

February 13, 2011 by Steve Brandon



Abraham and Sarah

Hebrews 11:8-12

1. Abraham obeyed (verse 8)
... even when he didn't fully understand.
2. Abraham lived (verses 9-10)
... even when he never fully received the promises.
3. Sarah received (verse 11)
... even when it was impossible.

Please open your Bibles to the book of Hebrews. For the past two months, we have been here in Hebrews, chapter 11, looking at the examples of faith contained in this chapter. We have seen Abel, who worshiped God. We have seen Enoch, who walked with God. And we have seen Noah, who witnessed for God. This morning, we come to two more: Abraham and Sarah.

These are two of the most important people in the story of the Bible. Indeed, when you read the Old Testament, that's what we see. I have heard one pastor say that the book of Genesis makes a b-line for Abraham and then slows down to focus upon him and his progeny. It's true. You read the book of Genesis, and it takes 11 chapters to carry us some 3,000 years in Biblical history. But, then, as you reach chapter 12, we slow down to a crawl as we focus upon Abraham and his relatives. It takes another 14 chapters until Abraham dies.

But, really, Abraham, remains in the background of much of the Bible. You can well argue the case that the entire Bible is about God's covenant with Abraham and how that covenant is carried out in Christ, and how that covenant is fully realized at the end of time. The entire Old Testament is a story of how God is dealing with Israel, who all come from the seed of Abraham. And in the New Testament, you see Jesus coming from the line of Abraham (Matthew 1). By faith, we join in the lineage of Abraham, "Those who are of faith ... are sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). And in the end (in the book of Revelation), we see the city upon which Abraham set his sights.

It is very appropriate that more space is given to Abraham here in Hebrews 11, than any other person. We see him brought up in verse 8. The text focuses upon him until verse 12. Then, there's an interlude of a few verses, and then, in verse 17, we see the faith of Abraham being picked up again until verse 19. It's only right that 8 of the 40 verses of this chapter should focus upon Abraham (and Sarah). After all, he is often called, "The Father of Faith." He was a "friend of God" (James 2:23). Abraham is mentioned nearly 250 times in the entire Bible.

Well, let's read our text this morning. And as we do, I want for you to focus your attention upon Abraham's faith. For really, the call of this text is for us to imitate Abraham's faith.

Hebrews 11:8-12

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Again, I trust that you will notice in this passage the repetition of the words, "by faith." Those words occur almost 20 times in this chapter. They are repeated three times in our text (verses 8, 9, and 11) Following those sign markers, my message this morning has three points. Each of my points have a sub-point, that helps to shed light upon the faith of Abraham (and Sarah), and help us with application.

The first is this, ...

1. Abraham obeyed (verse 8)

Look again at verse 8, ...

Hebrews 11:8

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Right there in the verse, I trust that you can see my point. You can see my point. It comes right from the text. "Abraham, when he was called, obeyed." Abraham's obedience was a demonstration of his faith. Had Abraham not gone out, it would have proved that he had no faith at all. But, he did go out, which demonstrated his faith. Now, notice where Abraham went. He went out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance.

God had told Abraham that he would inherit a land. And so, Abraham went out to that place. So far so good. But, in the last phrase of verse 8 is where we see Abraham's faith shining. And we see a great application for us. You see, Abraham obeyed (verse 8) ... even when he didn't fully understand. That is my sub-point.

Verse 8 says, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going." Isn't this what faith is? Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). Abraham wasn't shown the land first, and then he went out. No, Abraham was called to go out. Only later did he see the land.

This passage reminds me of my wife Yvonne. Most of you know that she was born (and raised) in California. We were married, almost 19 years ago in California and promptly moved here to Illinois (where I grew up). Now, when she came to Illinois, she really didn't understand what living here was like.

