

# Faith Illustrated: Abraham

Hebrews 11:8-22

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It is good to be together this morning, and if you are visiting with us today, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can (using the QR code up here or on the front of today's bulletin), or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

We are here this morning to worship God, to encourage each other, and to share the good news that God loves us. He sent his only Son to save us. He died in our place, he was buried, but he was raised up on the third day. This is the gospel, or the good news, and we respond to this good news through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism (a burial in water for the forgiveness of sins). And we do have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from the Lord's church in Seaford, Delaware. They posted online earlier this week, and they say, "Praising God for Joe's decision to put Christ on in baptism! It truly was a group effort. 'Some plant, some water, but God gives the increase.' Joe made the good confession this afternoon at about 3:30 near Bridgeville." Another backyard hot tub this week!

And this next one comes from the Lord's church in Dnipro, Ukraine. As translated by Facebook, they say, "Thank God, we have a sister in Christ Tatiana. This is a great holiday for all Christians. We wish her health, happiness, God's blessings and [that she may] continue to grow in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." So good to see it! And we share this by way of encouragement. If we can help you do what Joe and Tatiana have done this week, we invite you to get in touch. We encourage you to obey the gospel.

This morning, we return to our study of Hebrews – a message addressed to some early disciples who were having a hard time listening to Jesus, and this message is encouraging them to keep on keeping on, to live by faith, to endure. Well, today we return to Hebrews 11. Two weeks ago, we saw faith defined as ***"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,"*** and we are now looking at some examples of living by faith. This is what it looks like! Most of us understand that one of the best ways to learn is to watch somebody doing what we need to do. I have a nephew out in Washington State who is well on his way to learning how to be an electrician. I certainly don't understand everything about that process, but I do believe that he is an apprentice under a master electrician. And it may start by running out and getting tools from the truck, but it very quickly progresses from there. There is certainly a value to book learning (and that is part of it), but there is also a tremendous value to following somebody's example. And that is what we have here in Hebrews 11.

Last week, we looked at the examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah, and today we come to Abraham, a man referred to by Paul in Romans 4 as ***“the father of all who believe.”*** And what’s amazing to me is that the author of Hebrews condenses more than 30 chapters from Genesis into about 15 verses here in Hebrews 11. He cuts it down, then, to only what we need to know to live by faith. This morning, therefore, let’s learn from Abraham, and in keeping with the rest of Hebrews 11, we are about to be reminded that faith leads to action. By faith, people did things, and Abraham is no exception. Let’s move through this section one little chunk at a time...

### I. ...starting with the reminder that **BY FAITH ABRAHAM OBEYED.**

In verse 8, the author says that, ***“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.”*** This right here summarizes several chapters in Genesis, doesn’t it? We first learn of Abraham (or Abram) at the time, when he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, which is located along the Euphrates River, roughly 200 miles southeast of Baghdad, near the modern city of Nasiriya. Nasiriya is the fourth-largest city in Iraq. Do you remember Private Jessica Lynch, the prisoner of war in Iraq back in 2003? That all happened in Nasiriya, or modern-day Ur. That’s where Abraham was from. And I know, we think about these ancient cities, and we might be tempted to think of some place where the men grunt, and carry clubs, and drag their wives around by the hair as they travel around from cave to cave, but that was certainly not the case in Ur. Ur was an advanced civilization. We’ve done some extensive archaeological work in Ur, and we’ve found brick homes, and temples, and libraries. We’ve found the remnants of art and literature. We’ve uncovered a huge ziggurat (or stepped pyramid). I remember the first Gulf War and learning that Saddam Hussein parking two of his fighter jets right next to that old ziggurat, figuring that coalition forces wouldn’t dare destroy such an important ancient landmark, and he was right. Ur was highly advanced. But God calls Abraham out of Ur, out of this highly advanced civilization, and Abraham obeys, and he leaves, ***“not knowing where he was going.”*** Back in Genesis, God says that Abraham is to go ***“to the land which I will show you.”*** As far as Abraham is concerned, there are no plans, there’s no map to follow, but he is to trust God, and he does, leaving behind his friends and extended family.

