

Faith Acted Upon  
*The Book of Hebrews*  
By Chris Hand



Bible Text: Hebrews 11:8-19  
Preached on: Sunday, August 30, 2020

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So our reading then, Hebrews 11 from verse 8 to verse 19.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. 11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude--innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. 13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

And that is the word of God.

Well, this evening then, we're in Hebrews 11 and verses 8 to 19. The title is this, "Faith Acted Upon." Faith acted upon. We're seeing here, aren't we, the testimony of the elders. In verse 2 of chapter 11, this chapter that speaks to us about faith, doesn't it, it's there right at the beginning in verse 1, this definition of faith.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2 For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

And it's very much the testimony of Abraham, his life, and his wife Sarah too, that the writer is developing in this particular portion of scripture. We remind ourselves that he's taking the people of his day that he was writing to, people who had begun to forget what they owed to the Lord Jesus Christ and the thing actually that they needed again, the comfort, false comfort that the sacrifices of the Aaronic priesthood and such things, and he's saying to them, "No, that's not what you need to be watching. You need to go to the Old Testament, yes, offer the sacrifices, not for Aaron, not for the priesthood there, that's all completed, but you do need to go to the people and their faith, how they lived, their own choices that they made," which we'll look at again in a little moment. "That's where our lessons are," the writer is saying and those lessons, of course, come to us very clearly in the life of Abraham, the father of the faithful.

Let's turn to Romans 4:1-3. We see how Abraham there is a great example, an example of faith. "What then shall we say," writes Paul, "that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'" That is, the faith, saving faith, faith that believes God, believes in God and trusts him for righteousness, not our own works but looks to him.

Well, then in Galatians 3:6-9, we read there again about Abraham and Paul there writing says, "just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham." So there is Abraham, the father of the faithful, the man who showed faith and shows us all what faith is, what it looks like, what the kind of basis of it is as we look to God and receive the gift of righteousness, his pardon, his forgiveness, not of our works but it is the gift of God.

Well, the writer then is going to draw upon Abraham's faith and primarily Abraham's faith, to teach lessons to the people of his day and to show them actually that they're not following in the footsteps of Abraham. If they want to find the things in the Old Testament that they need to believe and follow, well, it's the faith of Abraham, for instance, they're not the sacrifices that they need to be taken up with. And all these people, as it says in verse 13, died in faith. They died still believing in things that they had not fully received. They saw things afar off. It tells us there, doesn't it, they saw these things afar off and they embraced them because they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Didn't actually receive those things but they believed them and they so afar off the day of the Lord Jesus Christ and received it, didn't live to see him die and rise again, haven't got the record we've got in scripture of the things he did but they believed with less light than we have. And so the people of that day really were being made ashamed by the examples of these Old Testament saints who didn't even have the record of Christ's

accomplishment on the cross and yet believed and did things that showed very much that they believed. Their faith was something they acted upon and so let's come to that now and develop that further.

Our first heading then: faith isn't just belief. It isn't just belief. What is belief? Believing certain things about God, believing certain things about Jesus Christ, believing certain things about ourselves. Oh yes, there are vital things and if we don't know those things, we'll never be saved. Well, the thing is this, that those things are believed and we believe them to be of such importance that we do something, that we do something. There's a response from us. It's just not information that we're presented with and, well, it doesn't really move us or make any difference to us, but here are things which make a difference to us. They change us. They move us. They make us do something. And that's what faith is. It's not a sort of abstract thing. It's not a simply intellectual thing that just lives in the mind and is a set of words and doctrines and beliefs that we could actually recite if called upon, but which has not actually done anything to us or made us do anything.

So Abraham believed God. Well, that wasn't just a matter-of-fact thing, that was a real reaching out to God. That was a real receiving and laying hold the things that God had said and showed him about the future, and showed him about the way of salvation, and showed him about the Savior that was to come. But we know that true faith will lead to action. There will be things that happen, things are never the same again when we believe, or at least they shouldn't be, and we become Christians. And we see it in works, the things that we do, and many of those works are actually choices that we make, the kinds of decisions that we're faced with and which we respond to in a particular way, that we choose that path and not that path. And that actually tells us what we're believing. That can be the reading back, if you like, as now our words this morning we're thinking about, but our actions also we can read back from those and they tell us actually whether we are holding faith, whether we have a living faith and so we say rightly those are works.

