

Faith of the Patriarchs

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9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God.

11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude-- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff.

22 By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones. (Heb. 11:8-22)

This last week was another week in which the message of the book of Hebrews showed its timeless and eternal character. A prominent writer and former pastor, Josh Harris announced to the world that he is no longer a Christian. When someone who has been in the spotlight and been something of a celebrity announces his apostasy, it brings to light all the themes of Hebrews: the true faith that draws near and holds fast, or the false faith that draws back and casts away. All the themes of the superiority of Christ, of being faithful to the finish to the finisher of our faith come to the light. And while we cannot know the particulars of Josh Harris's case, we can again ask, what does Hebrews mean by faith?

We've begun Hebrews 11, which is the writer's longest illustration of the book. He is picking out Old Testament characters to point at, to illustrate what faith it.

When we want to know what faith is, then Abraham is one of the first biblical characters we'd look to. Solomon might show us wisdom, Daniel might show us courage and integrity, but Abraham is rightly considered according to Romans 4:11 : the father of all those who believe, (Rom. 4:11).

In some ways, his faith is more admirable because of the era he lived in. Some biblical theologians see in Scripture seven different economies given to man. The first was innocence until the fall, followed by conscience which takes you to the flood, the third is human government which goes from after the flood to the tower of Babel. The fourth economy is the one Abraham and the Patriarchs fall under, the economy of promise. In all of them , man is given a different set of tests. But in all of them, the common thing needed is faith in God's grace.

But today we want to understand what faith is from the lives of the patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph during this period of time. This passage has five examples of their faith, and in the middle of those five is an explanation of what their faith fixed upon.

I. The Examples of Their Faith

1. Faith looks like obeying God even when you don't know the destination, or the way.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Abram lived in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia. Ur was a city-state with considerable power, trade, and sophistication. There Abram enjoyed all the benefits of city life, the best of civilisation after the Flood and the scattering of Babel. Along with his father Terah, he was an idol worshipper, likely worshipping the patron god of Ur: the moon-god Nanna.

He lived in probably one of the best places in the world to live in 2000 B.C., but at some point, the true and living God, came to Abram and said, "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1)

We don't know if this was a vision, a dream, an audible voice, or even an appearance. But all it was was a command, accompanied by a promise. " 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen. 12:2-3)

This unknown place, in an unknown direction, would become Abraham's inheritance. That's all he had. But verse 8 says, "Abraham obeyed by faith. He went out not knowing where he was going." Faith looks like obeying, even when it isn't clear exactly where you'll end up or how you'll get there.

Some people want the destination, the map, and a full breakdown of the trip before they'll set out anywhere for God. They insist that unless they know the details of what it will mean to obey God, down to the salary, living conditions, possible threats and dangers, that it is reckless and foolish to obey. But the Bible tells us that faith in Abraham's life looked like obeying even when he didn't have the details.

How can we obey God's will before He makes it known? The answer to this question is painfully simple. God has already disclosed His will, or most of it, in a clear and objective manner. The text of Scripture is written to make God's will known. The Word has not given every detail of every decision you will need to make. But it has made very clear your obligations to God and man, and how you can please God in the situation now.

It is simply that believers who want to know God's will must be committed to doing God's will. Submission goes before knowledge. Prov 1:7,. Verses like these show that God's will is not known as a theory given to us ahead of time. We do not have the privilege of placing God's will under scrutiny or of sitting in judgment over it. We are not permitted to find out what God's will is so that we can subsequently make up our minds about doing it. God has no reason to help anyone discover His will who has no real interest in doing His will. God leads those who are willing to obey.

For Abraham, the command was revealed: leave your country and go to a land I will show you. As Abraham obeyed what was revealed, the details of God's secret became clearer.

What does faith look like? Faith looks like obeying God even when you don't know the destination, or the way.

2. Faith looks like living like a pilgrim in the world, even when it's your inheritance.

9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Once Abram left Ur, you'd think God would have allowed him to begin building a town, or even a city. But no, Abraham actually lived the next 100 years of his life in tents. The word for *dwelt* means to live as a foreigner, one having no citizenship. For 100 years, Abraham moved from place to place: Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, Beersheba. He did so with Ishmael and Isaac, and eventually even with Jacob and Esau, who were both 15 when Abraham died.

Here they were, essentially the legal heirs of the land they were living in, having been essentially given the title deed by God, living in the country promised to them, but they were not yet allowed to call it their own. They had to accept that the surrounding Amorites, Perezsites, the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Hittites, were all residents, living in their land. The Patriarchs were the true owners, but they didn't get to build towns and cities. The only land they ever owned was a cave they bought from Ephron the Hittite, so that they could have a parcel of land to bury their dead. But until Joshua entered in, the Hebrews laid claim only to that cave.

Why were they able to do that? Verse 10 tells you why. He waited for a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Abraham was not going to disobey God and set up his own little kingdom, because he knew that when you act in unbelief, nothing you do will have permanence. Yes, he could have started building a city. He could have attacked the other tribes and carved out some land. But it would have been washed away in a moment. By waiting, and by living like a pilgrim, Abraham was looking for God's city.

