

Looking for the homeland

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] In the end, we are turning once again to the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, and we're going to read verses 1 to 22.

Hebrews 11, and you'll find this on page 1007. Hebrews 11, verse 1.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation.

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous.

God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so he should not see death, and he was not found because God had taken him.

[1 : 14] Now before he was taken, he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists, that he rewards those who seek him.

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear, constructed an ark for the saving of his household.

By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. 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.

[2 : 26] Even when she was past the age, she considered him faithful that promised. Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead were born descendants, as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

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 seek thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.

But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

[3 : 42] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, for which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

By faith Jacob, when died, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites, and gave directions concerning his bones.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now, perhaps I could ask you to turn back to Hebrews 11, please, on page 1007, and let's have a moment of prayer together.

Our Father, as we draw near to you, we pray that you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open your word to our minds and hearts, and open our minds and hearts to your word, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, a pioneer missionary in the New Hebrides Islands was struggling to translate the Bible into the language of the islanders.

[5 : 24] And one word he found particularly difficult to find an equivalent for was the word faith, the word which dominates this chapter. None of the words which existed in the language seemed to do it justice.

As he was sitting at his desk, wrestling with this, one of his associates came in from hard labor in the fields, sank down thankfully in a chair, and said, I'm so glad to find something that will bear my weight.

And Peyton says, that's what it is. Just as a chair bears the weight of this man, faith is something which will bear our weight. Faith is something which we can rely on.

Now, of course, faith is bigger than that. And the trouble about that illustration, all illustrations are inadequate. It's static. And it suggests that faith is something we sit down, and we, as the phrase used to be used, let go and let God.

It reminds me of a phrase that we are all very keen on using, where I'm coming from, or that's not where I'm coming from. That's not where I am.

[6 : 40] Now, we understand what that means. We use the phrase, but I want to suggest that be more Christian to talk about where I'm going to. And that is what the emphasis is in this chapter, looking for the homeland.

Where are we going to? Not so much where are we coming from. It's important to remember that. But where are we going to? Now, this chapter, this great chapter, is often taken out of context and preached on in a series of five or six sermons.

I've been guilty of that myself. In fact, I've done it here at the Wednesday lunchtime a good number of years ago. So, it's not wrong to do that, but like all other chapters, this is better seen in context.

Better seen in the context of the letter. And if you glance back at the end of chapter 10, the author says, We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve our souls.

The people of the past, the people from the beginning of God's dealings with humanity, how were they saved? They were not saved by works.

[7 : 54] They were not saved by sacrifices. They were not saved by rituals. By faith. By faith, Abel. By faith, Enoch. By faith, Noah.

By faith, Abraham. This is spelled out in more detail in verse 40, which we'll look at next week. But this is a chapter about the one people of God.

There aren't two peoples of God, an Old Testament people and a New Testament people. There is one people of God. One church of God. Right from the very beginning.

And I'm going to concentrate on Abraham this evening. I want to say a few words about verses 1 to 7. As you can see, the verses we read essentially go through the whole book of Genesis right up to its end.

But verses 1 to 7 really concentrate on the early chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 to 11. Faith, first of all, is a firm belief in unseen realities.

[8 : 57] We believe in the Creator. As we look around us by faith, we understand that the universe was created by the Word of God.

And that picks up what he's already said in chapter 1. God creating the universe. And there is, of course, the word play here on word. Created by his powerful Word.

But also created by him who is the Word of God. So you see, the whole letter is hanging together. He creates, he upholds. The fundamental truth about God that underlies everything else is at the very heart of Old Testament faith.

My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Everything else flows from that. Everything else depends on that. Fundamental truth about God and the fundamental basis for all our belief in him.

For by it the people of old received their commendation. Verse 2. By faith. And then he goes on in verses 4 to 7 to single out three individuals who particularly exemplified this faith.

[10 : 13] Abel, we are told, verse 4, offered to God a more acceptable... So pity the translation didn't keep the word better. The favorite word, one of the favorite words of our author.

Now what does this say? This is saying, Abel's sacrifice pointed to Christ. That's why it was better. Now clearly, if Abel's sacrifice was acceptable and Cain's wasn't, God must have revealed to both of them what sacrifice was about.

Cain chose to go his own way. Abel offered a sacrifice that showed right at the beginning, the great on of human history. He knew that to be saved there had to be a sacrifice.

And a sacrifice not just of an animal, but ultimately a sacrifice of the Son of God himself. Cain, on the other hand, is the patron saint of religion.

