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Sermon Brief
Text: Heb. 11:13-16, 20-22
Title: Living in Faith 3
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today we continue the emphasis on Living in Faith by looking further into the 'roll-call of faith' found in chapter eleven of Hebrews. Last Sunday's focus was on Abraham as the founder of the Israelite people. Today's emphasis in Heb. 11:13-16 and 20-22 continue focuses on Genesis 12-50 with the patriarchs of Israel singled out for attention. Hear the words of the writer of Hebrews about these individuals who served as the beginnings of the Israelite people.

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. . . .

20 By faith **Isaac** invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. 21 By faith **Jacob**, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, "bowing in worship over the top of his staff." 22 By faith **Joseph**, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.¹

As we noted last Sunday, the writer begins in verses one and two with a definition of faith, which then serves as the basis of his evaluation of selected individuals throughout the Old Testament who serve as illustrations of the kind of faith he describes at the beginning.

1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.²

Fundamentally, faith is assurance and conviction that guided the ancient Israelites. The writer makes the point that through such faith these individuals found approval from God.

The writer to the Hebrews saw in the lives of select Israelites the kind of faith needed by his Jewish Christian readers in the middle of the first Christian century. From these inspiring individuals out of the past the believers of the first century could find both inspiration and insight into living in faith. I believe that we can also find that inspiration and insight that can help us live in faith and thus gain God's approval as they did.

The emphasis on faith with the descendants of Abraham is on looking forward into the future. Two important aspects of faith are stressed here. First, faith does not always realize the anticipation (vv. 13-16) and second faith is convinced of the certainty of God keeping His promises (vv. 20-22).

BODY

I. Abraham's descendants' faith, vv. 13-16

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11.13 Κατὰ πίστιν ἀπέθανον οὗτοι πάντες, μὴ λαβόντες τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀλλὰ πόρρωθεν αὐτὰς ἰδόντες καὶ ἀσπασάμενοι καὶ ὁμολογήσαντες ὅτι ξένοι καὶ παρεπίδημοὶ εἰσιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. 11.14 οἱ γὰρ

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11.20 Πίστει καὶ περὶ μελλόντων εὐλόγησεν Ἰσαὰκ τὸν Ἰακώβ καὶ τὸν Ἡσαῦ. 11.21 Πίστει Ἰακώβ ἀποθνήσκων ἕκαστον τῶν υἱῶν Ἰωσήφ εὐλόγησεν καὶ προσεκύνησεν ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον τῆς ράβδου αὐτοῦ. 11.22 Πίστει Ἰωσήφ τελευτῶν περὶ τῆς ἐξόδου τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραὴλ ἐμνημόνευσεν καὶ περὶ τῶν ὀστέων αὐτοῦ ἐνετείλατο.

²GNT: 11.1 Ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων. 11.2 ἐν ταύτῃ γὰρ ἐμαρτυρήθησαν οἱ πρεσβύτεροι.

τοιαῦτα λέγοντες ἐμφανίζουσιν ὅτι πατρίδα ἐπιζητοῦσιν. 11.15 καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐκείνης ἐμνημόνευον ἀφ' ἧς ἐξέβησαν, εἶχον ἂν καιρὸν ἀνακάμψαι· 11.16 νῦν δὲ κρείττονος ὀρέγονται, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐπουρανίου. διὸ οὐκ ἐπαισχύνεται αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς θεὸς ἐπικαλεῖσθαι αὐτῶν· ἠτοίμασεν γὰρ αὐτοῖς πόλιν.

Tucked in the middle of the Abraham narrative in vv. 8-19 is this interruption to refer to the descendants of Abraham. In our way of thinking, such a 'summary' would have more logically come at either v. 22, the end of the patriarchal era, or at v. 38 at the end of the list. What appears to be the writer's point by 'interrupting' his Abraham narrative is to stress the eschatological, or future view, of faith assumed throughout the patriarchal narrative in vv. 8-22. By dropping vv. 13-16 into the middle of the Abraham narrative he dramatically makes this point. Faith is always looking forward to the future, and the realization of the promises of God. But the realization of those promises will be determined by God and not by the one possessing faith.

The reference to "all of these" goes back to the preceding verse and refers to "descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'" The writer pulls back to a long glance of time far beyond Abraham's own life time. What is clear from the context is that his primary thrust is on those descendants during the patriarchal era, since with verse 23 the folks from the Exodus forward are clearly in view. And particularly the generation of Israelites who entered the Promised Land under Joshua.

Abraham's descendants died in faith. The main point here is that these people sought to realize the promises of God for a homeland that God would give them, rather than Egypt where they had been living. But they did not realize this promise personally, for death overtook them before the Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua many centuries later. None the less, their lives were guided by faith in God that He would keep His promise of a homeland to them at least to their descendants.

The lesson here for us is an important one.

Some groups of Christians today twist the idea of faith into "I believe I'm going to get what I want from God now." And if I don't get it right away, it's because I didn't have enough faith. Such is utterly false. This is not faith in God. Instead, it's arrogance and sinful pride. It is carnal and not spiritual faith. It assumes that my desires are more important than God's will. It perverts the promises of God into a 'billy club' that can be used to make demands upon God. All in the disguise of 'being bold in our praying'! Arrogantly such twisted faith assumes that I know better what is good for me than does God. And it completely fails to understand the nature of biblical faith.

God calls upon each of us to trust Him and what He promises. We may or may not realize those promises in our life time. But that's beside the point. Faith isn't getting promises fulfilled right now! Faith is trusting God to do what He said, and in His timing rather than ours. And in the manner that He chooses, rather than how we have requested.

