

Hebrews 11:8-22

In Hebrews 11, the author of Hebrews characterizes some key aspects of the faith of the OT witnesses (**Heb 11:1**) in connection with which God testified of the invisible objects of hope to the saints of old (**Heb 11:2**). Those saints in turn, responded with persevering faith and became “a cloud of witnesses” to us (**Heb 12:1**).

After the brief, one-verse summaries in **Heb 11:4–7**, the author now gives a more extensive consideration to Abraham and his immediate succeeding generations.

Summary

In Hebrews 11:8-22, the author of Hebrews gives a longer presentation of Abraham and his family who received God’s testimony and thus became witnesses to us through their words and actions recorded in Scripture.

1. Patriarchal Pilgrims vv. 8-10; 13-16

The author of Hebrews portrays Abraham and his immediate offspring as pilgrims (**Heb 11:9**). This wandering of God’s people at this time was necessary because their inheritance was not of this world (**11:10**). God did not reveal this to Abraham all at once, but rather over the course of a lifetime of faith so that he would reflect upon the real fulfillment of the land promise.

God withheld an earthly inheritance from Abraham so that he would look in faith for a greater city (**Heb 11:10**) and so that Abraham and his fellow heirs would not inherit apart from all believers (**Heb 11:40**). By faith, Abraham saw his heavenly homeland where both he and we, as believers, have their citizenship, though for Abraham and the patriarchs the view was “from afar” (**Heb 11:13-14**). Though revelation was relatively undeveloped for Abraham and his descendants, it was always sufficient for them to genuinely understand the heavenly blessings that awaited them (**John 8:56**).

2. Birth of Isaac vv. 11-12

The author of Hebrews makes a similar point with the story of Isaac as with the pilgrimage theme of Abraham: God deliberately postponed the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham in the birth of Isaac, in order to point him to a better fulfillment to come (**Heb 11:11-12**).

3. Resurrection of Isaac vv. 17-19

After Isaac was born and the promise explicitly fulfilled, God commanded Abraham to offer up his son in order that Abraham would be forced to conclude that God is able to raise the dead.

4. Offspring Testimony vv. 20-22

Having also received divine testimony of the invisible things to come,, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph too responded with persevering faith and hence they also bear testimony to us. The author of Hebrews does not give all the details, he simply declares “by faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau” (**11:20**). The author mentions only Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s sons (**Heb 11:21**). Once again he only mentions the fact of the blessing as a believing response in God’s promise in the face of death. Believing the divine testimony, Joseph gave instructions that the Israelites should carry his bones with them when they went up out of Egypt (**Heb 11:22**).

5. Word and Event Revelation

The author of Hebrews not only regarded God’s words as His revelation but also saw the events recorded in Scripture as revelatory; they all “speak”. We see this in the way the author of Hebrews interprets the historical narratives of the patriarchs.

By word, God testified to Abraham of a future inheritance and of natural descendants by repeating his promises and sealing them with an oath-bound covenant (**Gen 15, 17**). By event, God held off fulfilling his promises with earthly fulfillment, so that Abraham and his heirs were led, in time, “to long for a better country, that is a heavenly one . . . which God prepared” (**Heb 11:16**).

Therefore even the events of Abraham’s life were directed by God to be revelation. If God’s testimony came to the fathers through word and event, so also the patriarchs testify to us through their words and actions as recorded in Scripture.

The author of Hebrews points to the verbal testimony of Abraham and of Jacob as “acknowledging” that they were aliens on earth who looked for a heavenly homeland (**Heb 11:13–14; cf. Gen 23:4; 47:9**). Then the patriarchs’ actions, when they refused to turn back to an earthly homeland (**Heb 11:15**) or when Abraham offered the son of promise (**Heb 11:17**) speak to us as witness of those unseen things in which believers too hope: life from the dead and a heavenly homeland.

The author shows that neither Abraham nor any other of the OT saints actually inherited the final form of the promised inheritance but only a shadowy foretaste. Nevertheless the OT saints were indeed heirs of the same promise as believers are, so that we too should heed their testimony and “become imitators of those who through persevering faith were heirs of the promises” (**Heb 6:12-18**).

The author of Hebrews shows us clearly that God’s OT revelation was oriented all along to the stage of worldwide fulfillment inaugurated by Christ.

Abraham and his offspring, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph testify to us in three particular ways: First, they looked forward in faith to the promised inheritance. Secondly, they trusted in the faithfulness of God to fulfill His promises both in the present and in the future. Thirdly, Abraham, in particular, trusted that God could even raise the dead.