

**LIVING BY FAITH WHEN PROMISES ARE NOT (FULLY) FULFILLED, PT. 1**  
**HEBREWS 11:8-12**

I placed a book order last week. And a few minutes after I placed the order, I received an email telling me when I would receive the order, along with a **tracking number from UPS** so that I could follow it's progress. I had placed the order no more than five minutes earlier. There was no way the order had been processed — the books were still on some shelf in some warehouse. But what's the first thing I did when I saw the tracking number? Yup. I did what you do — **I clicked it**, wondering, "Where is it? Will it get here earlier than promised???" (It didn't, though it did arrive exactly when promised; and that is one of the reasons my wife has noted that I am impatient...)

When someone makes a promise, we want to receive what is promised — now. And the longer we have to wait, the more we are tempted to question the legitimacy of the promise. That's true of our relationships on earth, and that is (unfortunately) true of our relationship with God as well. When we have to wait, we unrighteously question whether God is still able or willing **to do what He has promised**.

That really was at the heart of the Hebrew problem: the readers of that letter were suffering for their faith in Christ and had erroneously supposed that because of their faith in Christ, they would not suffer. So in Hebrews 11 the author provides story after story of people (from the OT) who lived faithfully to God, despite living in difficult circumstances.

This morning, in Hebrews 11:8-12, we come to the story of Abraham; in these verses, we will find that —

**LIVING BY FAITH MEANS ACTING ON GOD'S PROMISES WHEN THEY AREN'T YET RECEIVED.**

The faith of Abraham is of the same kind as those mentioned in this chapter already, but there is also a contrasting uniqueness between his and the others — Abel had little opposition before he was ushered into God's presence, Enoch never experienced death, and Noah knew when and what the coming judgment was, and how to save himself and his family. Like Noah, Abraham also received promises, but unlike Noah, Abraham never saw the fulfillment of God's promises on earth even though he lived to the age of 175. That reality sets the tone for how we understand the faith of Abraham — *how does one live by faith when God's promises are not fully fulfilled?*

In these verses, the writer reveals **four aspects of Abraham's faith**:

1. **By Faith, Abraham Left a Land of Comfort without **KNOWING** the Future (v. 8)**
2. **By Faith, Abraham Lived in the Land of Promise without **RECEIVING** the Promise (vv. 9-10)**
3. **By Faith, Sarah Persisted in Believing When **TEMPTED** to Doubt (v. 11)**
4. **By Faith, Abraham Left a Legacy Without **HAVING** that Ability (v. 12)**
5. **What We Learn from Abraham's Faith**

## 1. By Faith, Abraham Left a Land of Comfort without **KNOWING** the Future (v. 8)

- When the writer mentions Abraham to his readers, they already knew his story well. Abraham might be the most well-known character in the Bible. His story accounts for almost  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the book of Genesis (11:26 – 25:10) and is the longest section of any of the people mentioned in this chapter.
- The author gives a simplified explanation of how Abraham got to the land of Canaan — **he was called...**
  - ✓ Genesis 11-12 and Acts 7 provide more details for us.
  - ✓ When Abraham received this call, he was living in Mesopotamia (**Acts 7:2**) — in the city of Ur, in the region of the Chaldeans (today, southern Iraq; **Gen. 11:31**).
    - **Ur** was about 140 miles SE of the ancient city of Babylon in the region of the Garden of Eden and politically influential in the region.
    - Ur was well-developed in education (reading, writing, and arithmetic); it was financially prosperous, a trading center, and a manufacturing center of statutes and idols (made from imported gold, copper, ivory, and hard woods).
    - And Terah and Abraham were influenced by that idol worship (**Josh. 24:2**).
    - “Abraham was a sinful heathen who grew up in an unbelieving and idolatrous society.”  
[MacArthur]
- ✓ God told him to go to leave Ur (**Acts 7:3**), but evidently did not give him all the details. On the journey, he settled in **Haran** (**Gen. 11:31**) with his father, Terah, Sarah, and his nephew, Lot. The journey was ~600 miles.
- ✓ Terah, Abraham’s father, died in Haran (Gen. 11:32), and from there God led him to **Canaan**/Israel (**Acts 7:4**; **Gen. 12:1**) — but again was not specific about where Abraham was to go (approx. 400 mi.).
- ✓ The one thing that Abraham knew was that he was getting **an inheritance** (Heb. 11:8; Acts 7:5). It is notable that almost every time **inheritance** is used in the NT it refers to eternal life (**9:15**; Eph. 1:14). Abraham was anticipating, desiring, and looking for something beyond this life, and believed that God was a rewarder of those who had faith in Him (**v. 6**).
- **What the writer emphasizes** in this verse is that Abraham *went* — there was a particular action in his faith.
  - ✓ He says three times that Abraham went: **obeyed by going out...he went out...he was going**.
  - ✓ Just as Noah did, when God spoke, Abraham acted and obeyed. The difference is that Noah did that as part of the chain of godly people, while Abraham did that as an idol worshipper (which is hope for all of us today who have come out of ungodly homes and families — God is not dependent on your physical lineage to give you a godly spiritual legacy).



- ✓ The writer emphasizes the *immediate* response of Abraham: ***When he was called obeyed by going out*** — “being called, Abraham obeyed [by] going...” While the call of God was still in his ears, he acted. There was no delay to his action — even though he didn’t have all the details (*didn’t know*).
- ✓ Abraham didn’t have to have all the details to act (***not knowing*** — and he wouldn’t know until he got to Canaan, **Gen. 12:7**); he simply needed to know the One who called him — that was enough for him to act.
- ✓ “To leave the certainties one knows and go out into what is quite unknown—relying on nothing other than the Word of God—is the essence of faith, as the author sees it.” [Morris]
- ✓ Abraham obeyed God and went to a land that he did not know because he knew there was better “safety” and greater “peace” in obeying God not knowing what was ahead than staying in the known situation in rebellion against God.

## 2. By Faith, Abraham Lived in the Land of Promise without **RECEIVING** the Promise (vv. 9-10)

- We might think that once Abraham arrived in the Promised Land that all was well (and easy). But the writer reminds us of the realities of Abraham’s circumstance — it wasn’t easy.
  - ✓ He lived ***as an alien...as in a foreign land*** — he is a “foreigner” in the ***land of promise***. He had made this long journey, left his home for a new home and when he got there, it was still not “home.”
  - ✓ “Paradoxically, when he got to the land of Canaan that God had promised to him, Abraham lived in it, not as its owner, but as a resident alien.” [Morris]
  - ✓ This was not unusual for others who followed God — the patriarchs were often called sojourners and aliens (Gen. 17:8; 20:1; 23:4).
  - ✓ The writer of Hebrews emphasizes his alien position by saying that he was ***dwelling in tents*** — he had no permanent home and no permanent location — and it was true of the two generations that followed him as well, ***Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs***. His son and grandson received the same promise as Abraham, but their “permanent” home was also a temporary tent.
  - ✓ (And the writer expects us to remember that under Jacob, the 12 patriarchs went to Egypt for 400 years because of Joseph and the famine — they still were not home!)
  - ✓ There is also a further irony about Abraham’s tent-dwelling; he wasn’t an owner of land in the promised land — until near the end of his life; he bought a burial plot for Sarah (Gen. 23). How bleak that might have been for him. Except he was thinking about something else...
- What kept Abraham hopeful and encouraged while not receiving the promise (for over 100 years) was explained in v. 10 — despite being promised land in Canaan, he anticipated something more (***for***):
  - ✓ ***He was looking for the city...*** — He was looking for a final city, a great city, a final destination that was a permanent structure — something only God could design or build. Both the ***design*** and ***building*** are perfect, impenetrable, and indestructible. For God to build it means it is eternal (Heaven).

- ✓ Abraham went to Canaan, obeying the promise and command, but he was looking for more. He understood that the promise of the land and the people was the appetizer for something greater.
- ✓ The secret of Abraham's patient persistence was that he was looking for the permanent dwelling. Even had he been a landholder with a permanent structure, that was as temporary as his tent.
- ✓ It was because Abraham was looking for something beyond the land of Canaan that he was able not only to dwell in a tent without possessing any land, but also content to live anywhere within that land, and not (for instance) contend with Lot about the best piece of land (Gen. 13:8ff). Like all godly people of faith, he had his eyes on a bigger prize (vv. 6, 15-16).
- ✓ He could live faithfully in the Promised Land without receiving the full promise, because he was anticipating something better than a tangible and temporal promise.