In James 2:20-24, let me just read those because that introduces very much this idea that we do something with what we believe. So we see here and he's speaking about Abraham again, "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." What makes faith manifest, what makes it to be seen and understood that this is a real beating heart in this person, it's the things that they do. And there supremely is Abraham and we'll come to him a little bit more in a moment, but the decisions he made showed that his convictions, all of his heart lay with God. He believed God and that was most evidently clear from his works.

So that's true enough, we're saved by faith alone, that there's that response of trust, there is that belief in Christ, but as we often hear, that's not true faith if it's just faith alone, it's just something that we believe. No, it's seen what we believe by what we do and the

choices most especially that we make. So we see faith is actually a life. It's actually life itself, a life of faith, a life of believing in those unseen things of verse 1, things that we haven't actually got but we've been told about future events, judgment day, resurrection of the dead, and we believe those things. We believe what it says about ourselves, that we're sinners, that we are going to be judged when we come in the future before God. And we believe he exists and we can't sort of say, "Well, there he is," and point to him there, "I can point him out to you there." We believe he exists, the world is his handiwork and so though he be unseen in a way, and the judgment day is unseen, heaven is unseen and hell is unseen, we believe in their reality and that moves us to present action. We do things in the light of that in the here and the now. It makes a difference.

So it's not just, well, there may be a heaven, there may be a hell, and we shrug our shoulders as if who can tell, it makes no difference to me. I was talking to somebody yesterday and they were saying that so few people believe in an afterlife, so few people believe in the afterlife. Don't believe in it. Don't see anything there. Well, we believe that there is and we do things because of that. We do things very differently because of that and we make choices in the light of what we believe to be so.

So obedience, obedience is that response of the heart to things that we believe to be true. Can't say, "Well, up there is heaven there, or there's the judgment day," but we believe it's going to happen. We believe it's going to be happening as sure as anything. The Lord Jesus is going to return, we believe it's going to happen and that is as good as an established fact even though we haven't seen it. Even though we are not sort of there, they would say it's just happening now or give a date to it or anything like that, but we obey and we make decisions in the light of these unseen events, realities that are to come.

So it's a great mistake to think that faith is simply an intellectual thing, just learning certain facts and we are able maybe to recite them in a particular way. No, it's all of life actually. It's a continual response, a continual aligning of ourselves and an obedience that we make to conform more precisely with these unseen realities, beings and events that are to come. So faith isn't just belief and it's interesting how do we know that we do believe? How do we know that we're true Christians? Big question, isn't it? Real question, one we should ask ourselves, "Am I a true believer?" Well, one of the helps to us is to be able to look back in life to key events, key moments, critical moments in life. What did I choose there? What direction did I take? When I was faced up with something, something perhaps very costly, something that was going to be very difficult and I actually brought myself although kicking and screaming and it may have been a real battle and it took me a while to get there, but I nevertheless came to follow the way that I knew the Bible said was the right way and I fitted in with things, I brought myself to obey what I find there.

And when you have those moments in life and you can look back at them, key moments, critical decisions that needed to be made, and when those decisions aligned with the Bible, aligned with what God's will was, it's an encouragement actually. It's shown to us that there, those were works, those choices were works, that obedience was a work that showed we had a living real faith. It was expressing that we believed what God says over

and above what might have been easier, more comfortable, what man was saying, people were calling you a fool perhaps for the choices you were making, but you made it and it was in line with what God had revealed and that shows we have faith.

To my second heading: obedience is a sign of faith. Right, that's all we've been saying, obedience is a sign of faith. And obedience, that often gets a bad publicity in this day and this age. Obedience, it just sounds so robotic, doesn't it? As if you haven't really thought about it, you just do what you're told. You're in the Army and whoever it is commands you, you don't argue with them and say, "Why have I got to do that?" You just do it. If they tell you to run 20 miles that way, you run 20 miles that way. If they tell you to run 20 miles the other way, then you run 20 miles the other way. And it's, you know, rather an unintelligent, a rather unreasoning sort of process but it's not like that in the Christian faith because we know the person that we are obeying. We know his voice. We know the voice of the Shepherd and we know that the voice of the one who commands us and requires of us certain things and whom we are duty-bound to obey, is very loving, very generous, very kind, very merciful. And he is the living God, the living voice and an obedience that we give not to something abstract, not just to some rules and such things that we're following at the moment, as it were, in our country, but actually obeying one who is warm and gentle and full of instruction and who teaches us and has our best interests actually at heart. He moves us on in life and informs us along the way so that we rely on him more. We know he's a Father. We trust him as such and so our obedience isn't blind, uncritical and unthinking but it's actually a response to somebody we already know and trust and therefore credit him, honor him, believe that what he says is good and right because we know who is speaking to us.

