

Hebrews 11:8-22

Examples of Faith: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are portraits of what it means to trust in a sovereign God of grace. We see in their lives examples of what it means to have "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

This faith is demonstrated in the manner in which Abraham chose to follow the call of the LORD God and leave his home, his father, his security and go to an unknown place. When Abraham heard the call of God he obeyed. This was an act of faith. God summoned him and he acted in obedience immediately. He left the security of family and friends to dwell as a stranger in a land, without rights of citizenship or possession.

Abraham's faith is outstanding because he was the first in his family to place his trust in Yahweh, the LORD God. His father was an idolater. Joshua says his forefathers all "served other gods" (Josh. 24:2).

The great example of faith is seen in the fact that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not live to see the fulfillment of the promise that the land would be theirs. They wandered as alien nomads in a foreign land, but even in death they were faithful believing in the promise that God would fulfill His promise to them. History proves that God was true to His word and He did provide a land and descendants.

Faith of Abraham

The writer of Hebrews held Abraham in such high esteem that he referred to him ten times. Only Luke and John mention Abraham more.

It took faith for Abraham to leave Mesopotamia and as a foreigner look for the Promised Land. It was a step of faith when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac. He looked for the city God would provide for him as an inheritance.

To understand Abraham's testimony we must keep in mind Genesis 15:6, "He believed the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." The apostle Paul's commentary in Romans 4:5 declares, "to the one who does not work but trusts in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness."

Abraham accepted God's promises and acted on them. He took God at His Word and walked by faith seeing what the human eye could not see. The testimony of Abraham begins in Genesis 12:1 and covers many chapters.

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:8-10). All Scripture quotations are from New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update unless otherwise noted.

Leon Morris notes, "To cultured men in the first century, the city was the highest form of civilized existence" (*Hebrews-Revelation, Expository Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, p. 118). The city denotes permanent residence. There is nothing more insecure than living in a tent. The city represents permanence because it had foundations.

Abraham's eyes were not focused on an earthly human city. By faith Abraham spent his whole lifetime in temporary residence because he was awaiting the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. God is the builder. The city symbolizes heaven, the residence of God. Abraham looked forward with absolute confidence that one day he would enter that city whose designer and builder is the LORD God. The imagery moves from a pilgrimage to the actual possession of the city.

Abraham did not have his gaze fixed on an earthly city with materialistic gain. He was looking for something far greater. He is not looking for the earthly city of Jerusalem. It makes you wonder why we have a lot of false teachers focused on Abraham's material wealth as their goal in teaching rather than the higher more important emphasis of his spiritual vision of being in the presence of the living God. The spiritual wealth of Abraham has been completely left out by these modern teachers.

Hebrews 11:16 reads, "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 a city for them" (Hebrews 11:16). That city is heaven. Hebrews 12:22 says, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels." Hebrews 13:14 reads, "For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). It is the heavenly Jerusalem which is above where God resides. You can read about that New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. This is the home every believer in Christ should have his eyes focused upon. Even though we live as strangers and pilgrims in this world, we look forward to our inheritance in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1, 9-27). It is "the holy city, Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:10).

The apostle Paul contrasts between the "present Jerusalem" and "the Jerusalem which is above" (Gal. 4:25-26). We are going to a prepared place for a prepared people.

Abraham's faith was focused not on an earthly city with its riches, but on a heavenly city. He had his eyes set on eternity. He was looking at that which is not earthly, but spiritual which physical eyes cannot see. He got eternity into the picture. Earthly temporal values were of small consequence to Abraham.

The author of Hebrews shifts his argument to include Sarah in verse eleven. She is obviously important to the argument because the son of the promise could not be born without her involvement. She was barren, and because of her age she could not bear children except for a divine intervention. Abraham upon the death of Sarah, after the birth of Isaac, would go on to father more children (Gen. 25:11ff).

Faith of Sarah

"By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore" (Hebrews 11:11-12).

God's promise to Abraham and Sarah was beyond all human possibilities. Abraham was 99 years old when the birth of Isaac was first announced, and 100 when Isaac was born. Sarah was 90 years old! (Gen. 17:15-21) They were as good as dead (Rom. 4:19).

However, the God who can raise the dead can make a 90 year old woman conceive naturally!