Can we even imagine? Today, before I go on a trip, I want to know where I’m going! I will research restaurants, and campgrounds, and attractions, even gas stations. This afternoon, I am heading to Ohio, and when I get in the car I want to know exactly how far it is to the Steak-n-Shake in Bloomington, Illinois. But for Abraham, this is not a vacation, this is a permanent move. Some of you know that our daughter is in the process of finding an apartment down in Tennessee. Right now, she’s staying with an older couple from church, a retired pharmacist and his wife. It’s going well, she’s enjoying her new job as an accountant down there. But my next job as a dad is to get her stuff down there. We’ve got everything packed up on this end, I’ve checked on renting a small moving van, but I’m not loading the van until she finds a place. I’m not getting on the road until I’ve got an address. We understand this. Abraham, though, obeys the Lord and simply leaves, ***“not knowing where he was going.”***

Now, as we apply this lesson on faith to our lives today, I hope it’s obvious that our faith should also cause us to obey God’s commands, even if we don’t have every detail worked out. In a sense, the Christian life is like a journey, like a move from one place to another. There were some, like the Rich Young Ruler, who heard the call of Jesus, but they did the math, and decided that following Jesus would be too expensive. There were others, like the disciples, who heard the call and dropped everything to follow him. Like Abraham, ***“by faith”*** they obeyed. At the age of 75, at a time in his life when he should have been pretty settled, Abraham obeys and follows the Lord as he moves close a thousand miles from home.

Oh, and by the way, once he gets to where he's going, he discovers, first of all that there are some terrible people already living there, and secondly, that there's a famine in the land! And I don't know about you, but that almost reminds me of Abel. Abel obeys God, and he almost immediately gets killed by his brother! Or we might think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego who obey God and get thrown into a blazing furnace. Or we might think of Paul and Silas who preach the good news and get thrown in prison. In the same way, Abraham obeys God by leaving Ur, and that's when life really starts getting difficult. But he obeys. The author of Hebrews, then, holds up Abraham as an example of obedience. By faith, Abraham obeys.

**II. As we continue, we find that once Abraham obeys God by leaving home, HE LIVES FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE AS A STRANGER, AS AN ALIEN, AS A PERPETUAL VISITOR ON THIS EARTH.**

In verses 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."* By faith, Abraham knew that this world was not his home, that he was just a passing through. And remember: Abraham is 75 years old, and he lives to the age of 175, meaning that he lived in a tent for the next 100 years of his life. Today, we might say that he never unpacked his bags; he lived out of a suitcase for the rest of his life. He never put down roots. Can we even imagine spending the rest of our lives in a tent? I've said many times that tent technology has improved tremendously over the past 20 or 30 years, and there are some huge benefits to spending some time in a tent. After a few nights, I sleep better. There's something about the cycle of light and darkness (I don't know), but it's like my brain resets after a night or two, and I sleep better even after I get home for a few weeks. But there are some downsides to living in a tent: Animals; tents are not bear-proof; I've had raccoons try to get in and snuggle with me. Getting dressed lying down can be a challenge. Wind and falling branches can be challenge. Hail is not cool in a tent. There are times when I've had to get up and shake the frost off of my towel before getting a shower. I've had my shampoo freeze solid. I've had to scratch ice off my phone to see what time it is. And I love the adventure for a week or two here and there, but for Abraham and Sarah, this is permanent. What would you miss if you had to move into a tent for the rest of your life? Running water? Having a front porch? Having an actual floor? I don't know what they missed, but they lived the rest of their lives as strangers, passing through a foreign land.

But then we also have the strange cultures along the way. If you've traveled in a foreign land, then you may know something of the challenge involved. I remember a trip to Montreal to help the church up there, and I remember something as simple as trying to find a parking place. We're in this huge city, and there's a no parking sign followed by a bunch of fine print. I don't know French, but I think it said something about Tuesday and Thursday and certain times of day. I don't know! Even parking was hard. Taking the bus was hard. Always sticking out like sore thumbs is hard. I was just telling Josh and Shelby this week about the challenge of traveling in Paris and Rome. In the winter, everybody wears black and dark brown over there. Not us! We all had our florescent yellow and orange Columbia ski jackets on. And we were a foot taller than everybody (even our kids). It's hard always being different. People stare. We were in something like an Aldi in Germany, and a little boy laughed and pointed and said something about "Americans." And did you know that in Paris they eat their hamburgers with a knife and fork? Yeah, it's hard being different.

