

Hebrews 11-8-22
Abraham the Paragon of Faith!

Prayer: please join me in prayer...

Sermon introduction:

Mickey Cohen was a notorious gangster in Los Angeles during the 1950s. After hearing Billy Graham speak at an LA crusade, he proclaimed that he was a Christian. He said he had put his faith in Jesus, he even prayed the sinner's prayer. However, his life changed very little.

When confronted about his life of crime and vice, he said, "There are Christian football players, Christian cowboys, Christian politicians; why can't there be a Christian gangster?"

Jim Vaus occasionally worked with Cohen in the dark world of organized crime, before he encountered Billy Graham. After a Billy Graham crusade, he too put his faith in Jesus. But when he put his faith in Jesus, his life was radically changed, and he no longer lived like he used to.

What was the difference? They both had faith, but one had saving faith and one had non saving faith.

I'm sure most of us have met people like Mickey Cohen... Their "faith" has no effect on their lives.

How about you? What kind of faith do you have? Do you possess saving faith or do you possess non saving faith, like the faith of Mickey Cohen? How do we know if our faith is real or fake, saving or non-saving? What does saving faith look like? How will saving faith help us persevere until the end? It is hard to think of more relevant topic.

This brings us to Hebrews 11. This whole chapter is devoted to the topic of faith, but Abraham, the great paragon of biblical faith, is given the most airtime.

Why? Abraham's imperfect life is a perfect illustration of saving faith.

His life shows us what saving faith does!

What does saving faith do? Saving faith acts! How does it act?

Abraham's faith caused him to leave.

Abraham's faith caused him to conceive.

Abraham's faith caused him to sacrifice.

First, Abraham's faith caused him to leave.

What did Abraham leave? He left his homeland!

Hebrews 11:8-9 (ESV) — 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. **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.

This is a flashback to Genesis 12. It is around 2000 BC. Abraham lives in the city of Ur, located on the Euphrates river in modern day Iraq. Ur was a large, influential, and sophisticated city.

The city was dominated by a massive temple composed of three levels. The top level was devoted to the moon God. Archaeology indicates that this culture was guilty of human sacrifices during Abraham's life.

Then, out of the blue, with no warning, God appears to a pagan man named Abram in Genesis 12:1 (see also Acts 7:2-3). He tells Abram to leave his homeland.

Imagine being in Abram's sandals.

God says, "Abram, I want you to leave your homeland."

Abram says, "I have a few questions... first, which God are you? Second, you want me to just start walking??? Third, do you really want me to leave all my friends, my career, my customs, my religion, and my possessions? And by the way, where am I going?"

God says, "Yes, start walking, I will show you where to go. Don't worry about the details. Trust me, I will take care of you."

Abram, "But my friends will think I'm nuts..."

God, "Trust me..."

Amazingly, Abram believed God and he acted. His faith led to action, which meant that his faith was real faith.

Illustration:

When was I converted??? When my faith led to action. Tell the story...

Application:

Abram's faith caused him to leave his homeland and step into the unknown.

God does not always give us all the details when he asks us to do something. Why? He wants us to trust him!

Sometimes obeying God is a little scary...

God, if I become a Christian, I can't do the things I used to do.

God, if I tell my friends about Jesus, they may not like me.

God, if I tell the truth to this customer, I may lose this sale.

God, if I give this money to a friend in need, I may not have money to buy that new car.

God, if I break up with this non-Christian, I may be single the rest of my life.

God, if I discipline my child, my child may not like me.

Here is the point... Saving faith acts, even when it has to step into the unknown.

Do you possess this faith?

What specifically did Abraham do? He left his homeland!

Why did he do it? He really believed in the promise land!

Hebrews 11:9 (ESV) — 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.

Hebrews 11:10 (ESV) — 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:13–16 (ESV) — 13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. **14** For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. **15** If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. **16** But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Abraham obeyed God and left his homeland. Why? Because he really believed that his final destination was the eternal promised land and live in the eternal city.

How can I say this? According to verse 16 Abraham always had the eternal promised land in mind, not the physical land of Palestine.

The land of Canaan was always meant to be a small foretaste of the heavenly land with the eternal city.

His desires are captured well in a hymn we will sing later...

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

All oer those wide extended plains,
Shines one eternal day;
There God the Son forever reigns,
And scatters night away.

Hope of the eternal promise land motivated Abraham to obey God's commands. He really believed, so he acted.

What will the eternal promise land with the eternal city be like?

Revelation 21:1–5 (ESV) — 1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. **2** And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. **3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." **5** And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Abraham did not arrive at this city during his life, neither do we. During his life, he lived as an exile and a stranger, just like us. Which is why we often feel out of place.

Illustration:

Have you ever felt really out of place???
traveling to Belgium...
The Sherman Alexie reading....
going to Athens (rioters)

Application:

Like Abraham we are exiles and strangers in a strange land. This world is not our own.

1 Peter 1:1 (ESV) — 1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

Phil 3:20 says that, “our citizenship is in heaven.”

Abraham knew, by faith, that he was a citizen of the eternal city. This gave him the strength to leave his homeland and step into the unknown.

His faith acted.

First, Abraham’s faith caused him to leave.

What else did it do???

Second, Abraham’s faith caused him to conceive.

Hebrews 11:11–12 (ESV) — 11 By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. 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.

The ESV says, “by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive...”

I rarely challenge the ESV, but most scholars disagree with the ESV’s rendering of v 11. Why?

According to the ESV, verse 11 reads, “Sarah herself received power to conceive.” But a literal translation of the Greek says, “received power to deposit seed/sperm.” Only males have the power to deposit sperm. This is why most scholars think that verse 11 is about Abraham.

