

Hebrews 11:8-12 "Putting Faith on Display: Abraham"***

Main Idea: In Hebrews 11:8-12 we see Abraham putting faith on display. From his example we see a vivid illustration that living by faith involves three phases.

I. Phase #1: God extends a call and a promise (8a).

- A. He told Abraham to go.
- B. He promised Abraham an inheritance.

II. Phase #2: We must respond by trusting God and acting on His promise (8b-11).

A. By faith Abraham went to a new place (8b).

- 1. We don't need to know where the journey will end in order to take the next step.
- 2. It should be enough for us to know that God knows.

B. By faith Abraham lived like a foreigner (9-10).

- 1. He lived with God's promise in mind.
- 2. He lived in tents, and taught his son and grandson to do the same.
- 3. He was looking forward to a city.

C. By faith Abraham and Sarah had a child (11).

- 1. If we're going to live by faith, we're going to face challenges.
- 2. If we're going to live by faith, we must believe that God is faithful.

III. Phase #: God fulfills His promise (12).

- A. He gave Abraham descendants.
- B. He gave Abraham The Descendant.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself these questions...

- 1. What command is the Lord wanting you to obey today?
- 2. What challenge is the Lord wanting you to overcome today?
- 3. What promise is the Lord wanting you to believe today?

Have you noticed that God often asks His people to do things that, at the time, just don't make sense? Build an ark, Noah. Start walking through the Red Sea, Moses. Attack the massive Midianite army, Gideon, with 300 soldiers. Feed the 5,000 hungry men, Jesus told the twelve, who had only five loaves of bread and two fish. Start in Jerusalem, early church, and take the gospel message to the world

In each case, the natural response was the same. "You want me to do *what?!?*" And that's because, quite frankly, the divine instructions didn't make sense.

What's the appropriate response when God tells you to do something that doesn't make sense? It's obedience, right? The Creator of the universe deserves our absolute obedience. But that's easier said than done, and that's because there's something necessary if we're going to do what He asks us to do when that something doesn't make sense to us. In a word, it's *faith*.

What is faith? Have you memorized our working definition? *Faith is trusting in the person of God and acting on the promises of God regardless how I feel.*

One of my favorite stories to illustrate faith is the one about a water well located on a very long and seldom-used trail across Nevada's Amargosa Desert. Wired to the handle of the old pump is the following letter tucked inside a baking-powder can that reads:

"This pump is all right as of June 1932. I put a new sucker washer into it and it ought to last five years. But the washer dries out and the pump has got to be primed. Under the white rock I buried a bottle of water, out of the sun and cork end up. There's enough water in it to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. Pour about one-fourth and let her soak to wet the leather. Then pour in the rest medium fast and pump like crazy. You'll git water. The well has never run dry. Have faith. When you git watered up, fill the bottle and put it back like you found it for the next feller.

(signed) Desert Pete.

P.S. Don't go drinking the water first. Prime the pump with it and you'll git all you can hold."[\[1\]](#)

In the words of Hebrews 11:6, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

We can't please God without faith. We are saved by grace through faith. We are to live by grace through faith. And when we're living by faith, people will see it.

There's a very simple structure to Hebrews 11. In verse 1 we see faith defined. In verses 2-40 we see faith displayed. The writer places before his readers the names and examples of some eighteen men and women who modeled faith. That's because the first readers were facing persecution, and some were growing weary, and all of them needed a fresh reminder that it's worth it to live by faith. Hebrews 1-10 highlights Christ's supremacy—there's none greater, and there's no provision for sin greater than His. The appropriate response? That's Hebrews 11. Believe in Him. Put your faith in Him.

Thus far, we've looked at Abel, Enoch, and Noah, men who were sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they could not see. This morning, we're going to see Abraham putting faith on display. The writer of Hebrews 11 gives more ink to Abraham than to anyone else. He actually makes reference to Abraham ten times in Hebrews. Back in 2:16 he expressed that all who believe are "Abraham's descendants." In 6:13-15 he explained that God made a promise to Abraham, and that after waiting patiently, "Abraham received what was promised." From Abraham's example in Hebrews 11:8-12, we see a vivid illustration of how living by faith works. Living by faith is an ongoing process that involves three phases.

