

Hebrews 11:8

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Preacher: Iain D Campbell

[0 : 01] We're going to turn this morning to the chapter from which we read in Hebrews chapter 11. And I want us to focus our attention on a phrase that occurs and recurs in the course of this chapter.

We find it used for the first time in verse 8. By faith, Abraham. By faith, Abraham.

This particular letter of the New Testament and this chapter in particular are very clearly designed to encourage God's people in living their Christian lives in a fallen world.

With every temptation that there was to go back to a different way of life, the writer is wanting to encourage God's people here to keep on keeping on and to go forward.

It's very interesting that that theme is to be found both at the beginning and at the close of this particular section of Hebrews.

[1 : 11] At the end of chapter 10 we're told, we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.

And so then we have this great race through the Old Testament in chapter 11 and chapter 12 takes up this theme again. Therefore, in the light of all that chapter 11 tells us, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked our forest.

So it is unmistakably the purpose of the writer, not just in writing this letter to the Hebrews, but in bringing together all of these episodes and cameos from the Old Testament that make up the 11th chapter.

It's very clearly his design and his purpose to encourage you and to encourage me to persevere as Christians in a fallen world.

And I suppose it's expanding for us the principle that runs right through the scriptures that the just, the Christian, is a person who lives by faith.

[2 : 28] So this chapter is, as you know, a chapter all about faith. But it's not just a discussion about faith in the abstract.

It's not just a discussion about faith in a vacuum, because faith doesn't operate in a vacuum. It's very important to remember that in this day of modern spirituality, where faith is such a buzzword, and there are so many different faiths, and we're meant to give legitimacy to every and any kind of faith.

Biblical faith, the faith that God looks for, and the faith that God commands, is very specific. It's one of a kind. It's a unique type of faith.

It stands alone. And this chapter demonstrates for us the reality of faith in God. And it does that by reminding us that faith is always something that is demonstrated in action.

This isn't just a statement that tells us that lots of people had faith. This 11th chapter of Hebrews is a chapter that tells us of what people did because they had faith.

[3 : 48] So Abel, for example, offered a good sacrifice because he had faith. And Enoch was taken from this life and walked with God because he had faith.

And Noah built an ark because he had faith. And Moses suffered with God's people because he had faith. Faith is always demonstrated in action and in obedience and in service.

And we're asked to remind ourselves of that as all of these witnesses from the Old Testament are brought together here in this chapter. By faith they all did something.

And then we're reminded here that faith is always a reactionary grace. It's always a response to God's prior work.

See, Enoch walked with God and was commended as someone who pleased God. And therefore, before he lived that kind of life and did that thing, he knew what it was that God was pleased with.

[4 : 55] Noah built an ark by faith because before he did that, he knew what God was going to do and what God wanted him to do. Moses suffered with God's people by faith because before he did that, God worked and revealed and spoke to him.

And his faith simply reacted to what God had said and to what God had done. The faith of the Bible is never a dead faith and it's never a sleeping faith and it's never an inactive faith.

And nor is it a grace that simply operates by its own initiative. Faith is always something that responds to God's work and to God's word and to God's grace.

The gift of faith, the grace of faith, always responds to the prior grace of God in action and in human history.

Now I want to bring all of these principles to bear in our study of Abraham. He's one of about 15 individuals who are named in this chapter as someone who lived by faith.

[6 : 04] The phrase by faith, Abraham occurs at least three times in this chapter. It actually occurs four times in the New International Version.

You'll notice that in a footnote, verse 11 and its interpretation is a little bit uncertain. Should that be by faith, Abraham, or should it be by faith, Sarah?

There is a little bit of a cuddle over that. But there are at least three places where the phrase by faith, Abraham, occurs. At verse 8, by faith, Abraham, when he was called to go out to a place that he would later receive as his inheritance, he obeyed and went.

