

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

Hebrews 11:8-22

Key Verse: 11:8

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."

In chapter 11:1-7, we learned that faith is spiritual reality that we do not see. For example, Jesus saw with the eyes of faith that his 12 disciples, who knew no more than hills and fish, would be raised up as the best leaders who ever lived, especially in the world salvation work of God (11:1). We also learned the faith that pleases God. In order to please God we must believe that God is living, and that God rewards those who earnestly seek him. Today's passage is the story about Abraham's faith. When we study Genesis, we see there were many ups and downs in Abraham's life of faith. But when we study Hebrews, we learn that Abraham had faith that pleases God. Let's think about how Abraham's faith pleased God.

I. Abraham obeyed God's calling (8-16)

First, Abraham obeyed and went (8). Look at verse 8. "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." This verse explains how Abraham responded to God's calling. When God called Abraham he promised to give him many sons, as many as to establish a great nation. God also promised to make his name great and to give him the land. At that time, Abraham was 75 years old and he had no son to

inherit his name. God's promises of blessing were indeed fascinating, especially to an old man who had no son and no fame and no land. Any fallen man can venture to obtain such marvelous blessings so that he might make his name great. There is a saying, "A tiger leaves his skin and a man leaves his name." That's true. As there is no tiger which wants to die not leaving his skin, so there is no man who wants to die as a nameless mediocre. Abraham Lincoln was not so great among his contemporaries. But down through the generations Abraham Lincoln's name is truly great. They say that the books about President Abraham Lincoln are far more than the books about Shakespeare. President Abraham Lincoln was named after Abraham. But in light of his name Abram, meaning "a noble father," he was not so ambitious. God promised to give him the land (Ge 12:7). Abraham did not want any land because he had his hometown and his own house and he was too old to cultivate the land. Even if he cultivated the land and harvested the crops, he had no one to feed. So Abraham could have stubbornly refused God's promises and said, "Leave me alone."

But verse 8 says, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." It was not easy for Abraham to leave his home country and his relatives and all his property in his old age. He must have been deeply attached to his homeland. It was not easy for Abraham to go to an unknown foreign land without any security guaranteed. It was not easy for Abraham to leave his home country, not knowing where he was going. They say that in Abraham's times foreigners were regarded as enemies and there were many tigers and lions in the mountains. So it was not easy for Abraham to commit his life to God and

obey God's calling. These days there are many people who say, "I commit to no one. I commit myself only to God." In reality, they don't commit to God. So they cannot commit to anyone. Jean-Paul Sartre's writings about the uncommitment problem are no longer fiction, but reality. But Abraham committed himself to God and obeyed God's calling, because he honored God as God.

God's calling was indeed a great test and challenge to Abraham. God wanted him to obey his calling absolutely. God wanted him to give up all his calculations and depend on God only. Humanly, it was impossible for Abraham to obey God's calling. But he "obeyed and went" (8). God's calling is high calling. Without an absolute attitude no one can obey his calling.

Second, Abraham lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob (9-10). Look at verse 9. "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise." By faith Abraham went to the promised land. Abraham might have expected that the promised land would be like a paradise in which he could live in rapture. But it was not a paradise; it was a part of the world. There were already many people living in Canaan, who were trying to survive, blinking their blue eyes. Abraham would have to live as a foreigner among the native people. Foreigners are always lonely and insecure. Abraham understood that the promised land was not paradise, but a foreign country. However, Abraham did not return to his homeland. He lived in the promised land as long as he lived. But Abraham did not live according to the corrupted ways of the Canaanites. He lived a life

of faith. He lived as a foreigner, believing that he was a pilgrim.

Abraham lived in a tent. When we read other parts of the Bible, we learn that Abraham was richly blessed by God, so he could have made a mansion house and lived in it. But he lived in a tent. He also taught his son Isaac to live in a tent. He also taught his grandson Jacob to live in a tent. Abraham did not try to live in this world forever. He lived in this world in the awareness of being a pilgrim. He lived in the living hope of the kingdom of God. Look at verse 10. "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Third, Abraham believed that God is faithful (11-12). To Abraham, his childless problem was the testing stone of his faith. He was too old and his wife Sarah was barren. But Abraham believed God's promise is true. Look at verse 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." When Abraham saw himself, he was an old man. His wife was a snow white grandmother who was barren. It was impossible for Abraham to believe that he could have a son. But he believed that God's promises are true. The last part of verse 11 says, "...because he considered him faithful who had made the promise...." Abraham did not believe habitually. He fought the good fight against Satan's doubt. He struggled hard to hold on to God's promise. He prayed earnestly to believe that God's promise is true. He could not keep his faith naturally. He maintained it by believing that God is faithful.

When Abraham honored God as God and believed that God is faithful, finally God gave him a son, Isaac. Abraham was joyful as if he had received many sons, as numerous as the stars in the sky, as countless as the sand on the seashore. In reality, Abraham saw sons as numerous as the stars in the sky with the eyes of faith and rejoiced in God.

There are two worlds: the world of faith and the world of money. Those who live in the world of money only depend on money and fall into misery. One woman works two full-time jobs and a part-time job. She tries to take care of her family members with money. She thinks that money will make her happy. But she has a bad habit of going to casinos where she loses everything. Then she becomes miserable and feels worthless. On the other hand, those who believe that God is faithful can rejoice in God. Dr. Noah and Sweetie Rhee had lived as a shepherd family for American students for 18 years, but they had no child. The Lord gave them his word of promise, "...your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son..." (Lk 1:13). By faith they began to pray every night for a son to be born. At last, Noah Rhee, Jr. was born. And all of God's people rejoiced. This happened when they believed that God is faithful.

Fourth, Abraham had faith that hopes (13-16). When we see the world, the world seems to be filled with secular, ungodly people who are nothing but slaves of money. But the author of Hebrews stresses that there were many godly men and women who had lived as pilgrims. Because of their lives of faith God was happy to be called their God. There were many who died without receiving the things promised. But they were full of hope because they had faith in God. They were full of hope because they had faith in the kingdom of God. Look at verse 13. "All

these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth."

Humanly speaking, those who have wealth and honor seem to be happy. Those who do not have worldly possessions to show off to others seem to be unhappy. But in reality all those who put their hope in worldly possessions are miserable, whether they have or have not. Yet those who have faith in God are happy because their hope is in God and in his kingdom. One woman has every reason to be sorrowful because of her family situation. But she is not. She is happy, so happy. She is happy to take care of God's flock of sheep as her own dear children. She is happy because she put her hope in God and in his kingdom. Those who have faith in God are happy because God is not ashamed to be called their God. God loves to call them, "my faithful children." Look at verses 15-16. "If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

II. Abraham's faith in God's love (17-19)

Once, God tested Abraham, saying, "Offer your one and only son Isaac as a burnt offering." God intended to raise many descendants of Abraham through Isaac. So Isaac could not be a sacrifice. To Abraham, Isaac was given after 25 years of faith training. So God could not ask him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. But God tested Abraham to offer

Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham was ready to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. Look at verse 19a. Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead.... Here, the word "reasoned" is not sinful human reason. It is spiritual understanding. Abraham understood spiritually that God was going to bless Isaac, even if he had to raise him from the dead in order to do so. Abraham loved God so much that he had no doubt about God's command. Missionary Peter Park of Nigeria lived in a nice air-conditioned embassy compound with his wife, Monica, and three children. But in order to share common life with African students, he moved into the African community near the university. He was okay. But his children cried every night. Their crying broke his heart. But he offered his children to God and faithfully served African students. Soon his children adjusted and became missionary coworkers with their parents. And God blessed his ministry with many growing disciples of Jesus. We can offer our children to God when we love God. When one loves God, he can give more and more to God. When one does not love God, he can see his wife as money. "Abraham offered Isaac to God" is the best expression of his love for God. This event reminds us of 1 John 4:18a. It says, "There is no fear in love."

III. Isaac, Jacob and Joseph (20-22)

First, Isaac's good influence (20). Look at verse 20. "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future." Isaac inherited Abraham's blessing. But he did not abuse God's blessing. He maintained God's blessing well and passed it on to Jacob. Isaac was the one and only son of old Abraham. So he must have been spoiled. But he quietly maintained God's blessing. While doing so, he loved his wife as

himself. When they had a family problem because they had no son for 20 years, they did not quarrel or blame each other. They prayed together for a son to be given. Then God gave twin sons, Esau and Jacob, through whom twelve patriarchs were born. Isaac did not fight over pieces of cake with the ungodly. He conceded his wells, dug out through much effort. Thus he showed to ungodly people that he was a godly man. Isaac was the best man of influence in the Bible.

Second, Jacob's faith (21). Look at verse 21. "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." Esau and Jacob were twin sons of Isaac. Jacob was a man of competition. Jacob was sorry that he became a younger brother to his brother Esau, just because Esau was born a few minutes earlier. In the matter of time, he took away his older brother's birthright. Because of this, he had to leave his mother's home when he was very young and lived under his stingy uncle Laban for 20 years. He also competed with his uncle Laban and took away two daughters and two maidservants from him. At the end, he procured almost all the estate and made Laban an empty-handed man. To escape from Laban, Jacob had to go back to his home, where his enemy Esau was waiting for him. Through competition he earned honor, that is, the birthright, love, that is, four wives and eleven sons, and wealth, that is the property of Laban. Then his worldly possessions became a great burden to him. For example, his four wives wanted to split him into four pieces every night. His sheep and goats were too noisy at nighttime. Finally, Jacob competed with God through a wrestling match at the Jabbok River. He grabbed God and did not let him go until it dawned in order to receive God's blessing. So God lost the match and blessed Jacob. Jacob learned that

God was the source of blessing. And all the worldly blessings were nothing but burdens. When Jacob was dying, he worshiped God, leaning on the top of his staff. He also blessed his descendants with God's blessing.

Third, Joseph's faith (22). Look at verse 22. "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones." Joseph was the second youngest son of Jacob, and Jacob loved him most. But his step-brothers hated him because of his father's one-sided love for Joseph. In their hatred, they sold Joseph into slavery. In slavery, he became the chief steward of General Potiphar of the Egyptian Empire. Then Joseph was put in prison because of a foxy woman's manipulation. There, he became a shepherd for the prisoners. Whatever he did, Joseph was successful, because God was with him. In the time of hardships and sufferings, he did not fall into self-pity.

By God's grace Joseph became the Prime Minister of the Egyptian Empire. But Joseph had no attachment to the glory of the Empire. When his end was near, by faith, he spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Joseph instructed his brothers and his attendants to carry his bones to the promised land so that his bones might be buried in the promised land. Here, "promised land" is a symbol of the kingdom of God. Joseph loved God and obeyed his father's instructions not to be buried in Egypt but to be buried in the promised land. This is a very small event. But this small event reveals that Joseph was a great man of faith even though he is not included among the three ancestors of faith.

In this passage we learn Abraham's faith and the faith of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. By faith they lived as pilgrims on earth, pressing forward to the kingdom of God. Faith is spiritual reality. Faith requires absolute obedience.