

Hebrews 11:8-16 The example of Abraham

Introduction

There are some people who stand out in any context in which they participate in life. As I am writing this sermon I can remember a boy who started High School the same day as me. He was a very pleasant and modest individual but was simply good at everything. No matter what the subject being studied or the particular sporting activity been undertaken I cannot recall him being other than very good at everything! All of us know some people who stand out quite naturally from their peers because of things in which they excel. However, the subject of this study had no formal academic qualifications - but this is not too dissimilar from the minimal qualifications obtained by two Prime Ministers of Great Britain in the last century, Winston Churchill and John Major. He did have significant managerial skills because he built up a large business that employed many people, but this achievement does not merit a mention in the biblical account of his life as something for which he is commended. On the surface, a reader unfamiliar with the biblical story could be completely puzzled as to why Abraham made this list of heroes and heroines of the faith. In this account in the book of Hebrews he is commended for how he handled moving home repeatedly, together with coping with the heartache that resulted from the problem of a childless marriage and later being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, reasoning that if God really wanted that to happen He would raise Isaac from the dead. Such a reader might think –well many people have moved home repeatedly and not been sure where to call their settled home but they don't make this list. There have been many couples who have struggled to conceive a child yet that fact doesn't merit an entry for them either in the list on that basis. Yet this individual Abraham is central in the faith story to three of the world's major religions today, not just Judaism and Christianity, but Islam also claims him as a prophet and allocated references to him on 188 occasions in the Qur'an – a considerably shorter book than the Bible.

It doesn't end there, because the Bible describes him in a way that is unique to this individual. He is described in Isaiah 41:8 in this way: *'But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend...* What an incredible honour bestowed on this man by God to describe him as His friend. If you and I use this term to refer to someone we have a particular reason for doing so. We are marking them out as very special individuals who have touched our lives in a particular way which we appreciate. God valued the contribution of this person so highly and entrusted to him a most remarkable calling. Abraham is already mentioned in the book of Hebrews in Hebrews 6:13-17: *When God made His promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for Him to swear by, He swore by Himself,¹⁴ saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.'¹⁵ And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.¹⁶ People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.¹⁷ Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath. If that was not enough our author refers to Christian believers as *Abraham's descendants* (Hebrews 2:16); to understand how we who are not even Jewish qualify for such a status we need to recall Paul's words in Romans 4:16-17: *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.¹⁷ As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.'* He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. So what particular features of Abraham's faith does our author draw to our attention?*

1. His obedience (Hebrews 11:8)

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 context is seen in Genesis 12:1-4a: *The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ² '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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'* ⁴ *So Abram went, as the Lord had told him;* it is hard for us to place ourselves in his position. There is not a single known community of faith known to him worshipping the God who called Abraham to undertake this journey. He and his family and all Sarah's family and the rest of their community were followers of the moon god Sin. The city where they lived was the most developed urban community in the world at that time. There were many people living in the United Kingdom into the first part of the twentieth century who had a less comfortable life than this family would leave behind three thousand years ago! In material terms at each stage of the journey away from home his living standards went down. There will be a limited number of people in the United Kingdom in the twenty-first century who would find that an attractive proposition! So we get the picture of the selling of his fixed assets and packing up all he could carry with him and the extended family and employees who were also in on the adventure. We can understand that a limited number of people choose to sell up and go on extraordinary adventures around the globe – a disproportionate number seem to come from these islands, but maybe it is those ones we hear about the most when they return or die in their attempts to accomplish some significant goal. In each case such individuals would have decided in advance precisely where they were going and what they hoped to achieve. But this was not the case with Abraham. He did not know where he was going. God invited him to set off without telling him the final destination. It takes a special kind of person to be up for that kind of adventure. Can you imagine the conversation with his parents and in-laws and other friends and acquaintances?

We could not blame them for having serious doubts about the wisdom of such a step. Abraham is seventy-five years old, and although he lives to be much older than you or I will attain, he could not be called 'young' by any fair description of him. At an age when the vast majority of his contemporaries and ours will have settled down to see out the rest of their days living more quietly than before here is this man about to set off on the greatest adventure of his life. His obedience is extraordinary. There is something special about this friend of God who has such an implicit trust in the One with whom he has begun a special relationship. His obedience to God's call is almost like that of a young child trusting their parents assuming that they know what is best for them. God knew He could rely on this man when He called him to undertake this extraordinary mission that would have, ultimately, world-changing implications through one of his descendants. Although the land to which he eventually came and settled would one day in the future belong to his family, it was in excess of four hundred years later before they owned substantially more than a graveyard. Abraham obeyed God because he was asked to do so by God. No earthly reward was tangibly received in his lifetime, except for the respect in which he was held by so many people for his devotion to God. It comes as a real challenge to us. Am I willing to keep on trusting God even though times are hard and I cannot see how the future will turn out for me? Do I commit to ongoing obedience to the Lord when my prayers do not appear to be answered and the future prospects for such an answer look bleak? This person of faith is an inspiration to us because of his amazing trust obedience to God.

