



Abraham, The Father of Faith

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 11:8-19 (8-16)

October 9, 2016

Pastor Nick Shaffer

Abraham – The Greatest Example of Faith Over the last several weeks, we have been blessed as the writer of Hebrews has held up for our consideration and for our encouragement, three men of exemplary faith, three men of living, active, worshipful, consistent, steady, and obedient faith – Abel, Enoch, and Noah. The Hebrew Christians had and we have, in each of these men, an example to follow and a great encouragement to continue in the faith, to continue in the face of obstacles, in the face of the unknown, in the face of opposition and mockery, in the face of hostility and unjust suffering and accusation, and for us, in a world that increasingly sees faith in Christ and trust in God the Father as not only antiquated and obsolete, but as a threat to the humanistic agenda that drives it. Each one of these men offers us solid examples of earnest and serious faith, faith that we must emulate if we are to be faithful to Christ and please God.

And today, the writer of Hebrews is going to offer us a look at the man who is presented in the Word of God as the greatest example of faith among men, Abraham. It is of this man, Abraham, of whom God first testified, **“He believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6, ESV)** In both Romans 4 and in Galatians 3, Paul uses Genesis 15:6 as his proof text that justification, that salvation, is through faith and not based upon human works. In each case Paul contrasts the true way of being right with God – by trusting in God and His promises – ultimately in the saving work of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ – with the way that men naturally think about salvation, namely, that we earn our way into heaven, or that salvation is for everyone regardless. Abraham stands as the example of the way that God saves all who are saved – by grace, through faith in His promises – all of which are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Abraham is the example of saving faith.

For this reason, Abraham is extolled in Scripture, not only as the Father of the nation of Israel, but as the Father of all who are saved by faith, Galatians 3:6-7 testifying, **“just as**

Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”... Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (Galatians 3:6–9, ESV) It is this Abraham of whom James writes, **“The Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God.” (James 2:23, ESV)** It is for these reasons that Abraham is the undisputed archetype, the paragon of true and living faith. His faith has much to say to us as the people of God today, just as it did to the Hebrew Christians who received this letter before us. So let’s see this picture that the writer of Hebrews paints for us of character of Abraham’s faith, and we are only going to look at verses 8-16 this morning although we read through verse 19 – verses 17-19 demand their own sermon. But look with me again, first at verses 8-12. The writer of Hebrews says, **“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.” (Hebrews 11:8–12, ESV)** Now what is it that we are supposed to understand and emulate as it regards Abraham’s faith? Let me just give you several things to think about. First, in Abraham we see

The Responsiveness of Faith In order to understand this, we need to know a little about the history of Abraham. Abraham was in the line of Shem, Noah’s son, but in that line of Shem, the worship of God eventually degenerated into idolatry. He lived in an ancient city called Ur, located on the Euphrates River in what is now southern Iraq. Ur was an advanced city boasting an advanced system of writing, advanced mathematics, an educational system, prosperous business and trade, and it was also a hotbed of idolatry. In the center of Ur was a three-tiered Ziggurat. A ziggurat consisted of a more or less square structure made of stone, on top of which was built another, slightly smaller, square structure, on top of which was built another slightly smaller square structure - and so on. And so a ziggurat was this tower that grew ever upward, narrowing as it went. To look at a ziggurat from any sort of distance would reveal something like a very large staircase - a stairway to the heavens. It was the center of idolatrous worship, of pagan worship, of human sacrifice, even. As

advanced as Ur was, it was under the bondage of the darkest sort of paganism, and Abraham was an idolater himself, steeped in the paganism of his people.

What completely changed this man and all of history with him, **was the voice, the call, the summons of God.** Abraham would have lived and died and we never would have known anything about him at all had God not singled him out and called him to be His own. God chose Abraham and He spoke to him.

Think of it beloved. How many times had Abraham prayed and offered sacrifices to these gods, to the idols of Ur? How many times had he prayed to them and heard only silence? How many times had he bowed his head and prayed for an heir, for a son, for the gods to open his wife's womb and heard nothing in return? He was 75 when God called him – 75! For all of his life he had been devoted to these gods and never heard a word, but one day, God by His grace, broke into Abraham's life. One day the God of Glory, the One True God, spoke to Abraham and his life was never the same. He did not deserve God to speak to him, did not merit God's intervention in his life – this was sheer, marvelous, matchless grace! Abraham was not singled out because he was a good man, or because God saw his faith. He had none! He was singled out by God's grace, a grace that carried with it the power to hear and believe God's voice.

It is the story of all of us who know God in Christ, all of us who have been saved by His grace – the Hebrew Christians and everyone in this room who knows the saving grace of God. God comes to us when we are hopelessly lost and with no true, personal knowledge of Him. He comes to us when we are **“dead in the trespasses and sins in which we are walking, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, living in the passions of our flesh, by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”** (cf. Ephesians 2:1–3, ESV) He reveals Himself to us when we are lost in sin and calls us to life, calls us to faith, calls us to trust in Him and in His Son and by His grace, gives us the very faith that we need to respond to Him. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV) That is the spiritual biography of all of us who know Christ as Savior and as Lord.

Abraham responded to the call of God with faith. His faith responded to God's voice, to His revelation of Himself. He did not quibble or negotiate with the Lord, did not hesitate, bargain or reconsider. He responded to God by faith. In fact, when the writer of Hebrews says, **By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called**, the idea is that he responded to God while God's call was still ringing in his ears! Faith responds to God. It does not put off obedience for a more convenient day. It does not treat the voice of the Lord as of no consequence. Abraham does not take the revelation of God lightly, His calling, His

commands as flippant or frivolous, but vibrant faith, strong faith, responds to God immediately. Think about how often we put off or rationalize away, or simply try to ignore, the commands and convictions of Word of God and His Spirit. Abraham did not... not at that moment, when God called to him in Ur. He responded with obedience. And, listen, his response of faith was costly.

The Cost of Faith Abraham's faith was costly. The writer of Hebrews says: ***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.*** When God called to Abraham, he called him to leave his father's house, to leave his family, to leave his kindred, to leave everyone and everything that he knew, everything that was familiar and which brought him some sort of security – to leave it all behind. He didn't even know where he was going. It was not until later in the process that God would reveal to him where he was headed, to Canaan. That kind of faith costs. It required real courage and trust.

What is it that takes a man out of religion he has known his whole life, flips his beliefs on their head, makes a man willing to leave all that he has known and go somewhere he doesn't even know? God steps into your life; God invades your life, that's what! True faith abandons all to follow Christ. He had to come out from his family, out of a city he had known all his life, out of a people that did not know God. He had to leave everything familiar behind. And sometimes that is required of faith. To follow the Lord, He had to leave his godless family behind, those who would stand in the way of following God. That's costly, right? Jesus said: ***“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”*** (Matthew 10:34–39, ESV) Now look, the point is not that we are to despise or needlessly estrange ourselves from our families. But Jesus did mean that if our closest loved ones stand in the way of faith and obedience to our Lord, we must follow Him. That is a message that the Hebrew Christians needed to hear, rejected as they were for their faith in Christ and it is one that we need to hear as well. Nothing can stand in the way of faithfulness to Christ. Abraham's faith was costly and ours will be as well. We have to settle that truth in our hearts.

What so often stands in the way of real faith is that we want to mitigate or lessen the cost. We want God to walk with us as we lead the way. We want to lead God and call the shots, we want to manipulate and control outcomes and demand God's blessing rather than following Him, even when it is costly. That is not real faith. Real faith trusts God so much, loves Christ so much for what He has done, that it makes us willing to do what He commands and go where He goes, no matter the cost. All that matters is that we are with Him. Abraham's faith was a costly one. Moreover, the writer of Hebrews wants us to see that Abraham's faith was persistent and forward-looking.

The Forward-Looking Persistence of Faith The writer of Hebrews tells us: ***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.*** It was not just faith that made Abraham obey God; it was by faith that he was enabled to be a sojourner in the land that God promised to his descendants. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham, but during his life and the lives of his son Isaac and grandson, Jacob, God gave him no inheritance. Instead he lived there as an alien, as sojourner, not fitting in, dwelling in tents. Abraham would never own a piece of Canaan in his lifetime save for a cave in field in Machpelah near Hebron where he would bury his wife, Sarah.

His descendants would inherit Canaan, but he never did. Every morning as he awoke, he would look of his tent at this strange country, where people had homes and families and a settled life, at these cities that were bustling and vibrant, but he did not become discontent. He didn't become frustrated or feel disenfranchised, not resentful that he was not like everyone else. He did not question God's goodness to him. He did not give himself to complaining and grumbling toward God. And here is why. He understood this – that his reward, his hope, his satisfaction, was never going to be found in this life, never going to be found in a city that was designed and built by Canaanite kings but which had no real permanence, no real foundation. He looked to a city that has foundations that could never be shaken, to a city whose designer and builder is God. When Abraham went up from his father's country to Canaan, he was not just counting on the promise of piece of real estate; he was looking beyond to the promise of heaven. I want you to see that Abraham had faith that endured, a faith that saw the things yet unseen, that longed for, and looked forward to,

with dogged persistence, the eternal city of God – the city where God dwells, where Christ is in all of His glory, where God dwells with His people. He had his eyes focused on heaven.