### 3. By Faith, Sarah Persisted in Believing When TEMPTED to Doubt (v. 11)

- The emphasis shifts from Abraham to Sarah in verse 11, though they are intertwined in the promise because of their marriage. We can understand this verse better if we remember the promise (Gen. 12).
  - ✓ There was a promise of land (Gen. 12:1)
  - ✓ There was a promise of seed/posterity (descendants; Gen. 12:2)
  - ✓ There was a promise of spiritual blessing (posterity/descendants; Gen. 12:3).
  - ✓ Verses 8-10 in Hebrews 11 deal with the promise of the physical land
  - ✓ Verses 11-12 deal with the promise of physical posterity and descendants.
- In the introduction to Abraham and Sarah, Moses makes it clear that they were childless (Gen. 11:30).
  - ✓ We don't know how old they were when they arrived in Canaan, though God again affirmed His promise in Gen. 15:1, 5-6.
  - ✓ Abraham wondered if his lineage would come through his "next of kin," Eliezer (Gen. 15:2).
  - ✓ Ten more years passed (16:3), and Sarah had the idea of letting Abraham have children through Hagar, Sarah's maid/servant (16:2) — and Ishmael was born when Abraham was 86 (16:16).
  - ✓ Thirteen years later, Abraham and Ishmael were circumcised (17:24-25) and then God made the promise again (18:10). All this happened when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 (17:17).
  - ✓ It should be noted that Sarah's initial response was skepticism and doubt (Gen. 18:12).
- The Hebrew readers would have known that story well; the writer comments on it in v. 11 —
  - ✓ It was **by faith** that **even Sarah herself** — that phrase is probably pointing to her initial doubt — **received the ability to conceive**. The idea is that while she doubted, she eventually believed.
  - ✓ There is a question about how to translate this verse since Sarah is obviously the subject, but the next phrase is literally "received power to put down seed" which refers to Abraham's involvement in the process of conception. So is the writer talking about Sarah's or Abraham's faith?

- ✓ The writer is speaking about Sarah because she clearly the subject and the writer is emphasizing **even Sarah** — i.e., in addition to Abraham. And the word “to” (put down seed) could be understood as “with regard to” or “in connection with,” so might read it something like this: “Sarah had faith regarding (or to receive) [Abraham’s] power for the laying down of seed.”
- ✓ Regardless, though, both are involved in the process of conception — they both were incapable and both were **beyond the proper time of life** for childbearing (v. 12; Paul calls them as good as dead, Rom. 4:19). So for the child to be conceived and born, both had to have faith to participate. Both did.
- ✓ So the verse concludes that Sarah **considered Him faithful...**
  - The writer emphasizes **Him...who had promised** — What is important is who not just what the promise is (Gen. 12), but *who* has made the promise. Faith is impotent if it is in the wrong object. And God is the only able promise keeper (6:13; 10:23; 12:26; cf. Acts 7:5).
  - This phrase is a reminder that this chapter is not about the power of having faith, but having faith *in a powerful God*. The chapter is about the ability and trustworthiness of God.
- ✓ When God promises and declares, sometimes there are temptations to doubt (e.g., Jn. 20:24ff). Sarah reminds us that doubt is not final; there is still an opportunity to repent and change and trust God to do what He promised, which **even Sarah** did. The way out of doubt is to remember God’s promises.

#### 4. By Faith, Abraham Left a Legacy Without HAVING that Ability (v. 12)

- The writer concludes this section **therefore...** Because of the faith of Sarah (and Abraham), there was **born even of one man...**
  - ✓ Notice the contrast between “one man” and *innumerable* descendants (**stars...sand**).
  - ✓ Abraham was only one man — and an impotent man at that.
  - ✓ The descendants that came from him were not about him and his power. They were about the power of God and the promises of God. Abraham had no power; God had every power. Abraham left a legacy, because God was gracious to work through a “dead” man to accomplish His purposes.
  - ✓ “God’s blessing is beyond human calculation.” [Morris]
- The writer has been reminding the readers about God who fulfills and keeps promises — he has used the life of Abraham to illustrate God’s faithfulness.
  - ✓ God kept the promise about the land to Abraham (Gen. 12:1).
  - ✓ God kept the promise about the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:2).
  - ✓ And this verse, while about the physical descendants, also suggests something more than physical descendants — just like Abraham looked for a better dwelling than Canaan, so he had descendants greater than just the physical nation of Israel (Gen. 12:3) — all the world has received the blessing of salvation that came through his ultimate descendant, Jesus (10:19-22; Gal. 3:16, 29).
  - ✓ When Abraham received the promise of God (Gen. 15:1, 5), he believed and was saved (Gen. 15:6).

