

Hebrews 11:8-19

“The Habits of Faith”

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Epiphany Season

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word as it comes to us from Hebrews 11:8-19. It also printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

*8 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. 9 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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. 11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. 12 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.*

*13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 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.*

*17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

In the 2nd century, the early church father Irenaeus wrote this: "the glory of God is a living man, and the life of a man is the vision of God."

Irenaeus was referring to the glory that inhabits a man or woman who has been made truly alive by means of their communion of God.

He describes such a person as "the glory of God." The glory, the splendor, the holiness of God inhabits such a person so that they become glorious through their communion with him.

And according to Irenaeus, since human beings are the pinnacle of the created order, there is nothing more glorious in all creation than a man or woman who is truly alive in this way.

And I think what Irenaeus speaks of is dramatically evident in Hebrews 11.

There is a glory here in these verses as we read of the saints of old, of men and women who communed with God and became fully alive - Abel and Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph and Moses and Rahab and Gideon and Barak and all the rest.

And it's right for us to read a chapter like this and long to be made glorious like those who have gone before us - to have this kind of faith, to have this kind of communion with God.

I think sometimes we don't have a big enough vision for the possibilities of holiness that is available to us in this life. Sometimes I fear we settle for far too little of the joy, the peace, the maturity that God offers to us in Jesus Christ.

And this chapter, Hebrews 11, is given to us at least in part to enlarge our imaginations for what kind of saints we might actually become if we embrace a life of faith in the living God.

And, in context, that's exactly what the Apostle is calling us to. The whole point of this chapter is that the Apostle is saying to his readers - this is your story.

Abraham and Sarah and Joseph and Moses and all the rest - they're not just ancient stories or impossible models for faith — they're actually the kind of people we're called to become.

And you don't have to be famous to be this kind of person. In fact, I suspect that most people with the kind of faith Hebrews 11 talks about aren't famous at all. There are saints all around us, there are models of faith for us to imitate if we just open our eyes.

Friends, there is nothing more glorious in the world than a man or woman who has become a saint while they're still alive. I don't mean that such a person is morally perfect, of course. But there are some Christian men and women who, by the time they near the end of their lives, just exude holiness.

They have a kind of calmness about them, a quiet joy, a gentleness kindness with which they treat others, all of which is the fruit of faith that has been tested over the decades of their lives, and has now become mature and strong.

And now, as they approach the time when the day of their death is drawing near they are not afraid, they are not anxious, they simply ready to let go and go one to the glory that is waiting for them.

I hope you know what I'm talking about. I hope you know men and women that have become saints before your very eyes.

My great-grandfather, Lucien, was like that. My grandmother, Joyce, was too. At my previous church in St. Louis, I knew a woman named Carolyn that embodied these things. At our church, my dear friend Jeanie was a living demonstration of these things before her death which was two years ago this past week.

I don't know about you, but somehow becoming that kind of person over time is what I want most in this life. To become someone who isn't anxious or angry or driven this way and that by the circumstances of my life. But to become holy and joyful and gentle and full of faith and ready, in the end, to embrace the relinquishment of death.

And this kind of faith, this kind of holiness and maturity isn't just reserved for "super-Christians." This is meant to be the normal trajectory of our lives as we abide in Jesus over the decades. Remember the words of our Lord Jesus, who taught us: *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*

I think our passage this morning, in its extended commentary on the faith of Abraham and Sarah as well as Isaac and Jacob, has a great deal to teach us about how to live in this kind of way, how, by God's grace, we might become this kind of person.

Because this whole chapter, and this passage in particular, is all about the habits of faith - the patterns of life that are embodied by Abraham and Sarah who both had the the kind of faith that we are called to imitate - that we might become sons of Abraham and daughters of Sarah - that we might become holy and mature and full of the kind of faith that doesn't shrink back but rather endures and leads to the preservation of our souls.

So, this morning, I want to talk about three "habits" or "postures" of faith that we see in our passage this morning.

**The first habit of faith that we see in this passage is a simple obedience to the commands of God.**

In verse 8, we read this: *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.*

Genesis 12 describes this part of the story very succinctly. These are first words God speaks to Abraham.

*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. 2 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. 3 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." 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.*

Abraham was settled in Haran when God spoke to him. But God told him to leave his home and to go to a new land that he would show him, and he promised him a reward if he obeyed. And Abraham, believing that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him, had faith and obeyed.

The habit of faith begins always with obedience. This is the story of the Christian life. Sainthood and holiness and maturity don't begin with intellectual prowess or ecstatic experiences or amazing theological insights that no one has ever considered before. No, the first habit of faith is simply obedience.

Someone outside of yourself - either God himself, or someone else speaking on behalf of God, tells you what to do, and you do it. You submit yourself to God's authority, even if you don't quite fully understand it, and you obey.

God told Abraham to go, and Abraham went. Even though he didn't know where exactly he was going, still he went.

And this is how it always is with God's people.

Elisha tells Naaman to bathe in the Jordan River and he (after some initial resistance) goes down into the muddy water.

Jesus tells John and James to leave their nets and follow him, and they get up and start walking.

Peter tells the crowds at the day of Pentecost to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, and they confess their transgressions, turn from their rebellion, and receive baptism.

Every person of mature faith that you know began here. Every person that eventually becomes glorious begins with this. With simple submission and obedience to the commands of God. It is a fundamental habit, a primary disposition, of mature faith.

There is a kind of humility to obedience. A surrender of yourself. But there is also a promise - that those who humble themselves will be exalted, that those who obey will be made glorious.

