

Waiting on the Promises of God

Heroes, Part 7

Hebrews 11:8-22

There's an old hymn from my childhood that many of you may have sung as well growing up. The lyrics of the first stanza read,

*Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
Through eternal ages let His praises ring.
Glory in the highest I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God.ⁱ*

As I studied the next Hero of faith, listed in the registry of Hebrews 11, these lyrics came back to my mind – however, with one change – a change that could better summarize the lives of Abraham and Sarah.

Instead of *standing* on the promises, I changed it to read, *waiting* on the Promises of God.

Listen to the second stanza with that word change in mind:

*Waiting on the promises that cannot fail
When the howling storms of doubt and fear
assail
By the living Word of God I shall prevail
Waiting on the promises of God*

This fits Abraham and Sarah's lives perfectly.

Now the writer of Hebrews condenses chapters of Old Testament narrative and a biography spanning more than 100 years into 11 verses in Hebrews chapter 11.

And in so doing, he presents the life of Abraham – the forefather of our faith – in 4 movements.

1. The Initiation of Faith

We'll call the first movement, the initiation of faith.

Follow along as I read at *verse 8. By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob; fellow heirs of the same promise; 10. For he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

If you go back the extended account of Abraham's life, you discover that he is living in a city by the name of Ur.

It's a city on the Euphrates River in what is now southern Iraq.ⁱⁱ

Most people will automatically think of the city of Ur as some prehistoric campground where men ran around with clubs, dragging their wives by the hair.

Thanks to extensive archeology, we're shown once again that ancient mankind was both sophisticated and educated.

Excavations going back to the days of Abraham reveal cobblestone streets, academic

buildings and three-story houses with tiled flooring.

They have uncovered buildings with Ur stamped on its bricks; along with extensive evidence of organization, wealth and luxury.ⁱⁱⁱ

In fact, in one discovery dating back to the time of Abraham, they found a clay tablet; and on that tablet, whoever had been using it, was the working out of a problem in trigonometry – a problem they were still working on at Oxford and Cambridge [75 years ago].^{iv}

Having barely survived Algebra 1, I would not have even recognized that math problem.

Archeologists also uncovered at Ur a massive ziggurat built before Abraham was even born – dedicated to their chief god.

At the top of the ziggurat – which was a pyramid shaped building – they found at the top level a room covered in silver, dedicated to their moon-god, Nammu.^v

Some historians believe that Abraham's father was a high-priest in this false religion and that their family was one of the most prominent families in the city.

I'm telling you all of this so that you can catch a better glimpse of young Abraham. He was a member of a leading family, living in an organized, educated and wealthy city in the Middle East, situated on the bank of a beautiful river.

And into that world, suddenly, one day, the glory of God appeared to Abraham – immediately shattering the myths of moon gods; revealing the existence of a personal, true and living God.

And God, surrounded by the mantle of glory, appeared to Abraham, according to Stephen's one and only sermon in Acts 7.

And God delivered to Abraham this singular message – “Leave your country, your family, your world and go to a land that I will show you – this land that I will give to you.”

At that moment, Abraham placed his faith in the reality of this living Lord and he obeyed the word of God.

The writer of Hebrews 11 wants to make sure his audience understands that Abraham's obedience did not produce his faith, his obedience proved his faith – in the living God.

I love this little phrase tucked inside *verse 8*. ***And he went out, not knowing where he was going.***

There were no billowy clouds spelling out – “Promised Land 800 miles this way”.

When you travel, you want those signs, right? How far away the cities are; where the pit stops are; what gas stations are up ahead.

I drove to Columbus, Ohio this past Saturday, preached on Sunday morning and drove back Sunday night. I had all sorts of directions: written directions from an internet site as well as a GPS mounted on the dash of my rental car . . . and that GPS woman just chattered away.

What I really wanted to see was that brown and cream billboard sign announcing, “Cracker Barrel” ahead!

Abraham had no map, GPS or favorite restaurants; he had nothing for directions but the command of God's word – reiterated in Genesis 12 – leave your country; your extended family and your house of comfort.

And here's the promise – as you are leaving, I will be directing your steps.

I want to point out another phrase that can easily be missed; notice how the next verse informs us that he will be ***living in tents (verse 9)***.

We might be tempted to think – we'll that's the way they lived. No, Abraham has come from a wealthy family, more than likely owning one of those 3-story houses with paved floors, open courtyards, luxurious gardens and a riverfront view.

God is asking Abraham to leave all of that and go live in a tent.

That would be like God telling you that He's going to give you and your descendants the land of Scotland as an inheritance, and then tell you you're going to live the rest of your life over there in a camper.^{vi}

Which was also another way of telling you – you are never really going to settle down again – during your lifetime.

