

Text: Hebrews 11: 8-22

Title: A The Faith Family

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PRAYER:

Gracious Father, you are truly worthy of the praise and adoration we bring to you. But we thank you that you are a generous God. And in the very act of singing your praises, we seem to find ourselves and understand that we were made for you and that our highest joy and deepest delight is in giving ourselves to you. Discovering the freedom of the children of God and knowing what it is to be part of a family for which you care. Brothers and sisters, and aunts and uncles, and grandparents and children and friends who are bound together in Jesus Christ. This again, is the blessing that flows from you. And we desire, therefore, that our blessings should flow back to you as we listen to your voice and your word. We pray that you would so speak to us through it that we find ourselves more and more loosened from everything that brings us into bondage and all that holds us back from unreserved delight in knowing and trusting and loving and serving you. And so we are come as servants, looking to the hand of their masters; and, maid servants who look to the hand of their mistresses. We pray that you would open your hand and supply our need, that you would point your finger to our lives through your word that we may find direction and that you will close your hand over our lives. That we may find our deepest security in your grasp of us. So lead us we pray into the pastures of the scriptures and feed us there that we may be nourished and strengthened to serve you for your glory. We pray this together in Jesus, our Savior's name. Amen.

Please be seated. Now we have been reading and studying these Sundays in the letter to the Hebrews. We have come to Hebrews Chapter 11, and today we read the section beginning in verse eight through verse 22. And you'll find the passage on the pew Bible

page 1007. And for our children who have their children's Bible the passage is on page 1498. Hebrews Chapter 11 and verses eight through 22. Let us hear the word of God.

SCRIPTURE READING:

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.

Which, of course, is exactly what God had promised to Abraham.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By Faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

SERMON:

This great chapter that so many of us love with its catalog or portrait gallery, perhaps, of the heroes of the faith, is here to teach us that faith is not a commodity. It's not like money in the bank on which you can draw from time to time when it is needed. Your non-Christian friends think that's what you have as a Christian. They say, "I wish I had your faith" in somewhat similar terms as they might say to some of us, but by no means all of us, "I wish I had your bank balance".

But faith is not a substance that we put in our spiritual bank. Faith, as we've seen, is the response of our whole being to the person of the Lord, to the Word of the Lord, and especially, faith is how we respond to the situations in which the Lord and His providence places us by trusting him rather than trusting either our own resources or the situation in which we find ourselves.

He begins this chapter, as we noted, with what looks like but isn't actually a definition of faith. He says, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". And as we saw, that's not so much a definition of faith as it is a description of what faith feels like in the life of the believer. And that's the reason he goes on for the rest of this chapter, not so much to, as it were, narrow down his definition of faith, but to give us illustrations of what it's actually like to be a believer. What it's like to exercise faith as we find ourselves in a whole variety of situations and circumstances.

And as he speaks about this, one of the things that's so obvious is that he's calling us, as our forefathers used to say, to "act faith". They didn't mean by that to pretend to have it when you don't have it, but actually to, to exercise faith. To bring mind and will and emotions and affections and heart and soul and strength resolutely to trusting in the Lord. So faith is not passive. Faith is not in that sense characterized by a kind of pious inertia. "Faith is active", says Martin Luther, "Faith is", well, "it's a busy little thing". And he's trying to capture the sense that we find here in Hebrews Chapter 11 of heroes of the faith and all kinds of different circumstances, resolutely trusting the Lord and pressing on with the Lord.

And here, as he picks out Abraham, he's picking out the great Bible hero of faith. In our studies in Nehemiah the other Sunday evening, in Nehemiah Chapter nine, we

discovered how Abraham was described as the man who was "full of faith" in his Lord. And in the New Testament, the writers of the New Testament often turn back to Abraham and say, "You see Abraham is a man who was justified by faith. He trusted in the Lord and he was accounted in a right relationship with the covenant God as He lived in this way". And here is the writer gives us, in a sense, a kind of summary of the crisis point in Abraham's life. He's indicating to us that it's often in crisis points that we see: first of all, whether somebody really is a believer; but also we begin to see what the texture and the feel and the power of a life of faith is really like.

And as we look at these verses eight through 22, the author tells us about four situations in which Abraham trusted the Lord. The first is a situation in which he was obedient to the word of God. The second, is a situation in which he and his wife trusted the promises of God. The third, a situation in which he passed a test that came from God. And the fourth, the way in which he therefore experienced the faithfulness of God.

