

Faith that Lives Wholeheartedly for God

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to read scripture for us now. I've got two readings, one from the Old Testament, Genesis chapter 11, into chapter 12. And then we're going to read from Hebrews chapter 11, which David is going to come and preach from in just a little while. So first of all, I'm going to read Genesis chapter 11, verse 27, to chapter 12, verse 8. So the first part, which introduces us to Abraham, or Abram as he was then, and some of his family. And then we're going to read about Abram being called by God. The words are going to be on the screen. There's Bibles at the back.

It's also in the printed handout if you have one. And if you'd like to get up and grab a Bible at any point, please do so. So this is Genesis chapter 11, verse 27. Now these are the generations of Terah.

Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran. And Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father, Terah, in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives.

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and Ishca. Now, Sarai was barren. She had no child. Terah took Abram, his son, and Lot, the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai, his daughter-in-law, his son, Abram's wife.

And they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran. Now the Lord said to Abram, Go forth 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.

[2 : 0 2] And then we're going to turn to Hebrews chapter 11. No, we're not. Not yet. Sorry. 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. So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 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.

When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moray. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, To your offspring, I will give this land. So he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there, he moved to a hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And in Hebrews chapter 11, just a short reading, verses 8 to 12.

By faith, Abram 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. Amen. This is God's holy word.

We come this evening to Hebrews 11 and once again, and to the figure of Abraham. Come to the next verses of chapter 11. Really verses 8 through 19 are the verses in which the writer zooms in on the person of Abraham. We're not going to look at all those verses. Just going to look at verses 8 through 12 this evening. And Abraham is focused upon here as, of course, a man of faith. He was an individual whose life and existence really was shaped by his faith in God. And time and time again in the Bible, when faith is to be illustrated, then Abraham's example is often highlighted. And we see this in other passages in the New Testament, James chapter 2,

[5 : 11] Romans chapter 4. And that's exactly what we see happening here in Hebrews chapter 11. Abraham is seen as a great archetype of faith. And I suppose one of the things that we, many of us, take for granted, I suppose, today is a belief in one God, monotheism. But that was not the case.

In Abraham's day and generation, that was not the norm. It was a day of polytheism, many gods. And in that culture, society, generation, Abraham stood out in his conviction and belief in one creator, God. And that's why the great monotheistic religions of today, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all look and call themselves children in different ways, children of Abraham. The word Abram, and then Abraham. Abram means father. Abraham, father of many. And these Christians to whom the letter of Hebrews was written, as we remind ourselves, were a group of believers trying to stand for Jesus Christ in a very difficult and hostile environment. And they were in need of encouragement to keep on persevering in the way of faith. And so the writer turns in these verses to Abraham and holds him up to the light so that his readers can just, so they can see more clearly how the life of faith is to be lived out, even in a hostile world. And so we look this evening at the first part of this section, running from verse 8 through 12. And in time-honored tradition, I want to pull out three things here about Abraham and his faith. And the first thing I want you to notice with me is the obedience of faith, the obedience of faith. And we have that in verse 9. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going.

This reference, of course, is to Genesis 12, to that passage that Chris read for us, to Abraham's response to Abraham's response to God's call on his life. We read there, leave your country, your people, your father's household. Go to the land I will show you.

I like the King James Version. It's a little more emphatic. Get thee out of thy country. And so, out of the blue, God's voice comes. Go from your country to the land I will show you.

Abraham is not given a map. He's not given some kind of travel brochure. He's not given coordinates. He's not given directions. He's not given an itinerary. He's not given any guarantees.

[8 : 28] He's given a command, and he's given a promise. Go to the land I will show you. And Abraham is called to surrender his plans, his will, his life completely to God.

And we're told that by faith, or through faith, Abraham obeyed God. He's called to leave everything. His culture, his security, his identity, and really to step into the unknown.

And Abraham, as we read the text, doesn't negotiate. He doesn't, you know, demand a five-year plan. He doesn't engage in a comprehensive risk assessment. He obeys because he trusts the one who calls him.