Cain is the one who says, Let's worship God in our way. Let's make the church a place full of people doing good works.

[11 : 24] Let's get married in the church. It's much nicer there. Let's support all these kind of causes. Cain is these things are good in themselves, but the trouble is they are not evidence of faith.

They're essentially saying to the Lord, We know how to worship you. Now the point is we don't know how to worship God unless God first speaks to us. We would have nothing whatever to say to God unless God first spoke to us.

Remember, nobody in the book of Genesis had a Bible, and yet they were able to walk with God, they were able to offer sacrifices, they were able to build arcs and show all the evidences of faith.

Why? Because God presumably revealed himself, and those who showed faith believed and acted on this. So Abel shows us that faith depends on the sacrifice, ultimately the better sacrifice of Christ.

Enoch shows us that faith brings us safely home. By faith, verse 5, Enoch was taken up to which you would not see death, because before he was taken, he was commended as having pleased God.

[12 : 41] Enoch's example is commended to everyone. Without faith, it is impossible to please him. Not just believing in a God, but believing in this God, this God who promises, there is God who calls us to trust the promises and obey the commands.

And Noah shows us that faith saves us from judgment. Noah, the first person in the Bible, interestingly, would be called righteous. And indeed in 2 Peter, he's called a preacher of righteousness.

So you see, Christ, the Christ who saved you and I, saved Abel. He saved Enoch. He saved Noah and countless, countless others.

After all, if the death of Jesus can save us who live thousands of years after it, surely, can also save those who live thousands of years before. It's an event happening at a particular place, at a particular time, and yet its consequences are eternal.

So, these, as I say, these verses, they are much more detailed, but I just want to mention them tonight, and now to look at Abraham, the pilgrim par excellence, the one to whom more space is given in this chapter than anyone else, and the other patriarchs.

[14:02] And really, from verses 8 to 22, we are going through Genesis 12 to 50. We are like Abraham, looking for a homeland, looking for a city.

So, what is Abraham's faith about then? First of all, Abraham's faith was shown by obeying and taking risks, verses 8 to 12.

If you read the story again in Genesis 12 to 25, first of all, Abraham's already old. He's not a young guy, thinking, oh, it's great fun, I'll go out and have an adventure.

He's old, he's settled, and he is secure. For, nowadays, it's difficult to go, in fact, it's probably impossible to go anywhere in the world that we can't find out about.

But for Abraham, the land beyond the great river was shrouded in mystery. And he had no godly example to follow. In the city, are of the called the ins, they worship the moon goddess.

[15:05] And the names of some of his family reflect that. So, Abraham is obeying, he's taking a risk. He knows he's on a journey.

When he was called, verse 8, to go out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance. Notice, it's simply a place. God doesn't say even where the land is.

And not only did he not possess the land in his lifetime, he wasn't even possessed in the lifetime of his son and his grandson. That is faith.

Always looking to the future. And you'll notice in verse 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.

He realized that this land was never more than provisional. It was a trailer of the world to come. It was a glimpse of what it would be like in the true homeland.

[16:10] But he never thought that it was the homeland because he looked for the city, verse 10, which had foundations. Contrast the nomadic life.

He came from the great city of Ur, powerful, splendid city, and he lived in tents as a nomad. But also, this city is mentioned in chapter 12.

We'll look at it in a few weeks' time. Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Glorious things of who are spoken. Zion, city of our God.

And why does it have foundations? Why will it last? Because its designer and builder is God. And some Jewish writings use this of God making the universe.

It's not fantasy. It's a real country, a deeper country, solid joys and lasting treasures. None but Zion's children know. So you see, Abraham's faith is first shown by his obedience and risk-taking.

[17:14] And that faith is also a fruitful faith. Verse 11, By faith, Sarah conceived power to conceive even when she was past the age.

innumerable descendants of whom we are part. Thousands, thousands, like the sand on the seashore, like the starry heavens, Abraham's descendants.

Now, if I'm interested, as you read this chapter, we'll see even more next week. Don't imagine these people went through their whole lives with an unsullied faith which never doubted, never wavered, never got into problems.

After all, if you read the story back in Genesis, you'll find that Sarah laughed in incredulity when she was told that she was going to bear a child at my age and my husband at his age.

How on earth am I going to bear a child? But, you see, the point is, faith and doubt are not incompatible.

[18 : 20] Faith does not mean you never have doubts. Faith does not mean you never have worries or problems. Faith means you persist even when you cannot see how it can be worked out.

Sarah laughed at the idea of the birth of Isaac but later on believed. That's why it's very important not to say I place great emphasis on my faith.

