

Practical Faith, Hebrews 11:8-12, 6/16/19 Steve Harden

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” Hebrews 11:8-12.

This is the word of God. How do you face a future that is filled with uncertainty? I trust that we’ve all lived long enough to recognize that there is nothing certain about the future. We don’t know the future. On every front in our day, whether it’s what is happening around the world, whether it’s politically, some of us know that a job isn’t really secure, even if we think it might be. Our family, marriage, health, our financial futures are never certain. The best laid plans fall apart. So how do you deal with an uncertain future? How can you not be scared or fearful or anxious about what may come to pass? How do you approach life where nothing is certain, with confidence and poise and fearlessness? Is such a thing possible? Can we do that? In the midst of so much uncertainty, so much unknown about the future, can you truly be happy and content? My answer is yes. And the answer is simple but not always easy.

The answer is that we must trust God and trust Him to mean what He says. That’s it. To trust God and trust Him to mean what He says. I want you to see today that the Bible has answers to what you’re dealing with today, whatever your uncertain future may be. It has very

practical answers. Yes, it deals with deep, deep theological and philosophical truths, but they are never dealt with in a vacuum apart from real day to day life. In fact, in the letters, the Pauline epistles, the letters that Paul writes in the New Testament, you'll see that there's always a pattern here. There's always a pattern where he deals with a theological and a philosophical issue in the first part, and then he moves on to say, okay this is what that means. This is how this is played out in your life: what I've just presented theologically, this is what it looks like in day to day life, and he does it over and over again. Theology is never dealt with in a vacuum, it's always, always effectual in your life.

In the book of Hebrews here, the Jews in Rome are depressed and discouraged. About fifteen years earlier they had gone through a tough time of persecution and the storm clouds are on the horizon for the persecution coming, that may well be worse this time. And so, their temptation is to abandon the faith. They're considering leaving Christianity and going back to Judaism where it's safer. Now they're wondering, is Jesus worth it? If that's not rubber meets the road stuff, I don't know what is! He is telling them, "Yes you may be fed to the lions, but I'm here to tell you, it's worth it." That's mind boggling. You and I may not be threatened with being burned at the stake like they were, but we do have stress in life that tests us. How much do we trust God? How much do we trust God for our future? This morning I want to encourage you; you may not know where you're going, but you know who you're going with, and that makes all the difference. You may not know where you're going, but you know who you're going with, and that makes all the difference.

In our trek through Hebrews 11 this summer, we've looked at different characters of the Old Testament. We've looked at Abel, and we've looked at Enoch and Noah. Today we begin

looking at a man by the name of Abraham. More than any other person in the Old Testament, we see Abraham exemplify what it means to walk by faith trusting in God's promises. So, I'll present three principles about faith from Abraham's life, today.

Faith obeys, faith endures, but also faith believes. So let's start with faith obeys. God told Abraham to leave his home in Ur. Today, this is where southern Iraq is, very close to where the garden of Eden was at that time. Ur seems to have been the cultural Mecca of the ancient world. In Abraham's day it was already an ancient city. It was founded in 2,000 B.C. It boasted an elaborate system of writing, it was leading the world in mathematics, it was known for huge educational facilities, it was the cultural center of the ancient world. In terms of religion, it was dominated by a ziggurat, which is a rectangular monument or temple, built by Ur-Nammu right around the year 2,000 B.C. It was probably inspired by the tower of Babel, so you think of the tower of Babel, think of this ziggurat in Ur. It was very pagan, obviously, right?

Think about Abraham. He was a prominent citizen of Ur. He was wealthy; he was prominent; he was probably well entrenched in the social and religious framework of the community. We can safely assume that he was an idolater. We are never told anything other than that. We know for sure that his father was. In Joshua 24:2 it says: "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods." So, we can assume that Abraham was a pagan, and we have no indication that he was looking for God before God chose him.

He may or may not have been more moral than his neighbors, we don't know. We have no reason to believe that he was. You see, the difference is that God chose him. And he called to Abraham, "Get out. Leave your home. Leave Ur." We find that in verse 8, God called Abraham

out of his paganism, and into a relationship with Himself. God told him to leave, and Abraham said, "Okay." He obeyed without knowing where he was going. It wouldn't be until years later that he found out that Canaan was the promised land. If Abraham was our contemporary and we heard this story, we probably would have thought, "Hm. There's another wealthy eccentric." Or maybe we would have just called him a fruitcake. "What Abraham? God told you to move? Where are you going?" "I don't know." See how strange that is? To pack up everything that you own and leave not knowing where you are going? This wealthy man had his roots deep down into his homeland and he moved his family without the knowledge of where he was going and when asked to explain, he said: "I heard the voice of God."