And obedience also is rendered to him knowing the cost, that we look at what is this going to require of me, what is this going to cost me, what am I going to have to give up perhaps, what am I going to have to change if I'm to obey God. And we look at that and we don't look at it as a nothing, we look at it as something that we're going to reckon on. That's what it requires of me, let me look at that, let me see. Is there a response in me towards that? Am I able to say, "Yes, I'm willing to pay that cost"? Or, no? Or half yes, half no? And that tells us, doesn't it, something then about ourselves.

Obedience is always able to account for itself and what it's had to give up, what it's cost in order to obey, in order to follow what God requires, what opportunities we might have had to surrender, what riches, what comforts, what joys and pleasures we've had to part with. That obedience as we respond to that voice that we know and that we love, that we have God's voice in scripture, we know it and we're Christians and have the Holy Spirit, we, as it were, recognize who it is he's speaking to as we've got a fuller view of him. Well, then that cost that may be required, we know that we can trust him with the consequences of it. We know if we obey, we're doing absolutely the right thing, we're doing it for the right person, and more we might be doing it for the right reasons and we can trust him with all of the consequences. All of the consequences. We don't know what they are. We wonder if we're quite capable of any of it really, but we trust in him and just as he is the one who loves us and supports us and encourages us, so when our obedience means difficulty and hardship, we know that he will also be with us and support us and

bear with us in that. Well, there's nothing of that, only the Christians. Well, there's nothing in this. Think obedience is a dry robotic sort of thing that we're just told what to do so we just do what we're told and that's all it is, and we never think very much, don't count the cost and surely don't really understand the person who is speaking to us as a living being. No, the world knows nothing of that but we do.

And so we have illustrated for us here, don't we, in Abraham these very principles of having to by faith do things where you can't see all the outcome, you haven't got all the answers there sorted but you're following God, trusting him, and believing that all those unseen things are real things, that you're in a process, on a journey that's taking you finally to a real place even though at the moment you can't account for it and you can't see it. And this was Abraham in verse 8, wasn't it, leaving Ur, destination unknown, when he was called to leave and go to the land that he was told would be his as an inheritance. That was something, wasn't it? A promise, you're going to inherit this particular place, don't know where it is but you're going to follow, then it will be revealed and you'll see where it is.

And that meant parting with quite a position of eminence we might imagine that Abraham had, that he was a man with some respect in the city, a man of some wealth. He had servants and all manner of possessions but it had to be realigned, it had to be changed, he had to leave, and all the cost of that because now he'd been caught up with this relationship he was now in with God. God had spoken to him, spoken to him, opened his mind, blown away all of his idolatry and grabbed his attention, showed him he was a sinner and an idolater and that now he was the recipient of extraordinary promises, promises of salvation, promises of people that would come from his own family line though he was an old man at the time, that he was called, fairly elderly.

So we find him on his journey. "Farewell, friends Farewell, home. I'm following God now." That's what it's like, isn't it, when you become a Christian, following God now. "He's called me. He's called me out of this place, my sin, where I am where I'm bound up with that and I'm going to part with it. I'm following him now." That's what baptism is about, isn't it? That's the beauty of that, "I'm following him now. It shows I've parted company with everything else and it's all about him now. It's all about him and he's going to show me things. He's promised me an inheritance and I'm looking forward to that and I'm believing for it and it's worth giving up all the old habits and the old ways and some of the old friendships and my old haunts, and all the old ways of doing things which I had thought was the only way you did things. Now I know it's not and I want to be parted from it. I want to go in a different direction."

So that was Abraham. Faith was action, required of him action, big action, a big choice, and he could often look back on that, couldn't he, and see there is reality there in the way I responded then. There was a reality there and it showed that I was believing, I was following in that way. Well, it speaks, doesn't it, in verse 15 of that parting from the land that you've left. Well, you might have had opportunity to go back but it had no power, did it? It had no power. And as for the Christian, isn't it, when we stop and we think, we've been some years on the journey, in the Christian past there is somewhere a sort of hazy

recollection of hard work to actually remember what was he like then. But certainly whatever it was like, he's no desire to go back to it. You don't want to go back to that that you left behind and forsake the advantages that you've gained, your walk with God and your testimony and that hope of heaven, that you're not going to allow anything to prize that from your grip. That good report on the day of judgment that you believe and you trusted in God, that's accounted as righteousness and that's precious and the world that you left behind has nothing by comparison. It is, isn't it, it's an emphatic goodbye, a big goodbye that we wave to that land of old. No going back.

