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ISAIAH 1:10-20  
HEBREWS 11:1-3, 8-16

“WHAT FAITH *DOES*”

*The point of this sermon is that faith binds believers to God’s reality—past, present, and future—that determines everything we know and do.*

Do you remember those times in your childhood when you tried to prove to your parents that you didn’t do what was being claimed? How did those usually turn out? Mine didn’t go well, because often the best I could come up with was, “David did it.” And unfortunately for me, he was already a suspect for another “crime.”

There are always situations that require us to show proper, convincing evidence. If you are going to sell your car, what must you have? The title. No matter how much my parents might have desired otherwise at times, my birth certificate proved I belonged to them. When it comes to things that truly matter, things of great or invaluable worth, we need a way to verify ownership.

So, what if someone asked you to prove that the future promises of God are yours? What would you pull out as your “title-deed?” That’s the question verse 1 is answering. The author of Hebrews is saying that faith is the God-ordained means to have certainty that the “things hoped for” and “things not seen” are objectively yours. Sometimes people might think that you must have extraordinary, otherworldly experiences to have certainty about these things. Others might think that moralism is the true test—a life free of mistakes and failings. And to be sure, faith doesn’t exclude extraordinary, otherworldly experiences, and of course, true faith bears the spiritual fruit that comes from obedience to God’s Word.

But what verse 1 is telling us is that it is only through faith that future realities, the things hoped for, are brought into the present. Faith allows us to enjoy the promise of Christ’s return, the resurrection of the body, and our future glory and reign in heaven today. And the second part of verse 1 is saying it is only through faith that we are given the eyes to discern the activity of our invisible God in present situations. Faith gives us a visual certainty that we otherwise couldn’t have. Think about how Jesus described the coming of God’s kingdom. He said it was like a mustard seed (Mark 30:31) and yeast mixed in with dough (Matthew 13:33). Small, unnoticeable things that are easily missed, unless you have the eyes of faith. And do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples when people were bringing children to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray? “Do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” Apart from faith, how does that make any sense? Isn’t it the mighty who rule kingdoms, not innocent, needy children?

And when Jesus calls us to follow him, he tells us the only way to be his disciple and save our lives is by putting to death the life we think we must have (Mark 8:34-35). How does that sound

apart from faith? It sounds insane and repressive. You see, without faith we can't hear those words, pick up our crosses, and follow Jesus. That's why without faith it is impossible to please God (11:6) and receive His approval (v. 2). Faith moves us to act, and faith enables us to act with a real certainty about the reality revealed to us in God's Word.

Apart from faith we cannot know what is in store for us, and without faith we are blind to God's activity happening right in front of us. And as verse 3 says, without faith we are ignorant about how this world came to exist. Past, present, and future are all involved. Every dimension of our lives is lived out in faith.

You see, verses 1-3 are more than a simple definition of faith. What we are being told here is what faith *does*. Faith binds us to what is True. Faith is like an iron, unbreakable link to the Reality known to God. That's why you mustn't think your faith is irrational, groundless, or wishful thinking. To those without faith, of course it will look silly and even crazy, but sadly, the joke is on them. Because in the eyes of God, a man or woman who lives by faith is pleasing. Who are the righteous in the eyes of God? Those who live by faith. It is those who live like Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants.

How did this faith work itself out in Abraham's life? When you read the entirety of Hebrews 11, you'll notice these "heroes of the faith" had vastly different experiences. Some "conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire," while others "suffered mocking and flogging." Some were "stoned to death, sawn in two and killed by the sword." Experiences vary, but what we see in these men and women, and especially in Abraham—the biblical exemplar of faith—is the pattern of faith. And the pattern begins with Abraham's obedience. Abraham's "believing life began with an immediate act of obedience" as one commentator puts it.<sup>1</sup> We know there was disobedience in Abraham's life after this immediate act. The same is true for any true believer. But that first step in response to God's Word sets the tone for everything that follows. It recalibrates our lives to the tune of God's Word. One of the ways we can assess whether we have truly responded to God in faith is to ask whether there is a genuine striving and desire to bring the full scope of our lives under God's authority and direction.

That's what Abraham was after. And right away, we see that it was costly for him. We're told that he "set out" from home. That meant Abraham left behind the things in his life that provided him with security, comfort, and his identity. Aren't those things we still look for today? How many look to their bank accounts for security? Think about all the serious sacrifices we refuse to make, fearing how those sacrifices will affect our addiction to comfort. And how many identities have we taken up that have nothing to do with following Jesus as Lord?

Sacrifices are the companion of faith but attached to the call to set out is God's promise of an inheritance. Abraham set out trusting that what God would provide would surpass the life he built for himself. The problem with our sin is that it tells us we are the best architects of our lives. And when we insist on designing our own lives, guess what happens? Unlike Abraham, we'll never take a real step of faith, because we can't fathom not being able to guarantee the

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 324.

outcome. What did Abraham do? “He set out, not knowing where he was going.” And when he arrived, how did he live? As a foreigner who spent the rest of his life living in a tent.

For the rest of his life, Abraham never felt truly at home. He had a constant homesickness for a place he couldn't return to or rebuild. How did he persist? “He looked forward to the city that has foundations.” One commentator points out that the Greek literally reads, “For he was looking for the city which had the foundations.”<sup>2</sup> The idea is that there is only one city that can boast of enduring foundations. As the hymn puts it, “All other ground is sinking sand.”

And notice how, beginning in verse 12, the focus shifts to Abraham's descendants. And verse 13 tells us that Abraham's descendants “died in faith without having received the promises.” Abraham's faith was passed on. Even through all the trials, all the ups-and-downs the family the experienced, the faith of Abraham was never extinguished. It continued to burn and give life. And when Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he reminded them that they share the faith of Abraham (4:16) through believing in the gospel concerning Jesus Christ, God's Son (Romans 1:3).

And so, the faith of Abraham is alive in Christians today. But only as long as we continue to confess that we are “strangers and foreigners on the earth.” Jesus warned us that “the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” will choke the word and put an end to faith.

Last week, we heard about the man whose fields produced abundantly, so he pulled down his barns and built new ones. It was clear where that man's treasure was to be found. He had no desire for heavenly country. He was quite content to build his own kingdom.

Who do you think we most look like? The family sojourning in tents, or the man with impressive barns? Whose life do you think made a credible witness to their neighbor?

Abraham and his family showed their faith, not through their possessions or wealth, but through their desire for the heavenly city that only God's hands could build. And for that reason, God isn't ashamed to be identified with them. God wasn't looking for anything beyond their trust. Very simply, God asked them to place their lives in His hands. And today, God is asking the same of us. And this isn't a blind step, because God has set out for us. Jesus has not only come for us but made our return home secure.

Later in Hebrews, we are told that “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (13:12-14). You see, Jesus is the ultimate Abraham, he is the man of faith, who set out for us and gained many descendants. And when he was here on earth, he had nowhere to lay his head. Each day of his life he was looking ahead to joy of returning to his Father. But his joy would be incomplete if we weren't able to be there as well (cf. John 17:24). So, Jesus was rejected and thrown outside the city and crucified in our place, so we could have a place in his eternal city. Jesus' sacrifice means that our way to God is absolutely secure, because his sacrifice of blood secured our

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<sup>2</sup> Hughes, *Hebrews*, 326.

eternal redemption. You can't be unwashed of Christ's blood, so we can have certainty that the grace that washed us will be the grace that preserves us and brings us to the eternal city.

One day, that holy city will come down from heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband, and then God's people will finally be at home. But until then, we walk by faith, turning our lives over to the one who paid the price to bring us home.

Let us pray.

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