The first of these he mentions, you'll notice in verses eight through ten. Abraham's faith was illustrated by the fact that he was obedient to the Word of God. Verse eight. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance". We are familiar with the story. There is Abraham and his family. They're living in a pagan world. They are surrounded by pagans. And God says, "Abraham, come out with your family and go to a land that I will show you. So he went out in obedience to the Lord, even although he did not know the destination to which the Lord was leading him".

And the author goes on, later on in verse 13, to explain to us how this was possible. I mean how was it possible? We sometimes have this kind of fanciful idea of these heroes of the faith as though they lived in a different kind of world order. So it was kind of easy for Abraham. But if he lived in our day, it would be difficult for him. Well, imagine God comes to you and says, "I want you to go to Africa". God comes and says to you, "I want you to go to South Korea". God comes and says to you, "My purpose is I'm actually going to take you to North Korea". How would it be possible? How is it possible for anyone to obey the voice of God. Well he explains to us. He says, "They understood, Abraham and his family understood that in this world they were aliens and exiles from their true home in the city, the heavenly city, that God was building". And so they were prepared to leave the city that man was building, not knowing what the implications

would be because they trusted that God would lead them on. They were sure, as the men's chorus was singing this morning, that there were "solid joys and lasting treasures, that only the citizens of the Heavenly Zion knew." And that they would experience measures of those joys and treasures as they made their way, not knowing where they were going in this world, but knowing what their destiny was in the world that was to come in the city that God was building.

And it's another illustration, isn't it, of this great biblical principle that the man or woman or young person of faith lives his or her life from the point of view of our final destiny. And we work backwards from our final destiny to how we are going to live in the present world. Thing that marks Abraham was that he was an enormous measure. Yes, he had feet of clay and his wife had feet of clay, but in enormous measure he had been set free from all these desires we have to build things round about us as though this world were our home. And because of that, he was a really free man for the Lord. And many of us are not free men for the Lord. Isn't that true? We are we are not only responsible for what we have and do in this world, but we are actually prisoners of what we have and do in this world. And we need this new perspective that faith brings. That sets us free from the clawing grip of the things of this world. And once we are thus free, then we are able to obey what the Lord says. Whatever it is that He says to us.

There is a natural desire in the minds of worldly people to get everything to settle down here. And what delivers the Christian from that is that he or she knows there is no settling down here. But there is a gloriously secure setting down there. And when that has grasped you then you have this wonderful freedom to be obedient to the Word of the Lord, whatever he says.

But then you'll notice he moves on in verses 11 and 12. Faith obeys God's Word. And yes, faith trusts in God's promise. Yes, I did notice it was Mother's Day today. It's not Mother's Day in my heart because it's not Mother's Day in Scotland, but it's Mother's Day in the United States. And therefore, I'm kind of glad or maybe even relieved that Sarah enters into the picture here. But actually, Sarah's in this picture everywhere. And it's rather important that we grasp it the particular way in which she enters into the picture, I think we would completely misunderstand if we didn't realize she's in the whole picture. What do I mean? Well, the point at which she enters into the picture is in order to bear Abraham's son. And that's, that would be a less than biblical view of what a

woman and a wife is for if we didn't understand there's a bigger picture here. You know, women do not exist simply to bear the children of men, do they?

So what is he driving at here when he mentions Sarah? And after all, it seems as though he's speaking about Abraham's faith. Well, I think it's fairly obvious, isn't it? We know from Genesis that, that Sarah was not what you would call a shrinking violet. At times she could be feisty. You know the interesting thing about Sarah? The interesting thing about Sarah was one day Abraham came in and he said, "We're packing. We're leaving here." Now. Wives and mothers. Your husband comes in 6:00 at night. Hard day's work. And before he's even pecked you on the cheek and said, "Have you had a decent day, honey?" He says, "We're leaving". What's your first question? Your first question is, "Then where are we going? Isn't it? And he says, "I have no idea where we're going." Well, what ya gonna say? You're going to say, "Well, we're not going anywhere, honey. We're not going anywhere with the children and the mortgage and the grandparents. We're not moving if you can't tell me where we're going". Now why is Sarah looked to by women in the New Testament? Well, we've answered the question, haven't we? Because when Abraham came home for dinner and said, "Honey, we're moving". And she said, "Well, where are we moving?" "Actually, dear, I have not the foggiest idea. But God has promised that he will take us there". She said, "Count me in. Count me in".

Now. There is a very important lesson for all of us here. It's this. This passage really does focus on Abraham, but the thing we need to know about Abraham, we men need to know this about Abraham, we men who are not yet married need to know this about Abraham's Sarah -- characteristically, a man's trust in the Lord never rises above his wife's willingness for him to trust in the Lord.

