

# The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

## The Characters of Faith Part 4 (Abraham – Part 2) Hebrews 11:8-12

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. 9 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; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 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.

Joseph was born on September 6, 1888 in Boston, Massachusetts. He was ambitious as a boy, delivering papers and doing chores for neighbors – anything he could to get ahead. His drive took him to Harvard where upon graduation; he married the mayor's daughter, but was not known for his fidelity. Still ambitious and wanting to be rich, he imported liquor from Europe during Prohibition. He also amassed a fortune in banking, shipbuilding, and motion-picture distribution, and then became the first chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission where he outlawed many of the tricks he used to build his wealth. He was eventually named ambassador to Great Britain just prior to WWII, but resigned after his opposition to war with Hitler made him unpopular on both sides of the Atlantic. His own presidential aspirations dashed, he then devoted himself to the political careers of his sons. Attributed to this man is a very famous quote that says, *“when the going gets tough, the tough get going.”* His name was Joseph P. Kennedy and of course his son John F. Kennedy did become president in 1961.

His famous quote, while it has an inspirational ring, is certainly man-centered. In context it says that the way to overcome adversity is to try harder; that if any man wishes to succeed, if he is tough enough, if he will try hard enough, he will overcome. While there may be some earthly instances where this is true, nothing could be further from the truth spiritually speaking. To be right with God is not about man's toughness or harder efforts, but upon the effort of one, Jesus Christ, who has done for man what no man could do for himself – by virtue of a perfect life, a perfect death, a perfect substitution and a perfect resurrection has granted His perfection as the believer's perfection – the believer being the one who receives this perfection of Christ as his own **“by faith.”**

So this morning I wish to offer you a modified version of Joseph P. Kennedy's quote, one that fits well within the context of Hebrews 11, particularly as we look at the life and faith of Abraham. Rather than *“when the going gets tough, the tough get going”* – consider this, *“when the going requires faith, the faithful get going.”* Since faith, as we noted last week, is a gift from God, such a phrase focuses far more on the person and blessing of God rather than on man. Faith becomes about what God has done for man rather than what man has done for either himself or for God. Faith is about what we know to be true of God; about what we know regarding what God has done for those who believe; and about how such a knowledge then affects our lives and behavior. Our text this morning reveals such truths in the life of Abraham.

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If we are to learn about faith, it makes sense to go to Abraham. In Romans 4:11, Abraham is extolled **“the father of all who believe...”** His faith is to be the faith of all who believe. It is no wonder that he then occupies a prominent place in the opening narrative of Scripture with Genesis 12-25 chronicling his story. So much a picture of faith, the apostle Paul uses Abraham as his prime example of justification by faith alone, apart from works in Romans 4 as well as in Galatians 3:6-18. But he was not content to leave it at this. Paul would make the most astonishing of assertions concerning salvation – that it is not Jews by physical birth that are Abraham’s truest descendants, but rather that the true children of Abraham are those who believe in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ, a belief that has a profound effect upon behavior. In Galatians 3:7 and then again in 3:29 we read this –

***Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham...And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise.***

The true sons of Abraham are those who **“are of faith”**. It stands to reason then that even in the “Faith Chapter” more verses and more attention is devoted to Abraham - why, that we might know and exemplify the faith of Abraham. Do you have the faith of Abraham? To answer that question one needs only see what the faith of Abraham looks like and then compare that to your own profession of faith. From Hebrews 11:8-12 we see three key aspects of genuine, saving faith and on which I will expound. The three keys are that...

- I. **Genuine faith compels (11:8)**
- II. **Genuine faith contrasts (11:9-10)**
- III. **Genuine faith conquers (11:11-12)**

Let us explore these one by one and examine our own faith in light of these keys and see that when life requires faith, the faithful get going.

## **I. Genuine faith compels (11:8)**

*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.*

I know that I spent a considerable amount of time discussing this verse last week as it relates to the call of God and the obedience of Abraham. This is because, as we noted, the calling of God is one of the most prominent themes of both the Old and New Testaments. Not to belabor that point, I do wish to make a couple more comments concerning this verse.