Then verse 9, by faith, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger. And then by faith, verse 17, he offered Isaac as a sacrifice. And you will notice just reading through this chapter that the greater part of the chapter is taken up with the faith of Abraham.

Now there is something very significant about that because the writer has already mentioned Abraham in the course of Hebrews in chapter 6. And he mentioned him as someone who had faith in the promises of God and was patiently waiting for God to fulfill his promises.

[7 : 19] So he's already mentioned Abraham and drawn our attention to his faith earlier in the letter. And in this chapter he complains that he doesn't have time to deal with other people that he could mention and what they did by faith.

So you see what I'm saying. He's already mentioned Abraham. He doesn't have time to mention others. And yet he still wants to give the greater bulk of this chapter to the faith of Abraham.

And he has good reason for doing so. Because, as you know, it is in the case of Abraham that the word for faith is used explicitly for the first time in the scriptures.

People before Abraham had faith. But it's only when we come to the narrative of Abraham in Genesis 15 that we are told that Abraham believed God.

And for the first time in the Bible, this faith word, this Hebrew word from which we get our word, Amen, this word that is going to be so crucial in our understanding of the gospel and in our understanding of the Christian life, is used explicitly of Abraham.

[8 : 32] And Paul describes everyone who has faith as, in some sense, a child of Abraham. We are walking in the steps of the faith of our father, Abraham.

So this great principle of faith is explicit in the Genesis history of Abraham. And so now we have this section of this chapter taken up with Abraham and drawing our attention to the faith of Abraham.

This active, responsive, reactionary grace that Abraham exercises in his life. And I want to underline and emphasize three things that we are told about by faith of Abraham in Hebrews 11.

And I'm really wanting to come to this question. What does it mean to be a believer? What does it mean to live a life of faith? And if you have faith, what does it mean to persevere in that faith?

And to keep on in your Christian life and to go forward in your Christian life and to live your Christian life by faith? What does by faith Abraham tell me about living as a believer in the 21st century?

[9 : 50] What did Abraham do by faith? Well, you see, the first thing that Abraham did was this. He responded to the call of God.

Faith responds to the call of God. If you have faith today, it's because you've responded to the call of God. If you don't have faith today, it's not because you haven't heard the call of God.

The call of God comes to us in the Gospel. And every time we open the Bible, God's voice is calling us. You need to respond to that call.

Abraham was called by God to go out to a place that he would later receive as his inheritance. And he obeyed and he went, even though he did not know where he was going.

His knowledge was limited. There was much that he did not know. But what he did know was that God was calling him.

[11 : 00] And it's very important that we catch what the writer is saying. It's not that Abraham was seeking God. It's not that Abraham was looking for God.

Do you remember in the book of Joshua, as Joshua, towards the end of his life, is responding to the children of Israel and encouraging them to go forward as God's covenant people.

And he surveys their history. And he goes over their past. And this is what he says. Long ago, your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the river, beyond the Euphrates, and worshipped other gods.

That's what they were. Heathen, pagan, idol worshippers, who had no thought of the God of Israel, the God of the covenant. But God says, I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the river and led him throughout Cana.

God says, I did it. I took him. I broke into his experience. When he was worshipping idols and when his whole life was taken up by pain and paganism, I broke in and I spoke to him and I called him and I took him.

[12 : 20] And the whole history emphasizes for us the absolute sovereignty of the God who works alone in his grace for the salvation of sinners.

That's the God who speaks to you and to me in the Bible. This is not a God who looks for our cooperation. This is not a God who is waiting for us simply to decide to follow Jesus.

This is a God who himself takes the initiative. His word comes like a light penetrating and piercing the blackness of Canaanite heathenism.

And he calls Abraham. And the whole emphasis is on what God does and what God says and God's activity and God's monergistic grace.

Grace that works alone. And Abraham simply responds. Don't read that Abraham says anything to God. And Abraham certainly doesn't know what the future holds.

[13 : 20] But God says to Abraham, I want you to give up your past. And I want this to be a new beginning. And I want this to be the opening of a new chapter. And I want you, Abraham, to be born all over again.