The LORD God took Abraham outside at night and said to him, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." God said to him, "So shall your descendants be" (Gen. 15:5). The response of Abraham was, "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). The promise is repeated to Abraham regarding Isaac in Genesis 22:17; 26:4; It was repeated to Jacob in Genesis 32:12. "For You said, 'I will surely prosper you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered'" (Genesis 32:12). The promise was literally fulfilled with the birth of Isaac and his descendants. Spiritually it is fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). "All the nations shall be blessed in you" (Gen. 12:3). "So those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer" (Gal. 3:9). "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (v. 29).

The context of this chapter would include all these patriarchs who walked by faith. They all died believing God would fulfill their promises in time. Their lives are a testimony of verse one. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Jesus said to the Pharisees, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My dad; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56).

"All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went 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 a city for them" (Hebrews 11:13-16). The hour of death for each of these patriarchs was the hour of victory of their faith. Their faith prevailed in the hour of death. In the hour of death their faith in the future and invisible had shown most brightly. They faced the moment of death by trusting in the everlasting promises of God. By faith they took possession of the everlasting inheritance. These "spiritual expatriates" knew the source of their blessings and they trusted Him. They had no intention of returning to the old life because they had made a commitment to a better promise.

How beautiful the statement "God is not ashamed to be called their God." The reason He is not ashamed is because "He has prepared a city for them." Indeed, God is pleased to be called their God. "They desired—even now—that better country, and God is not ashamed—even now—to be called their God" (Philip Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 480). This is a great encouragement for us to live our lives in a manner that is pleasing to Him. Jesus told His disciples the night before His crucifixion that He was going to heaven to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-3). The apostle John reminds us: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2-3).

Did Abraham really believe God would raise Isaac from the dead when he was called upon to offer him as a sacrifice?

The promise of the son of the covenant with Abraham was so tied to Isaac that if he died all would come to an end. "I will establish my covenant with Isaac" was the focus of God's promise to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:21). "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gen. 21:12).

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.' He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

How would he be able to reconcile the different revelations made to him? How could Isaac be the promise child if Abraham killed him? God has specifically said Isaac, not Ishmael, was the fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham. The covenant was renewed with Isaac, not Ishmael. The only answer is that Abraham continued to trust God to raise Isaac from the dead. This is the only way he could fulfill the promise of the heir. When Abraham untied Isaac and lifted him off the altar it was as though he had risen from the dead.

"The test of Abraham's faith lay in the apparent conflict between the promise of God that Isaac was to be heir and the commandment of God that he was to be put to death, which meant the extinction of Abraham's seed and the end of the promise. . . . Believing that God's promise could not fail, he was convinced that if Isaac died God would raise him from the dead" (Thomas Hewitt, *Hebrews*, p. 177).

God is the God of the covenant; therefore He is able to perform the greatest of all miracles which is the resurrection from the dead, if that is needed for the preservation of His promises to His covenant people. Figuratively speaking Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead.

Abraham received Isaac back as a "type" or figure (*en parabole*) (v. 19). Arndt and Gingrich observe that this word implies the author of Hebrews regarded the incident as a type of the violent death and resurrection of Christ. The sacrifice of Isaac was a type of our Lord's crucifixion. Thomas Hewitt writes, "Abraham's faith was able to reach the wonderful heights of the resurrection and for this reason Isaac was restored to him as one from the dead, as a type of the death and resurrection of the divine Son who was not spared (cf. Rom. 8:32; Jn. 8:56)" (*Hebrews*, p. 178).

No doubt Isaac's recovery from the offering as a sacrifice was also a prefiguring of the Abraham's ultimate seed, the Lord Jesus Christ and his literal resurrection.

God is faithful to His promise.

Faith of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones" (Hebrews 11:20-22).

They all walked by faith trusting God to do as He had promised. Everything depended on God's promise through Isaac. "God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. . . . But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year'" (Gen. 17:19, 21; cf. 26:2-5, 24; 28:10-15; 35:9-12; 46:2-4).

"It is no ordinary trial of faith to give up what we have in hand in order to seek what is a far off and unknown to us," wrote John Calvin. The patriarchs had "the assurance of things hoped for" and "the conviction of things not seen." It was a personal trust in the living God to do as He had promised. They took God at His word. Martin Luther said, "This is the glory of faith . . . Abraham with this obedience of faith shows the highest example of the evangelical life, because he left all and followed the Lord, preferring the word of God to everything else and loving it above all things . . ."

