

“He Was Looking Forward”

The Seventeenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 11:8-16; Genesis 12:1-5

Three of the world’s great religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) trace their origins back to Abraham. Yet the Genesis account speaks of Abraham as one who believed God’s covenant promise. It is said of him, Abraham “*believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*” This explains why the account of the life of Abraham in Genesis 11-25 fits perfectly within the “catalogue of believers in God’s covenant promise” in Hebrews 11. That Abraham was justified by faith is the reason why Christians are considered to be the true children of Abraham—much to the chagrin of Jews, and to the disdain of Muslims. Abraham is a man who pitched his tent in the land of promise, yet who also knew that dwelling in the land was not all that God had promised to him—God’s promise included eternal life as well. Therefore, Abraham is regarded as the man of faith, because he believed God’s covenant promise to make him the father of a great nation, and that he would have so many descendants that it would be impossible to count them all—despite the fact that this seemed to be a physical impossibility. It is to the story of Abraham as summarized in Hebrews 11, that we now turn.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hebrews and we are working our way through Hebrews 11, the so-called “hall of faith” because so many important Old Testament heroes are mentioned here. As we saw last time, the primary point being made by the author of Hebrews in this chapter is not that the people mentioned here are setting examples for us to follow (as people who had faith), but that these Old Testament saints all believed the same gracious covenant promise which God made to his people, and which the author of Hebrews has spent ten chapters unpacking. Rather than speak of Hebrews 11 as the “hall of faith,” it is much better to understand this chapter as a catalogue of justified sinners, sinful people who believed God’s covenant promise to save them from the guilt and power of their sin.

If we read Hebrews 11 as is often done (as a series of examples for us to follow), then we must ignore the critical point which the author of Hebrews is trying to make—that Jesus is superior to angels, Moses, and the priests of Israel. If the “hall of faith” interpretation is the correct one, then the author of Hebrews is telling those in this church who may be considering returning to Judaism, to “believe” just like your forefathers did. But that doesn’t get to the heart of the issue—recent converts from Judaism to Christianity, were going back to Judaism when they came under persecution. That their forefathers believed God is not under dispute. The issue is “what did their forefathers believe?” Or better, “in whom did they believe?”

The author’s point then is that everyone mentioned in Hebrews 11 believed God’s gracious covenant promise to save them from their sins. Therefore, what matters is not the presence of faith—that these famous Old Testament saints believed. What matters is the object of faith—these people believed the same gracious covenant promise, first issued in Genesis 3:15 when God declared, “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*” The nature and character of this promise unfolds throughout the balance of redemptive history in the form of the types and shadows we see in the history of Israel and the old covenant, a subject which the author addressed in Hebrews 7-10.

In verse 1 of Hebrews 11, the author defined faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Used throughout the New Testament as a noun (“faith”), as a verb (“to believe”), the key thing to consider is that according to biblical usage, the word “faith” is always directed toward a particular object (the thing believed). Most often, faith is directed to the person and work of Jesus Christ. But in

some cases (as here in Hebrews), faith is also directed to the unseen, i.e., the promises of God based on the work of Christ, but not yet realized. Simply put, faith takes God at his word when he promises to save sinners who trust in Jesus Christ.

According to the author of Hebrews, faith embraces the promises of God even when that promise remains yet to be fulfilled in the future. The purpose of the catalogue given us in Hebrews 11 then is that those of us with New Testament hindsight, can look back at these Old Testament saints and see them as justified and repentant sinners who believed God when he promised to save them from their sins. Although Jesus has died for our sins, and was raised for our justification, like them we too look ahead to the fulfillment of God's promise to save us from our sins and to raise us from the dead on the last day.

Therefore, by giving us this list the author is teaching us about the nature of God's gracious promise (the emphasis falls upon the fact that God brings to pass what he has promised, not so much that these people had faith), and that just as God saved each of these sinful individuals from themselves, now that Jesus Christ has come, these Old Testament saints have *already received* everything promised to them. While these people serve as an example to us, in the sense that they too are sinners who trusted in God to save them from their sins, the more important fact is that they point us to Jesus Christ. And by pointing us to Jesus Christ, they remind us that God will give us everything he has promised, just as he did for them.