2. His Patience (Hebrews 11:9-10)

⁹By 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.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. Sometimes it is difficult to get a sense of perspective on a situation. We have all at times probably misunderstood something someone has said to us or a message sent to us. It is not something we have done deliberately but by accident we have interpreted what is communicated incorrectly. If understanding everything said or done in the present can at times be a challenge it becomes even more challenging to see things in a broader or longer-term context. We live in an instant age when things have to happen quickly or else we quickly get frustrated. At one extreme is the merry-go-round of football managers. This season, only four games in Chrystal Palace sacked their manager Frank De Boer. He had only arrived in the early summer of this year, but his preferred playing style was quite different to the previous manager and his team had lost all their games without even scoring a goal. The chairman was convinced it was time for a change! As Christians when we pray, how long do we give the Lord to answer our prayers? How long do we expect to wait to see situations transformed or specific needs being met? Patience is something that is in short supply in our culture at present and as Christians it is so easy to be affected by the spirit of the age in which we live. Sometimes it takes days, weeks, months or even years to see our prayers answered. Will we keep on praying for as long as it takes? Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to encourage His followers to keep on praying for as long as it takes to see situations resolved. The story is recorded in Luke 18:1-8: *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*² *He said: 'In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought.'*³ *And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, "Grant me justice against my adversary."*⁴ *'For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!"'*⁵ *And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says.'*⁷ *And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?'⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.* The big challenge from Jesus comes in the last part of verse 8: *However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?'* In other words when Jesus return – assuming you and I are still alive on earth- will He find us continuing to give our best for Him totally committed to His service?

Abraham, having grown up in a comfortable solid home in Ur of the Chaldees, where many homes were two storey premises with basic underfloor heating facilities when required, spent the rest of his life sleeping in a tent. His children and grandchildren did the same. He was promised that this Canaanite territory would become the Promised Land for his descendants to occupy, but what did he own? In Genesis 23, after years of living in the land, the aged patriarch doesn't own a single blade of grass. His beloved wife Sarah dies and he has absolutely no-where to bury her body. Genesis 23:2-9 gives us some of the details: *[Sarah] died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.*³ *Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said,*⁴ *'I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so that I can bury my dead.'*⁵ *The Hittites replied to Abraham,*⁶ *'Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead.'*⁷ *Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites.*⁸ *He said to them, 'If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf⁹ so that he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.'* How long are you and I prepared to wait to see God keep His promises? Abraham knew

that in his lifetime he would not see the fulfilment of all that God had promised to his family. How long would they have to wait before they occupied the land as their own? Fairly early on in the adventure God gave His patient servant a hint at the timescale. In Genesis 15:13-16 it states: *Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for **four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own** and that they will be enslaved and ill-treated there. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ **In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here**, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.'* How did he have the capacity to be so patient and keep on committed to this cause, together with the next generations of his family? Our passage here in Hebrews 11:9-10 records that: *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. ¹⁰ **For he was looking forward to the city with foundations**, whose architect and builder is God.* Abraham was convinced that the best for God's people was yet to come. This is our hope for the future in the wonderful gospel of Jesus Christ. Life in the here and now, even at its best is but a shadow of what God has in store for those who love Him beyond this life. Abraham and Sarah communicated to their children and their families this wonderful heritage that God has in store for His children. It enabled him and then Isaac and Jacob in the succeeding generations to pass on the baton of faith trusting that God knew what He was doing through the ups and downs of their lives. Abraham could see the present in the light of the future –can you?

It is a real challenge to us as twenty-first century Christians to live this way. We carry out our evangelistic activities from literature through doors, to personal conversations, to on-line posts, to specific events and we are (rightly) disappointed when we do not see a response to all our efforts. We should have expectations of God at work and pray to that end –may we gain that expectancy, or if we have it, may we never lose it; however, equally, we must know the graces of patience and perseverance and firmly hold that because God has promised that He will build His Church that we will see new people attend outreach events; we will see people profess faith on **Christianity Explored** courses and in other contexts; that we will see believers' getting baptised and new members added to the Church; what God has not promised to us is how quickly this will happen. Sometimes the spiritual harvest comes very quickly, but on other occasions it can take many years. Are we willing to keep on working enthusiastically and expectantly for the Lord **until** we see the breakthrough? Too often even Evangelical believers can be influenced by the mind-sets of people around us and forget how God wants us to think. Remember Paul's words to the Church at Colossae: *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, **set your hearts on things above**, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² **Set your minds on things above**, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory* (Colossians 3-4). Why does Paul need to make this appeal to this local church concerning their hearts and their minds? Because like us they were too easily influenced by people around them to view their circumstances in a different way to how God perceived them. Abraham is a model to us of patient faith, of one who never gave up; who kept on going year after year convinced that God would keep His promises. May we also exercise such patient faith and display that kind of endurance in His service. If this is how we are living then there is no doubt that we can rest in biblical promises like I Corinthians 15:58: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.* Is there someone feeling discouraged who needs to hear these words? What you have done in all sincerity for the Lord will accomplish what He had planned. It will never be a waste of your time or that of anyone else.