As we said before in this series, Abraham's faith, like others' faith, is not faith in faith itself. It's not some nebulous leap into the dark. His is faith in the living God who speaks, who promises, the God who cannot lie. It's one of the great features of Abraham's life. All through his story, God says, go. Abraham says, where? God says, I'll show you later. God says, I'm going to make you a great nation. Abraham says, how? God says, I'll show you later. God says to Abraham, take your son to Mount Moriah. Sacrifice him. Abraham says, why? God says, I'll show you later. Because in the way of faith, everything is not revealed up front. Like Abraham, we do not know what lies ahead of us, what job, what country, what future. So many things are unknown. And yet, biblical faith steps into the unknown with the God who has made himself known. Martin Luther wrote these words, this is the glory of faith, simply not to know, not to know where you are going, not to know what you are doing, not to know what you must suffer. And with sense and intellect, virtue and will, all alike made captive to follow the naked voice of God. He goes on to say, Abraham with his obedience of faith shows the highest example of the evangelical life, because he left all and followed the Lord, preferring the Word of God to everything else and loving it above all things. Of his own free will, a pilgrim subject to the perils of life and death every hour of the day and night. And so the call of the gospel, the call of Christ, the call of God is a call to the obedience that comes through faith.

We think of Jesus speaking in Luke 14, if anyone comes to me, he doesn't hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. Yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

[11 : 43] Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. What is that? It's a call, isn't it, to put Jesus first in everything. It's a call to love him, to trust him, to obey him.

It's a very important point, I think, to grasp about being a Christian. Lots of people, when perhaps they're thinking about the Christian faith, wondering whether to commit themselves or not, ask things like this. You know, if I was to become a Christian, does that mean I will have to give up sleeping with my boyfriend or my girlfriend? Does that mean I will have to spend my money differently? Does that mean I have to forgive that person I absolutely hate? Does that mean I'm going to have to change my job? And what they're really asking is this, give me directions. Tell me where I'm going. Show me the land, God, that you're taking me to. And often what those questions express really is a desire to stay in charge and to stay in control, to remain in the driving seat, to have our hands on the reins of our lives. I'll go, God, but only if you show me where, only if you tell me exactly where we're going. But really to become a Christian means that we hand those reins over to God and we hand control to him and he takes the driving seat. And that is scary.

Christianity means submitting to Jesus as Lord. And yes, it is about loving him and trusting him and following him and obeying him. If you love me, says Jesus, you will keep my commands.

In the opening verse of his first letter, the apostle Peter talks to those who are elect exiles of the dispersion. According to the foreknowledge of God the Father in the sanctification of the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood. And the point Peter is making there is that we are chosen and called for obedience to Jesus Christ. And we don't know what may lie ahead. We may not even know where we're going. But nonetheless, like Abraham of old, we're called to put God first and to travel the way of faith and obedience. That's what we were hearing in part about this morning with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. There's that old hymn, isn't there? Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey. The obedience of faith. That's the first thing we see here with Abraham. And then the second thing, what I've called the endurance of faith.

The following verses, we find them there by faith. Verse 10, 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.

[15:12] Verses 9 and 10. Abraham arrives, of course, in Canaan, the land of promise, but he doesn't possess that land. This was the land that had been promised to him and his descendants, but there's a sense in which Abraham never really settled there. He was always a pilgrim. He had no permanent dwelling because he and his family lived in tents as strangers in a foreign land.

He's a stranger pitching tents in a land that is only his by promise, not by sight. He's a man without permanence. A man who must look to a future that he cannot yet grasp. It's interesting. Have you wondered what kept Abraham going during those early years in the land of promise? After all, he was 25 years in the land before Isaac was ever born. For those 25 years, all he had to hold on to was God's promise. There was no tangible sign of fulfillment. And of course, verse 10 gives us the answer, tells us how and why he endured, for he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. Abraham was a pilgrim, rootless in this world, because his heart, in some sense was anchored in another. He was not seduced by the cities of men, our Sodom, Babylon, because he saw by faith the city of God. He was looking for something more permanent and real, beyond his temporary tents to an eternal city with foundations. Abraham saw and understood that this world was not his ultimate home. And friends, that is the mark, is it not, of the Christian life. We are not at home here. This world offers much comfort, success, security, but faith says, no, I'm bound for a better country. I was visiting an elderly lady this past week. She's over 100 years old. And she's in a care home. And her own home that she's lived in from before World War II. And it's up for sale. And she's quite upset. And as we spoke, and I reminded her, yeah, but that's not your ultimate home. That's not your real home. That's yet to come. I agree. You know, Abraham, he enjoyed the many material blessings that God showered upon him and his family in the land of promise. And all of that was good. But it wasn't his ultimate goal. This world was not the foundation of his life. It was not the be-all and end-all.