He was given the promise of a land, without ever enjoying possession of the land.^{vii}

And how long would he live like that? For 100 years. And at the end of his life, the only

piece of property he actually owned was the grave site he purchased from a pagan so he could bury his wife.

What are you waiting for, Abraham? “I’m waiting on the promises of God.”

And just what kind of promise *is* that, Abraham?

We’re not told all that God revealed to Abraham, but it’s startling to consider the implications of *verse 10. For he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

What kind of city is that?

That can only refer to a still-future city; one which Abraham had evidently been told all about – *the Heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (Hebrews 12:22).*

This is the city with gates of pearl and streets of gold.

What are you waiting for, Abraham? And why are you camped out in a tent?

“I’m waiting for the New Jerusalem . . . the city designed and built by God . . . I’m willing to wait here in this tent on the promises of God.”

Oswald Chambers lectured in the Middle East until taken home suddenly after having an emergency appendectomy from which he never recovered. He said this – with his characteristic realism regarding the Christian experience, “The life of faith is not so much one of mounting up with wings as eagles, as it is a life of walking and not fainting . . . faith never knows where it is being led, but it loves and knows the One who is leading.”^{viii}

2. The Cultivation of Faith

In these Four Movements of faith, we’re shown the initiation of faith; secondly, the writer of Hebrews shows us the cultivation of faith.

You see, you might be tempted to wonder where Abraham’s wife was in this walk of faith.

Was Sarah frustrated by this change of events? Was she fuming about her husband’s farfetched plans? What’s all this about a promised land and a promised son and a promised seed? Was Sarah kicking and fussing as she packed her bags and mounted her camel for a long ride to who knows where?^{ix}

We’ve left our beautiful home on the river for a camper in the wilderness? Are you kidding?

So where was Sarah in all of this? The writer makes sure we understand she was right by the side of Abraham. In fact, *1 Peter 3:6* refers to her submissive spirit.

The author of Hebrews clarifies here in *verse 11, By faith, even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life – note this – since she considered Him faithful who had promised. 12. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of the heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.*

What are you waiting for, Sarah? I too, am waiting on the promises of God.

Now if you go back into the fuller account of Genesis, you learn that this Patriarch of faith was originally named Abram. God would later change his name to Abraham.

Abram means, “Exalted father; or “father of many” or in our modern vernacular we would say, “Proud papa”.

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote that Abram was always having to explain that he wasn’t quite living up to his name. The questions would come from merchants and guests, “Who are you? How old are you? How long have you lived here? What is your name?”

“Abram.”

“Oh, congratulations – you must be the proud father of many sons. How many sons do you have?”

“None.”

Abram must have steeled himself for the half-concealed snort of sarcastic humor about the absurdity of his name.

Barnhouse writes I once knew a man whose last name was Wrench, who told me how irritating it was to hear the well-worn jokes and wisecracks from people who met him. He would cringe as someone would hear his name and begin one of the wisecracks he had heard before like, “Are you the left-handed wrench; are you related to monkey wrench?” I also know a Mr. Meek who had been asked a

thousand times if he had really inherited the earth.”^x

Can you imagine the laughter behind Abram’s back – proud father of many.

And Abram waited it out. That is, until he finally decided he’d waited on God long enough and coupled with his servant girl who delivered a son named Ishmael.

I mean, for goodness sake, Abram had waited long enough . . . he was now 86 years old!

Beloved, this was a tragic *lapse* of faith, while God wanted to *cultivate* their faith and have them wait for their legitimate son, Isaac who would continue the promise of God for the coming nation and, ultimately, the Jewish Messiah.

Ishmael will grow up and father the Arab nations; to this day, the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac are fighting over a dozen square miles in the Middle East. And every night you can turn on your television to see and hear how the battle is raging.

And the fighting won’t end either, by the way, until Jesus Christ the Messiah comes to set up his kingdom in Jerusalem.

If we fast forward the biography of Abram, thirteen years after Ishmael is born, God comes to meet with him to remind him of the promises as well as inform him of a significant name change. God announced that He was changing the name of Abram – father of many, to Abraham – father of *multitudes*.

This appearance by God tests their faith to the limit. Both Abraham and Sarah are beyond the ability to conceive – in fact, **Hebrews 11:12** says their bodies were as good as dead – it was simply biologically *impossible* to conceive and deliver the promised son.

Think of it; it’s one thing to be called him Abram when he has only one illegitimate son; it’s audacity to call him the father of multitudes.

But that’s exactly what God does.

So . . . how is God going to pull this off now? Haven’t Abraham and Sarah missed the window of opportunity?

What can God do now?

Hudson Taylor, the pioneer missionary in China put our walk of faith in these terms; I read in his biography this statement he once made, “If

we are obeying God, the responsibility rests with *Him*, and not with us.”^{xi}

What a great statement. The responsibility to fulfill the promises of God belong to, well, God. Even when we can’t make it happen . . . God can.

