

Faith Taking risks

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[0 : 00] Now, in the Bibles there, if you turn please to page 1007 and to Hebrews 11 and to our second study in that chapter.

And we're going to read today verses 8 to 16. Hebrews 11, beginning at verse 8. The author has told us that without faith it is impossible to please God, but he has also emphasized that it is not our faith but God's faithfulness that is at the heart of Christian living.

That's why we've called the series Faith in a Faithful God. So verse 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.

By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

[1 : 25] 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.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had the opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country. That is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Amen. That is the word of God. And may he bless it to us as we study it together. And so we come to faith taking risks.

[2 : 30] In 19th century America, there was a stuntman of some celebrity by the name of Blondin. Blondin. And Blondin's particular stunt was the tightrope.

But that wasn't a big enough risk for him, or a spectacular enough activity. So in order to make it even more exciting, he had the rope stretched across the Niagara Falls, and it was his custom to travel across the falls on that rope.

But in order to make it even more exciting, a spectator's sport, he added a couple of details. He had himself blindfolded, and he pushed a wheelbarrow across the tightrope.

But there was still more to come. He used to say to the spectators, how many of you believe that I can wheel this barrow blindfolded across the tightrope? Of course, many of them put up their hands.

Right, he says, you come and sit in the barrow, and I'll wheel you across. One or two brave souls did. And as far as the story goes, none of them perished, none of them fell into the waters of the Niagara Falls.

[3 : 44] Now, leaving aside whether that was a sensible thing to do or not, the point about faith is that in order for faith to be valid, we must trust the person in whom we have faith.

Now, I certainly would not have trusted Blondin, not because I wouldn't have thought he was clever and gifted, but because anything could have happened. He could have slipped.

He could have had a heart attack. Anything could have happened. And that would have been the end. Faith in Hebrews 11, however, is faith in a faithful God.

Why do we take risks? Because we believe that God is faithful. Because we believe that when our faith falters, when our confidence goes, that God will be there to hold us.

And in the chapter now, we come to Abraham. Abraham in the Bible is the man of faith par excellence, the pilgrim who went out into the unknown.

[4 : 43] And his story is told in Genesis 12 to 25. And you may like to read it later on. It's a fascinating story of faith. Now, neither he nor his descendants, his immediate children, Isaac and then Jacob, received the fulfillment of their promises.

And thus their lives were lives of faith right up to the very end. And their lives were marked by two things. And I'm going to talk about these now. They were marked by risks.

And they were marked by rewards. So if we're living a life of faith, we're taking risks. And we're looking for rewards. Now, Genesis 12 tells how God called Abraham.

And Abraham struck out boldly into the unknown. Now, what risks did Abraham take? I want to suggest one or two risks that he took according to this passage.

Verse 8. He obeyed when he was called out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going.

[5 : 51] Not knowing where he was going. In other words, the first risk for Abraham was to leave everything that he knew. Everything that gave him identity.

Everything that made him Abraham, if you like. The Genesis story says God said to him, Leave your country. Leave your family.

Leave your father's house. Now, that's fun. That's exciting when you're young. When you leave home for your first job. When you leave home to go to university. Three years ago, when my son was preparing to go on his gap year to Bolivia, he was wildly excited.

As I confess, his parents found it more nail-biting than he did. And we were thoroughly glad when we met him a year later at Heathrow. Nevertheless, it was exciting.

He enjoyed it. He was looking forward to it. But Abraham was a settled, mature man. Abraham was probably well on in his 40s when this call came to him.

[6 : 53] He wasn't a young guy who was so great, I'll get away from the old constraints and so on. He was at that stage in life when people are putting down roots. When they want to enjoy the things that they've worked for.

When they want to feel settled. That was when the insistent voice came and said, Abraham, leave your country. Leave your father's house. Leave your family.

And the other thing is, when we're talking about Abraham leaving all that was settled. Nowadays, the whole world is pretty small, isn't it? Fast air travel.

When we want to go to a new country for a holiday or even perhaps to work, we can learn a great deal about it. You look up the internet. You read brochures. You talk to people who've been there. And while it's still an adventure, it's not totally unknown. For Abraham, the land beyond the great river was shrouded in mystery. He had literally no idea what God was calling him to.

[7 : 55] He went out not knowing where he was going. That's the first risk. Maybe that God is calling some of us here to that kind of risk. To risk our lives on the word of God.

Maybe we're comfortable. Maybe we're settled. And that insistent voice says, Come, I want you to go and do something else. The second risk he took was that he was not to see the promise fulfilled.

Verse 9, By faith he went to live in the land of promise and settled down there and had a comfortable home, two cars at the door, every wonderful salary coming in.

You know, of course, that's not what it says. It says, By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents. Once again, when you're young and fit, that's great, isn't it?

But that's not... You see, Abraham, as he goes into the promised land, discovers that's not the end of the journey. There's still more to come. Abraham, he was...

[9 : 01] And the people who followed him, verse 13, they were strangers and exiles on the earth. Now, in the 21st century, we know a great deal about refugees. We know a great deal about homeless people.

And we think of the number of people who go to, perhaps come to our country, perhaps go to America, hoping for something wonderful. So often it goes terribly, terribly wrong, doesn't it?

Like that poor Polish girl who was murdered here in this city, no doubt coming here, thinking that everything would be wonderful, and finding instead betrayal and death.

Now, Abraham went into a situation more like that, than a situation, say, like us emigrating to some country, we know where we're going. Living in tents.

That rather loses its glamour, if that's going to be for the whole of life, doesn't it? So he leaves everything that makes him Abraham. He's not to see his promise fulfilled. And thirdly, Abraham takes the risk that the promise is not going to be fulfilled at all.