Having defined faith in verses 1-3, and then mentioning in verse 6 that "*without faith it is impossible to please God,*" (it is not that faith pleases God, but nothing we do pleases God apart from faith) the author opens his list with three of the so-called pre-diluvians (Abel, Enoch, and Noah), all of whom lived before the great flood. We learn that Abel, Enoch, and Noah were all the beneficiaries of God's grace and responded by believing God's covenant promise that we would save them. Each of these men are commended for taking God at his word (faith) and as a result, doing what God commanded of them during their unique set of circumstances.

So, keeping these things in mind, we take up the second historical period in the author's list, and the so-called "man of faith," Abraham.

If you were going to set out to formulate a list of those Old Testament saints who believed God's gracious covenant promise, no doubt, the first person you would think of to include on that list would be Abraham.¹ This is because in Genesis 15:6, we read that Abraham "*believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*" As we saw when we worked our way through the last part of Hebrews 6 (vv. 13 ff.), the author has already held out Abraham as that one to whom God made his covenant promise which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ—"surely I will bless you and multiply you" (cf. Hebrews 6:14). It is because of God's covenant promise—including God's sovereign call—that Abraham becomes the father of Israel.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Abraham is lauded as someone who believed God's covenant promise, despite his present circumstances which made fulfillment of that promise seemingly impossible (his old age). Paul does so in Romans 4:3-5, as well as in Galatians 3:6-9, where Paul writes that "*know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*" For Paul, Christians (and not Jews) are the true children of Abraham because the salvation of the formerly godless Gentiles along with believing Jews was a fulfillment of God's covenant promise made to Abraham.

And then there is the account of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who, in his defense before the

¹ See the discussion in Bruce, Hebrews, 289, ff.

Sanhedrin, said this of Abraham in Acts 7:2-5. *“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’ Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living. Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.”*

It is quite remarkable that at a very early point in the apostolic era (still in the 30's of the first century) Stephen argues (much like the author of Hebrews will do thirty years later) that even though Abraham lived in the land which God promised to him, Abraham was still a pilgrim, on his way to something much, much, better than that chunk of ground to which God had called him in Palestine. Stephen's speech indicates that from the very beginning of the church, the story of Abraham's trust in God's promise was a standard polemic against Judaism, with special emphasis falling upon the fact the promise was ultimately fulfilled in those generations of Israelites long after Abraham died.

In verse 8 of Hebrews 11, the author makes much the same point as Stephen did in Acts 7, when he writes *“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.”* Abraham's father, Terah, is described in Genesis 11 as of the tenth generation after Noah, and we are told that Terah moved from Ur of the Chaldeans (186 miles south of modern Baghdad in Iraq) intending to go to Canaan (a land well-known for its bounty). Instead, Terah settled in the city of Haran, an important trading post in what is now modern Turkey (the northern portion of the ancient region of Mesopotamia).

Yet, it was while Abraham was still in Ur and God appeared to him and spoke to him the words of Genesis 12:1-3 (from our Old Testament lesson). *“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘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.”* Abraham took God at his word and obeyed the Lord's command as recounted in Genesis 12:4-5. *“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.”*

Abraham began his journey to an unknown land (Canaan) because he believed God's promise which included the following elements (which the author of Hebrews describes as an inheritance). Abraham will be the father of a great nation (Israel), his name will be great (Jews and Christians revere him), and in him all the families of the earth will be blessed (including our own families). As Paul says in Galatians 3:16, it is through Abraham's line that the Messiah has come—*“now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”* In fact, God will bless all those who honor Abraham and his descendants, and curse all those who do not—a promise which has nothing whatsoever to do with American foreign policy and the Israeli/Palestinians question. According to the author of Hebrews, Abraham moved to this unknown land “by faith,” i.e., he trusted God's promise.