Faith is following God into the unknown – the tests and trials of life – and then waiting, armed only with the promises of God.

And the responsibility rests with God.

This was the cultivation of their faith while they waited all these long years – even when they lapsed and failed in their walk of faith they would learn even more.

3. The Anticipation of Faith

The third movement of faith given to us in **Hebrews 11** is simply a restatement; you have the initiation of faith, the cultivation of faith and now, thirdly, you have the anticipation of faith. ***Listen to this – verse 13. All these died in faith, without receiving the promise, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.***

What are they waiting for? ***Notice verse 16 – they desire a better country*** – that word for desire means *to yearn after*.

And what better country is there for them? Notice, ***it’s a heavenly one – this is the city God has prepared for them.***

That city was represented by the Promised land – and the promised Messiah – and the promised nation – and the promised kingdom and on and on.

All these people died believing it was going to happen and it didn’t happen while they were alive.

And notice what they endured – they’re called here in **verse 13, *strangers and exiles.***

The word *exile* is a word for someone not much higher than a slave in the social scale of the ancient world. They had to pay annual taxes as foreigners living in the land; they were always considered outsiders by those in the community. And this word here translated ***strangers*** is even more harsh – it can be translated *refugees*.^{xii}

Imagine, living like refugees in a land they were promised to inherit one day.

In the meantime, they never were really home.

In a second century letter by a man named Diagnetus wrote this of Christians and summarized this spirit of promise we believe by faith when he said, “To them, every foreign country is theirs, yet every country is foreign.”

Here’s a theme song that should fit us all . . . this world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through.

We’re not settlers, we’re pilgrims . . . we’re just passin’ through and travelin’ on to that city, made by God.

That’s what *verses 20-22* are all about.

Notice *verse 20. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau* – his twin grandsons, *even regarding things to come*.

Can you see old Isaac communicating these prophecies and promises to his twin grandsons . . . “Listen boys, there’s a glorious city . . . a better country . . . a coming Messiah; this isn’t all there is boys . . . there are *things to come*.”

Verse 21 – By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph – his grandsons – and complained that it hadn’t happened yet . . . no, the text reads, and he worshipped.

Verse 22, the legacy of faith continues as each generation lives out this anticipation of faith; notice, *By faith Joseph when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones*.

I love this. Joseph says, “I’ve lived here just about all my life, but I’m not an Egyptian – I’m a Jew. And I don’t want my bones put in a pyramid – a symbol of idolatry – no, I want my bones to experience the coming resurrection in the land of promise.

Man, these people died in faith – they’d seen the things to come with 20/20 spiritual eyesight . . . they had a believed by faith the word of God.

What are you waiting for Isaac – what are you waiting for Jacob – what are you waiting for Joseph? We’re waiting for the promises of God.

4. The Declaration of Faith

The fourth and final movement of faith in the life of Abraham is repeated for us; we’ve seen the initiation of faith; the cultivation of faith; the anticipation of faith and now, the declaration of faith.

Verse 17. By faith Abraham when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18. It was he to whom it was said “In Isaac your descendants shall be called. 19. He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

What a test this was. God commands Abraham to offer up his son. But the promise had been clearly given that Isaac would carry on Abraham’s line and continue building that line into a living nation, numbering as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore.

But now the command of God seemed to contradict the promise of God. It’s going to be nullified.

He’s asking Abraham to give back his son. Is God some kind of Indian giver?

Think of what God is asking of Abraham.

I’m reminded of the well-known fable where the pig and the hen were out in the farm yard. And they’re out there talking things over and trying to come up with something to do for the farmer who was taking such wonderful care of them. They thought and they thought . . . until finally the hen said, “I’ve got it.” Let’s make him breakfast. I’ll provide the eggs and you provide the bacon.” The pig wasn’t too bright, but he thought about it and then it hit him, “Hey, that’s not fair . . . you’re going to give him an offering, but you want me to give him my life.”

God was asking Abraham to make an irreplaceable sacrifice.

If Isaac died it was all over.

So Abraham is putting everything on that altar. His hopes; his promise; his future; the object of his love and affection he’d waited more than half his life to hold.

The son you’ve waited for from Me – now give him back to Me.

I can still remember that tiled hallway in Baylor Hospital in Dallas, Texas. I was filling out the paperwork to admit my wife. It’s a long

story, but what began as a routine doctor's visit turned into immediate admission and within a few hours our twin sons would be born. I was all a flutter . . . Marsha was escorted to the delivery room and the clerk started handing me all these forms to fill out. I had no idea what I was filling out – for all I knew, I'd just signed up for five years in the Navy.

I filled them all out anyway.

I'll never forget that woman holding out to me one more form and she asked me a startling question – “Do you intend to keep your babies after they are born?”

I looked at her and said, “Of course.” I'm sure forms and admission procedures have changed over these 27 years – in fact, I was never asked that when our daughters were born.