Some time ago, I was giving special lectures at a theological seminary in the United States not to be named, not one that I customarily go to. And I, I learned from the scuttlebutt and the feedback afterwards that I had upset some of the students. And what it upset some of the students was I said, "Dear brothers, it is highly unlikely that the quality of your ministry, its decisiveness, its sharp edge, and its whole souled commitment will be able to rise above your wife or fiancé's commitment to that ministry." And that's true, isn't it? How do I know it's true? I know it's true because I've seen it so often. And I know it's true because it's not because you're a minister that's true. It's

because you're a man that's true. That's why it's so important to have some measure of discernment about those we marry. Why it's important for us to know that "two cannot walk together", as Amos says, and "except they be agreed together". And the fantastic thing about this couple, for all their ups and downs and wobbles here and there, is this remarkable way in which they were both committed to the promise of God. And especially when it came to that amazing promise that God had given to Abraham ages before that still had not been fulfilled. And then the Lord came along when Abraham was 99 and said, "About this time next year, Sarah is going to have a baby boy". And then he said, "Incidentally, where is Sarah?" Well, she was laughing in the tent. She was saying, "This is ridiculous. Here I am, 90 and there he is, 99" and as this text says, "He was as good as dead". She even says, there's a kind of there's an unbelieving cynicism which..., "I'm going to have pleasure at this stage of life. The idea is preposterous. But apparently she came to trust the promise. Now, how do I know she came to trust the promise? Well, you need to read between the lines. Baby Isaac did not come because a divine stork delivered him. You understand? Baby Isaac, who was wonderfully given by the supernatural providence of God, just as our children are wonderfully given by the supernatural providence of God, we are told in this text, was begotten and conceived in the same way every other baby born that year was begotten and conceived. Can I put it this way? At 90 and 99 there Sarah must have said to Abraham, "Let's see. Let's see if God's promise is true. Let's try to make a baby". It's astounding faith.

Now, how could they possibly have trusted the promise of God? Don't you remember how we noted that the very first thing that the author says before he goes on to speak about the heroes of the faith and their trust in the Lord, He tells us who the Lord is. He is the God who made heaven and earth out of nothing. The God who made heaven and earth out of nothing is surely the God who can keep his promise that he is now given again and again. That they will have this son, Isaac, through whose lineage the nations of the earth will be blessed. What can we say? What a mother. What a woman. What a wife. What a couple.

I happened to notice we went through Hebrews 11 at the Wednesday lunchtime services. I can't remember when it was some time ago. And the title for that particular address, which I discovered, I'd quite forgotten this, I gave was, "The Old Couple". Which I guess was a little pun on The Odd Couple. But what faith? You say, you say this is amazing Faith. Well, yes, it is. But you and I have the same amazing God. He, he's

not promising you. We have 99 year olds in the church, thank God. And they're young, 99 years old. This is unique. But since God kept his promise to Abraham and Sarah can we not believe that he will keep all of his promises to us, especially since the promise to Abraham and Sarah was a prerequisite for his great promise to give us his son as our Savior? Of course we can trust his promises.

So they obeyed his word. They trusted his promises. And then in the third place, you'll notice they passed his test. And this is in verses 17 to 19. The great crisis in Abraham's life. But it's a crisis for which God has prepared him by strengthening his faith. Actually, this is the third test. The first test came when God said, "Go to a destination that's invisible to you". The second when God said to them, "I'm going to give you a promise fulfilled that seems impossible to you". And now we comes to them and to Abraham in particular and asks him to be willing, although the command that he's about to receive will appear intolerable to him. "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love", Genesis 22:1 "and sacrifice him to me on Mount Moriah". And Abraham is obedient. He passes the test. He's willing to do it. Now, that's a very strange command. Did that mean Abraham thought, "Well, we don't have the law of Moses yet, so it's okay for me to assassinate my son?" No, there was already in scripture a forbidding of taking life. So why does he do this? Well, the passage tells us. His faith led him to the logical conclusion. And it's actually, it's not complex logic. If God has promised that through my son, he will bring salvation to the nations and God has given me this son when I've been 100 years old. Then this God, if need be, is able to raise this son from the dead in order to keep his promise. And so he goes. It's just amazing. He goes. And you remember, I remember this story every single day because there is a huge painting outside my office on the fourth floor of the Palmer Building, of Abraham with the knife in his hand about to smite his son -- when God stayed his hand. That's why Hebrews says, after a fashion, in a figure, he did receive -- his son was as good as dead, as the knife was in his hand. And in that sense, God gave his son back to him as though it were a resurrection.