And one of the things that marked Abraham out from his contemporaries was the fact that he lived his life as a stranger and alien in this world. He understood that he was passing through.

And this world, with its pleasures and comforts, was not his ultimate goal. Because that goal lay beyond. His heart was set on the eternal city of God. And it's this eternal reality that fed his soul and nourished him when things were hard and difficult. The Christian believer is a man or woman who has a longing for the eternal, a hunger for the glory that is to come. I wonder, what are we living for?

Are we living for that city? Or have we pitched our tent too firmly in this passing world? Life is short. And as you get older, you realize that more and more. Eternity is long.

[19:39] And we often struggle with that. The extensive, expansive nature of eternity. The immense dimensions of the world to come in relation to this world and this brief life.

I love those concluding words of the Narnia Chronicles of C.S. Lewis. And he captures something of this, I think, the last words really of the book, The Last Battle. He writes, For us, it is the end of all the stories. We can most fully say that they all lived happily ever after.

But for them, it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world had only been the cover and title page. Now at last, they were beginning chapter one of the great story that no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, and in which every chapter is better than the one before. I spent, I think, almost 25 years as a parish minister in the Church of Scotland. And as a result, I conducted many, many funeral services. In those days, there were, back in the day, there were no humanist celebrants. People died, they came to the parish minister.

I don't know how many funerals I've done. 750, 800, something like that. And I tell you this, there's a striking, striking difference between those in which the deceased lived as if this world was all that there is. And those where the deceased has been looking forward to that city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

What difference between those who've been living as if this world was everything, and those who've been living here as strangers and aliens.

[21 : 48] It's not without reason that Peter, in his first epistle, describes his readers just with those words, sojourners and exiles. Again, we were thinking about that this morning.

Because as Christians, we are to live as aliens and strangers in this world. In the world, but not of the world. Yes, it's good to enjoy the many material blessings, but we must not allow those things to loom so large that they become everything to us.

Idols. We need to fix our eyes on that which is infinitely more valuable and precious. I came across some words of J.C. Ryle this week. He writes this, The time is short. The fashion of this world, our caitland, passeth away. A few more sicknesses, and all will be over. A few more funerals, and our own funeral will be taking place. A few more storms and tossings, and we shall be safe in harbor. We travel towards a world where there is no more sickness. Where parting and pain and crying and mourning are done with forever.

Then he says, In the meantime, let us live the life of faith in the Son of God. Let us lean all our weight on Christ, and rejoice in the thought that He lives forevermore. Yes, blessed be God. Christ lives though we may die. Christ lives though friends and families are carried to the grave. He lives through the grave. He lives through abolish death and brought life and immortality to light by the gospel. Paul in Romans 8 says, I consider our present sufferings not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. These Hebrew Christians who first received this letter, some were losing their material possessions. Some had lost their freedom. Perhaps some were in danger of even losing their lives. And the writer is saying to them, as he says to us, look at Abraham.

Look at how he kept going. Look at how he lived and sojourned in this life. He lived as one looking forward. He lived in this world as one who belonged to another. How are you living? What are you looking forward to? Yes, things may be hard and difficult. There may be family problems and relationship difficulties and employment worries and health concerns and really all manner of stresses and strains. But are you in Christ walking in the faith of Abraham? Are you pressing on? Are you keeping on?

[24 : 47] Are you enduring? Are you looking to that city with foundations whose architect and builder is God? God's sake. The obedience of faith. The obedience of faith. The endurance of faith. Finally, quickly, what I've called the dynamic of faith in verses 11 through 12. 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. There's a bit of a debate on how verse 11 should be translated. I tend to think that the NIV translation really to be preferred to the ESV here. It reads, by faith Abraham, even though he was past age and Sarah herself was barren, was unable to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. I think the verbs refer to Abraham rather than Sarah. But it doesn't really matter because whatever translation we use, the meaning is clear. What is depicted really is an impossible situation. Sarah is old. She has gone through the change. Abraham is also old. He's beyond the years of likely being able to father a child.

And the promise of a son, a seed through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed, seems absolutely laughable. In fact, Sarah does laugh when she first hears it in Genesis 18-12.

What it is, is a picture of utter hopelessness. And that's why we're told right at the beginning of the Abraham story that Sarah, Abraham's wife, is barren, Genesis 11-30. What the writer is communicating there is this is a dead end. There's no hope. There's no way forward. There's no future.