But like Abraham, we are also different. As God's people, we are (according to 1 Peter 2), *"...a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession."* We are strangers living in a strange land, and as Peter goes on to explain, *"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul."* He urges us to *"...keep our behavior excellent among the gentiles."* Like Abraham,

our citizenship is in heaven. Like Abraham, we do not belong here. Like Abraham, we are *“...looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”*

**III. As we continue in Hebrews 11, we find in verses 11-12 that BY FAITH ABRAHAM AND SARAH CONCEIVED A CHILD.**

The text says that, *“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.”* Long story short, God promised Abraham many descendants. The name Abram, in fact, means “exalted father,” and when God renewed the promise of many descendants, God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, meaning “father of multitudes.” So here is this old guy with a name meaning “exalted father” or “father of multitudes.” But he has no children. Imagine the ridicule! Oh, that’s a cool name, how many children do you have? Well, none right now, but working on that! They wait and they wait, and here he is in his 80’s and 90’s. Abraham and Sarah get impatient at one point, and Abraham has a child with Sarah’s servant, but that wasn’t God’s plan. That caused a whole new batch of trouble. But eventually, at the age of 99, Abraham acts on faith, and Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac, even though she was 90 at the time and well beyond her childbearing years.

There’s so much we could learn from this: Don’t get impatient with God, don’t try to find shortcuts around God’s plan, and so on. But the lesson here is a lesson on faith. Ultimately, Abraham and Sarah both believe in God’s promise, even to the point where they act on it, and they conceive a child.

**IV. As we continue in Hebrews 11, we find in verses 13-16 that BY FAITH ABRAHAM LIVES AS A STRANGER.**

And yes, this is very similar to what we had up in verses 8-10, but we do have some new information here (in verses 13-16), where the author of Hebrews says that,

*<sup>13</sup> All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.*

Once again, we find that Abraham was a man without a permanent home. Whenever we meet new people, and when somebody asks my wife where she’s from or where “home” is for her, I always try to settle in, because it’s an interesting answer, with mentions of Washington, and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, and Colorado, and Ohio, and Hawaii, and Alaska, and Illinois. Back in February, I passed through the UP as I took the scenic route home from the lectures down in Tennessee, and I found the old Air Force base where Keola’s brother was born. They closed it as the Cold War was winding down, and it’s now a prison. I took some pictures and just loved tagging her brother on social media, “Hey! I’m standing here outside the prison where you were born!” But those who serve many years in the military and those in their families often don’t have a place to call “home.”

But I want us to notice in this passage that as a wealthy man, Abraham could have gone back to Ur; however, by faith, Abraham knew that where he came from really wasn't "home" at all; but instead, he was looking for a "better country...a heavenly one." He knew that his citizenship was in heaven. Abraham, then, didn't spend his whole life longing good old days back home. That's a miserable way to live! But instead, Abraham spent his life looking for something better, a heavenly home.

So we have the reminder: We are not to be at home here. And if we're honest, sometimes this world does seem like home. We do have a way of getting comfortable here. We've been in Wisconsin for more than 30 years now; that's longer than we've lived anywhere else. And we love the city of Madison. We have some awesome places to eat here. Madison is a great place to walk and run and ride a bike. Madison is consistently rated as one of the best places to retire. We have some great hospitals and health care. But as great as it might be, this place (thank God) is not our permanent home. Like Abraham, by faith we are looking for something better.

V. **As we continue in Hebrews 11, we find in verses 17-19 that BY FAITH WHEN ABRAHAM WAS TESTED, HE SACRIFICED HIS ONLY SON.**

As the text explains,

***<sup>17</sup> By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; <sup>18</sup> it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." <sup>19</sup> He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.***

The full account of this can be found back in Genesis 22, but basically, when Isaac (the promised son) is a young man, God tests Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his only son as a burnt offering. We aren't given a reason for the test, but we do know that God will test us from time to time, and we do know that God demands first place in our lives. As Jesus says in Matthew 10:37, **"He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."** God, then, puts Abraham to the test, and Abraham passes the test.

By the way, back in Genesis 22, after traveling for several days, when he finally gets to the base of the mountain, Abraham leaves his servants behind, and he says to them, **"Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you."** I just hope we notice that even though Abraham had been commanded to sacrifice his son, he says to his servants that **"we will worship and return to you."** In other words, Abraham knows that he is not coming back alone. And here in Hebrews 11:19 we have some insight into Abraham's thinking at the time. We find that Abraham **"...considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead."** And this is in a time when we haven't yet seen anybody raised from the dead in scripture. Abraham, then, is so sure of God's promise, he knows that when he kills his son, God must be bringing him back from the dead. Abraham had faith that God would work this out.