I. Phase #1: God extends a call and a promise (8a).

Here's how it happened in Abraham's life. Notice the beginning of verse 8, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance..." Stop there and ponder God's initiative in two activities in Abraham's life.

A. He told Abraham to go. The text says that Abraham was "called." The verb is passive, with the

implied subject being God. God *called* Abraham. Genesis 11:31 indicates Abraham was living in Ur of the Chaldeans at the time—that's modern day southern Iraq in what was then Mesopotamia. Archaeological findings show that Ur had a well developed civilization and culture in Abraham's time.

But God had special plans for Abram and Sarai, as they were known then. So He called Abraham. In time He entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham. Keep in mind Abraham wasn't seeking God, and in fact, probably was worshipping pagan gods. Yet the message was clear. The Lord told Abraham to *go*.

Go where? *Go to a place*. What place? God didn't tell him, not specifically. In the Genesis account he simply said, "Go to the land I will show you." The Hebrews account says Abraham was called to go to a place he would *later receive as his inheritance*. Which points to a second activity God initiated in Ur...

B. He promised Abraham an inheritance. That's why Abraham needed to leave. The Lord had something better in store for him, and not only for him but also through him. Yet to receive it, to receive this special place as his inheritance, he had to leave.

To see this promise in its fullness, we need to go back to Genesis 12:1-3: "The LORD had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"

That's one of the most important passages in the Bible. In Genesis 1-2 God created the universe. In Genesis 3 man rebelled against God. In Genesis 12 God chose one man, Abraham, and revealed His plan to bless that man, to turn his descendants into a nation, and to bless the world through that nation. The rest of the Bible tells the story of how God kept His promise to Abraham, gave him a chosen son, then a chosen family, then a chosen nation living in a chosen land, and out of that chosen family and into that chosen land He sent the chosen Messiah named Jesus, who lived in that land, died on a cross in that land, rose from the dead in that land, and established His church in that land with the charge to take the message of His saving grace from that land to the world.

So living by faith begins with God extending a call and a promise. *Go*, was His call to Abraham. *I have an inheritance waiting for you*, was His promise. Does God extend a call to us, and has He given us any promises related to that call? Yes, He has, as we'll discuss in detail momentarily. How should we respond to God's call and promises?

II. Phase #2: We must respond by trusting God and acting on His promise (8b-11).

Commenting on Abraham's example, Philip Hughes observed, "True faith always leads to decisive action."^[2] When we hear the call of God, the appropriate response is to trust God and act on His promise. And enabled by God's grace, that's exactly what Abraham did. In this section, the writer of Hebrews uses the words "by faith" three times, and each occurrence puts the spotlight on a decisive action involved in Abraham's display of faith.

A. By faith Abraham went to a new place (8b). "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."

The tense of the verbs indicates Abraham obeyed and went without hesitation. He did what God told him to do immediately.

Think of what he left. He left Ur of the Chaldeans, "a land at that time blessed by fortune and at the height of its prosperity."^[3] To the natural man, that didn't make sense. Again, Genesis 12:1 makes it clear that the Lord told Abraham to leave his country, his people, and his father's household. He was asked to

leave everything he had known for seventy-five years of life.

This was no small decision. As John Calvin put it, "It is no ordinary trial of faith to give up what we have in hand in order to seek what is afar off and unknown to us."^[4] Martin Luther pondered what it cost Abraham to leave Ur: "In the first place, it was hard for him to leave his native land, which it is natural for us to love... Furthermore, it is hard to leave friends and their companionship, but most of all to leave relatives and one's father's house."^[5]

Sad to say, there are not a few people sitting in churches today who are refusing to go where God wants them to go simply because they are fearful to part with the familiar. They like their house. They like having their family members near. They like the security of the known. And so they refuse to go and assume a ministry God intends to accomplish through them for His glory. And in their refusal they miss the joy they could be theirs if they would but live by faith.

What gave Abraham the courage to go? You say, "Well, his faith did." Yes, but what mobilized his faith? Look again at our text. "By faith Abraham *when called to go*...obeyed and went." He heard the call of God through the word of God. It was God's Word that produced this display of faith.