The story that I like to tell is this. The first fall that she was here, she just loved the colors of the leaves in the trees. She just couldn't get enough of it. I'm sure that she was delighted to be in Illinois. I'm sure that she was convinced that we had made a good choice in moving here to Illinois. All was happy in the Brandon household! And then came winter. And then she wasn't so sure. Come the next fall, she had a different response to the beautiful leaves. To be sure, she enjoyed their colors. But, she knew what they meant. Her joy was tempered. They meant that the winter was coming - six long months of cold!

This is a bit like Abraham. "He went out, not knowing where he was going." This is essentially what the writer of Genesis tells us.

Turn in your Bibles back to Genesis 12. This chapter contains the call of Abraham. In this passage, we see God's great act of grace, choosing Abraham out of the millions in the world to bless him. Why Abraham? God's grace!

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

There was the call to Abraham. "Get up and move your belongings to the land that I will show you." He gave no indication of where this land was. He didn't give any indication of what this land would be like. He merely said "go!" And in verse 4, we see Abraham's faith in action.

Genesis 12:4

So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him.

You get the sense here that the obedience was swift. Certainly, this wasn't an easy thing for Abraham to do. Ur of the Chaldeans was in modern-day Iraq. It was more than a thousand miles to get to the promised land. In those days, that would have been a long, long way! It would have taken him months to get there. Abraham was well-settled in Ur of the Chaldeans (11:31). But he took all that he owned and left for the land. Look at verse 4 again, ...

Genesis 12:4-5

... Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

Here was Abraham, following the LORD, and finally arriving in the land of Canaan. Once there, that's when God showed him the land that he would receive. This move was a great act of faith. There's lots of application here for us. God may call you to something, which you can't see. If we could see it, it's not faith.

I remember when we started the church. Yvonne and I were launching out to a place that we didn't know. I quit a nice job. We moved from a comfortable place, and we moved to Rockford, where we became totally dependent upon the Lord. And it has been stretching for us ever since. But such is the call of faith.

In recent days, the move to this building has been a call to faith. It has made the finances of the church much tighter. As we have spent all of our savings to get in here. There is a pressure (at least I feel it) of expectations that we all have in this place. "Now we have a place, what are we going to do to impact Rockford?" I have hopes and visions and dreams. But, as of yet, many of them are unrealized. It's been stretching for me. And I expect it to be for years to come. That's not a bad thing. It's a good thing. It's the nature of faith.

Now, today, we don't receive revelation quite like Abraham did. He received an audible calling from the Lord to leave his country and go. But, that doesn't mean that God doesn't lead us today. A great way in which God leads us today is with the issues of unemployment. There are several in the congregation who have lost their jobs in this recession. You don't understand all of the reasons behind the loss of your job. You don't know what's really going to happen in the future. But, it's a great time to have faith in the Lord like Abraham, allowing Him to lead you to a land that you know nothing of. Will you be like Abraham?

Another way that God calls us is through evangelism. You have some people in your life who need to hear the gospel. But, you just don't know how they will respond. Perhaps you fear their response. God has called us to share the wonderful news of Christ. Perhaps this is a good way for you to step out in faith, not knowing the result.

Perhaps there are plain issues of sin in your life. You know what God's word says. You know the will of God. But you are slow in obeying. You are slow in obeying because you are weak in faith. If you had the faith of Abraham, you would obey the Lord quickly. Oh, may God grant us help in these things, that we might have the faith of Abraham.

Well, there's the first characteristic we see here of Abraham. Abraham obeyed (verse 8), even when he didn't fully understand. Let's now turn to our second point. It's found in Hebrews, chapter 11, verses 9 and 10. Let me read them for you now, ...

Hebrews 11:9-10

By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God

Here's my point. Ready?

2. Abraham lived (verses 9-10)

That's the main verb found in verse 9. "By faith he lived." Profound, huh! This is where my sub-point helps to make sense of the point here. Abraham lived (verses 9-10) ... even when he never fully received the promises.