This may mean that he was looking for Heaven itself, and it may refer to His looking for God's kingdom established on Earth. In the end, there is no real tension there, because the Heavenly Jerusalem will one day be upon the Earth.

You know what faith looks like? It looks like accepting that this world is not Heaven, that you haven't put all your eggs in this basket, that plenty of your hopes have “postponed” written over them.

A rough and ready definition of worldliness is simply trying to make this world and this life all that Heaven is supposed to be. If you are worldly then you don't accept the fact that sometimes you need to spend some of your money on God's kingdom and not on yourself which means accepting less material comforts; sometimes you need to advance His name at the expense of your own, sometimes you need to accept that you are not on the best-liked and most-admired list of the world, sometimes you need to be willing to be rejected. As he'll say at the end of the book “ 12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. 13 Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. 14 For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. (Heb. 13:12-14)”

It's tough to act like a pilgrim, when this is my Father's world. It's tough to not get to experience all life has, when the promise is that the meek will inherit the Earth.

But faith waits. It trusts that now is not the time, as Elisha said to Gehazi, now is not the time to receive all the goods.

Faith waits, because it is looking for something better, and it is not going to, like Esau exchange a birthright for a quick bowl of soup.

Phi 3:20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

What does faith look like? Faith looks like living like a pilgrim in the world, even when it's your inheritance.

3. Faith looks like trusting God for what appears to be impossible.

11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude-- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Sarah isn't often commended for faith. After all, she was the one who laughed when she first heard that she and Abraham would now have a child in their old age. But even though Abraham is usually the primary focus of trusting God, Sarah too had to believe the promise. At that age, she had to trust that it was so, yield, and so receive strength to conceive and bare a child.

She also had to trust that the one making the promise was faithful, and so participate, and surrender to God's purposes.

But she had to trust that He would do what was impossible from a human perspective. Sarah was ninety. Abraham was 100. She had the choice to either shake her head, scoff and just say, this is ridiculous, or she could trust that God could do the impossible.

We see the difference in the response to Gabriel by Zacharias and by Mary. When Zacharias was told that he and his wife would have a humanly impossible birth, his response of unbelief was "How can this be?" When Mary was told that she would have a humanly impossible birth, her response of faith was "How shall this be?" Zacharias responded with, that's impossible, it can't happen, and he was disciplined with muteness for a season. Mary, on the other hand responded with, "I trust it will be so, but I don't understand how it will happen, since I am a virgin".

Faith trusts God for His promises, when it looks like it is not possible for them to be fulfilled.

How often have Christians missed seeing the power of God because they drew back or refused to obey when it looked impossible. They judged what God can do by what man can do, and decided in advance what God was able to do in the situation.

Can God spread a table in the wilderness? Can God save the rabbi overseeing the persecution of the church? Can God turn pagan Rome into a protector of Christian churches? Can God establish churches in pagan areas and non-Christian areas? Can churches in secular cities thrive? Far too many Puddleglums and Eeyores fill the pews, attempting to protect God from embarrassment of not being able to do what He promised He would do.

As a result, verse 12 tells us, Abraham's obedience through her resulted in descendants in the millions. And since Galatians expands the definition of a child of Abraham to not only include the physical descendants, the Jewish people, but also all those people who share Abraham's faith. Jews and Gentiles who place their faith in God's promise of salvation becomes spiritual descendants of Abraham.

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4. Faith looks like total surrender to God's will, even if His methods are mysterious.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered

up his only begotten son, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

When Abraham received the command to take his only son Isaac and sacrifice him, he must have gone through massive confusion. He knew God did not delight in human sacrifice. He also knew that Isaac was the key to God fulfilling His promise. He had been told "In Isaac your seed shall be called." Not Ishmael, no one else except through Isaac. If Isaac did not survive to manhood and have his own children, the promise of land, seed and blessing was null and void.

So Abraham had concluded that God, for his own purposes, wanted Abraham to kill Isaac, and then He would raise him from the dead. He didn't know why. He knew nothing of the motives or methods. Perhaps he sensed that what God really wanted to kill was an idol in Abraham's heart. Perhaps Isaac had become an end rather than a means, perhaps he was now occupying a place that belonged to God. But Scripture never tells us. It just gives us the poignant scene, where Abraham promises the servant that he and Isaac will go up and both would return. He knew he would be coming back with Isaac, but he could only guess at how.

And when Isaac, who was probably around 13, asks the heart-wrenching question, "Where is the sacrifice", Abraham can only answer with the veiled truth: God will provide the sacrifice. If Isaac is the sacrifice, then God is providing it and Isaac's resurrection. If God is providing a substitute, then He will do it and explain it. Scripture spares us the moment of agony when Abraham bound Isaac, whether Isaac submitted peacefully, or whether he struggled in horror, whether Abraham had to wrestle his son onto the altar through tears, or whether his son's trauma and fear made him almost immobile. We know Abraham was not waiting for a command from heaven to stop, but fully intended to go through with the sacrifice. When God does interrupt him, he receives Isaac back from the dead figuratively, for he had died to Isaac being an idol, and now received him living and alive as his beloved son. But had Abraham demanded an explanation, and told God that he would only obey when he understood the reasons, he would never have got that far.