I remember asking her, “Why would you ask me that question?” She said, “Well, we have a list of people who are waiting for parents to give up their infant and if you had filled out this form, we would have contacted the people who are currently at the top of our list.”

I said, “Wow . . . if you don't mind me asking you a question – how many people are on that list?”

She said, “Nearly 2,000 couples . . . and that's just for this hospital in this city.”

This just so happens to be Adoption Sunday – a nationally designated Sunday on this subject.

Can you imagine going through all the waiting and all the forms and all the money and all the travel and prayer and agony and waiting and waiting and waiting only to finally be able to adopt your child and then you raise them and love them and train them and after a number of years God comes along and says, “Now I want you to put your child back up for adoption . . . I want you to give that child away.”

Either illustration allows you to feel the pain of Abraham's heart with this incredible test of faith.

What could cause Abraham to go through with this deed . . . to obey this command? We're told in *verse 19 – Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac up from the dead.*

He didn't know why God would do it this way, but He assumed God knew what He was doing.

What he didn't know was how much Isaac would become a picture of Jesus Christ – God's only son.

And by the way, this was just as much a test of faith for Isaac in the promise of God that a nation would come through him, as it was for Abraham.

Isaac isn't a little boy either; he's somewhere between the ages of 30 and 35. I wouldn't be surprised to learn one day that Isaac was exactly the same age of Jesus when He was offered up as our substitutionary sacrifice.

Like Jesus, Isaac went willingly. He lay upon the wood of that altar willingly.

Just as Christ, the only unique Son of God, obeyed the will of His Father and he was nailed to His altar of wood - willingly.

The hill where Abraham and Isaac passed their test of faith is a place that later became known as Golgotha – taken over by the Romans as the place of official executions by crucifixion.

Golgotha was at the northern summit of Mount Moriah, where many believe Abraham prepared to offer Isaac.

I wouldn't be surprised to find out one day that the very spot of Abraham's altar where his son Isaac prepared to die; the exact spot where Christ literally gave his life, by the will of His Father, to pay the penalty as an offering for all our sin.

Abraham, the father of faith, illustrated with Isaac the very depths of the gospel of Christ.

For Christ would literally die and then literally resurrect from the dead; He will literally come back one day and literally set up His kingdom in Israel and rule the world and all the faithful will reign with Him on that day.

What are all of us waiting for? We are waiting, to this very day, on the promises of God.

In the meantime, you pass your tests of faith as you continue to believe that God will make all things right . . . that God will give you strength to walk without fainting.

Even though circumstances seem to contradict His promises; His promises remain faithful and true.

Thousands of Christians in North America have learned one of Don Moen's praise songs

which affirms God's sovereign involvement in their lives. Most who sing this song, however, do not know the kind of hopelessness from which the lyrics came.

Several years ago, Don was awakened in the middle of the night. His mother-in-law called to tell him and his wife of a car accident that would impact their entire family. Don's sister in law, her husband and their four boys were on a trip. They were involved in a car accident – all of them seriously injured – this couple's 8 year old son was killed.

As Don and his wife grieved with and for their family members, they felt rather helpless at communicating any kind of hope to these bereaved parents.

Don prayed and asked the Lord to help him express hope, perhaps through a song. In a very short time, Don wrote out some lyrics and then wrote a tune that, to this day, gives fellow

believers a deep sense of hope in the promises of God. It goes like this –

*God will make a way,
Where there seems to be no way
He works in ways we cannot see
He will make a way for me
He will be my guide
Hold me closely to His side
With love and strength for each new day
He will make a way . . . He will make a way.^{xiii}*

From the life of this hero of faith – and all the heroes associated with Abraham . . . faith is walking into the unknown, and then waiting, and all you have to cling to are the promises of God.

And you discover that the promises of God are enough.

What are we doing, church?

We are *waiting* on the promises of God.

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i Russell Kelso Carter (1849-1926)

ii R. Kent Hughes, Hebrews (Crossway Books, 1993), p. 95

iii G. Campbell Morgan, The Triumphs of Faith: Expositions of Hebrews 11 (Baker, 1980), p. 142

iv Ibid, p. 78

v Hughes, p. 96

vi Adapted from Hughes, p. 97

vii John MacArthur, Hebrews (Moody Press, 1983), p. 330

viii Life Application Bible: Hebrews (Tyndale, 1997), p. 182

ix Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, The Practical Life of Faith: A Study of Hebrews 11 (Insight for Living, 1989), p. 18

x Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans: Volume 2 (Eerdmans Publishing, 1982) p. 312

xi Howard Taylor, Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission (OMF International, 1996), p. 31

xii William Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews (Westminster, 1976), p. 148

xiii Don Moen, God Will Make a Way (Integrity's Hosanna Music/ASCAP, 1990)