**If the first habit of faith that we see in this passage is a simple obedience to the commands of God, the second habit of faith that we see in this passage is an orientation away from this life and toward the future fulfillment of the promises of God.**

We see this disposition in our passage this morning in two places, first in verses 9-10, where we read:

*9 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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

The apostle tells us that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all lived in the land of promise, and yet they lived in tents. In a time when economic power was measured primarily in land ownership and control, they didn't own any of the land that had been promised to them.

They lived in tents as wanderers. And if you read the record of the lives of these men in Genesis you'll find that not only did they live in tents in the land of promise, each of these men — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — had to leave the land of Canaan for substantial portions of their lives because of famine or danger. Indeed the final heir in this chain of fathers and sons, Jacob, spent his last years away from the land of promise and died far away in Egypt.

In fact, the only piece of land that these men ever owned in the promised land was literally their burial plot.

In Genesis 23, we find that Abraham bought the field of Ephron that he might bury his wife Sarah there after she died, and one by one, Abraham and Isaac were eventually buried there as well.

Even Jacob, though he died in Egypt, had his body carried back to the same field by his sons so they could bury him in the only piece of land he had ever possessed.

And Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived this way, in tents, because they were looking forward to something greater. To a promise that they did not yet possess but would one day be fulfilled — not even in their lifetimes, but after their death.

They died, still waiting for the promise.

This kind of looseness toward things of this world, this kind of future orientation which is one of the fundamental habits of faith is summed up by the apostle in verses 13-16:

*13 These all [Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Jacob] died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.*

Where are you invested? Where are your desires oriented? There is so much in this world that calls out for our attention. Reputation. Comfort. Wealth. Success.

But what the Apostle wants us to see is that people who have been made glorious in their faith hold loosely to the things of this world, because they have their hearts set elsewhere.

It's not that those who have been made glorious in their faith aren't concerned about treasure and wealth and reward. But the men and women who possess mature faith know the difference between what is fleeting and what is permanent.

They're not concerned about their reputation in this life or their wealth in this life, or their security in this life - their hearts are oriented toward the future, toward that which lasts, that which God will establish forever.

And that kind of faith gives these men and women a freedom to live in this world without having to possess it, a lightness to receive whatever God gives now as a gift, not a payment, and a humility to lose whatever they need to lose in this world - comfort, wealth, reputation - in order to gain that which is more precious - a heavenly country, and all the promises of God which will never fail or fade away.

But the habits of faith that we see in this passage are not merely a simple obedience to the commands of God, or a life lived toward the future promises of God.

**The third habit of faith that we see in this passage is a fundamental belief in the absolute power and goodness of God.**

Abraham and Sarah knew that God had not promised them possession of the promised land in this life. And so they did not count on that promise, but looked forward to its fulfillment in the future.

But they knew that God had promised them something. He had promised them a son and an heir.

And so they put all their chips in on this, even in their barrenness, even in their old age, that God would give them a Son and that he would protect and defend that Son, even if it meant raising him from the dead. In verses 11-12 we read about the faith of Sarah in the power and goodness of God.

*11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. 12 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.*

Sarah was aged. And Sarah was barren. But she believed that God would give her the joy of a son. And by faith, she received the power to conceive.

And in verses 17-19, we hear of how Abraham committed himself into God's hands, believing that God would keep his promises to him even in his Son's death.

*17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."*

*19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

I love verses 17-19 here, because the Apostle, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives us insight into one of the deepest questions of the Old Testament, which is this - how did Abraham obey God in Genesis 22 when God told him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice?

We learn in these verses that Abraham's faith wasn't blind. It wasn't just a shot in the dark. He knew that God had promised him that his son Isaac was the son of promise, that it was through Isaac that God's promises would be kept.

And so he reasoned that if God had commanded him to put Isaac to death, then God would raise Isaac from the dead.

How did Abraham come to believe this, to reason in this way? We don't know. No one had ever been raised from the dead before at this point in history. It wasn't a thing God had done before.

But the habits of faith Abraham had practiced all his life - obedience, looking to the future, absolute dependence on the goodness and power of God had prepared him for this test, such that the imagination of his faith was so deep and wide and strong that he knew that the only thing he knew for certain when God told him to sacrifice his son is that, no matter what it took, God would keep his promise.

And so if God needed to raise his Isaac from the dead to keep that promise, well then, the God he worshiped was powerful enough and faithful enough to do just that.

So Abraham traveled to the mountain and ascended to the top. He built the altar and tied his son to the wood.

He lifted the knife and prepared to kill his son, not because he was a fool or because he was ignorant or because he was desperate, but because he was wise, because he had been made glorious, and because he trusted that the God he had known all of his life was able to raise his son from the dead if that was what was necessary to keep his promise.

Now, Abraham's test of faith in Genesis 22 may seem dramatic, but the reality is that one day, that same test will come for you, and for me, and for each one of us.

Because one day, death will come for us all. And what we believe about the power and faithfulness of God will finally and fully be put to the test.

Because if God is going to raise us from the dead on the last day and give us new and unending life, then what do we have to fear from death?

And, believe me friend, when that day comes, when that trial draws near, the person you have been becoming all the days of your life will be revealed.

And the path of faith, the path of faith available to you, today, is to begin now to obey by faith, to begin now to hold to things of this world loosely by faith, to begin now put your trust in the absolute power and goodness of God by faith so that when the final test comes (and it will come) you will already be glorious, and you be able to look death in the eye and to say with all the saints who have gone before you:

*"All we go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."*

For we are not of those shrink back and are destroyed, but we are those who desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

And by faith, we will, like Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob be made wise, and strong, and glorious.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.