Living by Faith: Noah, Sarah and Abraham
Hebrews 11:7-12
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If you've been with us over the last two weeks you know that we are in the middle of a series through Hebrews chapter 11.

Hebrews 11 is often called "The Great Faith Chapter" in the Bible as it contains a list of men and women who lived their lives in remarkable ways proving that their eyes were not set on the rewards of this world, but on the rewards of God's kingdom. And they strived for these rewards their entire lives, some of them seeing some fruit for their efforts, and others none at all.

But last week we saw that faith in itself is not the goal of this chapter, instead faith is the stepping stone to something of ultimate importance – pleasing God. And so Hebrews 11:6 is the central verse in the whole chapter because it tells us:

> And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

So pleasing God is the goal, and faith is the means to that end. And so what we get in this chapter then is not a list of examples of faith to shoot for, but a list of men and women who pleased God and a path that we can follow to do the same.

Now here I want to be really clear. The idea of pleasing God by faith is not an optional luxury that some extraordinary Christians achieve while the rest of us can be content with something less.

Often people think the Hebrews 11 list is not talking about saving faith, but extraordinary faith. But that is not what this chapter is about. These people are not "faith heroes" to look up to but never look like. Instead the faith depicted here is the faith that separates Christians from the rest.

Friends this may sound hard but I would be remiss not to say it. Many church attending people have been lied to and told that saving faith makes people pray a prayer, and if you have done that, then that is all that is required. I'd love to believe that, but I don't see it anywhere in the Bible. Instead what I see is that saving faith leads people to persevere to the end and live obediently such that everything they do is motivated by their desire to please God. These people aren't extraordinary Christians, they are just Christians.

On judgment day people will be separated into two categories, sheep and goats. And the sheep will be accepted into God's glory while the goats will end up in hell.

The sheep will be people who had their eyes fixed on the treasure in the field, on God's reward, and gave up everything necessary in order to get it. And the goats will be everyone else. There will not be a sub-category of sheep who "believed in Jesus" and "prayed the magic prayer" and "showed up to church regularly" but didn't making seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness everything that mattered in their lives. Those people will be called goats not sheep, and Scripture seems to indicate that most will be goats, even possibly most church attending people. After all Jesus told His disciples:

> Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

So I urge you make certain you are on the right road. Give everything you've got to learn what it means to please God.

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Today we are looking at the God pleasers Noah, Abraham and Sarah – people who had saving faith. And as we do ask yourself "Do I have the same saving faith these people did such that I can say my eyes are set on Christ's reward, I'm seeking the treasure in the field regardless of what it costs, I'm living a life that pleases God."

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If you haven't already please open your Bibles to Hebrews chapter 11. We will be picking up in verse 7 today. As you turn there would you pray with me?

[Pray]

There are three people mentioned in the verses we are looking at today and they give us a three part picture of what it looks like to please God. We will look first at Noah, then skip down to Sarah and finish with Abraham.

So first look with me at verse 7.

[Read Hebrews 11:7]

After the murdered Abel and the undying Enoch, Noah is the third person given as an example of someone who pleased God. Genesis tells us:

> The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time…. But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Genesis 6:5;8)

In contrast to everyone else, God's favor or pleasure was on Noah. So what did Noah do to warrant this favor? Hebrews says he lived "by faith" – faith was the means or the path that Noah walked to find God's pleasure. And then Hebrews tells us what this faith looked like for Noah because saving faith always has a physical side. It results in action.

And so the text says Noah was "warned about things not yet seen" and then it says he responded in "holy fear" and "built and ark to save his family."

So God spoke to Noah – Genesis doesn't tell us whether that was by dream or vision or somehow in person – but in some way He told him about the coming flood that was going to wipe out humanity, and in spite of how preposterous this must have sounded to Noah and in spite of the fact that he was not given any "evidence" that what God said was true, because Noah feared God he "did all that the LORD commanded him."[1]

And this is what it means to live a life fueled by a fiery faith. God's call to action must be met with 100% obedience.