We think perhaps maybe a non-Christian family, non-Christian neighbors, what do we have in common? What do we have in common? Their worldview, what really gets them stirred up and where all their hopes are, all their fears are, that's not me. That's not where I'm at. I'm traveling on. I've traveled past that. I've left it. It doesn't have a draw that it once might have done to me when I was a younger Christian but now I can see more clearly where I'm going and it's even more attractive and I believe in more those unseen things and those unseen days, the day of judgment. I'm believing even more in that unseen place, that reality, heaven itself that I am making my pilgrimage towards. And faith says of the old life and the old places, nothing to see here, carry on obeying, carry on following, carry on making those decisions that always realign you away from that place, away from that old life and towards the new life and the hope that you have. I don't want to go back. What's there to go back to? And the writer is saying to the people here, "You'd lose everything. You really would, you would lose everything. Don't go back. Keep going forward and you'll find more yet in God's comfort and help."

Well, verses 11 to 12, this is Sarah, isn't it, Abraham's wife. She was an old woman indeed when she was promised that she would have a child. It seemed impossible, there seemed no hope, and yet although she did have a moment, some belief there, but actually scripture thinks better of her here, doesn't it? She had such faith that she believed that something impossible could happen, that something unseen, unheard of, someone of her age having a child which she believed could happen. And it did and there she is now able to conceive her child Isaac. Laughter, a good name. Well, they were all laughing with joy and wonder at what God had done in his greatness. And it's beautiful, isn't it, here that her unbelief is forgotten, her faith is remembered. We know there was some unbelief but we can see there is faith, faith again, an action that was taken. How she must have prayed, prayed that God would bring to fulfillment those things. You can see the answer and wonder that such an answer could ever happen with her body as good as dead and Abraham's body as good as dead as well, that God remembered her and her faith now as here as a memorial to her.

Then we have verses 17 to 19, the passage we read in Genesis 22, that extraordinary obedience of Abraham. This was the crowning event, wasn't it. Well, we just talked about Sarah and this child that seemed to be an impossibility but became a reality, and then Abraham is asked to sacrifice that child from whom all those peoples as numerous as the stars and the sand on the seashore, that boy that was to be the father of children and to produce all these children. Now Abraham was instructed to lay him on an altar to kill him and yet Abraham believed that God was able to raise him from the dead, that he could be

brought back from the dead, that God had that power that even if he, Abraham, was to thrust that knife into his son and seemingly thrust it into all the promises God had made to him including that of a Savior, a Messiah to come, that God still would work it out. He would obviously have to bring Isaac back from the dead and as it says, in a sense, that's just how Abraham received him because in his mind, in his actions, he'd already committed the act there, he'd already reasoned his way being able to kill his own son and the belief that God would raise him from the dead.

And so what faith that that was. It was seen in actions. It wasn't the choices that he made but when God called him and told him this is what he is to do and he does it. Well, there would be a struggle in there for sure. There were many questions and much perplexity, I'm sure he would, and yet he obeyed and that's the main thing, isn't it? His heart was toward obeying God even though in this the cost seemed extraordinary and so much hinged upon this child that it all seemed to hang in the balance, but he accounted God as powerful enough to deal with the consequences and faithful to all his promises. And surely how he was vindicated, how God testified of Abraham's faith and showed us in this man what will be required there, I hasten to add to sacrifice anybody. This was a one-off, one extraordinary event but it shows us that here in Abraham, the father of the faithful, a man whose faith is an example to us, what wonderful wonderful obedience faith acted upon.