[10:11] Look at verse 11. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age. Read in Genesis 18.

What age are Abraham and Sarah? They're both 90. Not usually regarded as an age at which people have children. Nevertheless, in that chapter, God says to them, is anything too hard for the Lord?

It's God's reliability, rather than Abraham's faith. So you see, he takes these appalling risks. He leaves the settled home. He leaves everything that makes him Abraham.

He goes to live not in a settled and comfortable community. Archaeologists have uncovered the city of Ur of the Chaldeans, where Abraham lived. And it was a magnificent place.

Wonderful houses, wonderful facilities, and so on. Astonishing for that time, so many thousands of years ago. And he also went not knowing whether the promise could be fulfilled.

[11:14] Somebody once said, pray for miracles, but plan for possibilities. When we have faith, that's what we do. Although I sometimes suspect we do the opposite. We pray for possibilities, and vaguely hope for miracles.

That wasn't Abraham. Abraham went out trusting in the God. I trust the God of miracles. Abraham could have sung this with great enthusiasm. I'll trust the God of miracles.

Give to him my all. Faith involves risks. And if you're not a Christian at the moment, remember that, please.

Faith involves risks. It's going to take everything you have. It's not going to be easy. But secondly, faith involves rewards. They're not just risks.

They're rewards. You see, simply taking risks is something that anyone can do. But there are rewards, and they are far greater than the risk.

[12:12] And that's something to remember as well. If you're not sure whether you want to commit your life to Christ, the rewards will far outweigh the risks. The risks are temporal.

The risks will cease one day, but the rewards are eternal. Now, I want to suggest there are two particular rewards in this passage, which are not only true about Abraham, they're true about everybody who follows this path of faith in the faithful God.

First of all, Abraham was going towards a true home and a real homeland. Verse 10, he was looking toward the city that had foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Tents don't have foundations. Living nomadically doesn't have foundations. But he was looking for a city which did. It's also called in verse 14, for people who speak thus make it clear they are seeking a homeland.

This word home with all its associations, we talk about being homesick. We talk about being away from home. Abraham, while he left his home, was actually going to his true home.

[13:23] And it's called in verse 16, a better country. But as it is, they desire a better country. That is, a heavenly one. Now it's important to realize this, that the city is already there.

It's not that the city was still to be made once Abraham reached it. The city is already there. It's not just something at the end of life or at the end of time. The city is already there.

It's already built. It already has its foundations. Now, life takes away lots from us, doesn't it? And ultimately, life will take everything away from us that we value.

And it's sometimes so easy to be overwhelmed by nostalgia, isn't it? For places we once lived in, people we once knew, people we loved who are now gone, and so on.

Now, what's the answer to that? The answer to that isn't wallowing nostalgia. Here, scripture has the answer. There is a true homeland. There is a place where God's people will one day gather, where God's people are already gathering, and one day will realize they have come home.

[14:31] Have you read the Narnia stories? There's a wonderful depiction of that at the end of the last battle. As all Aslan's friends arrive, the unicorn stamps his foot and says, the grass is greener, the sky is bluer.

I've come home, he said. And the reason, he says further, we love the old Narnia, was that it sometimes looked like this. And when we reach the true homeland, we'll find everything that was in our earthly homelands only far more real, and unlike everything in our earthly homes, far more lasting.

So that's the first reward. First reward is, if we walk the path of faith, we'll go, we'll come home. Our true homeland, a better country. But secondly, is an even greater reward.

And that's in verse 16. Therefore, at the end of verse 16, therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. In other words, not only will we arrive at home, we will arrive to our true lover, the Lord God himself.

In many ways, the Bible is a great love story. The picture that's used in the Old Testament about God and his people is the picture of the great lover. The people of Israel are the wife, if you like, of their God.

[15 : 56] And in the New Testament, Christ the church is the bride of Christ. And one of the pictures of heaven in the book of Revelation is of a great wedding, the wedding of the lamb and his bride.

So, giving up all these things that Abraham did was going to be more than compensated because he was going to find, when he reached home, that his father would be waiting for him.

His father would be there to welcome him. The one that he had known so well on earth, but only known intermittently, so to speak, he was going to be the one who welcomed him home.

Faith means taking risks. It won't be the same for us as for Abraham. We all know what risk we'll have to take. If we're already Christian, we know there are continuing risks.

We sang about this, didn't we? I do not know the course ahead. What joys and griefs are there? Of course we don't. We have to take risks. But there are rewards.

[16 : 58] There are great rewards. And these, while the risks are different for us than for Abraham, the rewards are identical. The rewards are a homeland and being welcomed home by our father.

So whatever situation we're in today, we may have lived the life of faith for a long time. We'll be getting weary. We'll be getting tired. We'll be beginning to wonder whether it's all worth it.

This passage is saying, of course, it's worth it. There is a home and there is a welcome. And if we're tempted to give up, remember that. The risks are overwhelmed by the rewards.

And if you're not sure whether to come to Christ or not, it will take risks. It will be difficult. But one day, when we arrive in the true Narnia, to use Lewis's phrase, we'll discover that everything we loved on earth will be there.

Everyone we loved in the Lord will be there. And it will all have been worth it. That is what it means to take the risks of faith. That's what it means to have faith in a faithful God.

[18 : 08] Let's pray. In God our Father, how we praise you that in spite of our weakness, in spite of our fickleness, that you have prepared a city for us, that you have prepared a homeland, that you have prepared a welcome.

So give us courage and strength. give us the faith and the vision to keep going until that day arrives when we reach the homeland and receive your welcome.

As we go back to our ordinary business or whatever we are doing this afternoon, may the light of the world come, the world that we cannot see but which is real. May that light shine upon the pathways of earth so that we will rejoice in your goodness and we will rest in your love.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.