraham wasn't a foreigner simply because he was a victim of unhappy circumstances. He wasn't a foreigner just because he was forced to be. He made a deliberate choice to live his whole life as a foreigner for God's sake.

Verse 15 says if he just wanted to go back to where he was born and raised, he could have done that. But no, he was looking forward to the city of God. And that's what sustained him.

[ 26 : 00 ] And that's what can sustain us. Through all the uncertainties. Through all the impossible situations. Through all the vulnerability and deprivation and insecurity and discomfort and dishonor that comes from being a foreigner.

He was looking forward to a better country to come. You see, through faith, the objective future reality of God's promises shapes our personal present experience.

That's what it means back in verse 1 when it says faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the certainty, the conviction of things not seen. It means the objective future reality of God's promises shapes our personal present experience.

Abraham lived his whole life in tents. And a tent has no foundations. Because he was looking forward to the city with foundations. Designed and built by God himself.

The objective future reality of the city with foundations enables us to live in the midst of an unstable world. It enables us to live confidently in God when it seems like your life doesn't have a secure foundation.

[ 27 : 10 ] And your circumstances are vulnerable to change at any moment. It enables us to pack up and move across the country and know that God will go before us. Or it may enable you to live in the same place for 50 years.

And know that you're not missing out. Just because you haven't traveled the world. The objective future reality of a heavenly homeland. A better country in the world to come shapes our way of life now as foreigners in this present world.

It means that you can be a lifelong American citizen. You can work for the U.S. government. But our greatest love and our greatest highest loyalty is for the international and everlasting kingdom of Jesus Christ.

It means that if God calls you to do so, you can move here from Texas and stay in the northeast for the rest of your life and love it. Or God can call you to move down to Texas from the northeast and you can live down there for the rest of your life and love it.

It means that when our culture gradually drifts further and further away from Christian principles, we don't simply express frustration, but we see it as an opportunity to bear witness to Jesus by living differently from the norm.

[ 28 : 22 ] I think that is what God is calling the church in America to in the years to come. It's to be willing to live differently from the norm. And not simply to express frustration about various cultural trends.

But to embrace our identity as foreigners in this world. Who can love our neighbors. Because we have a heavenly homeland and a better country to come.

So faith means obeying God's call into an uncertain future because of God's certain promises. It means considering God faithful in the midst of impossible situations because nothing is impossible with him.

And it means accepting our identity as foreigners because we have a better country to come.

Abraham lived by faith. Imperfectly. But there was one who lived as a foreigner in this world even more than Abraham did.

Jesus Christ obeyed God's call to leave the security and comfort of heaven and become a foreigner and a stranger in this world. Jesus Christ continued throughout his life facing an unwavering obedience.

[ 29 : 31 ] Even when facing impossible situations. Bearing the sin of the world. And he said, Father, your will be done.

Because he considered God faithful. And all the way to the end, Jesus identified as a foreigner in this world. He gave up his rights. He was crucified outside the city. He was despised, rejected, homeless.

And forsaken. And he became an outsider so that we might be invited in. And brought into the family of God now and forever.

And have a place in the eternal city of God. And that Jesus who was crucified is now risen. And it says he's not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

And when we trust in Jesus, he's become our brother and God is not ashamed to be called our God. And that's the best promise of all.

[ 30 : 30 ] The God of the universe is not ashamed to be called your God. Your Father in heaven. He claims you. It's not easy to live as a foreigner in this world.

But God turns what is hard for our good. I want to conclude as I began. By reading the words of some who are foreigners among us. The last question I asked them was this.

How has God comforted you, taught you, and made you a blessing while living in a foreign land? And this is what I would hope that he would teach each of us. As we seek to live in this world as foreigners.

God has taught me that problems and trials never last forever. He has given me assurance of my salvation. God has used the fellowship of believers in the church to show me how brilliantly the light of the gospel still shines in the midst of darkness.

God has made me understand through my struggles here that the whole earth belongs to him. He has also taught me not to create an idol of the acceptance and approval of men. God comforted me by providing me another loving family here that I would never expect to get if I did not leave my own country.

[ 31 : 44 ] I have learned to rely on God who provides himself. When I am obedient to God, I feel him saying, I am with you. When I feel weak, that's when I am strong.

God has taught me to be obedient to my bosses. Some people say it's not good to submit to authority because a bad boss can take advantage of you. But it's better to be humble and give grace to these people as we have been given grace.

Finally, our obvious alienness brought lots of people to speak to us. Very different people from all walks of life, which in itself has been a blessing. And remarkably often, the ensuing conversations led to an exchange about God and our faith and blessings experienced far more often than this had ever happened back home.

Through all this, God proved himself to us as unshakably stable, reliably faithful, unquestionably wise, marvelously purposeful, graciously forgiving, full of love, worthy of all our trust and reliance.

Amen and amen. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that your call to us comes with a great promise.

[ 33 : 04 ] We thank you that you are unshakably stable, reliably faithful, unquestionably wise, marvelously purposeful, and worthy of all our trust and reliance.

Lord, would you strengthen us to live as foreigners in this world because we look forward to a better city to come.

Strengthen us, Lord, to live by faith and hope and love in you. Fill us with your spirit today, Lord, so that we may be empowered to do that.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's stand and respond to God's word together.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.