John Calvin says this of Abraham, "He did nothing that was not by the command of God. This is surely one of the principles of faith that we do not move a step unless the Word of God shows us the way and shines before us like a lantern...We must learn that this is a thing to be observed through the whole of life, to attempt nothing unless God calls."^[6]

Is there somewhere that God has made clear He wants you to go? Maybe to talk to a neighbor about his need for Christ. Maybe to seek reconciliation with a brother you've offended. Maybe to the next new members class. Maybe to a new ministry. Maybe to a new country of service. I ask you...Are you willing to go?

You say, "But I'm afraid to go." Be encouraged, for you're not alone. Hebrews 11 is filled with examples of people who, by faith, faced their fears and did difficult things, and they did so because they were gripped by the call of God and the promises of God. They chose to live Word-based rather than feeling-based lives. As Raymond Brown explains, "These men and women were prepared to take God at his word because they knew it was a word of unrivalled authority, decisive importance, immense power and complete reliability."^[7]

What makes Abraham's display of faith even more amazing is to ponder what he *didn't* have that we have. He didn't have a Bible to read. He didn't have a host of God-fearing examples to inspire him, dead or living. His own father was a pagan, polytheistic idol worshipper (see Josh. 24:2), as had been his grandfather, and everybody else in his family. And yet in spite of these obstacles, when called to go, by faith Abraham went.

Beloved, the reality is this...

1. *We don't need to know where the journey will end in order to take the next step.* The text plainly says that Abraham went, *even though he did not know where he was going.* Leon Morris remarks, "To leave the certainties one knows and go out into what is quite unknown—relying on nothing other than the Word of God—is the essence of faith."^[8]

I like Martin Luther's assessment, "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."^[9]

Are you trying to figure out what God wants you to do with your life? Here's the beauty of living by faith. We don't need to know where the journey will end in order to take the current step God has made clear to us. Indeed...

2. *It should be enough for us to know that God knows.* And as we follow Him, He'll let us know

what we need to know when we need to know it.

Did you realize, according to the Genesis account, that Abraham didn't receive the promise that the land would be his until he actually entered Canaan itself? God's initial promise to him was simply that He would make him a great nation and a blessing. Not until Abraham obeyed and traveled to the land of Canaan did God tell him in Genesis 12:7, "To your offspring I will give this land."^[10]

There's a second evidence of faith mentioned in our text. First, by faith Abraham went to a new place. Secondly...

B. By faith Abraham lived like a foreigner (9-10). Verse 9—"By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."

So Abraham left Ur and traveled around the fertile crescent to the land of promise. Sounds good. How did he live once he got there? Here's a shock. He *lived like a stranger in a foreign country*. The Greek verb *paroikeo* (lit. "to dwell beside") means "to dwell temporarily," "to live as a foreigner," "to live as a resident alien," "to sojourn."

In the LXX it's used mostly of strangers, who live in a place without holding citizenship.^[11]

Don't miss this. To leave Ur required faith for Abraham, but so did living in Canaan. In fact, as Philip Hughes explained, "The situation into which he moved on his arrival in his land of promise was a more severe trial of his faith than was the call to leave home and kindred." Think about it. Hughes continues, "It was easier for him to live by faith as he journeyed toward a goal as yet unseen than to do so upon reaching this goal and finding that the fullness of all that had been promised was 'not yet.'"^[12]

God promised him an inheritance, so he left Ur. He got to the land of Canaan and God said, "This is it. This is your inheritance...but not yet." And so by faith, Abraham waited, and while waiting lived as an alien, a foreigner, a sojourner.

What kept him going in Canaan? The same thing that moved him from Ur...

1. *He lived with God's promise in mind.* By faith he made his home in the *promised* land. So later did Isaac and Jacob, says our text, who were heirs with him of the same *promise*.

No, Abraham didn't have land, but he had something better. He had God Himself who promised him in Genesis 15:1, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

Is God enough for you? As the story goes, Adoniram Judson was lying in a foul jail in Burma with 32 pounds of chains on his ankles, his feet bound to a bamboo pole. A fellow prisoner said, "Dr. Judson, what about the prospect of the conversion of the heathen?", with a sneer on his face. His instant reply was, "The prospects are just as bright as the promises of God."^[13]

The writer shares a specific piece of information with us about life in Canaan for Abraham...