The prophet Habakkuk put this idea of faith so well in 3:17-19:

17 Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. 19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

Here is real faith. When humanly speaking there is no reason to trust God, yet complete trust and commitment to Him remains strong and unshaken. Does your faith measure up to this? The example of these descendants of Abraham challenge us here.

Their faith made God proud. The writer ends with the declaration, "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." God approved of their faith and moved to ultimately give them something beyond their expectation. They never anticipated Jerusalem and the temple during the patriarchal era. But God did and eventually this was provided for the Israelites. By trusting God their descendants received something from God far better than was envisioned. For God's people in the new covenant we look toward a new home in Heaven. The yearning is to realize that as quickly as possible in the second coming of Christ that would bring immediately the full realization of the promise of a heavenly home.

Their faith challenges us. Our faith must be focused on God, not on getting our wishes. Then, God will be free to do in us the unexpected and to bless us in ways never imagined.

II. Faith commitment by the other patriarchs, vv. 20-22

20 By faith **Isaac** invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. 21 By faith **Jacob**, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, “bowing in worship over the top of his staff.” 22 By faith **Joseph**, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

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In the last three verses the writer quickly alludes to three of the twelve patriarchs in Genesis 12-50. One episode from the life of each is touch upon as an illustration of the kind of faith he described at the beginning of chapter eleven.

Isaac’s faith (v. 20): “By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau.” Genesis 27:1-40 traces out the trickery and deception used by Jacob to gain his father’s blessing. The writer’s point here is not the dark side of this episode. Instead, he saw in Isaac’s blessing a deep trust in God as is reflected in the blessing recorded in Gen... 27:27-29 given to Jacob:³

27 So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. 28 May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. 29 Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

Isaac’s faith was for God to do for his sons what God had done for him throughout his long life. God had blessed him through his life time. Out of that came the conviction of God’s continued blessings upon his children. Our faith must include the expectation of God to bless our children as they serve Him in faith as we have done.

Jacob’s faith (v. 21): “By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, ‘bowing in worship over the top of his staff.’” The death bed blessing of the sons by the patriarch is the point of Jacob’s faith as well as of Isaac’s faith above. But here the focus is upon the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, as described in Genesis 48:1-22. The blessing is described in verse 20,⁴ after the more detailed blessing of Joseph in vv. 15-16.⁵ The reference to Jacob leaning over the top of his staff (cf. Gen.. 47:31⁶) to confer the blessing signals Jacob’s submission to God’s will. This symbolic action by Jacob underscored his faith as submission to God’s plan. Just as with Isaac, so also Jacob in his blessing expressed confidence in God blessing his children and grandchildren in the future. This faith made no demands on God in how to bless his descendants. To the contrary, Jacob trusted God to bless in the way most appropriate. Just as Isaac so does Jacob reflect confidence in God to keep His promises. And particularly as those promises relate to their children.

Joseph’s faith (v. 22): “By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.” The death bed blessing motif continues with Joseph and alludes to Genesis 50:24-25.

24 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” 25 So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, “When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.”

Joseph’s faith was certain that God would deliver the Israelites from Egypt and take them into the Land of Promise just as the Lord had promised Abraham centuries before. So certain of this was he that he made his brothers promise to carry his remains with them to Canaan for burial in the land of promise rather than for them to remain in Egypt. Gen.. 50:26 says that when Joseph died he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in

³The subsequent blessing to Esau is found in vv. 39-40: “And Esau lifted up his voice and wept. 39 Then his father Isaac answered him: ‘See, away from the fatness of the earth shall your home be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. 40 By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose, you shall break his yoke from your neck.’”

⁴Gen.. 48:20: “So he blessed them that day, saying, ‘By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, ‘God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.’”

⁵Gen.. 48:15-16: “15 He blessed Joseph, and said, ‘The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, 16 the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth.’”

⁶Gen.. 47:31, “And he said, ‘Swear to me’; and he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed.” The quote in Heb. 11:21 exactly reflects the Greek LXX text, which differs from the original Hebrew text, as translated by the NRSV above.

Egypt. Both Exodus 13:19⁷ and Joshua 24:32⁸ indicate that Joseph's wishes were honored by the Israelites in the Exodus.

To be sure it was over four centuries later before God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and into the promised land. But Joseph through faith knew that God would do this one day. And thus his request for his eventual burial in the land of promise.

These patriarchs exemplify to us the nature of true faith in God. Their faith looked to the future and focused on God's blessings of their children and grandchildren etc. They made no selfish demands on God for themselves. No one said to God, "Give what you've promised to me right now!" No, not at all. The promise of a homeland made to Abraham and renewed to each of them would wait for their descendants for its realization. And this did not deter nor weaken their faith in God one bit.

What a challenge to us in modern society with its demands for 'quick fixes.' Faith is confidence in God. And the passing of time does not weaken that confidence. Instead, it reaches out in trust and certainty that God will work in His own way and in His timing to do what He promises.

CONCLUSION

Living in Faith! What a marvelous opportunity God gives us. He comes to bless but insists first that we reach out to Him with unwavering trust and commitment, i.e., that we place our faith in Him. In that faith commitment is a decision to always obey God, to always trust Him and to always submit to His will. That's the challenge to us today. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and the early Israelites of the patriarchal era challenge us to this kind of faith.

What about it? Do you have this sort of faith in God?

⁷Exod. 13:18-19, "18 But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. 19 And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for Joseph had solemnly sworn the people of Israel, saying, 'God will visit you; then you must carry my bones with you from here.'"

⁸Joshua 24:32, "The bones of Joseph which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground which Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph."