

XXVII. The Faith of Abraham

January 29/30/31, 2019

Hebrews 11:8-16

Aim: To imitate the faith of the patriarch Abraham, who looked for the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises in a heaven country, in a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

A. Actions of Faith (Hebrews 11:8-12)

Phillips: Of all the studies of the life of faith in Hebrews 11, the longest and most involved is that of Abraham, the patriarch of Israel. His is also one of the longer accounts in the Old Testament, running from chapters 12 to 25 in the Book of Genesis. Abraham's significance can hardly be overestimated. It was through him that God gave the covenant of grace by which we are saved. Therefore, our salvation rests in part on God's faithfulness to Abraham. Paul gives Abraham the important designation 'the father of all who believe' (Rom. 4:11). Thus we are saved as the spiritual offspring promised by God to Abraham, and his faith provides a model we are bound to follow. In the New Testament, Abraham provides the example of faith par excellence. In the Old Testament, he is the first person to be specifically commended for his faith. Genesis 15:6 says, '[Abram] believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness.' The apostle Paul particularly emphasizes Abraham as a model for faith (see Romans 3-4; Galatians).

Bruce: The faith of Abel, Enoch, and Noah might have to be inferred from what is recorded of them (although for all three of them it is a certain inference); but Abraham's faith is explicitly attested in the Genesis narrative: 'he believed Yahweh; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Gen. 15:6). Our author has already referred to Abraham's faith in the promise of God and his patient waiting for its fulfillment (6:13ff.); here he enlarges on the same theme. Repeatedly throughout his career Abraham acted as a man who walked by faith and not by sight, and made good his claim to be recognized by all subsequent ages as the father of the faithful.

Hughes: Without any doubt Abraham is the greatest example of faith in the Bible. Of course, others such as Enoch and Noah lived extraordinary lives of faith, but none are so closely chronicled as that of Abraham. And we do not find such detail about the inception, progress, and ultimate display of faith as is given regarding Abraham in his epic life as recorded in Genesis 12-25. The Bible holds Abraham up as the great example of faith and the father of all who truly believe (Neh. 9:7-8; Gal. 3:6-7; cp. Heb. 2:16; James 2:23). Abraham is thus the undisputed paragon of faith. And so, because of the greatness of Abraham's faith, we have much to gain from his example, which is given extended coverage in Hebrews' great Hall of Faith.

MacArthur: Abraham is a composite of God's pattern of faith. He reveals the totality of the true faith life, all the ingredients that constitute it. Abraham was the father of the Jewish people, and he is therefore presented to the Jews to whom the book of Hebrews was written as the most strategic example of faith. They needed to realize that Abraham was more than the father of their race; he also was, by example, the father of the faithful, the father of everyone who lives by faith in God.

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1. The Promised Land (11:8-10)

a) Faith Obeys (11:8)

(1) Obedience (11:8a)

⁸*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place...*

Phillips: We learn of God's call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1. Abraham's life of faith begins here, as our passage says, by faith he 'obeyed.... And he went out, not knowing where he was going.' This was not only the beginning of Abraham's salvation, but an important beginning in the history of God's redemptive work. We see in Abraham that faith acts in response to God's call. It is God's initiative that is emphasized at the beginning of Abraham's life of faith, God's sovereign grace that goes forth with His saving call. It is important to realize that Abraham was not saved because there was something special about him, but by virtue of God's sovereign choice. Abraham was not singled out because of his faith, but because of God's grace. We might think he was picked because he was a good man. But the Bible argues otherwise (Is. 51:1-2; Jos. 24:2-3). Abraham was not seeking God; he was a pagan idol-worshiper when God called him. Abraham was saved, then, because God sought him. His faith was preceded by God's call and responded to God's call, a call that came by grace alone by God's sovereign choice.

MacArthur: Abraham was a sinful heathen who grew up in an unbelieving and idolatrous society. We do not know exactly how or when God first made Himself known to Abraham, but he was raised in a home that was pagan (Jos. 24:2). His native city of Ur was in Chaldea, in the general region called Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Isaiah refers to Abraham as 'the rock from which you were hewn' and 'the quarry from which you were dug' (Is. 51:1-), reminding his fellow Jews that God sovereignly condescended to call Abraham out of paganism and idolatry in order to bless him and the world through him.

Hughes: It is important to note that Abraham's believing life began with an immediate act of obedience. Faith and obedience being inseparable in man's relation to God, Abraham would never have obeyed God's call if he had not truly taken God at His word. Abraham's obedience was thus an *outward* evidence of his *inward* faith. His obedience was so prompt that the Greek text presents Abraham as setting out on his journey while the word of God was still ringing in his ears.

MacArthur: In the Greek, 'he was called' is a present participle, and the translation could be, 'when he was being called.' In other words, as soon as he understood what God was saying, he started packing. It was instant obedience. It may have taken several days, or even weeks or months, to make final preparation for the trip, but in his mind he was already on the way. From then on, everything he did revolved around obeying God's call.

Schreiner: The parade of faith continues, and Abraham naturally follows Noah. The author reflects on the command of God in Genesis 12:1 and the response of Abraham in Genesis 12:4—'So Abram went.' Hebrews summarizes what occurred in the words, 'By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed.' It is obvious that he obeyed, but Hebrews adds that Abraham's obedience flowed from his faith. It is clear from what the writer tells us here that Abraham's first act of faith did not take place in Genesis 15:6, even though that verse is the first time we are told that Abraham believed. He dared to leave his homeland only because he trusted in God.

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Bruce: Abraham's faith was manifested first of all by the readiness with which he left his home at the call of God, for the promise of a new home which he had never seen before and which, even after he entered it, he never possessed in person. 'By faith Abraham, in obedience...'; faith and obedience are inseparable in one's relation to God. If the patriarchal narrative says in one place that Abraham was justified because he *believed* God, in another place God confirms to Isaac the promise made to Abraham 'because Abraham *obeyed* my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws' (Gen. 26:5). He would not have obeyed the divine call had he not taken God at His word; his obedience was the outward evidence of his inward faith.

(2) Inheritance (11:8b)

...that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.

Phillips: Astonishingly, verse 8 tells us that he didn't even know where he was going. Abraham did not have a crystal-clear plan, a vision that mapped out where he would be in five or ten or fifty years. Rather, he met God, he heard God's call, and at great cost to himself and surely with much perplexity, he obeyed and went. Faith always demands decisive action and always manifests itself in obedience to God's command.

Bruce: Our author points out that Abraham did not receive the promise of the inheritance at the time of his first call; the land to which he was directed to go was the 'place which he was to receive as his inheritance'; the promise of the inheritance was not given until he had returned from Egypt and Lot had chosen the well-watered circuit of Jordan to settle in (Gen. 13:14-17); it was reaffirmed to him along with the promise of an heir (Gen. 15:18-21), and again after the bestowal of the covenant of circumcision (Gen. 17:8). The divine bidding was sufficient for him at his first call, and 'he went forth, not knowing where he was going.' The promise of the inheritance was not in the first instance an incentive to obedience; it was the reward of his obedience.

Schreiner: Abraham was promised a land (Gen. 12:1), which would be his inheritance, but he wasn't told the location of the land when he set out. He trusted that God would reveal the place of his inheritance and that God would give it to him. Faith, the author instructs the readers, does not see the end at the beginning. Faith always trusts in the promises of God, even when it looks as if they won't be fulfilled. The readers should do the same: they must cast themselves entirely on God and believe He will give them the final inheritance.

Hughes: What is more, the text adds that 'he went out, not knowing where he was going.' It was not until later that his destination was revealed to be the land of Canaan. There was a glorious element of abandon in Abraham's faith! Faith spawns reflexive steps of obedience. It steps out. We must not imagine that we have faith if we do not obey. Are we truly obeying God's word to us? Where is our faith?

MacArthur: It was not Abraham's plan to leave Ur and then Haran, and eventually settle in the land of Canaan. In fact, when he left Ur he had no idea where he was going. He was called by God, and only God knew what was in store for him.

(3) Life of Faith

Phillips: The life of faith begins when God reveals Himself to us. In Abraham's case it was apparently a divine visitation. For us it may be hearing God's Word preached, or opening and

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reading a Bible. It may begin by seeing something Christ-like in the life of another person. But in every case faith begins with God revealing Himself to someone lost in sin, ignorant of and unconcerned about Him. We see here, too, what faith requires. Abraham had to leave his home, his family, his prospects for life, to go where God called him. So it is for everyone who would be saved. God calls us not merely to believe some abstract facts, but to obey His call and to follow Him. Abraham's example shows us what real conversion looks like, namely, that there is a definitive change of life. For Abraham, this meant rising when called and going where he was commanded as a manifestation of his trust in God.

Phillips: We begin the life of faith not knowing where we are going. At the beginning, most of us, Abraham included, could not handle an awareness of all that will happen in and to us, all that will be required, all we will give up and receive along the journey of faith. Like us, Abraham really didn't know what was in store, but he had met God and heard His call. He believed, and by faith he obeyed and went. That itself is more than flesh alone can ever do, and it shows that faith is a divine gift inspired and empowered by God Himself.

MacArthur: The life of faith begins with the willingness to leave one's Ur, one's own place of sin and unbelief—to leave the system of the world (cp. Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:14; Gal. 1:4). Giving up the old life is one of the greatest obstacles to coming to Christ, and is also one of the greatest obstacles to faithful living once we are in Christ. The force that makes us want to hold on to the old life is sometimes called *worldliness*. Worldliness may be an act, but primarily it is an attitude. It is wanting to do things that are sinful or selfish or worthless, whether we actually do them or not. One of the surest marks of the demise of worldliness is a change in desires, in loves. As we grow in Christ and in love for Him, our love for the things of the world diminishes. The pilgrimage of faith begins by separating ourselves from the world, and as we concentrate on Jesus and fellowship with Him, soon we do not care about the things we once loved so much.

b) *Faith Sojourns (11:9-10)*

Phillips: The call to faith is always followed by the life of faith; the same principle by which we first are saved enables us to live as saved people. Thus we find in verse 9 the description of Abraham's life in the land of Canaan. We have seen how difficult it is to obey God's call. But many a Christian has learned how much easier it is at the beginning of the life of faith and how much harder it is to live that life of faith over a period of many, many years. Abraham began by obeying God's call, and he persevered by believing God's promise. God had promised him a land as his own inheritance, and Abraham's faith consisted of receiving that promise as he continued to obey and serve.

(1) Land of Promise (11:9)

(a) Sojourner (11:9)

⁹*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.*

Phillips: With fits and starts, Abraham finally arrived in the land of Canaan, which God had promised that he would possess. However, when Abraham got there, he found that it was inhabited by the Canaanites, an idolatrous people who did not know the Lord. By faith he lived there, not as its owner but as a stranger 'in a foreign land.' He lived as a sojourner, a resident alien in the very land God had promised would be his own.

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Hughes: Having shown that it was by faith that Abraham obeyed, setting out of the promised land, the writer adds that it was also by faith that he was able to be a sojourner in the promised land. God had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham, but during his life (and the lives of his sons, Isaac and Jacob), God ‘gave him no inheritance ... not even a foot’s length’ (Acts 7:5). The only land Abraham ever owned was Sarah’s tomb, a cave in a field in Machpelah near Hebron, which he bought from Ephron the Hittite (Gen. 23).

Bruce: Even when he received the promise of the inheritance, it was the promise that he received, not the visible possession of the land; but to Abraham the promise of God was as substantial as its realization. He lived thereafter in the good of that promise. Year after year he pitched his moving tent amid the settled inhabitants of Palestine, not owning a square foot of the country until he bought the field of Machpelah near Hebron from Ephron the Hittite as a family burial-ground. Yet, living like a resident alien in the land which had been promised to him and his descendants, he did not grow impatient. Some visible tokens of the word of God he did indeed receive, in Isaac the promised child of his old age, and even in Isaac’s son Jacob, through whom the line of promise was to run. (According to the chronology of the received text of Genesis, Abraham’s grandsons Esau and Jacob were fifteen years old when he died (cp. Gen. 21:5; 25:7, 26), although Abraham’s death is recorded before the birth of the twins). But Isaac and Jacob in their turn did not live to see the fulfillment of the promise that the land would be theirs; they remained nomads like Abraham himself.

Schreiner: When Abraham arrived in the land, he didn’t take immediate possession. Indeed, he didn’t possess it at all! It seemed as if God’s promises wasn’t true. He lived in the land as a sojourner and as an exile (cp. Gen. 17:8; 20:1; 21:34; 24:37; 1 Chr. 16:19). He didn’t establish a domicile but lived as a shepherd in tents, constantly on the move. And life was the same for Isaac and Jacob. They didn’t possess the land during their lifetimes either. They too lived as sojourners traveling from place to place in the land (Gen. 26:3; 37:1; 47:9). Even though the promise was not realized in their lifetimes, they clung to the promise.

MacArthur: As a pilgrim, Abraham was immediately willing to give up his homeland, his friends, his business, his religion—everything. He wasted no time putting all these things behind him. But faith also has a time for waiting and for being patient. ‘Dwelling in tents’ was the way of travelers and nomads. Even in Abraham’s time, tents were not considered permanent residences. Not only Abraham but also his son and grandson, Isaac and Jacob, lived out their lives in tents. They were in the land God had promised, but they did not settled down in it. Those great patriarchs, in fact, would *never* possess the land, except by faith. The land was in sight but not in hand. Near as it was, the land was still only a promise. Abraham did not build any houses or cities. ‘He lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land.’ As a transient in the land, he had to be patient. Because the land was promised to him, patience must have been all the harder. It was promised but never possessed. Abraham’s faith required a great deal of patience in order to live without grumbling as an alien in his own land.

(b) Life of Faith

Hughes: The word for Abraham’s existence was *dissonance*—he never fit in. His religion was different and far above that of the land. He was a monotheist, and his neighbors were polytheistic pagans. His standards of morality were rooted in the character of God, while theirs came from the gods they themselves had created. His worldview invited repeated collisions with that of the inhabitants. He was always living in conscious dissonance. What a lesson for us!

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The life of faith demands that we live in dissonance with the unbelieving world. A life of faith is not anti-cultural, but counter-cultural. Thus, a vibrant faith is always matched with a sense of dis-ease, a pervasive in-betweenness, a sense of being a camper. This does not mean, of course, that Abraham was separate from culture. To the contrary, the Genesis record reveals he was deeply involved in the politics of the land. But there was always that dissonance. He was never at home!

Hughes: The parallels between Abraham's experience and that of the Christian are easy to see, because the Christian has the promise of an ultimate land. In fact, every believer is called to step out in faithful obedience and to follow Christ as he leads on to that land. All of us are, by faith, to obey and go as God directs, though we do not know where the path will take us. All of us are, by faith, to become willing sojourners, living in constant dissonance with the world as we await our final inheritance. It is a dangerous thing when a Christian begins to feel permanently settled in this world.

Phillips: This presents a classic picture of the life of faith. We have great promises from God which belong to us now, but by and large have not yet been manifested in our experience. Abraham went to the land promised to him, but when he got there it did not yet belong to him. This shows us the 'already-not yet' character of the life of faith. We possess the promises already, but they are not yet consummated in our lifetime. This is what Hebrews 11 emphasizes from the beginning, that faith is the evidence, the possession of things not yet seen. By faith Abraham lived in the land that was not yet his own. Abraham's experience informs us that the life of faith is not one of receiving all of God's promises in tangible form, but rather of believing them in the face of hardship, receiving them by faith, living as Abraham did out of confidence in and reliance on God. From beginning to end, the Christian life is one of faith and not of sight.

Phillips: We live this life in a world that is not our own, as pilgrims rather than possessors, as strangers living in an alien country. This means that Christians do not belong to this world but to another (cp. Phil. 3:20). Our allegiance belongs to another realm. As strangers, our long-term interests are not attached to this present world, which we know is passing away. We do not find our comfort here, not because we are a difficult sort of people, but because our permanent home is elsewhere and we have a growing homesickness for the place where we belong. Being a pilgrim means that we do not love the things of this world (cp. Col. 3:1-3). It is always good, therefore, for Christians to assess how tightly worldly things grip our hearts.

Phillips: Therefore, we are to live as those who expect to wake up soon in the realm of glory. That is where we belong in Christ. This is who we are, this tells us where we belong. We are God's chosen people, his elect and beloved children in Christ (cp. 1 Pe. 1:1-2). This means that though the world accounts you nothing, you are chosen of God. It is a hard truth that you do not fit in here, that the world is not likely to think much of you as you live by faith within its precincts. There is a reason why secular history records nothing of Abraham—because Abraham and what he represented were of no interest, of no appeal to the world. And as you lead a quiet, godly life, you will not interest the world much either. You do not belong to it, but you do belong to God. He cherishes you, even if the world despises you—as it did our Lord Jesus Christ. God has set you apart for Himself, He has sanctified you by the Holy Spirit, He has purchased you by the precious blood of Jesus to be His very own.

Phillips: The reality of our pilgrimage is often difficult for us to bear. We grow impatient for more possessions, resentful that we cannot be like the others around us. The desire to put down

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real roots here in this world, a weariness with the pilgrimage of faith, leads many into spiritual difficulties. This is why we must live by faith, as Abraham did. We live and feed our faith upon promises, delighting in God's boundless love for us, remembering our end which will be so different from that of this world. And while we wait, God give us Himself as our present comfort, our near companion, our saving help.

(2) City of God (11:10)

¹⁰*For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

Phillips: This paragraph concludes with one of the greatest statements of the life of faith, a statement that has inspired the hearts of countless believers. Verse 10 tells us what kept Abraham going all those long years. Imagine how many times Abraham looked out from the flaps of his tent at some great city or settlement in that land. He must have yearned for those comforts. He had a keen desire for the things offered in that land, dusty as it was—a longing to settle down, to live in peace and rest. But our text tells us plainly that by faith he lifted his eyes upward to better if distant things, to a city far surpassing anything set before his eyes—a city with foundations—designed and built not by Canaanite kings, but by the Lord of heaven.

Phillips: There is an obvious comparison between the tents in which Abraham lived, dwellings without foundations, and the cities of Canaan with their earthly foundations, and finally the city to come, the City of God, with its eternal foundations. Abraham longed for foundations, but he chose the eternal instead of that which passes away. Abraham looked to what is to come, not contenting himself with the offerings of the world, not sacrificing his inheritance for the refuse of a dying humanity. Abraham's heart was in the city to come, and he placed his hopes there by faith in God. Abraham applied to his situation what we often call an 'eternal perspective.' He considered his present in light of his future inheritance with God. This is how Christian faith is sustained in the midst of deprecation and trial. An eternal perspective acquired from God's Word is essential for any consistent and persevering Christian life. If we are going to persevere in the Christian life, then we too must fix our eyes on that city. For that is our destination, our true home, though we know not what lies between it and us.

Hughes: Abraham *went out*, and Abraham *camped out*. But in his obedience and sojourn he was overall (with some famous exceptions) a patient 'happy camper.' Why? Because of his ultimate faith perspective, as described in v. 10. Literally the Greek reads, 'For he was looking for the city which had the foundations'—the idea being that he was looking for the *only* city with enduring foundations. There was simply no other! This city was, and is, totally designed by God. 'Builder' (*demiourgos*) signifies the one who does the actual work. The city was designed in God's mind and built with His hands. Significantly, it was a 'city,' a place that is intrinsically social. There he would not only see God, but he would dwell with believers in harmony rather than dissonance (cp. 12:22-24). No more camping! No more dis-ease. No more alienation. No more pilgrim life.

Schreiner: How could Abraham keep trusting God when the promise of land wasn't being realized? The author argues that he was anticipating something in the future, something greater than the earthly land of Canaan. He was looking forward to the coming of a city, and this city will have 'foundations,' i.e., it is an unshakable city. Nothing can shatter or displace this city. A similar thing is said about the kingdom in 12:28; it is 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken.' The city can't be dislodged, for its 'architect and builder is God.' No human being can overthrow the

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city of God. The city of man is temporary, but the city of God is eternal. We see again the typology of the writer. The land of Canaan points to something greater, something more profound and lasting than any location on earth. It points to the city of God. Abraham began to realize that there was something greater than Canaan awaiting him, that he would inherit the city of God.

Bruce: What was the secret of Abraham's patience? This, says our author: the commonwealth on which his hopes were fixed was no transient commonwealth of this temporal order. He was looking for a city of a different kind: the city with eternal foundations, planned and built by God. Just as the true rest of God is not the earthly Canaan into which the first Joshua led the people of Israel (4:8), so Abraham kept his eyes fixed on the well-established city of God which was to be revealed in the time of fulfillment. Here certainly our author may be said to allegorize—to discern in the promise to Abraham that the earthly Canaan would be his and his descendants' an underlying promise of a richer and eternal inheritance. To our author it is the heavenly Jerusalem (cp. 12:22), the commonwealth of God in the spiritual and eternal order, now effectively made accessible by the completion of Christ's high-priestly work, so that all the men and women of faith come to be enrolled there as free citizens.

MacArthur: The secret of Abraham's patience was his hope in the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of God. His ultimate Promised Land was heaven, just as ours is. Even had he possessed the land of Canaan in his lifetime, it would not have been his ultimate inheritance. He was patient because his eyes were on 'the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' As important as the earthly land was to him and to God's promise, he looked up toward the heavenly land, which he knew he would inherit without fail.

2. The Promised Son (11:11-12)

Hughes: Having explained how Abraham's faith worked in relation to the promise of the land, the writer now begins to explain Abraham's faith and the obtaining of a promised son.

a) *Historical Background (11:11)*

¹¹*By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.*

Phillips: Verse 11 refers to the time when God came to Abraham with a promise of great blessing: 'Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great' (Gen. 15:1). Imagining hearing such words from the Lord, and yet when Abram (as he then was called) heard them, instead of rejoicing, he complained (Gen. 15:2-3). This scene encourages us that God does not dismiss us in anger when we complain to Him despite the many great blessings He provides. Here Abram resembles us. He is the beneficiary of amazing grace, yet his heart is breaking because of the one thing dear to him that he does not have. Abram's sorrow was made especially poignant by his name, which means 'father of many.' Yet he was into his later years and had not fathered a single child. Long before, God had promised, 'To your offspring I will give this land' (Gen. 12:7), but after decades Abram had no offspring. This would be a source of great consternation in our society, but in the Orient where Abram lived it was a galling humiliation.

Phillips: The Bible responds to our cry of discontent directly, unabashedly making promises of great blessing. We find this in the case of Abram. Genesis 15 goes on to depict one of the most marvelous scenes in all of Scripture. First, God promised Abram that a son from his own body would be his heir. Abram had heard this before, and he was incredulous. Therefore, as he so

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often does, God appealed to another of Abram's senses, taking him outside under the canopy of stars. He said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your offspring be' (Gen. 15:5). The next verse tells us Abram's response, in what the apostle Paul uses as a paradigm for us all: 'Abram believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness' (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3).

Phillips: God relates to His children in this world largely through promises. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were a people looking beyond the horizon, looking for the promise yet to come, yet to be fulfilled. That great coming arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, and yet Christians, too, are waiting for things that are yet to come. The New Testament believer is also one who looks for that which is yet to come, for the promises yet to be fulfilled. As 2 Peter 1:4 says, 'He has granted to us His precious and very great promises.' Abraham's experience shows at least two reasons why God deals with us through promises. The first reason is to lift our eyes above the realm of our circumstances, even as He lifted Abram's eyes high into the heavens. All through our lives, God's promises lift our aspirations higher. On our own we would be content with some happy relationships; God wants us to have union with the Son of God. We aspire for earthly success; He intends for us heavenly glory. We would settle for health and wealth; yet He has everlasting life in store for us. Such was the case with Abram. He wanted a son, but God intended that he would become the father of all the redeemed.

Phillips: The second reason God deals with us through promises is related to the first, and is also revealed in Abram's example. God is moving us along, directing us to our feet for a journey. Given a choice, we would all settle down in this life, in this world, this fleshly existence. Abram, we can be sure, would have been all too happy to raise a brood of sons alongside a good, clean well, with mud-baked bricks to form the walls of a study house. But this world is not our home, it is not where God would settle us forever. Again, Paul tells us, 'For the present form of this world is passing away' (1 Cor. 7:31). We were not meant for this place. Our souls were not created only for this life, so God uses the combination of want and promises to raise us to our feet and move us along the way.

Phillips: Abram received God's great promise with faith, yet the years to come proved hard nonetheless. His wife particularly seems to have suffered from her inability to bear children. In Genesis 16 we see how she responded. At Sarai's insistence, Abram slept with Hagar and she conceived, bearing him a son named Ishmael. This may have seemed like an answer to prayer—a blessing from God—but if so, the delusion was soon dispelled. The first result was turmoil within Abram's house, as Hagar and Sarai predictably launched a bitter war for pride of place and authority. This took place when Abram was eighty-six years old, ten years after his arrival in the land. The second problem emerged thirteen years later, when Abram was ninety-nine. God came to reaffirm the original promise and inform Abram that Ishmael would not be the son of blessing.

Phillips: The problem with Sarai's suggestion and Abram's action was that it tried to achieve God's promise by man's power. This is the kind of thing we are tempted to do. We have a great longing and trust that God intends to bless us according to His wisdom. But just to help Him out, we take matters into our own hands, according to our wisdom, even employing sinful means to attain the ends we want. We justify all this by saying it is faith, just as Abram and Sarai must have done, when in fact it is unbelief that is holding our hands. Doubting God's power for what seems impossible, we manipulate what is possible by our own devices.

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Phillips: Genesis 17 tells us of God’s return to Abram, when Ishmael was thirteen years old. God challenged him, even while renewing the promise. He said, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless, that I may make My covenant between Me and you, and may multiply you greatly’ (Gen. 17:1-2). God was confronting Abram for his unbelief and sin. ‘I am God Almighty,’ He said, forcefully asserting His worthiness to be trusted absolutely, His omnipotent power to accomplish all that He had promised. ‘Walk before Me, and be blameless,’ He then commanded, pressing His requirement of obedience. Both rebuking Abram’s unbelief and encouraging him to new faith, God added, ‘I will make [or “confirm”] My covenant...and multiply you greatly.’ Abram was ninety-nine years old, but his success with Hagar showed that he could produce children. Therefore, it must have been a great encouragement to Abram, however astounding it might have been, when God declared that henceforth his name would be Abraham. Not Abram, the ‘father of many,’ but Abraham, ‘father of a people.’ Surely God intended this to be a sign of Abram’s faith. Abram had stumbled in his faith, but God placed him back upon his feet with an even greater sign of blessing and a call to renewed trust.

Phillips: Abraham was ninety-nine when God renewed the promise, yet he did not have the child of promise. God had changed his name; He also changed the name of his wife from Sarai to Sarah, an name that means ‘princess,’ to indicate that His promise still dealt with her. Yes, Abraham would father a nation, but not through young slave girls he bought and brought to his bed. It would be through his legitimate wife, Sarah, despite her advanced age and barren womb (Gen. 17:15-16).

Phillips: God’s insistence that Abraham’s offspring would be born through Sarah is a sign that salvation is by grace alone. God promised great blessing to Abraham in terms of offspring. Abraham’s childlessness brought God’s covenant into question—God’s faithfulness and His plan of salvation. How would the world be blessed? How would the seed of salvation come? Would it be by natural means—by works—or by supernatural means—by grace alone? We find God’s plain answer in His promise regarding Sarah. ‘She shall become nations,’ God said of this ninety-year-old, wrinkled woman. ‘Kings of peoples will come from her.’ On the surface, this really was laughable. In fact, Abraham did laugh at the idea (Gen. 17:17-19).

Phillips: This is how God has designed salvation to work: in a manner that confounds human expectations and leaves all the glory to Him alone. In Genesis 18 God made the same promise again, this time in the presence of Sarah, and she laughed too (Gen. 18:12). But Genesis 21 tells us that Abraham went to her and she bore a son. They named him Isaac, which means ‘laughter.’ They no longer laughed in unbelief but cried tears of joy in renewed wonder at the power and faithfulness of the promise-keeping God.

b) *One Son (11:11)*

¹¹*By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.*

Phillips: Despite stumbling into unbelief and sin, Abraham sets a great example of waiting on the Lord in faith. The NIV translation of verse 11 rightly links Abraham’s faith with Sarah’s, saying, ‘By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise’ (cp. Rom. 4:20-21).

Phillips: Hebrews 11:11 seems to have a specific episode from Abraham’s life in mind, because it includes Sarah’s faith that also received the promise. Indeed, there is some question as to who

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is the main subject of this verse, Abraham or Sarah. Different versions make one or the other the subject of this verse. The flow of thought makes Abraham the main subject, especially in connection with verse 12, yet it was together that this sorrowful pair found grace to trust in God and in His promise.

Schreiner: Most versions understand Sarah to be the subject of the main verb. However, the meaning of the verse is contested. The alternate interpretation is captured by the NRSV: ‘By faith he [Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.’ According to the NRSV and other interpreters, Abraham is the subject instead of Sarah.

Bruce: According to the transmitted text, as commonly translated, we now have a statement about the faith of Sarah. There are difficulties in the way of the traditional interpretation, some of them less weight and some of them more so.

(1) The Argument for Abraham

(a) Sarah’s Lack of Faith

Bruce: Sarah, it is said, is not a good example of faith. According to Gen. 18:12 she laughed when she overheard the divine promise that she would give birth to a son, and the comment of God on her laughter (Gen. 18:13ff.) makes it plain that it was the laughter of incredulity. Yet according to the promise she gave birth to Isaac nonetheless. No doubt when Isaac was born she laughed in a manner that betokened no incredulity but exulting wonder (Gen. 21:6). But our author speaks of an act of faith that preceded her conception of Isaac. Still, this is not an insuperable objection. Our author elsewhere in this chapter can see faith where most people would not.

Schreiner: It is also noted that Sarah did not have faith in giving Hagar to Abraham in Genesis 16 and laughed in disbelief when the angel of the Lord told her she would have a son (Gen. 18:9-12).

MacArthur: The Genesis account gives no indication that Sarah ever showed much faith in God. Both Abraham and Sarah, on different occasions, had laughed at God’s promise of a son in their old age (Gen. 17:17; 18:12), but Sarah had even taken matters into her own hands by persuading Abraham to have a son by her maid, Hagar (Gen. 16:14). She did not trust God’s promise and was bent on doing things her own way, which, she soon found out, was not the way either of obedience or happiness.

(b) Continuity with Verse 12

Bruce: In verse 12, it is still Abraham’s faith that is the subject, so that v. 11, if it refers to Sarah, is a digression. Even so, it would not be an irrelevant digression; Sarah was very much involved in the fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would have a son.

Schreiner: Seeing Abraham as the subject is also supported because the words ‘from one man’ in v. 12 are clearly limited to Abraham.

(c) Abraham’s Faith

Bruce: The Genesis narrative lays stress on the quality of Abraham’s faith in accepting God’s promise that he would have descendants when he was still childless. It is in this particular

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context that Abraham ‘believed Yahweh; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness’ (Gen. 15:6). On the usual reading of our present passage the author has nothing to say about this signal demonstration of Abraham’s faith.

(d) ‘Power to Conceive’

Hughes: Some other translations along with the ESV make Sarah and her faith the subject of verse 11. But this is implausible because the phrase ‘received power to conceive’ literally is ‘power for the deposition of seed/sperm’ (*dynamis eis katabolēn spermatos*), a patently male function. Thus, Abraham has to be the subject of the sentence. This is the view of nearly all contemporary New Testament scholars, including F. F. Bruce, Leon Morris, and Simon Kistemaker. Most believe the misunderstanding is due to a wrong accent mark in the Greek that incorrectly renders ‘Sarah herself’ as a nominative and not a dative.

Schreiner: The most important reason for seeing a reference to Abraham is the expression the ‘power of procreation’ (*δυναμιν εις καταβολην σπερματος*, *dynamis eis katabolēn spermatos*), literally ‘the power for laying down of seed.’ The activity described here fits with what men do rather than women. On this reading, Abraham received the ability to produce sperm that could beget children even when he was an old man.

Bruce: The one firm argument against taking v. 11 as a statement of Sarah’s faith lies in the fact that the phrase traditionally rendered ‘to conceive seed’ just does not mean that; it refers to the father’s part in the generative process, not the mother’s. A literal translation would be, ‘for the deposition of seed’; it does not denote the receiving or conception of seed. This is a straightforward matter of the natural sense of a Greek word, and had it not been for the apparent presence of ‘Sarah’ as subject of the sentence no one would ever have thought of finding a reference to conception here.

MacArthur: Though Sarah’s faith was weak at times, it rose to trust in the promise of God, so that ‘she received ability to conceive’ (*katabolēn spermatos*), meaning literally ‘to lay down or cast down seed.’ A woman, however, does not lay down the seed that produces conception. This phrase, therefore, must include Abraham, making him the understood subject of the sentence, the phrase *autē Sarra*, as a dative of accompaniment or association, could be saying that Abraham, in association with Sarah, received power to lay down seed.

(2) The Argument for Sarah

Schreiner: Despite the arguments supporting Abraham as the subject, the subject is probably Sarah for the following reasons. First, ‘Sarah’ is clearly nominative in Greek, and there is no textual evidence for the dative. Inserting the implied participle ‘being’ seems like an unlikely solution, for it isn’t evident that the participle is elided in reading the verse, and thus the best solution grammatically is to accept Sarah as the subject. Second, Sarah may have laughed in disbelief when initially hearing the promise, but Abraham probably disbelieved in the case of Hagar and Ishmael as well (Gen. 16) and also laughed when hearing the promise (Gen. 17:17). Ultimately, they both ended up believing despite their initial doubts. Third, the role of the one man in verse 12 doesn’t preclude Sarah’s participation and faith in having children. Fourth and finally, the most difficult problem is the expression about laying down seed. The phrase could be understood as a purpose clause so that Sarah receives the sperm produced by Abraham and conceives. Alternatively, the language of laying down seed should not be pressed and is not used technically here. The author speaks generally of the ability to bear children.

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(3) The Argument of Hebrews

Schreiner: If Abraham is the subject, the phrase about Sarah could be construed as a dative, which could be translated ‘with Sarah herself who was barren.’ Or possibly the feminine participle ‘being’ (*ουσα, ousa*) is implied, so the verse says Abraham received the ability to procreate even though Sarah was barren.

Bruce: If the adjective ‘barren’ belongs to the original text, ‘Sarah herself being barren’ is best taken as a circumstantial clause and ‘Abraham’ remains the subject of ‘received power.’ If ‘barren’ is regarded as a later addition to the text, then ‘Sarah herself’ may be construed in the dative case instead of the nominative, and the verse then runs: ‘By faith he [Abraham] also, together with Sarah, received power to beget a child even after the natural season of life, because he reckoned the one who gave the promise to be trustworthy.’ In either case, v. 12 then follows on naturally.

Schreiner: In either case the gift of having children is due to faith on the part of both Abraham and Sarah. The God who promised that they would have children (Gen. 12:2; 15:1-6; 17:5-6, 15-21; 18:10-14) was considered to be faithful, and the miraculous took place.

Hughes: The point is, it was biologically impossible for Abraham, as well as Sarah, to have children at the time the promise of a son was reaffirmed to them with the giving of the covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17). Abraham was ninety-nine years old, and his bride was ninety (cp. Gen. 17:1, 24)! Sarah’s personal assessment was, ‘I am worn out, and my lord is old’ (Gen. 18:12).

MacArthur: Faith was active in the miracle of Isaac’s birth. From the human standpoint, it was impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have a child. Not only had Sarah always been barren (Gen. 16:1), but by the time she was ninety years of age she was far ‘beyond the proper time of life’ for childbearing. Yet at that age she conceived and gave birth to the promised son (Gen. 21:2). The statement ‘she considered Him faithful who had promised’ definitely refers to Sarah, and makes it clear that she did come to trust the promise of God and does herself belong in this Hall of Faith.

c) *Many Descendants (11:12)*

¹²*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.*

Phillips: Hebrews 11:2 tells us what can happen when faith waits upon God’s promise. Fighting through their natural tendency to unbelief, Abraham and Sarah trusted the Lord. It is wonderful that Hebrews 11 says nothing about their unbelieving laughter and complaints—sins that were washed away by the blood of Christ—but speaks only about their faith, which God remembered. Believing God, they came together as husband and wife, and by the power of His grace God brought life from the dead womb, bringing a salvation that is all of grace.

MacArthur: Abraham had children upon children, the whole of the people of Israel. Every Jew that ever has been and ever will be born is a result of Abraham’s faith. Such is the power of faith. Abraham’s faith was in God. God’s promise of a special son and of innumerable descendants was the basis of Abraham’s faith.

Schreiner: Therefore, because of Abraham’s faith in the promise of God, many offspring were born through him. Having so many descendants was a miracle, for Abraham was a good as dead in terms of his ability to produce offspring. God, however, does what is astonishing, and He

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particularly works when it seems as if His promise will not be realized. Isaiah 51:2 is alluded to here. Abraham's offspring were as many as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. The wording here is close to Gen. 22:17, and the author clearly appeals to this text (cp. also Gen. 15:5). The readers should not faint in their faith, for if they read the OT, they are reminded that God fulfills His promises, but He often does so at a time and in a place that one doesn't expect. Abraham thought Ishmael was the fulfillment of the promise (Gen. 17:15-21), but God fulfilled His promise by giving Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. The fulfillment came, however, when they least expected it. Still, at the end of the day, they believed God could and would do what He had pledged.

Bruce: Thus from this one man Abraham, when he was already 'as good as dead' as far as the hope of founding a family was concerned, there sprang a host of descendants, in fulfillment of the divine promises that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17) and 'as the sand which is upon the seashore' (Gen. 22:17). The word rendered 'as good as dead' is the same perfect passive participle as Paul uses in reference to the same subject when he says that Abraham, on receiving the promise of God, weighted up all the adverse circumstances and 'did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body now *as good as dead* (*νενεκρωμενος, nenekrōmenos*), (he being about a hundred years old), or the deadness of Sarah's womb' (Rom. 4:19), but concluded that the certainty of God's word far outweighed them all. The point of v. 12, however, is all the more clearly made if Abraham is the subject of v. 11.

Hughes: The assertion that he was 'as good as dead' (perfect passive participle) in verse 12 is exactly the same in the Greek as in Romans 4:19. Abraham knew the situation and that it was humanly impossible, but he came to faith. Some people are under the impression that when a person has faith, he inwardly agrees to ignore the facts. They see faith and facts as mutually exclusive. But faith without reason is *fideism*, and reason without faith is *rationalism*. IN practice, there must be no reduction of faith to reason. And likewise, there must be no reduction of reason to faith. Biblical faith is a composite of the two. Abraham did not take an unreasonable leap of faith. How did Abraham come to such a massive exercise of faith? He weighed the human impossibility of becoming a father against the divine impossibility of God being able to break His word and decided that since God is God, nothing is impossible. Thus he became certain that God would do what He said—dynamic certitude! He had *visual certitude* as he saw that promised baby boy in his mind's eye and *future certitude* as he saw it as present.

Phillips: In this manner, the barren womb signifies salvation by grace all through the Bible (cp. Is. 54:1). This rose to a new level when another descendant of Abraham, indeed the special seed that God had in mind all along, was born not of the barren but of the virgin womb. The barren womb speaks of human failure and weakness and futility; the virgin womb speaks of a work that belongs to God alone, in which human works have no place at all—a rock cut not with human hands. The virgin birth tells us that the means by which the gospel produces its ends are not natural or man-controlled; they are not things we can manipulate for our own success, or that rely upon us. The blessing God promised to Abraham could come about only if a barren and elderly woman could conceive and give birth. When it comes to Christ, we find that there will be salvation from our sins only if a virgin girl can do the same. That Sarah conceived and gave birth, and that Mary did the same, tells us that the salvation we trust is of God from first to last, and to the glory of His name alone.

B. Attitude of Faith (Hebrews 11:13-16)

Phillips: Hebrews 11:13-16 looks upon faith as a pilgrimage. It describes the life of faith as a pilgrimage in a foreign land, a journey through life to a home that awaits beyond the grave.

1. Pilgrims (11:13)

a) *Far Off Promises (11:13a)*

¹³*These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar...*

Phillips: Verse 13 describes what the end of this life's journey looks like for a Christian. It is not certain whether 'these all' refers to all the examples given from the beginning of Hebrews 11 (Abel, Enoch, Noah, etc.), or to Abraham and his immediate family. The context suggests only the latter, although these words could be said of every believer presented in the Bible. They died still believing, but not having all the things their faith set itself upon. They were looking for something not realized in this world, in this life. The promises they trusted were not fulfilled in their present earthly existence: '[They saw] them and greeted them from afar.' Abraham was promised children, and he did live to see the promised son from the womb of Sarah. But *all* that God had promised—offspring like the stars in the sky, and with them his possession of the land—did not occur in his earthly life. He died still hoping for all that he had longed for and journeyed toward in this life.

Phillips: Verse 13 says that Abraham and the others 'all died in faith,' or as the NIV puts it, they 'were still living by faith when they died.' What a difference faith makes for every child of God in the hour of death which, unless the Lord should come, all of us must someday face. Abraham's approach to death is instructive. We see here that he never did receive the promise of owning the land during his lifetime. Genesis 23, however, tells us what he did when the time came to prepare for death. Sarah, his wife, finally died at a great old age, and Abraham mourned and wept over her. But then he did something he had never done before. He went to Ephron the Hittite, a nearby landowner, and bought the cave of Machpelah as the burial place for Sarah and later for himself. You see the point Abraham was making: in life he was a pilgrim in that land, but in death he would be an owner. His and Sarah's bodies would lie on land owned by him, because it was in death that he looked for the fulfillment of God's promise of a land and a home. Abraham died in faith.

Hughes: The next section is introduced by the author's statement that Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac finished well. Death is the final test of faith, and they all passed with flying colors, living by faith right up to the last breath. The beauty of their dying was that they died in faith though never receiving the fullness of the universal blessing that had been promised. The reason they could do this was, they saw the unseen—they were certain of what they did not see. The patriarchs could see through the eye of faith the ultimate fulfillment of the promises.

Schreiner: On the one hand God fulfills His promises. On the other hand the patriarchs died without seeing the promises fulfilled in their fullness. They had children but certainly not as many as the stars of the sky. They were 'foreigners and temporary residents on the earth' (cp. Gen. 23:4; Ps. 39:12), and yet they did not lament their social status but 'confessed' that they didn't live in the land as citizens but as exiles. The two terms for exiles here shouldn't be distinguished in this context. The patriarchs didn't die with cynicism and disbelief, even though they didn't possess the land of Canaan. Instead, they died in faith, as those who didn't receive

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the promises. Nevertheless, they ‘saw’ (*ιδοντες, idontes*) the promises with the eyes of faith. They didn’t shut their eyes to reality, for they recognized that the realization of their promises was ‘far away’ (*πορωθεν, porōthen*). They didn’t pretend the promises were fulfilled, and yet they knew God was faithful. They ‘welcomed’ (*ασπασαμενοι, aspasamenoι*) the promises, in the sense that they knew they would eventually come to pass. The author wants his readers to see the parallels. They may feel in their current distress that God isn’t fulfilling His promises, but a long view reveals that God is always faithful to His word.