No doubt, Abraham must have longed for foundations, for a place to set a permanent home but he chose the eternal rather than that which passes away. The greatness of the Canaanite cities must have been impressive compared to his tents, but he compared them to the city of which God was the designer and builder, city of matchless glory and eternal splendor, a city that represents the fullness of communion and acceptance with God, and he would not lose his faith, would not compromise his faith, for the all that the world offered. He would not sacrifice his faith for the inheritance of a dying humanity. He was content to live in tents, to be a stranger in the land in which he lived because, by faith, he chose to live in the light of eternity and it made him different than everyone else and the writer of Hebrews will say more about that in a minute. But first he wants us to see

The Desperate Dependence of Faith He writes: *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.* Here, the writer of Hebrews mentions one of the defining moments of Abraham's life of faith. When God called Abraham to follow Him, he told him, ***“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*** (Genesis 12:1–3, ESV) Central to the promise of God was this pledge that God would make Abraham the father of a multitude. He made this promise to Abraham when he was 75 years old and for 24 years the promise when unfulfilled.

In the meantime, Abraham had faltered in his faith and listened to his wife Sarah and fathered a son through her maidservant, Hagar, a son named Ishmael, but God rejected him because he was not the son of promise. God meant to give Abraham a son through his wife Sarah who had been barren all of her years and was by this time that the writer of Hebrews is talking about, 90 years old. The point is that from the standpoint of human reasoning, it was biologically impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have a child. Yet in Genesis 17, God renewed his promise to Abraham that by the next year, he and Sarah would have a son.

Abraham was 99. Sarah was 90. Sarah's personal assessment was to laugh and to say **"I am worn out, and my lord is old."** (Genesis 18:12, ESV) It seemed utterly inconceivable. But as Paul wrote of Abraham in Romans 4 in his teaching regarding salvation by faith, **"He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."** (Romans 4:19–21, ESV) He believed God with a desperate and dependent faith. He believed in the promises of God. He had a faith that what was impossible with man was possible with God.

In fact, that statement, **by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive**, is not the best of translations. Literally, what that phrase is referring to is Abraham, together with Sarah. The emphasis is on Abraham's faith, not Sarah's. Without getting too technical, the words translated as "the power to conceive" is literally, "the power for the laying down of seed" in the womb of Sarah. And the emphasis of the Greek in this text is, "By faith, together with Sarah, Abraham was given the power to lay down seed in her womb even though she was past the age of bearing because **he** – Abraham, not she – considered God faithful who had promised him a son."

Can you imagine the joy of desperate and dependent faith come to fruition in Abraham and Sarah? Can you imagine what it was like when Sarah discovered she was pregnant, or when she gave birth to their son, Isaac? No doubt, during his sojourn in Canaan, he had had many opportunities to offer hospitality to travelling merchants. And the conversations would all be the same. The trader would have answered Abraham's questions: "Who are you? Where are you from? How old are you? Tell me of your family." And then the conversation would have come back around to Abraham. The trader would ask, "What is your name?" The answer – Abraham. "Oh, father of a multitude. How many children do you have?" "None." It could have driven him to bitterness, to distrust of God but it didn't. His faith was desperate and dependent and finally fulfilled by God and by a landslide. **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.** And he isn't talking about his physical descendants, he's talking about all who are sons and daughters of Abraham through faith in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ.

It was years before God answered the longing of Abraham's heart for a son, a son from his wife, Sarah, but this longing and waiting kept him dependent upon God. It taught his desperate trust in the Lord. It taught him to wait upon the Lord. AW Pink makes this observation for all of us: "Faith provides a firm standing-ground while I await the fulfillment of God's promises. Faith furnishes my heart with a sure support during the interval. Faith believes God and relies upon His veracity (His truth, His honesty): as it does so, the heart is anchored and remains steady, no matter how fierce the storm nor how protracted the season of waiting... real faith issues in a confident and standing expectation of future things." And isn't that what the Hebrew Christians needed to stand firm in Christ. Isn't that what we need, beloved?