In verse 9 of Hebrews 11, we are told, *“by faith [Abraham] 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.”* As you may know, Isaac and Jacob are Abraham's son and grandson, respectively. We'll talk about them (the patriarchs) when we tackle the next section of Hebrews 11, vv. 17-22.

The land which God promised to Abraham is specifically defined in Genesis 15:18-21 as follows. *“On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘to your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.’”*

This is not only typical of ancient treaty documents in which the great king spells out the geographic details of the area he rules, this also gives Abraham and his heirs legal title to this land, provided they obey God. The specific terms of that obedience will come later in the covenant God makes with Israel at Mount Sinai when the Israelites come back to the land after leaving Egypt in the Exodus.

But it is in verse 10, that the author of Hebrews gives us the critical element in the New Testament’s interpretation of Abraham’s faith in the promise. *“For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”* Abraham believed God, and so followed God’s command and went to Canaan where Abraham was a foreigner living among the Canaanites. That act in and of itself is remarkable. But although Abraham believed God’s promise that this land was his, and would be the inheritance of those who descended from him (although this seemed to be physically impossible as we will see momentarily), Abraham looked past the bounty of the land of Canaan to those heavenly promises (including eternal life) which were much better.

Somehow and in some way, Abraham knew that the promised land (that good land flowing with milk and honey) was not an end in itself, as though sojourning in Canaan and enjoying the bounty of the land was the full extent of what God had promised him. Abraham knew that the earthly blessings he had been promised foreshadowed heavenly blessings yet to come. The material blessing (the land) directs Abraham toward heavenly things (eternal life). In fact, the author of Hebrews says that through faith, Abraham was actually looking beyond the promised land to a heavenly city—that which we know from other passages in the Bible (and in the book of Hebrews) to be the New Jerusalem, which one day will be our eternal home.

To put it another way, Abraham not only believed God’s promise to give his descendants the land of Canaan (and those earthly blessings which went with it), he also believed that God would forgive him of his sins and grant him eternal life in the New Jerusalem. Because he believed God’s promise (faith), Abraham obeyed God and journeyed to Canaan where he was a foreigner. But by faith, Abraham knew that he possessed eternal life was well. And it is because he believed that he would inherit eternal life, Abraham did the other things God commanded of him—such as raising the knife over Isaac as recounted in Genesis 22, a theme to which the author of Hebrews returns in Hebrews 11 verses 17-22 when he takes up the subject of the patriarchs.

In verses 11-12 of Hebrews 11, the author of Hebrews now turns to the account of Abraham and Sarah’s response to God’s promise to give their descendants the promised land and make these descendants into a great nation, when (up to that point) they had no children, despite the fact that they had reached the age when child-bearing was not thought possible. The author of Hebrews describes the Genesis account as follows. *“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.”* At this point, it is helpful to go back and read the original account in Genesis to fully understand the point the author of Hebrews is making.

The account of Abraham and Sarah believing God’s promise comes in two stages. The first stage is the promise made by YHWH to Abraham, as recounted in Genesis 17 (the same promise is also found in the first six verses of Genesis 15, as well). The second stage is the account of the fulfillment of that promise in Genesis 21:1-7. According to Genesis 17:15-21, *“And God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you*

shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' And Abraham said to God, 'Oh that Ishmael might live before you!' God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.'

Although Abraham and Sarah tried to “help” God fulfill his promise when Abraham had a son Ishmael with his slave woman Hagar, instead, God promises Abraham a natural son through Sarah. A one hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman are going to conceive a child. This is what God promised, and this is what they believed.

Then, in Genesis 21:1-7, we have the account of God’s promise being fulfilled. *“The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.’ And she said, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’”* God has done just as he promised he would do.