Try to explain that one to your mother-in-law if you're taking your family and your kids and her daughter. "God told me to move." But what's so interesting here is that we have no indication that he's worried about it. No indication that he thought it strange. It doesn't seem to matter at all where he was going, the only thing that mattered is that God said, "Go," and he went. See, that's faith. I can't help but think of the conversation when Abram came home to Sarah, and she asked him, "How was your day today?" "Well it was kind of strange, God spoke to me." "Oh, He did? How interesting!" Right? "Well what'd He say?" "Well, we're going to move." "Okay." Enough, right? A little bit of tension. "Where are we going to move?" "I don't know. He didn't tell me that." "Are you serious? You are serious!" That's faith. Abraham was either a nutcase or he was a man who had incredible faith in the trustworthiness of his God.

So, what does Abraham leaving Ur have to do with me? Well it may not be about moving, but it does speak to obeying the word of God without knowing where it may lead. The constant temptation is to worry about what is going to happen next. Am I alone? What's going to happen

next? What's going to happen in the future? What are things going to look like? Am I going to make that next sale? Am I going to be able to pay bills next month? Will I ever get married? If so, when will I get married? What's going to happen in our church? Will I ever be able to retire some day? Can any of us say that we don't know that kind of angst? It would seem that if we follow Abraham's lead, our life circumstances are not as important as what we make them. It's not about the circumstance, it seems like he wasn't anxious or impatient, even though he didn't have a clue. Now, he wasn't a stoic. We've seen kind of a revival of stoicism in our day. Stoicism is detaching our emotions from whatever is happening around us and not being moved too much by our circumstances. Abraham wasn't a fatalist; I think he had great joy in his going out. He went joyfully because he trusted God's promise. God promised him a land, so he went. See he didn't know where he was going, but he knew who he was going with, and it was enough.

When we face the world of problems and things that can go so wrong, this is the key to happiness and contentment. It's about walking with God. It's about trusting Him. Knowing that God knows you, and loves you is mind boggling enough, but to think that He is orchestrating all things together in the future for our good and His glory. What does it matter what you face, if you face it with Him? Can we not join the ranks of Abraham that say, "As long as You go with me, it's enough, in whatever we face." It seems that the Bible teaches us that the important thing is not knowing what's going to happen, but to learn to live in a way that no matter what happens I will be content and confident in His love and care and knowledge, that He's going to see me through. Isn't that what Christianity is about? It's not about knowing the future. It's about knowing who you're with. So faith obeys.

But secondly, faith endures. Faith endures. Faith bids us to continue to trust God's word even when we don't see any visible evidence of its fulfillment. We endure. Abraham left Ur never to return. And yet he lived out his life as a wanderer, a nomad; we see that in verse 9. He lived in a land that God promised him, but he was always a stranger there; he was always an alien there. Abraham and his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, never owned more than a small burial plot in the promised land. That's all.

I can't get my head around this except to say that if God told you to move to South America because you were going to inherit a small country there. Now that's pretty wild, right? But you say, okay, I'm going to trust God's promise. So, you load up the wife and the kids, you put them in an RV, and you start driving south. And so, for the rest of your life you go from campground to campground trusting that this is the land that God is going to give you, and never own an inch. That's enduring faith. And then your son and his family travel from campground to campground knowing this is the land God promised them, and never own an inch. And then your grandson... would you begin to doubt if you had really heard correctly? I know Abraham must have. How could he continue on? How could he live this life of the nomad having nothing to show for it? And it's only by faith, trusting in the reality of things I cannot see.

William Carey, the father of the modern missions movement, labored in India for 35 years and only had a few converts, 35 years of faithfulness in India. Yet every Christian missionary to India since that time owes William Carey a great debt. Do you know that today there are more than 28 million believers in India? Amen! But they can all trace it back to the faithfulness of a man who saw no results for 35 years. That's faith.

George Mueller felt like God laid his friend upon his heart to pray for his salvation. George Mueller prayed for his friend for 65 years, prayed faithfully for 65 years and then died. But his friend came to Christ within the year after George Mueller died. Faithfulness, trust in the word of God, His promises, Carey, Mueller, Abraham all had one thing in common. They endured. They never lost hope even though they never saw the fruit of their faithfulness. They remained faithful and believed God's word and lived accordingly. James 5:7-8 "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." Be patient, my friends. Endure.