If you think about this for any length of time, you will be amazed. Here was Abraham, the one who received the promises! He never got to settle in the land! Sure, he lived there, but the land was never his. He always lived in tents. The only piece of property that Abraham ever owned in the land was a burial spot for his wife, Sarah (Gen. 23). Other than that, Abraham spent his entire time in the promised land at the campgrounds in tents.

I love what Simon Kistemaker said: "Abraham's stay in Canaan was as temporary as the pegs he drove into the ground to keep his tents pitched." [\[1\]](#) Abraham was constantly on the move. After God showed him the land and promised to give it to him (Gen. 12:7), we read in Genesis, ...

Genesis 12:8-9

Then he proceeded from there to the mountain 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. Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev.

After that Abraham sojourned to Egypt, and came back again, only to wander around the promised land. We often think of the times of Moses as being the times of wandering, but Abraham did his fair share of wandering as well. And it wasn't only him. It was also his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob who wandered about the land as well (verse 9). They were shepherds, who were constantly on the move, looking for better land for their sheep to graze.

So, fathom this: here was the mighty Abraham, who had received the covenant from God, Himself. He received the promise, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7), but it was never given to Abraham. Here's a great lesson for us. Even Abraham, the patriarch, didn't experience his best life here on earth. There are many preachers who want to promise you your best life now. But, the reality of it is that your best life is later. And it may well be that you take some sorrows of your life down to the grave, never seeing your issues resolved in this life. That won't be OK if you are looking for ultimate fulfillment here upon the earth. But, if you are "setting your mind on the things above" (Col. 3:2) then you'll be content even if the sorrows of life never pass you by.

Abraham never saw it fully; who are you to expect that you will see it? Here's the thing: Abraham was never looking to the promised land for his satisfaction. Verse 10 says, "for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." In other words, Abraham wasn't even looking for a city here on earth. He was looking for a heavenly city.

Abraham is one of those talked about in verse 16, who "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. The thought of a heavenly city will come up again several times in the book of Hebrews. We see it in Hebrews 12:22, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" and Hebrews 13:14, "Here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come."

Such is the key to understanding Abraham's faith. He wasn't focused upon the here and now. He was focused upon the life to come! He was heavenly-minded. How about your faith? Are your heart and affections focused here upon the earth? Or, is your heart longing for the heavenly city, like Abraham's faith was. When your heart is focused beyond this earth, it has a wonderful way of creating a contentment with the way that things are now.

Let's move to my third (and final) point. It comes in verses 11 and 12.

Hebrews 11:11-12

By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Here's my point, ...

3. Sarah received (verse 11)

Again, that's the main verb of verse 11. "Sarah herself received." She "received" ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life. The sub-title to my point is this: Sarah received (verse 11) ... even when it was impossible.

Now, before we go on, I do need to mention some of the difficulties of this text. Because some of you have the old NIV (translated in 1984) text in your lap. This verse reads a bit different. In it, we read, "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise" (Heb 11:11 NIV 1984). Now, for the sake of time, I won't go into the details of why the text is translated this way. If you are really interested, you can talk with me. But, suffice it to say that in the 2010 update of the NIV, they changed the translation it to fit every other major translation, to leave Sarah as the subject of the sentence.

Hebrews 11:11

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. (NIV 2010).

Anyway, I trust that you know the story. God had promised that Abraham would become the father of a great nation (Gen. 12:2). But, Sarah was barren and she was beyond the years of child-bearing. Where's that promise going? One day, three men came and visited Abraham and Sarah in their tents (Gen. 18:1-2) Abraham brought them in and prepared a nice dinner for them. And then, one of the three men said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son" (Gen. 18:10).

Now, you have to understand that at this time, Abraham was 99 years old! Sarah was 89 years old! How could they bear a child? It was impossible! That's why Sarah laughed in disbelief when she heard the news, saying to herself, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (Gen. 18:12).