2. *He lived in tents, and taught his son and grandson to do the same.* "He lived in tents," says verse 9. And so did Isaac his son and Jacob his grandson. Do you see the contrast here? Abraham left modern civilization and all the conveniences and familiarity of Ur, and went to Canaan and lived in tents. The only property he owned there was the burial plot he purchased when Sarah died (Gen. 23).

Why would he do that? Why would he deny himself the things this world has to offer, live by faith in a tent, and beyond that, teach his son and grandson to do the same? You say, "Well, he was a nomad, and that's what nomads do, live in tents." True, but there's something else that motivated Abraham to live this way...

3. *He was looking forward to a city.* And not just any city, but as verse 10 says, "the city." "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." The imperfect

tense verb emphasizes this is the way Abraham lived throughout his life after God called him. He was *looking forward to a city*.

What is this city? We're told three things here that Abraham knew about it. One, its architect (Greek *technites*) is God. God is the designer, the One who planned this city. And two, its builder (Greek *demiourgos*) is God, for He is the One who constructs this city, which guarantees there's no shoddy workmanship there. And three, this city has firm foundations—it's not going anywhere like Sodom and Gomorrah did, two cities Abraham well knew.

So where is this city that Abraham looked forward to until the day he died? The writer of Hebrews identifies it for us in Hebrews 12:22, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." That was Abraham's hope, and ours too, says the writer of Hebrews. He closes the letter with this thought in Hebrews 13:14, "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come."

So this city is the heavenly Jerusalem. Jesus called it the *new Jerusalem* in Revelation 3:12, "Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, *the new Jerusalem*, which is coming down out of heaven from my God." The apostle John spoke of this city in Revelation 21:2, "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

The question is, how did Abraham know about this city? I don't know. Maybe God told him directly about it. Or maybe indirectly. Perhaps he heard about Enoch, that man of faith who walked with God until the day when God took him out of this world into His presence. That's what Abraham lived for. "In God's time, I'm going to join Enoch in the presence of God. I'm looking for that city, the city of God."

People who live by faith are looking forward to that city. That's what keeps them going through the trials that their wise heavenly Father brings into their lives. They're living, not for this world, but for that city.

Paul talked about that city in Galatians 4:26, "But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother." And in 1 Corinthians 2:9 when he wrote, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"

Dr. George Morrison, a great Scottish preacher, once said, "The important thing is not what we live in, but what we look for."^[14]

Brothers and sisters, like Abraham, we too are sojourners, and we're supposed to live like foreigners in this world. That's what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:17, "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear." (see also 1 Peter 2:11)

But like Abraham, we who know Christ are heading for a city. That's why we live by faith now, because we know we're heading for something far better later.

That's why Christ came, my unsaved friend. He died for sinners like us, taking our penalty for sin and providing the merit of His perfect life, to equip us for that city. He came to where we live in order to take us to where He lives. Do you know Him as your Savior? Have you put your trust in Him for your salvation?

There's one more activity mentioned here prompted by Abraham's faith.

C. By faith Abraham and Sarah had a child (11). "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."

The fact is...

1. *If we're going to live by faith, we're going to face challenges.* Humanly speaking, there's no way Abraham and Sarah could have a son. Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90 by the time Isaac was born. Living by faith meant they had to face that challenge. And enabled by grace, they did.

There's a textual question here that we won't address for time's sake. Is verse 11 referring to Abraham being past age, or Sarah being past age, or both? In the bottom line, they both were past age. And they both exhibited faith when God said, "You're going to have a son."

You say, "But didn't Sarah laugh when she heard the promise that she would bear a son?" Yes, initially. But after God's rebuke, she apparently repented and put her trust in his unfailing Word. Keep in mind that whatever Abraham did by faith, so did Sarah. Sarah too left Ur. Sarah too said goodbye to family and familiar surroundings. Sarah too lived in tents. Sarah too lived in the land of promise but never owned a square inch of it. And she did it all, as did her husband, *by faith*.