First, let me remind you that according to our text and the testimony of Scripture, the call of God *initiates* faith and faith *initiates* obedience. The call of God came to Abraham while he lived in Ur of the Chaldees, interestingly enough, modern day Iraq. He was a pagan, a devout unbeliever in the one true God, living in a city that promoted the worship of just about anything but the one true God. According to Joshua 24:2, Abraham descended from a long line of idolaters, those who worshipped other gods. We know that Abraham was about 70 years old when he received the call of God, perhaps not too old when you lived to be 175, but certainly not a young man. How exactly God revealed Himself to Abraham we do not know, but according to Acts 7:2 and the testimony of Stephen we learn –

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***The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran...***

Abraham did obey the LORD, leaving Ur, but he made it only as far as Haran, well north of the promised land and stayed there until his father died before moving on to Canaan. But what I would have you note here is that Abraham moved at the impulse and direction of God, not according to his own opinions of what he thought would best accomplish the purpose of God. And here is a truth to consider - *genuine faith does not act on its own but rather is compelled to act in accordance with God's Word*. Genuine faith always looks to the Word of God. When God calls it will always be consistent with His revealed Word.

The second comment I would make on this verse is that the word *call* or *called* is often used in the Scriptures with a connection to salvation. God issues two kinds of calls in the Scripture in connection to salvation. First there is what we refer to as the *general* call. This call is made to all people everywhere to repent and believe in the gospel. In Matthew 22:14 we see this general call referred to by Jesus when He said, *"For many are called, but few are chosen."* This *general* call is made abroad, but this does not mean all will respond. For, as we have noted, unless the Lord *grants* faith, the desire, the compelling to come to Christ will be absent. Therefore we see in Scripture what we call an *effectual* call, which refers to the work of God's Holy Spirit to draw specific individuals to faith in Christ. This effectual call is seen in the statement of Jesus made in John 6:44 –

***No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.***

In addition to God being the initiator of faith through His call, we also noted that the only genuine response to faith is obedience, that is - the believer will be compelled to obey, not compelled out of a feeling of "having to" but rather "wanting to" obey. Obedient faith will abandon all to follow Christ. Just as Abraham ***"went out, not knowing where he was going"*** – having left all that he knew and loved for the joy of following the LORD, the believer's faith is to be ready and willing to give up all this world offers in order to follow after Christ. Is this descriptive of your faith? This is the faith of Abraham. Abraham's faith followed the LORD and His revealed will even when it was inconvenient and difficult. Abraham's faith looked to the LORD and His will with his own decisions. Some would say that such a faith is crutch, that when the going gets tough, the tough get going. I say that it takes far more courage as it were to walk by faith, believing in promises, many of which you will not see until glory. But the alternative is to call your own shots rather than obey the call of God; to be compelled by your own whims rather than the directives of God. The problem is, we don't always know what is best for us in every situation. But according to God's word, the LORD does - for it is He who

***causes all things to work together for good to those who love [Him], to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).***

Does your faith compel you to obey Christ?

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## II. **Genuine faith contrasts (11:9-10)**

*9 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; 10 for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

In addition to the aspect that genuine faith *compels*, not forcefully but draws us to willingly obey, we also learn from Hebrews 11:9-10 that genuine faith *contrasts* (read text). Genuine faith is revealed in a contrast between the focus of those with faith versus the focus of those without faith. There are two thoughts I would draw your attention to from this verse.

First, the life of faith is in contrast to ways of the world. The world is into things – materialism we call it – people want things they can see, hold, display, show off to others, and simply possess to make themselves feel happy or better. Our children are certainly examples of this often desiring the latest gadget or device. But grown ups don't always do much better. We like things. And while the believer may certainly and ought to enjoy this life, his faith reminds him that he possesses something better, something more lasting than what the world offers. The only issue is, we must wait for the better to come according to God's timing. Abraham, it is said in our text, lived as **“an alien”** – literally, “a stranger” – the manners, customs and even many of the possessions of the world around him seemed strange and he therefore did not consider such things as his own nor the places he tread as his final stop. It might surprise many to know that Hebrews 11:9 is the only verse in the New Testament that refers to Canaan as the promised land. But the true irony for Abraham is that while the heir to the promised land, he never owned a bit of it except for the cave of Machpelah in which he buried Sarah, his wife. Some promise, huh? God promises Abraham this great land, but when he got there, he never received it. To this, the great Reformer John Calvin asks, “Where was the inheritance which he had expected? It might have indeed occurred instantly to his mind, that he had been deceived by God” (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], Hebrews, p. 279). Look at the tests of Abraham's faith - just after Abraham arrived in the land of promise, there was a famine that drove him from the land. But later he returned and lived in the land *by faith alone* – trusting that God had something better, therefore not living in a house, like his nephew Lot, who was obviously tainted by the godless values of Sodom, but in a tent, moving from place to place, always remaining distinct, in contrast to the people around him. He was never comfortable with the earthly surroundings.