It's a picture. It's a picture of abject human inability. A situation where there is no prospect of a happy ending. And friends, this is precisely where Christian life and faith begins. It begins with human inability. It begins with human helplessness. It begins when we realize that we are without hope on our own. When we're driven beyond our own resources and we're cast entirely upon God.

[27 : 21] When we realize we can do nothing to make ourselves acceptable to Him. It begins when we realize our own moral and spiritual bankruptcy.

It begins when we realize our own moral and spiritual bankruptcy begins when we give up on ourselves and look to the living God. And even as Christians, how often God brings us back to that place where we once again have to admit and confess our own weakness and inability.

when we have to cast ourselves on God. Because there is no other thing we can do.

And yet in Genesis 11 and 12, we read, of course, of how that situation of despair, into that situation comes God. God speaks. God calls. God acts. God promises.

Faith and hope are born. And a future begins to emerge. God promises a son, descendants, a future. From one man, 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. Now, of course, Abraham and Sarah's faith was not flawless. But God's promise does not depend on the perfection of our faith. Only on the perfection of His faithfulness. In time, Sarah's laughter of disbelief becomes the laughter of joy.

[29 : 00] Because God is true to His Word. Through her son Isaac, the line of promise continues until it reaches its climax in Jesus Christ, the true seed. The one in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen. In the face of a helpless and apparently hopeless situation, Abraham considered him faithful who had made the promise. He saw things through the lens of God's promise. He knew who it was who had made the promise. And that promise would never and could never be broken. And so, through God's promise out of a situation of death, there comes life. And there comes fruit. And there comes hope.

And there comes a nation. And ultimately, there comes a Savior. Paul says of Abraham, Romans 4.20, no unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God. But he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Friends, Abraham's life confronts us with the nature of faith, that it's not passive. It involves active obedience. It is the willingness to leave our haran, our comfort zone, our idols, our self-reliance, and to follow where God himself leads, even when we can't see the way. And Abraham's life assures us of the faithfulness of God. Abraham and Sarah were not superheroes of faith, frail, flawed, faltering human beings just like us. And yet, God's promise held firm. He did not abandon them, and he will not abandon us. He will never abandon his people. And just like the pre, like Noah and Abel and Enoch,

Abraham's life points us to Jesus Christ. He is the true son of Abraham. We're reminded of that in the very opening verse of the New Testament, Matthew 1.1. The great and wonderful promises made to Abraham have been fulfilled and extended and enlarged by Jesus Christ. That promise given to Abraham that through his offspring, all the nations would be blessed has found its fulfillment in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. It's found its climax at the cross, where Jesus broke the power of cancelled sin and set the prisoners free, and where he is gathering the nations of this world into the very family of God. And this Jesus is the one who has promised never to leave us or abandon us. He's the one in whom we enjoy forgiveness of sins and a right standing before God. He's the one who promises eternal life to all who will believe in him. He's the one who has promised resurrection life in the face of death.

He's the one who's able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. He's the one who will build his church and against which even the gates of hell shall not prevail. He's the one who has promised to be with us, with his people, even to the very end of the age. You may be beset by feelings of helplessness and fear, may have no sense of acceptance with God, fearful of death, anxious and troubled about the future.

And yet Jesus Christ calls you to himself, and he says, trust me and follow me and believe me. Friends, where is your faith today? Are you walking in the way of Christian obedience, even though the future is unknown? You're clinging to the promises of God, even when the way is dark. Are you living as a pilgrim with your eyes fixed on the city that is yet to come? And as the hymn writers say, when I'm faced with anguished choice, I will listen for your voice and I'll stand on every promise of your word. Let Abraham and Sarah teach you tonight.

[33 : 35] Let their faith inspire you. Above all, let their God, the God who calls, the God who promises, the God who fulfills, be your hope and your strength. Let them lead you to Jesus Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

The obedience of faith. Are you putting God first in your life? The endurance of faith. Are you looking forward to that city with foundations? The dynamic of faith. Are you standing on the life-giving promises of God? May God in his grace enable us so to do. Let's pray.

God our Father, we come to you in our weakness and frailty and inability.

And we look away from ourselves. And to you, the living God, we thank you that you're a God who speaks. You're a God who reveals himself. And you're a God who invites us to trust you and to stand on your promises. Oh Lord, we need your help. Meet with us, we pray. And lead us and guide us as we pray these things. In Jesus' name. Amen.