After discussing the faith of Abraham, holding up the faith of Abraham before our eyes as an example for us to follow, he then recaps the faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah saying, ***"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."*** (Hebrews 11:13–16, ESV)

None of these found the ultimate reward, the true blessing of knowing God in this life. It is not to be found here in this earth. Not fully. But all of them, except for Enoch, died in faith, died having seen with the eyes of faith the true promise of God, eternal life and joy with Him. And because they did, they had a

God-Pleasing Faith Listen beloved, here's the point. They all died still believing but not yet fully possessing all that God promises to His people. They died trusting God. Listen, they had a hope that could not be fulfilled in this life, anyway. So much of modern preaching packages the blessings of the gospel as so many temporal benefits. "If you trust Christ you will be more successful in work, have a spectacular and issue free marriage, have better kids, escape stress, lose weight, feel better, be more attractive... and the list goes on." No doubt, Christ does transform this present life. Some of these things may indirectly be the result. There are the fruits of righteousness, peace and joy to be experienced. But the result of

such preaching is people who live with their minds on earthly things, trying find ultimate satisfaction in treasures on earth and not in heaven.

It is easy to forget that following Christ brings persecution and trial. It means being a stranger and exile, like the writer of Hebrews says. It means not fitting in with others who are slaves to sin; it means denying yourself and taking up the cross and following Christ. It means a life of fellowship in the sufferings of Christ, not suffering for your sin but suffering for righteousness. Life in Christ means peace with God but conflict with the world, and war with Satan and the flesh. The primary blessings Christ offers do not lie in this life at all, but in the life to come. Even the current blessings we enjoy are to be found in Christ and we experience them only by faith.

Abraham and the rest understood that. They readily acknowledged, that is they confessed with their lives and with their words, that they were strangers and exiles in this earth. Look, it isn't that Abraham was a recluse. He wasn't. He engaged the world and was even well respected by his peers, but was not ensnared by the culture. The sense of the word "alien" is that he didn't fit in. The world pursues different goals and pleasures than we do. The world lives for this life only but we live in light of eternity. The world lives as if there is no God, but we live to please Him. We are not like those whose ***"end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,"*** (Philippians 3:19–20, ESV) Our mindset toward success, possessions, and the purpose of our lives must be radically different than the mindset of the natives. We are strangers and exiles with our eyes set on heaven and their hopes center in this world only and accumulating things and amassing all the experiences that they think will bring them happiness in this life. We are strangers and aliens who are ambassadors of Christ, living as salt and light for those around us, speaking to them of Christ, and keeping our eyes on the promises of God that are yet ahead for us.

The reason that they lived and spoke like this is because they were not of this world but sought a homeland in heaven. Though they may have been tempted, none of them went back to their old lives before they knew God. One of the saddest things in all of the world is when someone who professes to know Christ, goes back to their old life either by rejecting Christ or by living just as they always did with a smattering of religious language thrown in for good measure. For the Hebrew Christians to go back to Judaism to avoid persecution, to go back to their old lives would be like Abraham going back to Ur. Nothing stood between

Abraham and his old life except his faith. Likewise, nothing stood between the Hebrew Christians and stands between us and our old life except our faith. Abraham and the rest didn't go back because they could not be satisfied in their old life with their old ways of living. They desired something more. They desired God; they desired a better country; a heavenly one – the city of God. There was no retreat for them and no retreat for us. And what is the testimony from God?

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. No, God is not ashamed. In fact, the exact opposite is true. God is glad to be called their God, glad to be called of all those who by their faith show that they are looking for the better country, living with heaven in their sights, living like a citizen of the Kingdom right now. God is glad to be called their God. In fact, get this, when God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, his words were: **“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”** (Exodus 3:6, ESV) Nothing better could be said of any person, no higher tribute than this. But God gladly claims whoever trusts and obeys Him. Of the faithful, God can say, I am the God of...fill in the blank.

What did Abraham get in this life for his faith? Not what the world would say is worth much but then again, what the world thinks is valuable is passing away. Abraham's enduring faith received the eternal blessing of **the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.** What on this earth can compare with that? That is the question the Hebrew Christians needed to answer...and so do we.

© West Salem Baptist Church, 2016

Permissions: You are free to reproduce and distribute this material but you may not alter its contents in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. If you are posting online, a link back to this original document is preferred. Anything beyond these guidelines will require prior approval by West Salem Baptist Church.