Now here people often object, "Well if God told me to do something crazy like Noah I would obey, but He hasn't told me to do anything at all. I can't figure out what He wants. So since I don't know what He wants me to do there is nothing I have to do."

But this is a total misunderstanding about what it means to know the will of God. The fact is God has told all of us exactly what He wants from us.

Now some people received this direction by what is called "special revelation". So think Abraham being asked to kill his son,[2] - we will get to that next week. Think Moses at the burning bush being told to threaten Pharaoh and free Israel.[3] Think Mary being told what to name her baby even though she was a virgin.[4] And think Noah being told to build an Ark in the middle of a desert.

In each of these instances God gave people a "special revelation" of what He wanted them to do. And one similarity between all these examples is that every time God speaks like this, no matter how crazy what He says sounds, not once do we read that the person who received this revelation didn't understand.

In other words God is a perfect communicator and when He reveals His will like this there is never any breakdown in communication. The only question is whether or not we will obey.

But we must not make the mistake of thinking this is the normative way God speaks – in fact it is not. Instead the normal way God has spoken to the vast majority of people throughout history is through what is called "general revelation."

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[1] Genesis 7:5
[2] Genesis 22
[3] Exodus 3
[4] Luke 1:31

And this general revelation is also crystal clear and it is what we get in the Bible – both Old Testament and New Testament. So for example when Israel asked God what He wanted from them, whether burnt offerings or rivers of oil, Micah the prophet responded:

> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Even hundreds of years before Jesus was born the people of Israel were unable to use the excuse "We don't know what God wants from us." And the words of Jesus and the Apostles have only made it clearer.

Friends, God doesn't want you to move to Timbuktu, He doesn't want you to marry someone specific, He doesn't want you to take one university class and not another. What He wants from us is that we walk with Him like Enoch last week and Noah today. He wants us to share His heart and care about the things He cares about. And then allow this heart to change the way we live. To make us fight for justice and mercy with the same passion Jesus did.

Brothers and sisters, if you have been around the church for any amount of time, and read anything in the Bible, then you know what God's will for your life is. God wants you to look like Jesus in every situation you find yourself in – that is His will. So the question is never "What does God want me to do?" – that's just an excuse. But it is always will I act in holy fear, like Noah, and be obedient?

So ask yourself do I have saving faith like Noah evidenced by the fact that I am obedient to what God wants me to do?

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Second, look with me at verse 11.

[Read Hebrews 11:11-12]

Now if you know the story of Genesis you know that Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89 when the Angel of the LORD told them they were going to have a baby.

Now people who have babies the normal way know that this is not a normal age to get pregnant. Bodies shut down, fertility cycles end. And that is exactly where Abraham and Sarah were in this moment.

And so during this conversation between God and Abraham Sarah was standing at the entrance of her tent, and when the word came that she was going to have a baby she laughed.

I mean we don't have anyone in our church who is 99 but we do have a few people in their 80's. Imagine you had been childless your whole life in a culture where children were everything and then someone, anyone, God told you were going to have a baby next year.

There would be some seriously conflicting emotions right! Shock, horror, joy, disbelief - these are probably just a few of them.

And so Sarah laughed when she heard this. But God responded:

> Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? (Genesis 18:12)

Here is the thing with faith; it requires belief in the midst of the impossible and even the unimaginable. Often in churches we talk of the faith involved with building fund campaigns or successful programs, but if faith is required for those kinds of things it is a really small amount.

Those are things we can do if we put our minds to them and work hard. True faith is only required when humanly it is impossible to proceed. And this is what Sarah encountered in this moment. She knew there was no amount of herbal medicine she could consume that would reverse the effects time had taken on both hers and Abraham's body. Verse 12 speaks very realistically when it says their bodies were "as good as dead."

And so Sarah laughed.