It's no different for us. Sure there will be challenges, and lapses, but...

2. *If we're going to live by faith, we must believe that God is faithful.* I'm so thankful the Lord included the struggles of His people in the pages of His Word. Calvin has this to say about Sarah's laughing and prompt repenting. If you struggle with doubts at times, be encouraged. He writes:

"Her faith was mixed with distrust but, since she corrected her distrust when warned, her faith was recognized and praised by God. What she at first rejected as incredible, she obediently accepted as soon as she heard that it came from the mouth of God. From this we deduce a useful piece of teaching, that even when our faith wavers or halts a bit, it does not cease to be approved by God, provided we do not give way to our distrust."^[15]

As far as Abraham's faith goes, Romans 4:20-21 sums it up so well, "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." I urge you to memorize that passage. In fact, this evening I'll teach it to you in a song, the Lord willing.

So what's involved in living by faith? Phase one—God extends a call and a promise. Phase two—we must respond by trusting God and acting on His promises. Thirdly...

III. Phase #: God fulfills His promise (12).

Verse 12 "And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." How did God fulfill His promise to Abraham? In two ways. First...

A. He gave Abraham descendants. How many? More in number than the stars and the sand. God keeps His promises. And, of course, God didn't just give Abraham descendants. He gave him descendants, and then...

B. He gave Abraham The Descendant. He gave him Jesus. In a very real sense, we are here today because Abraham lived by faith.

So God extends a call and a promise. We must respond by trusting God and acting on His promises. And then God fulfills His promise. That's living by faith.

History is filled with illustrations of how this works. Here's a story from the life of missionaries Robert and Mary Moffat. For ten years this couple labored faithfully in Bechuanaland (now called Botswana) without one ray of encouragement to brighten their way. They could not report a single convert. Finally the directors of their mission board began to question the wisdom of continuing the work. The thought of leaving their post, however, brought great grief to this devoted couple, for they felt sure that God was in their labors, and that they would see people turn to Christ in due season. They stayed; and for a year or

two longer, darkness reigned. Then one day a friend in England sent word to the Moffats that she wanted to mail them a gift and asked what they would like. Trusting that in time the Lord would bless their work, Mrs. Moffat replied, "Send us a communion set; I am sure it will soon be needed." God honored that dear woman's faith. The Holy Spirit moved upon the hearts of the villagers, and soon a little group of six converts was united to form the first Christian church in that land. The communion set from England was delayed in the mail; but on the very day before the first commemoration of the Lord's supper in Bechuanaland, the set arrived.^[16]

Make It Personal: Ask yourself these questions...

As I stated earlier, "True faith always leads to decisive action." So let's ask ourselves three questions...

1. *What command is the Lord wanting you to obey today?* He told Abraham to leave Ur and go to a new place. What's He wanting you to do?
2. *What challenge is the Lord wanting you to overcome today?* For Abraham, it was living in tents, and it was being too old to have a child. What challenge are you facing? Will you affirm your trust in God today?
3. *What promise is the Lord wanting you to believe today?* God has the power to do what He has promised. What promise is He putting on your heart today?

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

^[1] Keith Miller and Bruce Larson, *The Edge of Adventure*, taken from sermonillustrations.com.

^[2] Philip Hughes, p. 466.

^[3] Quote by Philo, taken from Philip Hughes, p. 466.

^[4] John Calvin, quote taken from Philip Hughes, pp. 466-7.

^[5] Martin Luther, quote taken from Raymond Brown, pp. 203-4.

^[6] John Calvin, p. 167.

^[7] Raymond Brown, p. 203.

^[8] Leon Morris, p. 118.

^[9] Martin Luther, quote taken from P. Hughes, p. 467.

^[10] See Raymond Brown for his helpful explanation of the timeline; p. 204.

^[11] BAG, *Greek-English Lexicon*

^[12] Philip Hughes, p. 468.

^[13] The Presbyterian Advance, taken from sermonillustrations.com.

^[14] George Morrison, quote taken from W. Wiersbe, p. 319.

^[15] John Calvin, p. 169.

^[16] Unknown source, taken from sermonillustrations.com.