But, the man insisted, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son" (Gen. 18:14). Sure enough, God did the impossible and opened the womb of Sarah. We read in Genesis 21:1-2, ...

Genesis 21:1-2

Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him.

Here it is - God doing the impossible! Sarah received the ability to conceive and bear a son in her old age. His name, of course, was Isaac, which means "laughter." Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me, ... Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age" (Gen. 21:6-7). You can hear her joy in these words. You can hear her praise to God in these words!

God did the impossible for Sarah. How? He did it through faith. That's what verse 11 says, "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised."

Well, let's look at our last verse of the morning, verse 12. Because, there are some treasures here:

Hebrews 11:12

Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

This was the end of the life of Abraham. Indeed, looking back, we can see that he became the father of a great nation. In him the covenant was fulfilled, and this is exactly what was prophesied. God did the impossible. Although in his old age, Abraham was as good as dead. That is, he had no hope of having a child. And yet, God greatly multiplied him!

Indeed, the Jewish people have covered the globe! How easy is it to see looking back. But Abraham didn't have the privilege of looking back. Everything from his point of view was looking forward. He only had the promises. He never saw the fulfillment.

At one point, God took Abraham outside at night and told him to look at the stars, if he was able to count them. Then, he said, "So shall your descendants be" (Gen. 15:5). All Abraham could do was believe; and he did believe.

And you may well experience the same thing. God may do some wondrous things through you that you know nothing of, which only an historical perspective can bring. For instance, Yvonne and I were involved in planting Kishwaukee Bible Church in DeKalb, Illinois in the mid-1990's. At one point, we focused quite a bit of our attention upon establishing a college group on the campus of Northern Illinois University. By all outward means, the ministry was a failure. By the end of the year, we only had a handful of students involved in our group. We had some who had shown some fruit, but who had flaked.

But, looking back, I have often been amazed at what God did that year. We ministered to a freshman woman, who was drifting with her life, but really solidified her faith in Christ during her college years. She is now married and ministering in a church in Lena with her husband.

We saw a Jewish gal come to faith in Christ, and face some intense persecution from her parents, who disowned her. We still exchange Christmas cards with her, and I usually see her husband a few times every year.

We ministered to a man and woman who were living together in sin. They were sort of interested in Christianity. But, they were not interested in forsaking their sin. I remember clearly the time when I confronted the man and told him that what he was doing was not right. Later, he and his wife, came to faith. Now, their lives center around Christ and his church. We still exchange Christmas cards with them. They live in Iowa and often visit us on their way to visit family in the suburbs.

Here's an email that I received this past summer (July 22, 2010).

"Hi Steve, ...

I am not sure if you remember me or not but I wanted to drop you a quick letter. I attended NIU from 1992-1996. As a new believer (1996), I was given your name. During my last year at NIU I was able to attend Kishwaukee Bible Church.

I just wanted to take the time to say thank you. I appreciate the biblical foundation that was provided during that time period. Also, I am glad to see that you have been given the opportunity to lead a church on your own. Your family has grown quite a bit since I was at NIU, as has mine.

I am married with two children. You met my wife while I was at NIU as well. At the time we weren't married yet. We had the opportunity to share a meal with you and your parents at their home one Sunday afternoon."

He goes on to say that he is looking for a new church because the distance of his current church is too much. He was looking for a church recommendation from me in the "Aurora/Fox Valley area." I remember him a little bit (but I could never pick him out in a crowd). I don't remember his wife at all.

This email came as a super encouragement to me, knowing that the seed that you sow will be used of God in ways greater than you can imagine. Looking back, you might easily say that that was a pretty fruitful time. But, at the time, it certainly didn't seem to be fruitful.

That must have been where Abraham was. By the end of his life, he didn't have much. This "great nation" was only one son. But, that was the seed for God to accomplish great things in his offspring. There very well may be things in your life, which you can't even imagine, which God will do through you, that you know nothing of.