So, what are you willing to believe for a long, long time and refuse to let it go? Now, right now at Ethos we need a healthy dose of endurance, do we not? Sailing in some rough seas! But God has us here for a reason. Nothing that has happened has caught Him by surprise, nor anything in the future that will happen will catch Him by surprise. One day we're going to look back, to some degree I hope, and see what God was doing back in the day. So right now, we're called to endure, to be strong and courageous, as He told Joshua. Be strong, be courageous, endure! It is a time for faith. What does our future life look like? I don't know! But I know the One who does. I don't know where we're going, but I know the One we're going with, and it's enough. Faith obeys, faith endures, but also faith believes.

Faith believes. Look at verses 11 and 12. More specifically, faith believes the impossible. God not only promised a land to Abraham, but He promised a son. It was biologically impossible for Abram, as well as Sarah, to have children in their age. When Isaac was finally born, Sarah was

90 and Abraham was 99, and they'd been believing for a son for 25 years. They believed God, that's it. They just believed Him. Faith believes God even when what He says seems impossible. On the basis of the word of promise alone, Abraham believed.

Now, Abraham did not ignore the facts. He wasn't somehow fooling himself that at 99, he could father a son. No way, come on. He didn't ignore the facts; he knew it was impossible. But you see, he weighed on one hand the impossibility of a 99 year old man married to a 90 year old woman having a child, and on the other hand he weighed the impossibility of God going back on His word, and he said, "I'll go with God's word." Incredible faith. He believed that God would do what He said he would do.

Faith is not positive thinking; faith is not hoping really hard. Faith is trusting in the faithfulness of God's word. That's it. It's not that hard to understand. It's really simple, but not always easy. Some of us are really discouraged right now at Ethos; there aren't as many here as there used to be perhaps and that's hard. It hurts. The future is uncertain; there are things we just don't know. But what better time to consider what we know to be true? What do we know to be true from God's word, right now? Let me suggest a few things.

Jeremiah 29:11 and following: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart." Now these words were written specifically for Jews at a particular time in history in their situation. But may I ask you, are we not too God's people? Do these words not hold true to the character of God and how He relates to His people? I believe it's a strong word to us here. God has plans for us. We are not forgotten. He has a purpose for us, and those plans are

for wholeness, and not evil. These plans He has for us are to give us a future and a hope. So, what do we do? We know that His plans are good and so we call upon Him; we pray to Him with every confidence that He hears us. We know that because we seek Him, we will find Him. Isn't that what it says? Even in the midst of difficult days, we have hope for days ahead. If God be for us, who can stand against us? What do we have to fear?

Romans 8: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers." We can all agree, these are God's words, right? You can nod your head like this, right? They are God's words. Can we agree that they are true? Yes? Can we agree that they are written to those who are followers of Christ? Can we agree that we can trust Him to do what He says He will do? So, what is He saying that He will do in this text? We trust Him as followers of Jesus, that everything that happens to us, everything that comes into our lives, is for a reason.

There is a reason. I don't have to know that reason. Most of the time, I won't know that reason, but I can stand on God's word that what happens to me both corporately and individually is not meaningless. It didn't catch God by surprise, and God never says oops. Ever. So, we can trust that whatever we are going through, either privately or corporately as a body, there is a reason and there is hope. All things work together for good. Now, not all things are good. We are not saying that; God didn't say that. But He is more than able to work good for us corporately and individually when things aren't good. There's no such thing as fate. There's no such thing as fate.

We know that God has brought whatever He has brought into your life and mine, for a reason and there's purpose and meaning and all these things somehow work together for good. His purposes are complex and they're intricate, and I never know all the variables that He's using. But I know Him, and I know He's working for good, and it's enough. It's enough. We know that He's doing that work in us, making us more like Jesus. The work that He promises to do is to conform us into the image of His Son. That's what He promises. That's what He promises.

So, I know that whatever comes into my life, whatever comes into our life together, it's making us more like Jesus. And I can rejoice in that. I don't rejoice in everything, but I can rejoice that He's at work in me and in you and in us to make us like Jesus. Regardless of my interpretation of my circumstances or what's going on with me, I'm called to believe and to trust His word. He will be faithful and will do what He says He will do. So, we can trust Him. My role is not to understand; my role is to trust, regardless of what trials or circumstances I face in my life. My role is to trust. I am to sing with the Psalmist: "Some trust in chariots, and some trust in horses, but we will trust in the Lord our God." And it's enough.

Faith obeys. Faith endures. But my friend, faith also believes. I don't know the future; you don't know the future. We know there will be bright spots and we know there will be dark days, it is the nature of human existence. But this one thing we know, that we can face uncertain days with confidence and poise and courage, we can even face uncertain days with joy, because like Abraham, it matters little where we are going, the one thing that really matters is who we're going with. Let's pray.