One scholar writes,

“... Most believe the misunderstanding (reflected in the ESV) is due to a wrong accent mark in the Greek that incorrectly renders "Sarah herself" as a nominative and not as dative...” (K. Hughes)

Let me read from two other translations...

Hebrews 11:11 (NIV84) — 11 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.

Hebrews 11:11 (NRSV) — 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.

But... let's not miss the point. By faith Abraham and Sarah were able to conceive a child even though they were way too old. According to Genesis Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 90 when they finally conceived (See also Romans 4:19). This was a miracle.

They believed that God could do what he said he could do, so they acted.

Application:

God can do whatever he wants to do whenever he wants to do it. But more often than not, he does not work supernaturally unless we have faith.

Do you remember what he said in the gospel of Matthew?

Matthew 13:57–58 (ESV) — **57** And they (the Jews) took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.” **58** And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

Our Faith is often the means that God uses to work supernaturally. If we believe enough, are we guaranteed a miracle, no! But if we doubt God's ability to work supernaturally, he probably won't.

We must not overreact to the false gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity.

Abraham and Sarah believed that God had the power to help them conceive. As a result, (not to be crass) they went to the marriage bed.

Saving faith leads to action!!! But there is more...

Abraham's faith caused him to leave.
Abraham's faith caused him to conceive.

Third, Abraham's faith caused him to sacrifice.

What specifically was Abraham willing to sacrifice? His own son!

Hebrews 11:17–18 (ESV) — **17** By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, **18** of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

These verses are a reference to Genesis 22 and one of the greatest Acts of faith in the Bible.

Let me provide some context.

When Abraham is 75 years old (Genesis 12:1-2) God appears to him and tells him to leave his homeland. Then he tells Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. At this point Abraham and Sarah have no children. Surely, this promise of children brought them great joy.

A few years go by and Sarah does not conceive!!!

A few more years go by and God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands on the shore. (Genesis 15)

A few more years go by and there are still no children. Abraham and Sarah must have been really discouraged at this point.

Ten years after the initial promise Sarah is barren so she has Abraham sleep with her servant (Genesis 16:3-4). But this was not the promised child.

Finally, 25 years after God's promise to give them a child Isaac finally arrives (Genesis 21:5). Abraham is roughly 100 years old.

I can only imagine how loved, spoiled, and doted on little Isaac must have been. Abraham was wealthy, and I'm sure he lavished little Isaac with gifts.

Then 10-20 years later. God tests Abraham by asking Abraham to do the unthinkable.

He tells Abraham to take his son, his only son Isaac, up to the top of a mountain in order to sacrifice him!!!

Keep in mind, that all the promises made to Abraham (land, blessing, and offspring- Gen. 12:1-3, 13:14-16; 15:4-5, 16; 17:5-6, 15-21; 18:18; 21:10-12; 22:16-18) were tied to the life of Isaac.

These promises would not come to pass if Isaac was sacrificed, he was the only son. (Hebrews 11:18)

This command to Abraham did not make sense... it contradicted everything the lord had said up to this point.

Regardless Abraham, by faith, marched Isaac up the mountain, tied his wrists behind his back, laid him on the alter, and lifted his knife to kill him (Genesis 22:1-12). Then at the last minute the angel of the lord cries out...

Genesis 22:11-13 (ESV) — 11... "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

What was Abraham willing to sacrifice? His own son.

Why was he willing to do it? He really believed God's promises.

Hebrews 11:19 (ESV) — 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham trusted God so much, that he believed that if he took his son's life, God would raise him from the dead. He really believed that God will fulfill all of his promises, so he acted...

Saving faith always acts!!!

Application:

*Abraham's faith caused him to leave.
Abraham's faith caused him to conceive.*

Abraham's faith caused him to sacrifice.

Someone with saving faith trusts God so much, that he or she is willing to do whatever God wants them to do, no matter how costly, scary, or irrational it may seem.

This is the faith that saves!!!

Do you possess this type of faith???

Has your faith caused you to act, to do things that are hard???

Did Abraham always exhibit this kind of faith? no...

Abraham's faith grew over time. And your faith can grow over time.

Earlier in his life he lied twice about his wife to save his own skin (Genesis 12:13; 20:11-13). He did not trust God to protect him or his wife.

Later in his life he slept with Hagar (not his wife) to produce an heir (Genesis 16:1-5). He did not trust God to provide.

We are not saved by the quality of our faith we are saved by the object of our faith.

What is the object of our faith?

Back to our story...

God kept Abraham from killing Isaac, his one and only son. When Abraham was about to strike his son with the knife, the angel of the Lord stopped him.

2000 years later another father was prepared to sacrifice another son on another alter. But this time, no one stayed the hand of God the father.

God the father struck down his only son, so that sinners could be forgiven. We are sinners, unbelief is sin. We don't always believe as much as we should.

Our unbelief and sin deserve punishment. Jesus took all the punishment we deserve on the cross, then he rose from the grave.

Jesus Christ is the object of our faith, when we look to him, his life, death, and resurrection with the eyes of faith, we will be forgiven.

When you are worried about the quality of your faith, look away from yourself and look to Jesus, who suffered and died and rose from the grave so that your sins could be forgiven.

When we really believe that Jesus lived, died and rose from the grave for our sins we will act. How?

We will turn away from sin, because on the cross we see what sin deserves.

We will turn away from sin, because on the cross we see how much God loves us.

When we believe how much God loves us, we will want to obey his commands.

Faith acts...

Real faith, saving faith, Abrahamic faith, in the crucified and risen savior saves people and then it changes people.

Lets pray...