When viewed through the lens of New Testament hindsight, we understand that God makes promises like this to his people because his sovereign decree will come to pass (that he will save his people through his son Jesus Christ). We also understand that God alone has the power to ensure that this promise comes to pass. Sarah was given the ability to conceive a child at age 90. Despite her laughter, she believed God’s promise would come to pass. And she bore Abraham that son (Isaac) through whom his countless descendants will come (including the Messiah). Once again, the author of Hebrews points out that like her husband Abraham, Sarah embraced God’s promise “by faith.”

In the first part of verse 13, the author of Hebrews reminds that even though the promise was not realized during their lifetimes, *“these all died in faith, not having received the things promised.”* Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob lived their lives believing that God’s promise would be fulfilled after they were long gone from the earth. As the author of Hebrews puts it in the second half of the verse, *“but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”*

Based upon the course of redemptive history as it played out in their own lives (given what they had seen and experienced), these Old Testament saints had every reason to believe that although they were aliens and foreigners in Canaan, because they already possessed the title deed to the land, their descendants would one day possess that land which had been promised to them. In Hebrews 6:15, our author has already said of Abraham, *“And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.”* The focus falls not so much on what Abraham did (his faith and obedience), but on the unshakable nature and eternal character of the promise he believed.

In verse 14, the author of Hebrews elaborates on that point he had made back in verse 10—*“For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”* Here he adds, *“For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.”* As pilgrims and foreigners, these people are seeking that place where they can finally settle and dwell in peace and safety. They want a

permanent home in a desirable land. And by faith they knew that their descendants would have such a place when Israel returned to Canaan after being liberated from their bondage in Egypt. But in the meantime, they looked beyond their own present circumstances (as pilgrims and foreigners) to their heavenly home, where they would at long last enter their eternal Sabbath rest and dwell forever in the presence of the Lord.

It would have only been natural for people under such circumstances to become restless, get tired of life in a tent, and return to either Haran or Ur, where they lived before heading for Canaan. In verse 15, the author of Hebrews makes this very point. *“If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.”* Had God not called them to that land, or had they not believed God’s promise to pull up stakes and move to Canaan and dwell there as foreigners in anticipation of that day when their descendants would drive the Canaanites from the land and take permanent possession of it, no doubt, they would have just gone back to Ur. But they believed God’s promise, and because they did they also knew that possession of the land was not the end of the promise. There is so much more, because on day all of God’s people will dwell in the heavenly city which God has prepared for all those who believe.

As the author of Hebrews concludes, *“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.”* Canaan was a great place to live as a pilgrim and foreigner. It was a wonderful place for their descendants to inherit. It was the land flowing with milk and honey, after all. But Abraham was looking forward. Sojourning in the land of Canaan was only a step on the way to a better county, the city God has prepared for them, that place we common speak of as heaven.

What, then, should we take with us from passage?

In Hebrews 11, we learn something very important about Abraham that we do not find in the Genesis account. Abraham and Sarah not only believed God’s promise that their descendants would inherit the land of Canaan and dwell there permanently (until Israel disobeyed the Sinaitic covenant and was cast from the land), they also believed that the earthly inheritance pointed beyond itself to eternal life—to *“the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”* Although Abraham did not know the name Jesus Christ, he knew that God would redeem him from his sins, so that he might receive this eternal inheritance. Abraham was looking forward then to the coming of a Messiah and to the establishment of the New Jerusalem.

In the account of Abraham and Sarah we also find a strong parallel to the Christian life. Abraham was looking forward to his eternal rest in his heavenly home, and so do we. Abraham was a pilgrim and sojourner in Canaan, just as we are pilgrims and sojourners during our time on the earth as we make our way to the heavenly city. As wonderful and important as it is, this life is our preparation for the next. And like Abraham we too embrace God’s covenant promise by faith. But unlike Abraham who was looking forward to what was yet to come, because God has kept his promises, we know the name of our redeemer (Jesus Christ) and we know what Jesus did to secure for us eternal life in the New Jerusalem—he died for our sins and was raised from the dead for our justification. And it is Jesus Christ in whom all of God’s promises are fulfilled because he is our “yes” and “amen.”