I would also point out that this is the first time the word **"worship"** is found in the Bible (back in Genesis 22:5). It's the idea of bowing down. It's easy to think that worship is all about us sometimes, but worship is essentially the act of bowing down before the Lord, and Abraham's worship here is **"by faith."** I would also point out that Abraham is told to sacrifice his son in the mountains of Moriah. Mt. Moriah is mentioned only one other time in the Bible, in 2 Chronicles 3, where Mt. Moriah is identified as the place where Solomon would build his temple; or, in other words, Jerusalem. I'm just pointing out that Abraham offered his son to

God in the same place where God's own Son would give his life for us. The story of Isaac, then, is ultimately the story of Jesus. He ***"received him back as a type."*** Isaac is a picture of Jesus! But Abraham offers his son by faith. And the reminder for us is that faith means putting God first – even above our own families.

**VI. As we come to the end of this section on Abraham, we have just a bit of somewhat related "bonus material" as we come to a brief statement concerning Abraham's immediate descendants, as we find that all of them followed their father Abraham in LOOKING TO THE FUTURE.**

Let's close by looking at verses 20-22, where the author of Hebrews says that,

***<sup>20</sup> By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. <sup>21</sup> By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. <sup>22</sup> By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones***

If I could have a re-do on this morning's lesson, I might suggest a different heading up here, that Abraham LEFT A LEGACY for future generations. Isn't that what's happening here? We have this passing of the baton of faith to the next generation at the point of death. We have this section on Abraham, and then we move to Isaac who blessed Jacob and Esau. When did he do that? Right before his death. Isaac got his faith from his father. Can you imagine your dad strapping you down to an altar and raising the knife? That had an impact on this young man. Dad loves God even more than he loves me. Isaac then took that baton of faith and passed it along to his own sons, Jacob and Esau.

So we move to Jacob, and notice again, a reference to ***"dying."*** As Jacob was dying, he worships God leaning on the top of his staff, and he blesses each of the sons of Joseph. Why this reference? Other sons were also blessed, so why the reference here to these two? I think it's because Ephraim and Manasseh were born in Egypt, and even though these two were practically foreigners, grandpa Jacob made a point of including them in this legacy of faith. You two are a part of this, perhaps a bit of foreshadowing to the eventual inclusion of the gentiles in God's plan.

And then we have the reference to Joseph, and notice, out of everything Joseph did by faith in his life, the author of Hebrews focuses on Joseph's death. And this is really the pinnacle of faith in Joseph's life. As he is dying and as one of the most powerful rulers in the history of Egypt, he basically says to his sons, "You are not to put me in a pyramid like the other rulers, but you are to make me portable. Don't bury me, but put me in a suitcase, but me in a to-go box." And, of course, I'm just paraphrasing here, but on his deathbed Joseph basically said, "We will not be in Egypt forever. This place is not our permanent home; therefore, put my bones in a coffin, and when the time comes, you are to be prepared to take me out of here." And we are getting close to this in our study of Exodus on Wednesday nights. As they go through that checklist involved in getting 2-3 million people out of Egypt, Moses (more than 400 years later) makes sure they take the bones of Joseph on the way out. Joseph lived by faith. Joseph could see this day coming.

Abraham, then, leaves a legacy of faith. He is truly ***"the father of all who believe."*** And I think we learn something from Abraham concerning what it means to die well. There are so many things we want to have worked out for our children before we leave this earth (financial plans, and funeral plans, and passwords, and what to do with all the stuff), but to die well (according to this passage) is to leave a legacy of faith for those continue on. I think of my in-laws who first came to faith in Colorado many years ago, and how they've tried to pass that baton. For that, I will be eternally grateful. I think of my own parents who have done the same. What

a blessing! But we learn here that Abraham and his descendants were all able to die well, passing on a legacy of faith to the next generation.

**Conclusion:**

This morning, we've looked at the faith of Abraham, the father of the faithful. Was he always faithful? No. Was he perfectly faithful? No. But Abraham's faith grew stronger over time. He stumbled, but he got back up, he learned, and he moved forward, trusting God along the way. And that's for us. Faith gets started. Faith takes the first step. And faith grows along the way. Let me know if there's anything I can do encourage you to take the next step, whatever that might be.

Next week, Lord willing, we will take a look at the faith of Moses.

Before we get ready to partake of the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

This morning we are thankful for the faith of Abraham. We are thankful for his courage, obeying you and leaving his home even when without knowing where that journey would end. Thank you, Father, for giving us the hope of salvation, the hope of a life after this one. Give us eyes to see that great city that you have prepared for us. We look forward to being there together with you, with those who have gone on before us, and we look forward to being there with those who are yet to be born who may choose to follow in our footsteps.

Help us to be more like Jesus. We come to you in his name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)