And live a new life. And follow a new direction. And topple the gods of Canaan out of your heart. And be filled with one true God.

And come and follow me. And I hear the same voice on the lips of Jesus. As God is made flesh and dwells among us in the New Testament.

Do you remember the call of Matthew, for example? When Jesus simply came to him and said, follow me. And does exactly the same for Matthew as he did for Abraham long ago. Simply comes in and with the power of his voice calls him out.

And he follows him. And faith responds to that call. Have you heard the call of God in your own life?

[14 : 20] Oh, so many questions. I know so many issues. So many difficulties. What if this and what if that? And what if I get it wrong? And what if I make a mistake? And I don't really understand what it means to be a Christian.

I can see plenty of people who are Christians. And I wish I had what they had and the experiences they have. But listen, listen. You've got the call of God. Don't you think that this great God who speaks in the gospel is able to do for you what he did for Abraham?

Abraham, we are told, simply obeyed. Simply answered that call. Simply went out. Trusted his all to the God who was calling him.

His past forgiving. His present now in the hands of God. And everything in his life committed and consecrated to the God of the covenant.

To the God who called him. Faith responds to God's call. And then I want to say secondly that faith always looks to God's promise.

[15 : 30] I'm told that by faith Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.

And he lived in tents. As did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise.

Abraham is a wanderer. He's a migrant. You know that there is a point in Genesis 14 where Abraham is described as Abraham the Hebrew.

It's very interesting that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that phrase is translated with a phrase that simply means Abraham the migrant. The wanderer.

He had no fixed abode. There was no settled place for him. He was dwelling in the land of promise but it had not been given to him or even promised to him at that point as his inheritance.

[16 : 32] He dwelt there as an alien. As a stranger. This was not his home. But God came with the promise and God said to him that this would be his promise.

And that promise transformed his whole outlook. Yes, yes they were aliens and strangers on earth. But they looked to the promise and they lived by the promise and they fixed their eye on the promise that one day the inheritance would be theirs.

There was a place that they could call home. And the writer to the Hebrews is insistent on laboring the point that when they spoke about home they weren't referring to Mesopotamia on the other side of the Euphrates.

They could easily have gone back there if that was home. But that wasn't home. Home was in the promise. Home was a better country. Home was a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Home is the place God promised to give them. And Abram is a stranger on the earth.

[17 : 47] Because he is looking to the promise of a greater inheritance than anything earth can give him. He is looking to the promise of a city and an inheritance that will be everlasting.

It's very interesting that that whole language of exile is picked up in other parts of the scripture to describe the life of the Christian.

Listen to what Peter says. He tells us in chapter 2, sorry in chapter 1 of his first epistle.

Since you call on a father, he says, who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here.

In reverent here. We're strangers here. God's people are strangers here.

[18 : 54] This is not home. This world, with all that it promises and with all that we possess in it, this is not home. For the believer, there is another place that is home.

There is something absolute. And something that is eternal. And something that is beyond this present realm of time and space and sense reality.

We're here, but we're not of this place. And as Peter encourages God's people, he wants to say to them, you live your lives here just as those who are passing through.

Because the reality is beyond this world of shadows. Everything here, says this writer in the next chapter, is liable to be shaken.

But we've received, he says, an unshakable kingdom. Chapter 12, verse 28. So let us be thankful. Let's be thankful that our aims are not earthly.

[19 : 59] Let's be thankful that we are not called to live under the tyranny of the immediate. So many lives that are stressed out beyond belief, simply because they're living under the tyranny of the present, immediate world that's ready to be shaken.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, don't you be concerned with what you're going to eat or drink or wear. These are the things the Gentiles worry about. But that's not the kind of thinking inside the covenant, says Jesus.

No, inside the covenant, my people know where home is. We have an inheritance that is beyond being corrupted. That is beyond being defiled.