So final heading: faith sees heaven. Well, we've been saying that, haven't we, really? Faith sees heaven, sees an unseen place. Faith is like eyes, isn't it, that can look beyond the here and the now, the material world and all of its sadness and triviality and banality, and believes in a heaven. Sees heaven. The wonderful thing is that these elders of whom this good testimony is given that they had faith, they saw heaven too. The Promised Land, Abraham found that and had the strange experience of living as a stranger in it, they lived in tents even though this was the land God had promised. Unseen now, we can't actually see ourselves owning this land, we're just strangers, how is this all going to come to pass? Well, that lay off in the future, some way off in the future, in fact, but I believe will bring it to pass. That he actually was going to bring something greater to pass, that this was just a small picture of a greater place that they were making their way to and one day they would inherit in a bigger way, a bigger sense that simply this territory of land that at that point they were just still kind of tenants in rather than actual owner occupiers.

But it was heaven that they could see. That inheritance in verse 8, it is heaven, and the city of verse 10 whose maker and builder is God is heaven. Another homeland, verse 14, and again the country and the city of verse 16 is heaven. And Abraham acted in the present, great cost, faith eyed, unseen future reality are reckoned. It was as real as done. It was as though it was there right before his eyes and it was worth doing things now in the present, things that were painful, things that were difficult, because that place was real and he believed in its realities and he believed in a reality of the land he was actually sitting upon and realized that this should command his full attention, demand his total obedience and be the purpose of his life, to come finally to the glory of heaven, bear losses in order to get there, a place so so much better even than the beautiful inheritance

that he was scheduled and destined to receive there in Israel of today. But what is that compared to the glory of heaven itself, a place of holiness and goodness, a place of purity, love, a place of joy, an experience, an excitement and wonder?

No wonder because, of course, it is God's habitation. God is there and so it's going to be worth everything to be there, to be with God, to be with the Lord Jesus Christ. That'll be worth everything, everything to come finally through this sad world, this world of grief, this world of death and sorrow and sighing, to reach the glory of heaven itself. Abraham saw it, saw it from afar, believed it though, embraced it and said, "Well, actually here on earth even though I've got this promises of a land, actually I'm a stranger. I'm a pilgrim. I'm just passing through here because I'm taken up with that place, I'm taken up with what God has said. I'm taken up with God and so where He is is where I want to be. What He's promised is what's the most important to me." There we find faith acting upon these things, this reality.

So we should, shouldn't we, just make plans here and now. Well, it's important in its way and decisions about careers and decisions about studies and schools and places and where are we going to be in a year's time or whatever, pandemics permitting and the rest of it. Yes, that's right. Buildings need to be worked upon, houses to be sorted out, jobs in order to get those all in the right place there, dates we put in the diary. Well, in my diary, it's pretty blank for the autumn, I have to say. We don't know quite what's going to happen, do we? But hopefully it might fill up with some dates in due course but we have to put dates in the diary and plan and make those things there to be important. But we're always ready to leave at a moment's notice, always ready to part with it at the drop of a hat in order to go away to our proper home, to our homeland, to that city that God is preparing for us.

There's a final thought this, that God is pleased with faith, isn't he? He is pleased with it. Isn't it a wonder what we see in verse 16. There they are, they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. Well, he has prepared a city for them. Not ashamed to be called their God but he likes actually to be believed in. He likes people who believe, believe him, believe in heaven, believe in God's promises, account him faithful. Well, he says to such a people, "I will more than match their expectations of Me. I will more than honor their hopes. I will do far exceeding above what they hoped for because I'm not ashamed to be called their God, not ashamed to be having them and saying that these are My people." And he knows us, doesn't he, he knows we're not perfect, he knows that we really at times there are wandering around in all kinds of ways but he's not ashamed to be known as the God of these people. Of us in all of our ways and fumbling through. And he says, "I will meet their expectations. I surely will. They won't find anything missing or a lacking experience. They won't get there and think, well, this is a bit of a letdown." You go to places, you're told it's going to be the best place you've ever seen and you get there and it's a bit of a letdown. He's saying, "No, it's not going to be like that with Me. I'm not ashamed to be called their God. They will find that I'll more, more than meet their expectations and their hopes because I have prepared a city for them, prepared the new Jerusalem for them and there's homes and places and rooms and spaces for every single one of them."

Faith believes that. Faith sees that and God is pleased with that faith because we're crediting God with being true and reliable and a faithful witness, and those are the people that God is not ashamed to own as his own, what delights and pleasures and hopes and joys something of heaven in advance that we enjoy in the soul in the here and the now. So that's faith, faith that does things, faith that believes things, faith that makes choices in the light of unseen places and unseen events but we believe to be absolutely true, absolutely reliable, absolutely trustworthy and to be acted upon right now in the here and now of today.