One book that has been a great encouragement to me is a book entitled, "Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor - The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson," written by his son, D. A. Carson. If you don't know anything about D. A. Carson, let me tell you that he is one of the greatest theologians alive today (at least in my estimation). He has written scores of books and commentaries. His insights are deep and devotional at the same time. He has done great good for the cause of Christ. And yet, his father was "An ordinary pastor."

You can catch the flavor of the book from the beginning and end of the book. The book begins like this, ...

Some pastors, mightily endowed by God, are a remarkable gift to the church. They love their people, they handle Scripture well, they see many conversions, their ministries span generations, they understand their culture yet refuse to be domesticated by it, they are theologically robust and personally disciplined. I do not need to provide you with a list of names: you know some of these people, and you have been encouraged and challenged by them, as I have. Some of them, of course, carry enormous burdens that watching Christians do not readily see. Nevertheless, when we ourselves are not being tempted by the green-eyed monster, we thank God for such Christian leaders from the past and pray for the current ones.

Most of us, however, serve in more modest patches. Most pastors will not regularly preach to thousands, let alone tens of thousands. They will not write influential books, they will not supervise large staffs, and they will never see more than modest growth. They will plug away at their care for the aged, at their visitation, at their counseling, at their Bible studies and preaching. Some will work with so little support that they will prepare their own bulletins. They cannot possibly discern whether the constraints of their own sphere of service owe more to the specific challenges of the local situation or to their own shortcomings. Once in a while they will cast a wistful eye on "successful" ministries. Many of them will attend the conferences sponsored by the revered masters, and come away with a slightly discordant combination of, on the one hand, gratitude and encouragement, and, on the other, jealousy, feelings of inadequacy, and guilt.

Most of us—let us be frank—are ordinary pastors.

Dad was one of them. This little book is a modest attempt to let the voice and ministry of one ordinary pastor be heard, for such servants have much to teach us. [\[2\]](#)

And it ends with this, ...

Tom Carson never rose very far in denominational structures, but hundreds of people ... testify how much he loved them. He never wrote a book, but he loved the Book. He was never wealthy or powerful, but he kept growing as a Christian: yesterday's grace was never enough. He was not a far-sighted visionary, but he looked forward to eternity. He was not a gifted administrator, but there is no text that says "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you are good administrators." His journals have many, many entries bathed in tears of contrition, but his children and grandchildren

remember his laughter. Only rarely did he break through his pattern of reserve and speak deeply and intimately with his children, but he modeled Christian virtues to them. He much preferred to avoid controversy than to stir things up, but his own commitments to historic confessionalism were unyielding, and in ethics he was a man of principle. His own ecclesiastical circles were rather small and narrow, but his reading was correspondingly large and expansive. He was not very good at putting people down, except on his prayer lists.

When he died, there were no crowds outside the hospital, no editorial comments in the papers, no announcements on the television, no mention in Parliament, no attention paid by the nation. In his hospital room there was no one by his bedside. There was only the quiet hiss of oxygen, vainly venting because he had stopped breathing and would never need it again.

But on the other side, all the trumpets sounded. Dad won entrance to the only throne-room that matters, not because he was a good man or a great man—he was, after all, a most ordinary pastor—but because he was a forgiven man. And he heard the voice of him whom he longed to hear saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord." ^[3]

Would the truth be known, the success of D. A. Carson's theological attainments have come (at great measure) from his father, ordinary as he was. And as we return full circle to Abraham, my guess is that he thought himself to be an ordinary man, who died with one son, and some great promises unrealized. There may be some impossible things in your life - your marriage, your children, your finances, your health. I encourage you to trust the Lord like Abraham and Sarah did. They had God's promises that seemed impossible. But such are the ways of God. So, believe Him. Trust Him.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on January 30, 2011 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary*, p. 322

[2] D.A. Carson, "Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor - The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson, p. 9

[3] D.A. Carson, "Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor - The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson, p. 147