That is eternal in the heavens. Adam had an inheritance that was his, and at the outset it was without corruption and without defilement, but it faded away.

But Jesus has provided something that will not fade away. He says to his disciples, whom he promises a life of suffering and persecution and loneliness, he says, let not your heart be troubled.

[21 : 24] In my father's house, that's home. So you look to that promise. You live your life under the shadow of that promise. And you live every day persevering as a Christian, knowing that one day all of this will pass away, and we will pass from this land of the dying into the land of the living and to that place where there is light without any shadow at all.

Do you remember Asaph in Psalm 73? He was jealous of sinful people. There he was trying to remain as loyal as he could to the God of the covenant, fulfilling all that was required of him as a believer.

And yet, deep down in his soul, gnawing away was this agony of envy. There were people who didn't have God on their horizon at all, and everything was going well with them.

Something was wrong. God had said, I'll be good to Israel. But he wasn't good to Asaph. He was good to the enemies of the covenant, to those who disobeyed God. It was hard, painful for me to live in that environment.

But, but he says, I went into God's house. And then I remembered their end. And I realized that that godless world that looks so full is absolutely empty.

[22 : 50] Vanity of vanities. God is not there. And God has put these people on a slippery place. They can fall in a moment. And Asaph says, I'd forgotten these eternal absences.

And there I was living as an animal. An animal doesn't have faith. An animal simply has instinct. Reacting to immediate boundaries and immediate experiences.

Asaph says, that's what I was. Fleshly living. Wordly living. Reacting simply to what I saw with my eyes and heard with my ears. Instead of keeping the absolute promises of God before me.

Once I did that. Then I understood. Oh, how foolish I was. I realized then, God was good to Israel.

He had been keeping me all that time. And even though I was so absorbed with what was going on around me. And I'd forgotten to keep my eyes on what was ultimate and absolute.

[23 : 51] God was looking after me. How good God is. It's perhaps even more stark and explicit.

In Psalm 39. Do you remember how the psalmist says there? I dwell with you, he says to God. I dwell with you as an alien.

A stranger. As all my fathers were. That's what he says to God in his prayer. I'm here living on earth as a stranger with you.

But not as Spurgeon says in one of his sermons. Not as a stranger to you. Let me put it like this today.

It makes all the difference in the world. Whether in this world you are a stranger to God. Or a stranger with God.

[25 : 02] It makes all the difference in the world today. Whether you are a stranger to Jesus in this world. Or a stranger with Jesus. In this world.

The world is going blindly on. Alienated from God. But the church is marching on. Alienated with God.

Are you looking to these promises? What is absolute in your life today? Faith responds to God's call. Faith looks to God's promise. And faith thirdly submits to God's test.

The writer doesn't want us to forget that moment in Abraham's experience. When God said to him, I want you to offer up Isaac. And he reminds us that by faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

And he who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son. And suddenly there is a kind of a conflict between what God promised and what God now commands.

[26 : 19] God promised Abraham that through him and through his son, through the son of his old age, through Isaac, he would have an innumerable seed.

So everything hinged on Isaac being born and growing up safely into manhood and being able to father children.

And just when Abraham thought everything was going well, God said to him, I want you to sacrifice Isaac.

I called you once before, Abraham, to offer up your past for me. Now I want you to offer up your future for me.

By faith it's not a problem to Abraham. Faith leaves the problems to God.

[27 : 23] He does what God commands and he knows that God can and will fulfill his promise. Even if that means that Isaac must be put to death, God says Abraham will raise him from the dead in order to fulfill his promise.

But it's still hard. James, in chapter 2 of his letter, reminds us that Abraham was justified by works when he, through faith, offered Isaac up on the altar.

And reached that point where he submitted everything into God's hand. And demonstrated by what he did that he had faith in the promise of a covenant God.

And the writer here tells us that, in a sense, when God spared Isaac and actually didn't allow Abraham to plunge that dagger into Isaac's breast, which he did actually receive, in a kind of figurative way, his son back from the dead.