- ✓ Abraham's faith in God through which God declared him right was the same kind of faith that led to the salvation of all other people through Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:23-25).
- ✓ Perhaps this morning you are like so many in this world, believing in yourself to save yourself. You are no more able to stand before God and give a good accounting of your sin than Sarah could birth a baby at age 90. You need someone else to work for you. And that person is Jesus, Abraham's Son.
- ✓ I exhort you to believe in Him only to remove and redeem your sin. He will do it (2:14-15).

## 5. What We Learn from Abraham's Faith

- *We don't need to know the details of how things will work out in the future*; we simply need to know the One who commands us to act and what He commands us to do — and that is enough (v. 8).
  - ✓ It's enough for the one who is tempted by anxiety (Mt. 6:33).
  - ✓ It's enough for the one who is tempted to stop loving (1 Thess. 4:1)
  - ✓ It's enough for the one who is tempted to stop believing God (Heb. 10:35)
  - ✓ When we know what God has said, we have everything we need to know how to act (2 Tim. 3:16f).
  - ✓ (And by the way — we do know the future: Heb. 10:37).
- *Wherever we live, we are always living in an alien land — we are never home until we go Home* (1 Pt. 2:11; 2 Cor. 5:6-8). As long as we treat this place as our final destination we will never be satisfied. When we treat Heaven as our final destination, then nothing here will ultimately disappoint.
  - ✓ Abraham's experience is akin to what Paul wrote to the Colossians: "set your minds on things above..." (Col. 3:2ff). To be of earthly usefulness, our heads must be in the clouds of Heaven. We must be mindful of what is to come in order to have the right orientation on earth (2 Cor. 4:16-18).
  - ✓ Our home is not here; we should not grieve when we lose things here as if our loss is permanent.
- *The key to overcoming doubt is remembering the One who has made the promise* (v. 11). Like Peter, we are prone to look at the bigness of the waves and forget the promise of the "I am" (Mt. 14:30).
  - ✓ Sarah overcame her doubt by remembering the God who promised and His power.
  - ✓ The writer of the Hebrews pointed to the supremacy of Christ to strengthen struggling believers (e.g., 10:19-22; 12:3; 2:17-18; 4:14).
- *Our ability to serve God faithfully is not dependent on our ability — or even our faith. It is dependent on the ability of God* (v. 12).
  - ✓ Trials and troubles did not mean that God had failed Abraham — even when they persisted for decades and centuries.
  - ✓ Trials and troubles does not mean that God has failed us — it just means that we need to persist in believing in the One who has promised, trusting He will accomplish His purposes at the right time.

**CONCLUSION:** We live in a perverse world. But it has always been that way. This week I read Judges:

- ✓ I read of the perversely tangled life of Samson (chs. 13-16).
- ✓ I read of the idolatry of Micah and the perversity of his personal Levite “priest” (ch. 17).
- ✓ I read of another Levite’s concubine and the horrific sin against her (ch. 19) and then the civil war against the tribe of Benjamin (chs. 20-21).
- ✓ The final line in the book summarizes that difficult stage in Israel’s history: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (21:25). The sins of those days mirror and surpass the sins of our own world.

Living in a perverse world does not mean that God has forgotten or become incapable. It just means we haven’t yet received the full promises of God. But we will. As in the days of Abraham, this is no time to stop believing; this is a time to continue living by faith.

God made astounding promises to Abraham. And Abraham never saw the complete fulfillment of those promises in his lifetime. Yet he kept on believing.

- God promised a land, and he believed...
- God promised physical descendants, and he believed...
- God promised spiritual descendants, and he believed.

The author of Hebrews recounts Abraham’s story of believing without full fulfillment to encourage the readers (and us) that we don’t have to receive it all to believe God. And God has not failed when we don’t receive all the promises immediately. **Do not throw away** your confidence in God (**10:35**). **God is coming** and He will not delay from His timetable in completing His plan of redemption (**10:36**).

**BENEDICTION:** **Hebrews 13:20-21**