Beloved, we need to have more of this alien type mindset. When I traveled to Mexico a few years back, I stood out like a sore thumb. It was quite obvious that I was a stranger. They knew that I was not one of them. Even though I tried to speak their language and participate in some of their customs, I was yet an outsider. They knew it and I knew it. How much more ought it to be evident in the people of God that we do not belong to this world! Like Abraham, we are aliens passing through a foreign land. We ought not to get too comfortable here. We ought not to adapt to the world's mindset pursuing possessions and success. Our lives should exhibit a stark contrast. This world looks only to what it can have now and therefore weighs itself down with as much as it can. The believer is to travel light. Does this mean that it is wrong to have “things”? No, so long as the things don't have you – so long as the things are not your focus and goal. The faith of Abraham practiced the truth of Matthew 6:20 and the word of Jesus -

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***But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;***

The second mark of the contrast in the life of the faithful is that they possess a different hope. The hope of the modern material world is best summarized in that familiar bumper sticker that says, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The truth of the matter is that the one who dies with the most toys dies.”

Abraham ***“was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”*** We see here a different focus, a contrast to the focus of the world. I would like you to note something in our text here in verse 10 as it literally reads, ***“was looking for the city which has the foundations...”*** The definite article ***“the”*** is before ***“foundations”*** – Abraham was looking for the solid and secure dwelling place in contrast to his own ***“tent.”*** It would not be about what Abraham could dream up and build. The old Amway ploy was to encourage their workers to place a picture of some material dream, a house or boat, something big and expensive right on the refrigerator and then to labor to make it happen. The problem is more than 99% of Amway people never realize their dream because it is truly next to impossible to make the system work. Abraham did not have either an Amway or his own system of realizing the promise of God. He was ***“looking”*** – a word that speaks of waiting and anticipating, looking forward to something that is coming – he was looking for that which has as its ***“architect”*** that is its designer and its ***“builder”*** that is the One who brings it to pass as no one less than God Himself. Man looks to himself or even to other men as to what can be done. But in contrast to this, the man of faith looks to God, waits on God, anticipates what God has promised to bring about. Life requires faith and the faithful are those who are going about life even as Abraham did.

### **III. Genuine faith conquers (11:11-12)**

*11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 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.*

So we have seen that genuine faith compels us to obey and follow the Lord, it stands in contrast to the thoughts and practices of the world; and finally, genuine faith conquers. Let us read verses 11-12.

The problem facing Abraham and Sarah in regard to the promise of numerous descendants was that they were unable to conceive children. The promise was not simply a son, but also an entire nation. Remember that God was so intent on emphasizing this promise that He changed his name from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude). In Genesis 17:5-6 God promised that Abraham would be ***“exceedingly fruitful”***; that nations would come from him and that ***“kings will come forth from you.”*** But to complicate matters, humanly speaking, not only had Abraham and Sarah been unable to conceive, but at the point the promise was given, they were well past child-bearing age.

Now I would like to make a comment concerning verse 11 that I don’t intend to explain or defend right now, but I think that our translation here has made the wrong person the subject. It appears here that Sarah is the subject, but there is a reading of the Greek that makes Abraham the subject and this makes more sense when considering a number of things

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both in the text as well as in the rest of Scripture. First, the verb here, “received the ability to conceive” is literally, “the power to lay down seed.” If you have an NASB text, you will see this in the margin. This is purely a male function. Women don’t have this ability and therefore it seem more appropriate to understand Abraham as the subject. There is one Greek text that includes the word “barren” for Sarah and if it is original, the text here could rightly read, “By faith, even though Sarah was barren, Abraham received power to beget since Abraham considered Him faithful who had promised.”

The faith of Abraham believed God for the impossible. If you remember your Sunday School stories, in Genesis 18 Sarah laughed, actually mocked the idea that she would conceive and was rebuked for her unbelief. Remember that when confronted with her mocking, she denied it rather than confessing it. I have no doubt that in spite of her initial doubting however, she did eventually come to believe the promise of God, if not before, certainly after she conceived! But the point of verse 11 is to exemplify the faith of Abraham, a faith that believed the impossible. This agrees with what Paul says of this very event and is a pivotal point of the faith of Abraham in Romans 4:16–22

***16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”) in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. 18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.” 19 Without becoming weak in faith [unlike Sarah] he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; 20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief [unlike Sarah] but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. 22 Therefore “IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”***

Beloved, I submit to you that the faith of Abraham conquered all doubt and fear. It conquered because he had a firm and confident trust in the person, promises and provisions of God through Jesus Christ resulting in behavior consistent with the Word of God. Let me close with two lessons we ought to take home from this point.