3. His reward (Hebrews 11:11-12)

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. 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. What had been the biggest heartache to this couple over the many years of their married lives? It was the failure to be able to conceive a child for which they had longed. It could have been so easy for them to cry out to God: ‘God this isn’t fair! Look what we have given up for you. We sacrificed a fantastic standard of living and a secure future to live in tents amongst total strangers. We gave up the possibility of living near the families we loved and cherished – the vast majority of them we will not see again. Probably they could voice other issues that might not come to our minds, but things that felt a significant sacrifice for them. All we asked for God is a child of our own – okay we wanted a baby boy- but is that not too much to ask for? In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the modern Christian missionary movement got into its remarkable work of taking the gospel around the known world there were many missionaries whose lives or those of their spouses and children were cut short by disease or other challenges as they paid an incredible price for the cause of Christ. One place where initially there was little success was the Gold Coast, now called Ghana. It was a swampy country with serious health challenges for Western Christians coming in, but they rarely stayed very long. There was a good reason. They returned home in the coffins they had brought with them on the ships bringing the next group of Christian missionaries with their coffins. The breakthrough in reaching the people of that region was not great preaching or amazing pastoral care; it was not charismatic personalities in the missionary ranks or some cutting edge mission technique to win decisions for Christ. What made all the difference was seeing the price these missionaries willingly paid to see Jesus made known to them. They began to say –if this matters so much to these people to die for it, then I ought to look into it. It led to the present strong churches of Ghana and their missionary zeal to pass on the baton they received from European missionaries. I was deeply moved by a Ghanaian church leader who shared this commitment with me. Those first missionaries, like Abraham, lived for the reward of knowing that in His time God would fulfil His promises. They believed that Christian Churches would be established there in West Africa. The only issue was how long it would take for that to happen- not if it would happen. Do we share their conviction about God’s guaranteed reward for spiritual investment in people’s lives in our generation?

What was it that Sarah and Abraham were looking forward to seeing as their reward? Here in the book of Hebrews the answer is clearly stated: ¹¹And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered Him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And 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 (Hebrews 11:11-12). The answer was Isaac and his descendants. God promised them a land – did He keep His word. The promises were given in Genesis 17:7-8: *I will establish My covenant as **an everlasting covenant** between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.* ⁸*The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as **an everlasting possession** to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.* As part of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus at the Last Supper, something prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-40, there are some words we rarely quote in Jeremiah 31:36: *Only if these decrees vanish from My sight,’ declares the Lord, ‘will Israel ever cease being a nation before Me.’* Has God finished with His Old Covenant people? Some people say ‘yes’, but Paul, in his familiar passage of Romans 9-11 has this to say on this subject in Romans 11:1-2: *I ask then: did God reject His people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of*

Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.² God did not reject His people, whom He foreknew. God keeps His promises then and now!

4. **The pattern** (Hebrews 11:13-16)

¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Our author pauses to summarise the characteristics shared in common by the individuals mentioned to date in this list of faithful believers.

(a) **Their confidence** (Hebrews 11:13) *They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance...* Then and now in each generation as the people of God we must trust our heavenly Father to deliver what He has promised. When we do that we approach our work differently. We are working with God to see Him do His work in which we are invited to play our part in bringing it to fruition. We can look back by sight and see the extraordinary growth of the Christian Church – if they could retain their confidence with so little to see – surely we will retain ours today!

(b) **Their witness** (Hebrews 11:13) *..., admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.* Too often sadly Christians give the impression that what matters most to us – in terms of our priorities of time and resources – are the things of this life. It is only what we do for the Lord that will last. May God deliver us from being too earthly minded to be of any heavenly use! Are your priorities the same as the Lord Jesus had on earth of not letting anything get in the way of doing His will?

(c) **Their vision** (Hebrews 11:14-15) *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.* In Isaiah 50:7 words are used of the future Servant of the Lord, whom we know as Jesus, about His commitment to His mission: *Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. **Therefore have I set my face like flint**, and I know I will not be put to shame.* It is fulfilled as Luke records in his gospel in Luke 9:51: *As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus **resolutely set out for Jerusalem**.* How committed are you to Jesus' mission. I hope and pray we can all say 100%! It is what matters most to me.

(d) **Their reward** (Hebrews 11:16) ¹⁶ *Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.* In John 14:1-4 we recall Jesus' precious words for His present and future disciples: *'Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me.² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.'* Abraham received his reward for faithfulness in God's service. Will you and I receive the same blessing? I truly hope and pray that this will be the case, for Jesus' sake, Amen.