

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 14 May 2006

No. T0418

Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

The Gallery of Faith - Hebrews 11: Abraham and Sarah

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” Hebrews 11:1.

Whilst on holiday last year, my son came downstairs from his Bible study excitedly and said to his Grandpa, “Guess what Grandpa, I’ve found this really good verse.” He then proceeded to read out Proverbs 13:22: “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children!” Having given us all a smile he was a bit put out when I casually remarked to him that I had better change my will in favour of some as yet unborn grandchildren, as I too wanted to be a good man! You see, when we are young, and sometimes when we are much older too, the idea of an inheritance is pretty appealing. It is something that we think could make a difference to our lives for the better, but it is something that we want sooner rather than later.

As we continue our look at Hebrews 11, the gallery of faith, we come this morning to Abraham and Sarah. In looking at the lives of these two remarkable Old Testament characters we shall learn something about adopting a proper perspective in life. Not that I use the Living Bible much, but I do like its rendering of Ephesians 4:14, “We will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different, or has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth.”

Often, when a new baby is born and relatives see the child for the first time, one or another will comment on a particular feature and say something like “Oh, hasn’t she got her Grandma’s nose” or “His smile is just like his Granddad’s”. As God’s children, it would be a wonderful thing if it could be said of us that we had our Father’s eyes, spiritual eyes that could see things in just the way that God looks at things, to appreciate them in just the same way that He does. By adopting a proper perspective in life, then we shall truly have our Father’s eyes. Perhaps more than any other characteristic, the faith of Sarah and Abraham allowed them to view things properly. How else can we explain the incredible journey through life that they took with God? We shall consider three examples of their faith outlined in chapter 11:

1. An inheritance not realised
2. A son not expected, and
3. A sacrifice not required

An inheritance not realised.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would afterwards receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” Hebrews 11:8-10.

I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall when Abraham told Sarah of his latest “big idea”. In our day, he must have to have done so many dishes and bought so many flowers looking for the right time to tell Sarah the news that he felt called to leave home! More than that, to the inevitable question, “Well ok, where are we going?”, all he could say was, “I don’t know yet!” God called Abraham and Sarah to leave behind all that was familiar, the safety of known experiences, and the security that they had established as a married couple, and to head south. In human terms this was a poor career move. He was leaving behind a people whose star was in the ascendancy to become a wanderer, wholly dependent upon the leading of God.

What God asked Abraham and Sarah to do, He asks us also to do. We may not literally have to leave behind home and familiarity, although many have done so as they took up the missionary calling. But we do need to learn to leave behind our dependence on our own provision and learn to trust wholly in what God provides for us. In our hearts, this is what many of us secretly long for: a deep relationship that really is a daily walk with God. And yet timidity keeps us from making those first faltering steps away from security and out towards God. Would this morning that many of us together were ready to leave behind all that we rely on in this world, to fully rely on the providing of God. Imagine the impact that this would have upon my bank balance, or the number of people who used my home, or the way I spent my leisure time.

It was not that Abraham was always spiritually close to God. In fact, the greater credit must surely go to Sarah for that. Having accepted Abraham's dream she never lost sight of it, even when he did. When they went down into Egypt and Abraham's faith faltered, Sarah remained true. Abraham told her to say she was his sister to protect himself. Then again in the household of Abimelech he does the same. Sarah's life is placed on the line, as Abraham shrinks back in cowardice. Yet Sarah remains true and leads her husband back to his rightful place. If ever there was a tremendous work for a godly wife, it is this support that keeps the vision alive, even when a husband fails. Not once is it recorded that Sarah scolded Abraham with the words, "Well, it was your idea to leave home". When Abraham became rich by his failure, Sarah patiently kept the hope alive that had caused them to leave home and family behind.

In many ways, Sarah and Abraham prospered. Their life was not altogether unpleasant in terms of earthly joys. And yet I believe they never received the fullness of the inheritance they were promised. They never received the whole land that God will one day give to Abraham's descendants, and they never again knew the settled existence of a fixed home. The city whose foundations were laid by God was not to be revealed for many centuries. And yet they never gave up, and that is perhaps the most remarkable thing about this married couple. They were prepared to make the sacrifices in their own lives, so that a future generation could reap the rewards. In an increasingly "me now" society that is rare indeed. God has a city in view (Revelation 21), the foundations have been laid, and God is still building it. Am I as prepared as Abraham and Sarah to work for God with no thought of present fulfilment? Am I prepared to hold to the whole truth of God when others may fall away so that a future generation may take it on? And even if things were not to improve would I carry on where Jesus has put me, ready to forgo blessing now, so that the city will be perfect and complete in a day to come?