I place no emphasis on my faith at all. My faith is fickle. My faith comes and goes. Sometimes it's burning brightly. More often it's flickering along.

Sometimes you can hardly see it at all. The point about faith is it's laying hold of the faithfulness of God. Ultimately, Abraham reached the city not because he was a man of faith, which he was, but because he had a faithful God.

And that is the point. God is faithful. Notice that's an absolute state, but not God is sometimes faithful. Not even on the whole God is faithful, but absolutely all times, all places, to all eternity, God is faithful.

[19 : 32] That is why we can have faith. But if we try to rely on our faith, we are simply going to lose the way because it's not strong enough to bear us up.

So that's the first thing then about Abraham. Abraham's faith involved obedience, involved taking risks. Secondly, Abraham's faith looked to the future.

Verses 13 to 16. Here the author extends the promise to Abraham's descendants, his immediate descendants here, but by extension to us, these all died in faith, not having received the things promised.

In a very real sense, that is still true. Even in the last days. We will never all receive the things promised until the last day, until the new creation.

So, what is true of Abraham is still true of God's people today. The difference is not that our faith is greater than theirs.

[20 : 38] I mean, after all, if you think our faith is greater than the Old Testament, read some of the Psalms where the psalmist meditates in joy on the wonders of the Lord.

The difference is, we know more than they did because we live at a later stage in salvation history. But it was the same Christ who saved them.

It was the same city to which they traveled. It was the same faith which sustained them throughout time and space, the people of God. A reminder to look forward and not keep on looking back.

You remember the terrifying story in Genesis of Lot's wife who looked back. Now, I don't imagine for one minute that Lot's wife simply cast a glance over her shoulder.

What I imagine that means is she could not bring herself to leave Sodom. She lingered and lingered and lingered and was engulfed in Sodom's destruction.

[21 : 38] And in the context of the letter, our author is saying, don't be harking back to the shadows. Well, we now have the reality. These were shadows rather than subsists.

They were true shadows, true illustrations. Nevertheless, the direction of the Christian must be forward, looking to the future, looking to the homeland.

And that city is the city at the end of the Bible. the glorious new creation, which is a city which comes down out of heaven from God. Not created by our own efforts.

In the late 19th century, in the confidence of the late Victorian age, there are many hymns written about the holy city which we were going to create.

Not, it wasn't going to come down from God, out of heaven. We are going to create it by our own efforts because we were becoming more civilized, more sophisticated, and nothing, nothing was, nothing was beyond us.

[22 : 43] That hope perished in the trenches of the Great War in 1914 to 18. Amazingly, some people still believe that, that we will create the better country, the city which has foundations by our own efforts.

Once again, a better country, verse 16. This is a favorite word of our author, better. Not that the old things weren't good, but this is better. This is both homeland and heartland.

There are anticipations of it on earth. Our father, said C.S. Lewis, scatters many fine resting places on our journey, but he never allows us to mistake these for the homeland.

But in his grace, he does give us these wonderful times, times of holiday, times of special people. Those times when we, the veil becomes thin and we see the real Narnia ahead of us.

I know Hebrews doesn't mention Narnia, but if he'd known about this sermon, he would have. He has prepared a city.

[23 : 51] Remember that, remember what Jesus says in John 14. I go to prepare a place for you. Will we enjoy the place?

Well, of course we will, because we were made for the place. The place was made for us. It's the place where we will reach our full potential. The resurrection body, the glorious new creation, beyond sin and death, beyond the sheer drudgery often, and the sheer battle.

So, created for us by the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. Faith looks to the future, secondly. And thirdly, faith is about life out of death, verses 17 to 22.

And in verse 17, the severest test of Abraham's faith is when he was asked to offer up Isaac.

And think about it for a moment. God says to him, take your son. That's terrifying. Your only son.

[25 : 08] That's worse. But then the knife bites deeper still. Whom you love and offer him up as a sacrifice. How could anyone not shudder at that?

Now, many have said that, why did God need to test Abraham when he knew that Abraham would respond in faith?

Long ago, Augustine said that whatever God knew, Abraham certainly didn't know that his faith would stand up to this test. And I think that's so important.

It's not that God is testing in order to see if we're the right kind of material. He's testing in order to refine us, to make us into the kind of people he wants us to be.

And this is one of the clearest pictures in the Old Testament of life out of death.

Remember the words of Romans 8, he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, will he not freely with him give us all things?

[26 : 16] Abraham, when he was tested, received the promises. And notice verse 8, whom said, through Isaac shall their offspring be made. Well, if Isaac is going to be killed, how on earth is Isaac going to have family?