First, in Genesis 18:14 we read the rebuke of the LORD concerning Sarah’s unbelief in the form of a question – the LORD asks, “***Is anything too difficult for the LORD?***” Does our faith regard anything too difficult for the LORD to bring to pass? Obviously not, but we must be careful never to impose upon God an expectation that is not consistent with God’s Word. For example, there are those who teach and believe that if one has faith, then God has promised to heal the truly faithful from all forms of sickness. My wife, who has some type of nerve damage to her ear from birth was actually told when she was young that if she had enough faith, God would heal her and that if He didn’t it was her own lack of faith! How cruel is that? Where is it written that such should be the expectation of the believer? Is such a thing too difficult for God? No. Should it be expected to come to pass? No. God has not promised good health to everyone who believes. If such were the case then people of genuine faith

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would live forever. But the truth of the matter is that I am not aware of one faith healer that has lived past the age of 100! Beloved, our faith is not to be a faith in ourselves but rather a faith in God who is Himself faithful.

Second, let us remember what Abraham received in this life for his example of faith. He left family and friends never to see them again. He lost his father in Haran and from there he would never dwell in a home again. While he saw Isaac born and even Jacob, just two children of promise, he did not live long enough to see any of Jacob's twelve sons, sons which would constitute the beginnings of the tribes of the nation Israel. He came nowhere close then to seeing on this side of glory that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars. And, as we already noted, the only piece of the promised land he possessed was a burial plot. This is why in Acts 11:13 we read that Abraham died in faith, he died in assurance of things hoped for, in conviction of things not seen. This is because Abraham's faith was not focused on time, but on eternity; not focused upon the material but the spiritual, not focused upon his own ability but upon the ability of God. Beloved, we need to remember that the life of faith is focused not on our time, but on God's time. If we take the 175 years of Abraham's life alone, we would say that the promises of God failed, no land and only two grandsons. But from the perspective of God, things were right on time, for the true children of God, those who are Abraham's seed because of faith, who are Abraham's children because they have the same trust and confidence in the person, promises and provision of God through Jesus Christ as did Abraham are a number that we cannot count. God was and continues to be faithful.

Abraham's faith can be measured, examined and imitated. It is measured by its compelling him to obey, by its contrast to the thoughts and ways of those of this world and by its strength to conquer unbelief and doubt. Is this faith descriptive of your faith? Remember that Abraham's faith is not to be unique among the people of God, but is what we are to pray for, strive after and grow in. May the statement of Romans 4:20 be true for all in this place –

***yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.***

May we all grow stronger in the faith, giving all glory to God. And how do we grow in such faith, particularly if you are here this morning and are uncertain that you have ever experienced such faith?

Let me say that the only way that a person can come to faith in Christ is by the power of the Holy Spirit. You cannot will yourself to faith nor can you score brownie points with God by acts of service or good works. Salvation rests on the **merits of Christ alone**. There are some who believe that people make the choice to believe in Christ as if we are in control of our own salvation and have to give God permission to be sovereign! Hence all of the hell-fire and damnation sermons, and "pray the sinners' prayer NOW" or be damned, as if nothing more than the fear-of-hell would lead to salvation.

Let us remember that the purpose of the Law is to provide us with the knowledge of our sinfulness and drive the point home that we alone are powerless to change, while the purpose of the Gospel is to provide us with the message of God's saving grace and transforming power. Yet the Holy Spirit must work through both the teaching of Law and Gospel to bring about saving faith. To grow in faith is to understand such truths – pray for such an understanding.

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Let us remember that people in themselves are incapable of “choosing” saving faith. Jesus was most critical of the Pharisees who believed that salvation could be had by simply following the rules and doing the right things! That doesn't mean rules are irrelevant, but that we can only truly follow the rules - in spirit and in truth- if our hearts are changed.

Growing in grace is when He transforms our hearts and conforms our thinking to His, our actions and good works follow as heat accompanies fire. Only by the Holy Spirit's power can we pray or study meaningfully and adhere to a disciplined life that honors God. It is not by human will but by His power that we can even hope to live a life- to surrender our life and follow Him. When life requires faith, the faithful, by the grace of God, get going. May the Lord be gracious to each of us! Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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