All of the patriarchs suffered, but they remained faithful. William Tyndale said, "All that I do and suffer is but the way to the reward, and not the deserving thereof. . . . Christ is Lord over all, and whatsoever any man will have of God, he must have it freely given him for Christ's sake. Now to have heaven for mine own deserving is mine own praise and not Christ's. For I cannot have it by favor and grace in Christ and by mine own merits also; for free giving and deserving cannot stand together."

Leon Morris writes, "With all three the significant thing was their firm conviction that death cannot frustrate God's purposes" (*ibid*). At the end of his life Joseph demonstrated his unshakable faith by requesting that his body be buried in the Promised Land, Canaan.

"As with Abraham and Moses of old, the decisions we make today will determine the rewards tomorrow The emphasis in the Epistle of Hebrews is: Don't live for what the world will promise you today! Live for what God has promised you in the future!" (Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 279).

"Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Where is your focus today? Are you using Christianity for greedy gain and all you can get out of it? Anything that puts the emphasis on fulfilling material greed is not Christianity.

Just as God has provided a heavenly home, a city of God, for the Old Testament saints, He has a grand provision for us, too. Jesus said, "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-3).

We have to continue believing in the promises of God knowing that He may have to raise us from the dead to fulfill them. This is exactly where much of the popular preaching in our day misses the correct interpretation. They emphasize what you can get today in a materialistic world. Turn man into a god, and the true LORD God into a divine vending machine. Get your riches in this world today. You don't have to take the long road of true living faith and trust God to bless you in eternity. God owes you riches and blessings and perfect happiness today. You do not have to wait. You can instantly claim God's blessings today, now. Why do you continue to

live in poverty? What is wrong with this teaching? It is a sham. It is not Christianity. Jesus said, "Come take up your cross and follow me." Jesus called us to be servants and he set the example.

Isaac's restoration was a type or a parable, an illustration that points to the fact that God will give us what He promised if we trust Him. When Abraham untied Isaac it was like he had risen from the dead. That type is a vivid picture of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "The blood of Jesus, that is to say, the perfect atonement provided by the incarnate Son through his sacrifice of himself in our stead, is the whole substance of our confidence. The only merit in which the Christian trusts is the merit of Christ." (Philip Hughes, Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, 432).

What Abraham, Isaac and Jacob looked for was a better country, a heavenly one. God prepared for them a city. By faith they died looking for that city. My friend, are you looking for that city, too? The LORD God has done everything in preparation for you to enter that city. What is your response to His loving grace and mercy?

The apostle Paul longed for that city. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. . . . For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it" (Romans 8:18-19, 22-25).

Some Abiding Principles and Practical Applications

1. When we have true saving faith we will always demonstrate it in obedience. It calls for a decisive action on the part of the believer. "We love Him because He first loved us." If we love Him we will obey Him. God calls us to an obedient faith. Abraham responded to the call of God immediately. That should be every believer's response to Him.

2. Because we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus' finished work alone we will bear spiritual fruit in our daily lives. Good works, fruits of righteousness are the result of saving faith, not the cause of it. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

3. Because we begin the Christian life by faith we must also continue by faith. From beginning to end it is by faith. "nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. . . . I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:16, 20). We are justified by faith, and we are sanctified by faith in Christ. By the principle of faith we are justified and we persevere.

4. When we walk by faith we see the unseen eternal glory in store for every believer. It is by faith that we learn to look beyond the present temporary scene and see the unseen eternal promises which God has in store for His children. The apostle Paul wrote, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Like Abraham, this earth is not our homeland. "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21). Then why do we go occupied with this earthly life, and not with our eternal glory?

"So real were God's promises to Abraham that their fulfillment, though not yet, was as certain to him as something already and inalienably possessed. Thus the essential power of faith made the distant hope a present reality, and these believers of the ancient world 'saw' and 'greeted' the promised consummation, even, and indeed especially, in the hour of death, as though already face to face with it" (Philip Hughes, *The Epistle to the*

Hebrews, p. 478). Chrysostom said of Abraham, "he lived in all respects as one whose home is in the City which is yonder." Let that be said of us today, as well.

5. Because our great God and Savior has blessed us in this life He will continue to bless us in and beyond the grave. One day He will come and we shall be like Him! May these promised of eternal life sharpen our desire and whet our appetite to look more intently for the day of redemption. Jesus is coming! Even so, come Lord Jesus.

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