We'll carry on the promise. And notice this fascinating verse, he considered, Abraham considered verse 19, that God was able even to raise him from the dead.

You hear people saying there's no concept of life after death in the Old Testament. That is simply not true. What we have in the Old Testament, of course, is not the clarity we have which comes to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember that, remember in old Israel, there were people believed in the living God, the God who was from eternity to eternity, who committed himself to his people.

On the other hand, there was the brute fact that people died. And how do you put these two things together? How do you put the idea that the Lord will be your shepherd forever and ever?

[27 : 20] The idea that you die. So clearly, although they did not understand it, they believed that there was a future after death. And after all, we don't understand it clearly either, do we?

When we try to peer into the world to come, we don't clearly know what it's going to be like. And Isaac then becomes a picture of sacrifice and of resurrection.

The Christ who is to die and rise, as the author has already said in chapter 7, in the power of an endless life. You can see as our author reads his Old Testament, he is excited as he sees these pictures rolling out.

All the kind of portrait gallery. Someone has said this chapter is the Westminster Abbey of the Bible. Well, certainly when you read names like Samson, it's like Westminster Abbey in the sense a number of rogues are buried there.

But the point is, these are not flawless people. I don't see next week, particularly Samson, it's fascinating that Samson is mentioned and that his faith is mentioned.

[28 : 37] And we'll look at that later. Abraham doubted. Abraham ran away. Abraham went to Egypt and did various things. Ma'am had concubines and all the rest of it.

Probably the reason Abraham married otherwise was an attempt to try and do the job better than God. Lord, you're not giving me the means to have family so I'd better go and do it myself.

Rather think that's what David did at a later stage as well. That's not saying it was right, but it's showing that these were flawed people. Flawed, but faithful. So, Abraham and Isaac become this wonderful picture of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he goes on to the final words of, well, first of all, the words of Isaac. Verse 20, by faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

Isaac is not a terribly impressive character when you read his story and yet he's here as a person of faith realizing that his son Jacob who was anything but the kind of model for the children to follow.

[29 : 47] These are people of faith. It's particularly interesting that verse 21, by faith, Jacob went dying. I used to think that meant that Jacob only had faith at the moment of death.

I think that's not at all the case. The case is that Jacob's faith at the moment of death, at the supreme challenge to the faith, that was the moment when he exemplified that he had faith.

His faith, like ours, had been fitful. His faith, like ours, had taken many a knock and many a tumble. But he recognized that his family had a future bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

As he passes from this world into the next one, and he's given this vision, vision of what's going to happen in this world to the, first of all, to his descendants as they live in the promised land, but far, far beyond that.

And finally, we come to Joseph. Remember, I'm saying this third point, faith is life out of death. By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, once again.

[30 : 59] Now, in Exodus 13, we discover that Moses had faithfully carried out Joseph's words and taken the bones of Joseph and that in the book of Joshua we read how these bones were buried.

Think about it for a minute. The book of Genesis opens with the glorious words, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. It ends, Joseph died and was put in a coffin in Egypt.

A book that begins, in the beginning God created and ends in a coffin in Egypt. What's all that about? Until we remember that by faith we believe in a God who knows his way out of the grave.

Faith believes that death is not the end. Faith believes that this earthly life is simply a preparation for the life that is to come.

And when we believe that, of course, very far from making us ignore and belittle this earthly life, that gives this earthly life real meaning. If this life is going to culminate in the life to come, then everything we do now matters.

[32 : 17] Everything we do is significant. Faith then exemplified in Abraham and the other patriarchs and those before him.

And next week we'll see how it's further emphasized in the great figure of Moses and then in unknown figures. And finally, of course, at the end of this section, verse 12, surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.

Let me just finish by saying this. The vast majority of God's people are now in heaven. And this is true at any time.

And that vast number has grown immeasurably since our author wrote. Think of the many, many millions whose feet now stand in Zion.

The many millions who are on the journey. That's why we need to believe that faith looks beyond the grave. Faith looks beyond death.

[33 : 17] In other words, faith is looking for the homeland. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Lord God, we want to say great is your faithfulness. And we thank you for those famous and unknown who ran the race before us.

Those who are now some known to us, some unknown to us, were running the race with us at this moment. And we pray too for those who are still to join the race, but who will come part of that great multitude that no one could count.

And so Lord, give to us courage, give to us vision, give to us a sense that we are not wandering aimlessly, that we are on a journey, we are on a pilgrimage, which will lead to the homeland.

And we thank you for this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.