Now, what's the point of it all? The point of it all is simply this. That Isaac, in a sense, was the very best gift that the Lord had given to Abraham. It was a gift that he had longed for and sometimes been impatient about and with respect to which he had sometimes failed and sinned. But faith had revived and hope had revived. And now it seemed as though God had given him everything that he wanted, everything he had longed for with Sarah for years. At last, they must have felt totally united that God had

given them a son. And then it looked as though God was taking away the blessing He had given.

What's the lesson? The lesson is that what is being tested here is Abraham's faith, isn't it? You know, I have to be honest. I'd rather God left faith untested. I'd be very happy to live the rest of my life with untested faith. But then I'd be a poor thing, wouldn't I? Well, I already am a poor thing. I would be a worse poor thing than I am. In faith terms, I'd be weak and flabby. I'd be terrified of any challenge. You see, God has been building them up and building them up and building him up. And now he's in a position to say to the Lord, and this is what Faith does say to the Lord, "Lord, this is your very best gift to me. And it's still yours. Not mine".

Can you imagine? You know what it's like for us -- can you imagine this 100 year old man and this 90 whatever year old woman and they're out there pushing the buggy as they make their way on their pilgrimage and people come over and say, "How are you doing?" They say, "This is our son". And Abraham, "This is my son. Have you met my son, Isaac?" And is his growing up to be a teenage lad? "This is my son, Isaac. Do you know about my son, Isaac? You want to see a photograph of my son Isaac? Have him on my iPad. Have him in my wallet everywhere." He must have been beside himself about this, son. But apparently, by God's grace, this son is held in an open hand. And he understands every time he says, my son or our son, because that's the only language that we have, there's something inside of him saying, "But he's the Lord's". First and foremost. And we we hold them out to the Lord.

You know. When you begin to live with that style of faith, something very unexpected happens. You become enormously secure. You become enormously secure. And here I'm listening to this. You know, I listen to my own sermons, too, and I don't mean afterwards. That's unbearable, but I listen as you are listening. We're all listening to this and we're, we're all saying, "But that's that's a recipe for insecurity. No, actually, what plagues me is insecurity. Anxiety. Fear. Worry. Sometimes almost paralyzed, I can't stop worrying about this. But when faith comes with open hands to the Lord and and says everything is yours. When I don't, when I don't tighten my hands. Now, those of you who work in the insurance world, this is not a sermon against insurance policies. No. As Cromwell famously said, "You trust in God, but don't be stupid enough to get your powder wet. If we're going to war". But you see, it's this that enables us to sing as

heartily as we do sing, "Let Goods and Kindred Go". Well, that's great to sing when we're here in church. But what happens if goods and kindred do go? "This mortal life also. The body they may kill. God's truth shall triumph still."

And it is a deliverance. It cleanses us from the beginnings of so many neuroses from which, in miniature and great ways, we sometimes suffer. But it's contrary to our natural intuition. It's contrary to the ways of the world. But it is, my dear friend, surely we see this in Abraham. Just simply the most delightful way to live. Because it gives us poise in the midst of this strange and sometimes exquisitely painful world. Because everything we have: those we love, whom we hold in our hands before the Lord, we hold with open palms directed towards Him. And we say, "You love these more than we love them. And we therefore can entrust them to you and learn to pass the test."

Now, this test was unique, wasn't it? This isn't, this isn't in this sense, this word teaches you and me, but it's not directed to you and me. It's not saying to you and to me, "You know, go up to the mountains and sacrifice your children" any more than when Jesus says to the rich young ruler, "Sell every last thing you possess and go the whole caboodle to the poor and come and follow me, that if God has endowed you with riches, you need to get rid of them all and live a life of penury". But both of those instances are applications of the same principle that does apply to us. Which in the case of the rich young ruler, was this. Dear young man, you are in bondage to your riches until you learn to hold them with open hands in my presence to dispose of as I please. And the tragic thing about that story in the Gospels, Mark chapter ten is one of the places where it's told, is we're told that the young man went away with a heavy heart and he didn't stay long enough to hear Jesus say to the disciples who were just bowled over by this and saying, "Well, we've left everything. What about us?" And he says, "No one has ever left anything for my sake, and the gospel's, but has received a hundredfold in this time." Even if there are persecutions with it. The world to come. Eternal life. He isn't our debtor. Ever. All we have is safe with him. And when we grasp that, we are able to pass the test.