What was that all about? It was about God testing the faith of Abraham. Not because God needed to know what Abraham's faith was like.

[28 : 43] When God tests your faith, it's not because God needs to know what you are like. But it is because you need to know what God is like.

And you need to know what you are like. And God brings you to points of crisis in your life. Not because he needs to know how you will react.

But because there are things about yourself and things about him that you are yet to discover. And that you could never discover unless he brought you to these critical moments.

And let's not miss the obvious here. Sometimes God can use our children to test our faith. Sometimes he can use those closest to us to test how close we are to him.

And he calls Abraham at this point to give up everything that Isaac stood for. Of assurance that God would do what he had purposed and fulfill what he had promised.

[29 : 49] Absolute trust. Every time he watched Isaac. Abraham had the assurance of knowing that God's word was true.

As Isaac played and spoke. And sang and ran. And as he grew into manhood. His father rejoiced in the assurance of the covenant keeping.

God who gave these promises. But what now? Don't you think God sometimes brings you to points of absolute submission and absolute willingness.

Not because he's intending to go right through with it. But because he brings you far enough to realize just how much you need to rely. Not on yourself. Not on yourself.

Or any of your experiences. Or any of your senses. Or even your past. Or even your present. You simply have to rely entirely on him.

[30 : 56] See I think the essence of this test. Is that Isaac had to be laid on the altar.

Isaac had to be laid on the altar. But it was Abraham who had to die. Isaac needed to be sacrificed.

But Abraham needed to die. Needed to die to self. Needed to die to self reliance. Needed to die to the logic of his own processes.

And intellect and reason. Needed to be emptied of everything. And be left simply saying.

God can do this. I don't know how. I don't know when. But God can do this. Maybe my Christian brother or sister here today.

- [32 : 02] Maybe you need to die. More than you realize. Maybe that's why God has kept saying no to you. Every time you've called to him. To take away that thorn in the flesh.
- That's been buffeting you. Maybe that's why he said no to you. Every time you've prayed to him. To change circumstances in your life.
- Or to give you some other cup to drink. Just to make you more like the one who said. Not my will.
- But your will. Be done. Figuratively speaking. He did receive Isaac back from death. And he realized it was far better to be.
- In God's hands and subject to God's test. Than anywhere else. So where is the writer going with all of this?
- [33 : 08] Well we're back where we started are we not? Take all of these witnesses. Take all of these great men and women of faith. Let Abraham speak to you today.
- So that you will persevere. And run your risk. And fulfill your calling. In this life. Looking to Jesus.
- And keeping before you and I. The things that really matter. And don't be swamped by time bound trivia. Live your life in time.
- With eternity on your horizon. And in your heart. Having responded to the call of God. Looking to the promises of God.
- Submitting to whatever test God. Puts your way. To try your faith as Peter puts it. Faith that is much more precious than gold.
- [34 : 09] Tried by fire. You live in a way that will reflect your own absolute trust in the Savior that God provided.
- So that like Job in the Old Testament you can say well. There are many things about my life right at this moment that I do not and cannot ever understand.
- But I know this. He knows the way that I take. And when he has tested me. I will come forth like gold.
- I love the way St. Sam's renders that version. Psalm 66. You brought us through fire and water. But you took us to a place that met our heart's desire.
- That's faith speaking. I don't know what your experience is right at this moment. It may be fire and flood for you. It may be mountain top joy.
- [35 : 16] It may be valley depth pain. But the Bible says. But the Bible says. Listen to the witnesses. Of Hebrews 11.
- And keep your eye on Jesus. Who begins and who perfects the faith of his people. Are you looking to Jesus today?
- The things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. Who would not live like that?
- Who would not want to be a believer? By faith Abraham. By faith you. And me today.
- Let's run the risk. With our eye on him. Amen. Let's pray. Amen.?
- [36 : 28] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.