Faith looks like trusting God and doing His revealed will even when you don't understand the method. You don't understand why this trial must take its course. You don't understand why God allowed that loss. You can't see the wisdom of God not giving you that thing you prayed for. You can't see the wisdom of water baptism, or church membership, or life in the body of Christ, or church discipline, or expository preaching, or reverent worship, or giving, or missions. But because you don't understand it, does that mean you don't have to do it? Does God owe you a full and detailed explanation of why He is working in a particular way before you obey?

Sometimes the words of Jesus to Peter need to ring in our ears: "What is that to thee? You follow me?" You don't need your curiosity satisfied before you obey. God is not going to give the blueprint of His plans for us to inspect, or let us audit the divine workings and then choose to obey. If you demand explanations satisfying to you before you obey, then you are really the authority. We trust, even when we don't fully understand the method.

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5. Faith looks like trusting in what you will not see in your life.

20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones. (Heb. 11:20-22)

Isaac had heard the promise that the elder would serve the younger. When that came to pass through Rebecca and Jacob's deception, he knew he could not alter it. He had given the birthright to Jacob, and reserve a secondary blessing to Esau. He was at the end of his life, and could have pretended or decided that his blessing of Jacob was invalid because he had deceived him, but instead, by faith, he accepted the sovereignty of God in bringing to pass what was promised.

Likewise when Jacob was dying, he apportioned out prophecies and promises to his twelve sons, trusting that God would do something in each of their lives and their descendant's lives. They would not simply be assimilated into Egypt, but would end up back in Canaan, as discernible distinctive tribes.

And similarly Joseph, when he was dying, asked that his bones not be left in Egypt, but be carried back to Canaan during the Exodus, and buried in the same cave.

All these men made decisions and pronouncements based on things they would never be able to see or verify or control in their lifetimes. They believed even when they did not know when God would fulfill the promise. They had complete confidence in a promised outcome.

Besides your will and your inheritance to your children, is there anything in your life that you are investing in that will outlive and outlast you? To live a life of faith is to be investing in God's church, in eternity, in Heaven. You live with the future writing you an I.O.U. You won't see it, and you don't expect to. You trust that the people you are discipling will disciple others. You trust the Word you are sowing, the ministry you are supporting, the missionaries you are funding will bring forth a harvest beyond your lifetime. But you keep labouring to those ends.

A narrow life is a life only concerned with the sight of the eyes, what it can get and have.

When I was in London, I went to Norwood Cemetery, and visited the grave of Charles Spurgeon.

And in one way, Spurgeon's tombstone is like everyone else in that cemetery: a dash between two dates. A life reduced to a punctuation mark between birth and death.

But when you think of how Spurgeon's labour in the word, and in ministry continues to bless people 127 years after he died, you see the difference between a life lived in faith and one lived by sight.

Here was someone who gave himself to preaching, to training ministers, to writing, to missions, to Christian publishing, to orphan work, to relief work. And he being dead, still speaks.

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Those are five examples of faith from the patriarchs.

But here is his summary statement that explains their faith.

II. The Explanation of Their Faith

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Why did they live that way?

The word to circle in that paragraph is the word *better*. It comes up twelve times in Hebrews, and it explains why these patriarchs did what they did. Though they did not receive the promises, though they had an earthly homeland to go back to, they were seeking a better, and final country. They saw afar off the hope of God and His promises.

Verse 13 gives you four words. 1) They saw the promises, 2) they were assured of them 3) they embraced them 4) they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims.

They weren't sado-masochists who preferred pain to pleasure. They weren't stoics who tried to suppress the joy in their lives. They were people persuaded that God's promises were better! They were persuaded that living by sight would rob them. They were persuaded that taking shortcuts would steal ultimate and better joys from them. They were certain that drawing back to Mesopotamia would not be progress but regress. They didn't call it to mind, they looked forward and future.

This is the Christian message. When God opens your eyes to see the beauty and the glory of who He is and what He promises, it becomes to you substance and evidence, genuine spiritual reality. You are assured and persuaded of it. So you draw near to Him in acts of trusting obedience. For starters, you need to trust that God is God, and that He saves those who call on Him through His Son, Jesus. But then it becomes a walk of drawing near. A walk of obeying even when you don't know where it is headed. Obeying even when you don't know how God will do it. Obeying even when you don't know why He is doing it. Obeying like a pilgrim, like someone who won't see all he is sowing and building.

You don't see all the promises in your lifetime, but you have given up on this world and its kingdoms. Satan can't tempt you to become a citizen. You want something better. So you keep drawing near to God and His promises.

This is why God was not ashamed to be called the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Joseph. Let me ask you if you can fill in your name there. Can it be said objectively that He is your God by saving faith? Can it be said subjectively that you live like these men and women, so that God is not ashamed to be called your God?