And so the fourth thing that we find here very briefly in verses 20 to 22 is that. Abraham and Sarah, having obeyed God's command and trusted God's promise and passed God's test now experience God's faithfulness.

Have you ever puzzled over the fact that these next few verses in the Old Testament cover about 30 chapters, more than half of Genesis. These great figures, Isaac. And Jacob. And Joseph. And his children. And yet the author of Hebrews is -- slowly as though "they don't signify", as Jane Austen would put it, if she had written *Pride and Prejudice*, which, of course, I think she did. Why just pass them over? I think the reason is because he's actually still talking about Abraham here. And what he wants to say about Abraham is, "Now do you see how Abraham began to experience the faithfulness of God to his promises?" Yes, there are all kinds of imperfections, but he says "By faith, his son Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith. Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh". And you see what he's done? Just like in a moment, a flash before our eyes. He's begun with father and moved to son and moved to grandson and moved to great grandson. Some of you have lived to see that, but he moves even to great, great grandsons. That Abraham would not live to see. But what he's saying is, do you see that Abraham himself, even in the immediate future, as well as the longer term future, although he didn't fully see the consummation of God's promises with his own eyes. He tasted enough of God's covenant faithfulness to see it being worked out in his family and in his children, and, as promised, down through his grandchildren to his great grand children. God remaining faithful to his covenant promise.

My dear friends, at the end of the day, that's the only security we need. I'm the great romantic in my dreams, not in reality. But I've read enough to know. that all the statistics suggest that what a woman is looking for in a life partner, best friend and husband, which incidentally are all three one and the same thing, -- is security. And from a human point of view, you look at Abraham's life and say, there's no woman going to find security in this man. But you see the security that really matters. It's not the security that your husband provides for you with the things that are in this world. But the security he provides for you in himself. And in the family. And if the relationship is secure in Christ, if the family is secure in Christ, at the end of the day, the other things don't matter very much. Because the only things you and I possess that are going to last forever, are those we love. Your home's going to go. Your bank balance is going to go. The honors and awards you've received, they're all going to go. Everything is going to go. Nothing is going to last. But this woman you married. Or are going to marry. This husband you married or are going to marry. These children, grandchildren, great

grandchildren. They're going to last forever and forever and forever and forever. And, forever. And what we really need to know is that they are going to be secure.

And there must have been moments in this family tree when it looked as though security had gone out the window. Just as perhaps as true in your family tree. It looks, perhaps, in children, grandchildren things have gone out the window. But here's this couple who resolutely trusted in the covenant promise of God, even for things they would not see in their lifetime. And the amazing thing is that God was gloriously faithful to the promises that he had given, even when things seemed to be falling apart.

I happened on something, on my computer, just yesterday. That I didn't even know I had. It was the bulletin for a funeral service I conducted maybe a dozen years or so ago of a young Russian woman, whom in his gracious providence God brought into our church and brought into especially my life and Dorothy's life as an encouragement of grace. Her name was Faina. She had studied in the University of Moscow in the days of the Cold War. Never forget her telling me how she was, she was brought into the university on the 25th of December, which for most of us is Christmas Day, in order to write the mandatory essay entitled, "Why I Do Not Believe in the Existence of God". That was her background. By God's grace, she became a Christian believer. And I baptized her. I'll never forget that moment watching, watching this, this kind of magnificent Russian face. It had I am a Russian written all over it and a single tear running down her cheeks as I baptized her into the name of Jesus Christ. Only in the year or so that followed to develop leukemia. And despite the physicians monumental efforts, to die, as her husband and I recited together the words of the 23rd Psalm. And I came across the bulletin for her funeral. And I'd forgotten that on the front of it were words that she had written to me a few months before she died. These words. "I live day by day, drawing on God's power, wisdom and faithfulness." And then a word of exhortation to her friends, "Just continue to draw on God's never ending strength, amazing love and everlasting faithfulness". "When all around my soul gives way. He then is all my hope and stay. On Christ, the solid rock I stand." And we have seen him. We find him. We are able to trust him. We know things Abraham never knew. And so we know, "On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand".

Is that where you're standing today? On Christ? And Christ alone?. It begins to set you free to live by faith in a world like this for the glory and joy of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray together.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father, thank you that you have given us such monumental illustrations of what it means to trust you. We pray that through your word, our faith may be built up, that we may become strong and free to live for your glory. And we ask this in Jesus name. Amen.