Bruce: ‘These all’—more particularly, those mentioned in the five preceding verses, Abraham (with Sarah), Isaac, and Jacob—‘died in faith,’ as they had lived in faith. Their lives were regulated by the firm conviction that God would fulfill the promises He had given to them, and in death they continued to look forward to the fulfillment of those promises, as is evident from the words in which Isaac and Jacob bestowed their final blessings on their sons or grandsons, as vv. 20 and 21 indicate. But more generally, it is true of all the men and women of God in Old Testament days that they ‘died in faith: they had not received the promises, but they saw and greeted them from afar,’ as indeed our author affirms in v. 29, at the end of his honors list.

MacArthur: Not Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, ever possessed the Promised Land. In fact it was almost five hundred years after Jacob died that Israel first began to possess Canaan. ‘All these died in faith, without receiving the promises.’ Far from being a lament, however, this statement is a positive declaration that these men died in perfect hope and assurance of fulfillment. For the person of faith, God’s promise is as good as the reality. His promise of the glory ahead was as encouraging and certain to the patriarchs as actually possessing it could have been. These men of faith walked on it and pastured their flocks on it and raised their children on it, but they were not impatient to possess it. It was enough to possess it ‘from a distance,’ because their primary concern was for a ‘better country, that is a heavenly one.’

Phillips: This verse might seem to express a tragedy. After all Abraham and those with him spent their whole lives longing for things they were promised, longing to have a home of their own. They trusted God for this and believed the promises He gave them, yet they died without having received them. What a dismal story! What a poor commendation for the faith they represented! One thing this tells us, however, is that Christianity is not a religion focused on earth and this present life. The Scriptures make this point over and over again (e.g., Col. 3:2; Mt. 6:19-20). This directly confronts a view that is quite prevalent in our time: a packaged version of Christianity that offers mainly temporal benefits. Certainly, Christianity does give us spiritual resources that transform this present life—resources like righteousness, peace, and joy. But how easily we forget that to be a Christian means to be persecuted in this world. Our blessings are spiritual rather than material (see Eph. 1:3). To be a Christian means living as an alien and a pilgrim; it means not being able to fit in with others who are slaves to sin; it means denying yourself and picking up your cross; it means a life of struggle and fellowship in the suffering of Christ. The Christian life means peace with God, but war with the flesh, the world, and the devil.

b) *Strangers and Exiles (11:13b)*

...and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Phillips: Abraham and the others confessed themselves to be ‘strangers and exiles.’ This is a direct quote from Genesis 23:4. When Abraham went to the Hittites to buy his burial plot, he told them, ‘I am a sojourner and foreigner among you.’ In the Greek, the writer of Hebrews

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renders this with two words, the first of which is *xenoi*, meaning ‘aliens.’ This was a pejorative term indicating outsiders. It is not the sort of word one wanted to have applied to oneself. It describes not merely a person from another place, but rather someone who doesn’t fit in, who doesn’t belong. In our society, aliens can assimilate, but the writer of Hebrews says that in this world Christians never do. The other term is *parepidēmoi*, or sojourners. These are people who are passing through to a destination somewhere else. In Greek writings the term was applied to someone lodging temporarily in an inn, without a home in the place where he sojourned, even if he would be there for a while. That is what our text says about Abraham and those who follow him in faith.

MacArthur: In the meantime they were quite happy to be ‘strangers and exiles on the earth.’ In the ancient world ‘strangers’ (*xenoi*) were often regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt. They had few rights, even by the standards of that day. They were also ‘exiles’ (*parepidēmoi*) pilgrims or sojourners. They were refugees in their own Promised Land. But these faithful patriarchs were passing through Canaan to a better place, and they did not mind.

Bruce: It was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, however, who lived preeminently as ‘aliens and pilgrims on earth’ in a sense which is inapplicable to those Israelites of later generations after the settlement in Canaan. To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob Canaan remained a ‘promised’ land to the end of their days; their descendants saw the fulfillment of what was a promise to the patriarchs. But to the patriarchs that promise was sure because it was God’s promise; and they staked everything on its certainty. ‘I am a stranger and a sojourner among you,’ said Abraham to the sons of Heth (Gen. 23:4); he recognized and accepted his status as a pilgrim. So too Jacob, in old age, speaks of the long course of his life as ‘the days of the years of my pilgrimage’ (Gen. 47:9).

Hughes: Along with this they recognized and accepted the dissonance of being a camper in this world—they ‘acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.’ They embraced the life of a pilgrim as the only proper way for them to live. They died well because by faith they embraced the dissonance and saw the far-off fulfillment of the promise. This is how we, too, can die well.

2. Homeland (11:14-15)

a) Seeking (11:14)

¹⁴*For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.*

Phillips: By admitting they are aliens and strangers, they ‘make it clear they are seeking a homeland,’ namely, one in the world to come. Since we all come from someplace, this requires the believer to leave home to answer God’s call. Abraham was living in the land of his fathers when God called him to leave and go to the land of promise, there to live as an alien and stranger.

Schreiner: Those who acknowledge that they are sojourners and exiles and strangers on earth make clear that they are seeking a different ‘homeland’ (*πατρίδα, patriida*). If their hope was on earth, they wouldn’t long for a domicile that was heavenly. Again, this is the word for the readers as well. Their inheritance is heavenly and eschatological. Currently they are resident aliens, and they are awaiting the inheritance to come.

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Bruce: When the patriarchs used language like this, says our author, they made it plain that the place of their sojourning was not their home. Their ‘pilgrim’s progress’ through this world had as its goal a home elsewhere. Canaan was no more their home as they sought the country of their heart’s desire than the wilderness was the home of their descendants in Moses’ day who journeyed from Egypt to Canaan.

Hughes: The subject of finishing by faith is rounded off by advice for living by faith—specifically by setting one’s eyes on a heavenly country.

b) *No Return (11:15)*

¹⁵*If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.*

Phillips: Hebrews commends Abraham for his faith in that he made no attempt to go back to his homeland. Nothing stood between Abraham and his former home—nothing except his faith. The fact that he made no attempt to go back shows the strength and reality of that faith. Practically the worst thing that can be said of someone who once professed faith in Christ is that he went back to the home he had left. Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt simply because she looked back on Sodom; her heart went back with her eyes, and God judged her for unbelief. The strongest charge laid against the Israelites in the exodus was that they complained about the hardships of their journey and longed to return to their former slavery in Egypt. It was for the same spiritual betrayal that Paul sadly reported the apostasy of one of his helpers: ‘Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me’ (2 Tim. 4:10). In contrast to these examples, people of faith are like Peter and James and John when Jesus called them to be His disciples. Luke 5:11 tells us they ‘brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.’