Now let me direct you in a spiritual inventory of ourselves with a couple more questions. First ask yourself "What am I trying to accomplish for God that I will only be able to achieve if I use the gifts and abilities He has given me to their maximum potential?" In other words, what could you do if you pushed yourself to the edge of your abilities? The truth is most of the time I don't think we set our vision that high.

But now ask "What am I aiming for that is so impossible that I actually need faith to achieve it?

I think these are really telling questions because usually we set our visions so small that we can accomplish them with or without God. But I believe that God wants to show Himself powerful through our lives. And He will do that if we are obedient to use every ability and resource He has given us and then set our eyes beyond this on what He wants to do through us that only He could accomplish.

So just for a start are there people in your life – your neighbours or family members, who do not know Jesus? Romans 10:14 tells us "no one can believe unless they hear" and it places that responsibility make them hear on us. Now this responsibility isn't easy, but it is possible within our given abilities. All of us are able to use the gifts we have to connect with the people God has placed around us. We must stop making excuses for not reaching out. But then to see these people won to Christ requires the Holy Spirit because Jesus says:

> No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws them. (John 6:44)

So in order for us to see our neighbours won to Christ our vision must be set to use the gifts we have been given to the maximum of our ability and then believe God beyond our ability.

So ask yourself “Am I using the full extent of my talents, both my abilities and the resources at my disposal, to glorify God? And at the same time do I have my eyes set beyond my own talents so that I am living in faith?”

And I think this question also applies to us as a church. It is so easy to set an attainable budget and then allow that to dictate our vision. But it is totally another thing to set our eyes on what Jesus wants to do in the city and then say “who cares what the budget says, let’s risk everything to shoot for what we believe Jesus wants, and see if He will come through.”

Friends, I firmly believe that Jesus longs to show Himself powerful through the local church. Do you believe that?

I believe He wants to show up here and blow the walls out and fill people with His Spirit, but from the examples we see in Scripture it seems He only does this through people who please Him by living lives fueled by faith.
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So ask yourself “Do I want to see Jesus move like that in my life and in the life of my church? If “yes”, then please God by living by faith.

But what if your faith is weak?
…
Here we get something encouraging. While Sarah started by laughing in doubt, her doubt did not last. And so no matter how doubt filled your heart has been it doesn’t have to stay that way. Hebrews says ultimately Sarah “considered Him faithful who had made the promise.”

While to start with she thought the promise she was hearing was impossible, she decided to take God at His word regardless of reason.

And we can do the same. Perhaps when you came to Christ your faith was strong but now it has waned. No matter how far you have fallen God can do a miracle in your heart and revive your faith.

Friends, you are not too old, you are not too young; you are not too weak to see God move in power in your life and in your church. So choose to live a life that pleases God and ask Him to revive your faith so that you can believe for the impossible.
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Finally look at verse 8.

[Read Hebrews 11:8-10]

Abraham is known as the Father of our Faith[5] for a reason. He was the first person that God spoke to and promised to make a nation out of, and so he is the father simply because he was the first. But he is also the father of the faith because his faith was the kind of faith God wanted in His children. And so it is that everyone today who has saving faith is a child of Abraham.

Now there are three things here I want us to see.

First in verse 8 it says that Abraham obeyed God's call to uproot himself and his family from the comfortably familiar and go somewhere unknown.

In Genesis the story of Abraham starts abruptly with God's word.

> The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.
>
> "I will make you into a great nation,
> and I will bless you;
> I will make your name great,
> and you will be a blessing.
> I will bless those who bless you,
> and whoever curses you I will curse;
> and all peoples on earth
> will be blessed through you."
> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him…. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. (Genesis 12:1-4)

Obedience for Abraham meant saying goodbye to the comfortable familiar. Abram had lived in Harran his whole life – 75 years! And only at that point did he get the call to move out.

Friends, no one likes change, and especially well established and comfortable people don't like it. But if we are going to be people of faith, if our church is going to be a church of faith, this is absolutely essential. People that please God are people who obey and move even when the present is comfortable and the future is unknown.

Abraham had never been to the Promised Land. He didn't even have any clue which direction he would need to travel to get there. But when God told him to move he did.

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[5] Galatians 3:29

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So ask yourself "Do I have faith to move right now? Do I have the faith to do things differently in my life and get outside my comfort zone? Do I have faith for my church to move? Am I willing to change the things I like here in order to see Jesus' kingdom expand and His glory come? Am I a person with saving faith?"
…
The second thing we see in Abraham's life comes in verse 9. Abraham picked up and moved to the land God promised him even though it didn't look promising when he got there.

Abraham left behind his three-bedroom, two-bath home with a double bay garage to live in a tent! Do you see that in verse 9?!

Now often when we think of living in faith we imagine that if we follow Jesus it is going to get better. For example if we believe we should change our job and so we do, then a year later we say "we can see God was in this because now we make more money and have more comfort than we had before." Alternatively if the change goes badly we wonder if we heard God correctly. Surly God doesn't want us to have less does He?

But that's not how Abraham the God pleaser and father of our faith saw it. He was willing to wait for the blessing and even have his family wait for generations before they really inherited the land.

Verse 9 says "he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob." That's three generations of tent living. That's a lot of waiting and that isn't all.

God promised to make Abraham into a great nation – that's lots of kids. But Abraham had to wait 25 years before he would have the first son of this promise. That's a lot of waiting!

And ultimately God said all the nations would be blessed through him, but it wasn't until Jesus showed up that this because a reality. That's a lot of waiting!

And so here it is: Abraham pleased God because his faith enabled him to have a vision beyond his death bed. He was willing to go with God's timing even if that meant he would not see the fulfillment of the promise himself. That's faith. Amen?
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> I'm always impressed by immigrant families who come to Canada and for a generation or two submit themselves to working hard jobs with long hours and low pay in order to establish their family in this country. In contrast how short our vision often is. We expect to obey today and tomorrow be living the easy life because of it.

So ask yourself “Do I have the faith to wait for God’s blessing even if that means I get uncomfortable? As individuals this might mean being willing to live below your means to use your resources to bless those around you even though you or your kids don’t get the nicest clothes or the best vacations.

As a church the faith to wait might mean setting a vision big enough that it will only be realized 20 years from now after many of us are already dead.

Friends, do you have Abraham’s saving faith that enables you to wait for the blessing?

The final thing I want to bring out from Abraham’s life of pleasing God comes from verse 10.

The motivation behind everything that Abraham did was the reward that God had promised. Hebrews says Abraham’s eyes were set on the city whose architect and builder is God.

Abraham wanted the reward of being part of something that God was building, not just something that he could accomplish himself. And that is why he was willing to leave the familiar, head into the unknown, wait for decades, and ultimately not see the promise fulfilled – at least not with his human eyes.

And friends, this is the kind of life that pleases God. This is saving faith. So ask yourself “Do I have saving faith? Do I believe that God wants to do something through my life and through the life of my church that is bigger than anything I could ever accomplish on my own?” It’s true.

Do you believe that God’s vision for your life and your church extends beyond your physical death? It does. Is your faith fueled by a desire to be part of something God is building?

Friends, everything is on the line this Thanksgiving. God has been good to us as individuals and as a church, but the blessings we have received are not a ticket to coast. If our faith is going to be saving faith we must finish well by obeying God’s will in holy fear like Noah; and believing regardless of whether what God promises seems impossible like Sarah. And we must, like Abraham, say goodbye to the comfortably familiar and set our vision beyond our deaths and set as our goal arrival at the city whose architect and builder is God.

Friends we are saved by faith in Christ alone, but faith that saves is a faith like the faith of Noah and Sarah and Abraham. It is a faith that obeys God’s will and believes He is faithful and sets its vision on the impossible. Friends, do you have saving faith?