Schreiner: The patriarchs demonstrated that they didn’t long for any earthly land, for when they were exiles and sojourners in Canaan, they could have returned to the land of their origin. Abraham could have gone back to Ur or Haran, and he also stubbornly insisted that his servant never take Isaac back to such a place (Gen. 24:6). Jacob could have stayed with Laban instead of returning to Canaan. Their actions indicated their devotion and commitment to the Lord. They readers, on the other hand, are tilting in the other direction. They are tempted to go back to Judaism to enjoy the comfort and security of this world. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman empire, and they may have been included or move in this direction to avoid persecution. Or perhaps they wanted tangible assurance that their sins were forgiven through the concrete and repeated activity of the Levitical cult. They may have justified such a move by saying they were returning to the faith of their fathers. But actually, according to the author, their ancestors didn’t look backward but forward. They didn’t put their trust in an earthly city but a heavenly one, and the readers should follow the example of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Bruce: It is equally plain that, although they spoke of themselves as pilgrims in a foreign land, they did not refer to the land they had left as being their true home. In that case, they could easily have gone back there. But in fact they had no thought of doing so. When Abraham’s servant suggested to his master that Isaac might have to go to Mesopotamia in person to persuade his bride to come to Canaan, Abraham said: ‘See to it that you do not take my son back there’ (Gen. 24:6). In the following generation Jacob had to flee to Mesopotamia from the anger of his brother Esau, but his vision at Bethel on the first night of his journey there made it impossible for him ever to think of Mesopotamia as his home; Canaan, to which his returning steps were

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directed twenty years later, was now the ‘land of his fathers’ (Gen. 31:3), even if in it he had no settled abode.

Hughes: When Abraham and his family admitted they were aliens, they were making it clear they were not in their home country. And so it might be supposed that they longed to go back. And if in fact their hearts were still in the old country, they could have returned. But they did not!

Phillips: When Abraham left Ur, he no longer thought of himself in terms of his former home, but of the home to which he was headed. Is that true of you? In what terms do you think of yourself? What establishes your identity? Is it your family background? Is it your racial or social class or profession? Is it your earthly homeland or the school from which you graduated? If these are the sources of your identity and your desire, then they are still your home. You have not set your heart upon the city that is to come, the heavenly home to which God has called you. Your old allegiances will hold you back and discourage you from a true pilgrimage in faith before the Lord. This does not mean that Christians must physically change their place of residence, though that might be involved, but rather we must exchange our former hopes and dreams and affections in this world for new ones in Christ and in the world to come.

3. A Better Country (11:16)

¹⁶*But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.*

a) *A Heavenly Country (11:16a)*

Phillips: Abraham willingly left everything, and in this he shows what faith requires. Faith leaves one home in search of another: ‘They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.’ This is not only the counterpart to the idea of living as a stranger and an alien, but it is also the rationale and motive. What makes people spend their lives as those passing through, except that they are headed somewhere dear to their hearts? Abraham lived as a pilgrim here because of his eagerness to have that which can be possessed only by faith and is achieved only in a world that is yet to come. His home was elsewhere, with God and the city God had prepared, so it was only natural for him to live the way he did.

Schreiner: The patriarchs were animated by new desires and were fueled with godly longings. They desired a ‘better’ (*κρείττονος, kreittonos*) homeland. The better homeland is the ‘city’ God has prepared for His people. God is the builder of this city (11:10), and it is a heavenly city (12:22). The earthly city of man forecasts a far better heavenly city, the city of God (13:14). In the same way, John comforts his readers with the promise of the heavenly city to come (Rev. 21:1-22:5). The promise of a heavenly city is rooted in the OT where there are stunning promises for Jerusalem. What the OT says about the earthly Jerusalem is fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem according to Hebrews. This fits with the earthly-heavenly pattern so often observed in Hebrews. And it also accords with the nature of typology in Hebrews, so that there is escalation from the earthly city to the heavenly city.

Bruce: The truth is, their true homeland was not on earth at all. The better country on which they had set their hearts was the heavenly country. The earthly Canaan and the earthly Jerusalem were but temporary object-lessons pointing to the saints’ everlasting rest, the well-founded city of God. Those who put their trust in God received a full reward, and that reward must belong not to this transient world-order but to the enduring order which participates in the life of God. The example of the patriarchs is intended to guide the readers of the epistle to a true sense of

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values; like the elect sojourners of the Dispersion addressed in 1 Peter, they are to live in this world as ‘aliens and exiles’ (1 Pe. 2:11), and like the Philippians to whom Paul wrote, their ‘citizenship is in heaven’ (Phil. 3:20).

Hughes: The reason is, they had a ‘desire [for] a better country, that is, a heavenly one.’ And it is this spiritual longing that enabled them to persevere in faith. Paul tells us in Philippians that ‘our citizenship [*politeuma*] is in heaven’ (Phil. 3:20). In Ephesians he says, ‘So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens [*sumpolitai*] with the saints and members of the household of God’ (Eph. 2:19). We are super-naturalized citizens, and our citizenship is not only with one another, but is rooted in Heaven!

b) *A Heavenly City (11:16b)*

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Phillips: What could be more lovely than this: that God, the holy God and the God of grace, the sovereign God of all the world, is not ashamed of those who trust in Him, who sojourn in this world longing for the home He has prepared? All those long years Abraham identified himself not by the home he had left or by the place where he resided, but by the home he was seeking and the God who called him and gave the promises he believed. He and his sons were willing to be called men of God, not men of the world, and therefore God was willing to say, as we so often read in the Old Testament: ‘I am...the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (Ex. 3:6). If we would walk in Abraham’s steps, then we may insert our own names in that place.

Hughes: What will be the result? Our text beautifully answers. Because the patriarchs believed God’s word with dynamic certitude—because when God called Abraham to leave Ur, he believed and obeyed—because aged Abraham believed God when He said he would be a father, ‘God is not ashamed to be called the God.’ No higher tribute could be paid to any mortal. But God proudly claims whoever trusts and obeys Him, and they can humbly insert their name in the divine proclamation, ‘I am the God of _____!’

Schreiner: Since the ancestors longed for a heavenly homeland and city, and heaven is the residence of God, it is evident they longed for God more than they desired any of the things of this world. Since they longed for God in such a way, He is not ashamed to be called their God. Dwelling in God’s presence is their greatest desire, and thus God is not ashamed to be identified as their God. Indeed, He has prepared for them a heavenly city so they may reside with Him forever. The author commends the same for his readers. Their desires should not be for earthly comforts but God’s heavenly presence, and they should recognize that if they endure in faith and hope until the end that God has prepared a city for them.

Bruce: ‘Those who honor me I will honor’ says God (1 Sam. 2:30). The patriarchs honored God by putting their faith in Him; He honored them by calling Himself ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (Ex. 3:6). What higher honor than this could be paid to any mortal? These three patriarchs were not faultless, but God is not ashamed to be called their God, because they took Him at His word. It is noteworthy that, while Jacob is in many ways the least exemplary of the three, God is called the God of Jacob much more frequently in the Bible than He is called the God of Abraham or of Isaac. For all his shortcomings, Jacob had a true sense of spiritual values which sprang from his faith in God. For these, then, and for all who tread the same path of faith, God has prepared His city, His commonwealth. There is, of course no difference between the heavenly country and the city of God. Words could hardly make it clearer

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that the patriarchs and the other men and women of God who lived before Christ have a share in the same inheritance of glory as is promised to believers in Christ of New Testament times.

MacArthur: It is people of such faith that God blesses. Regardless of what we are in ourselves, if we trust Him, God is not ashamed to be called our God. ‘Those who honor Me I will honor,’ God says (1 Sam. 2:30). The patriarchs honored God, and God honored them. Nothing is so honoring to Him as the life of faith. In fact, nothing honors Him *but* the life of faith.

For next time: Read Hebrews 11:17-22.