A son not expected.

"By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude – innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore" Hebrews 11:11-12.

In Genesis 15, we read that Abraham laments the lack of an heir. All that he possessed would go to his servant, Eliezer of Damascus. But God had other plans for Abraham. So the promise is given to Abraham that he would have a child. Initially, Sarah tries to make things happen by giving Abraham her serving maid Hagar, with whom he could have a child. The result of this plan was Ishmael, from whom the Arabs trace their ancestry. Particularly today, we ought not to forget that these nations are a part of the promise of God. However, this was not what God had in mind and so, in Genesis 17-18, God reaffirms the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah. And because God has said it, so it happens. Isaac is born when Abraham is 100 years old, way beyond the time when he might have hoped for a son. Yet God had said it would be so! As we trace the history of the Jews, we can see how fully God has kept his promise to Abraham. Today, and into the future, God will continue to make of Abraham, descendants as numerous as the stars, for "he who touches you touches the apple of (God's) eye" Zechariah 2:8. As we consider the dreadful persecutions that have been suffered by the Jews right across the world as one nation after another has sought to destroy them, so we see the almighty power of God. He has promised and nothing will deflect Him from the fulfilment of that promise. Nations today may deny Israel's right to exist, may desire an end to the Jewish race. They will come to nothing, for God will not be moved from keeping His promise to Abraham and Sarah.

But one has to say it is almost despite mankind, yes even despite Abraham and Sarah themselves, that the promise is fulfilled. What conflict and enmity has arisen out of trying to do God's will by human means! If they had just waited until Isaac was born, they would have saved themselves so much heartache. How often we try to hurry God up. We know what He wants to do and so we try to do it in our own time and in our own strength, forgetting that "(God) has made everything beautiful in its time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). He will rule over the nations one day, but that does not mean that we should address Him as the king of this world now. He will judge the world one day, but we are called to be ambassadors not judges now. He will be surrounded by a company of thousands upon thousands one day, but let us not despise a small company of believers now. Do we look for the fulfilment of our dreams, yes, even our spiritual ones, now? That God has only this lifetime to get things right as far as we are concerned? If I were to live all my life in obedience to Him, yet saw no reward for it, would it all be a waste? Ought I to conclude that perhaps I was doing something wrong, or that the cost is too high and so I may as well give up? Before we approach the final sphere in which faith was active, let us find the important answer to these questions in the perspective that verses 13-16 give us:

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, (they) were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

What nobility, what valour as we consider these two, and others besides, continuing for God, with their eyes on a heavenly reward, their lives sacrificed for the greater good! I'm reminded of the final actions of Boromir, in the Fellowship of the Ring. Every time I see him get up, after being hit by arrows, buying precious time for his friends to escape, I feel that is the character we need today – lives sacrificed for the good of others.

A sacrifice not required.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.” Hebrews 11:17-19.

We could have spent all our time, and more, on the events of Genesis 22. What a heart breaking, breath-taking sacrifice Abraham had to make! And yet he was able to do so, not because he did not love his son, but because he did. There could surely be no more sons. Yet through a lifetime of wandering with God, Abraham had learnt that God was absolutely reliable. By giving up his earthly security, Abraham and Sarah had gained a far greater spiritual security. Abraham knew that through Isaac, God would make a great nation. If Isaac died, God was able to raise him from the dead. It was not until the angel intervened that Abraham realised that this was part of a test. For him, the awful reality was of his hand being the one to take the knife to Isaac. And yet he was prepared to do even that, because God had asked him to. Here at the very beginning of the history of the Jewish nation, God was testing Abraham to see if there was genuine trust in the relationship. For thousands of years following, the whole basis of relationship between God and His earthly people was to be based upon trust. That relationship could never work if there was no trust right at the beginning. How marvellously Abraham passed the test. Sadly, the history of the Jewish people in the years that followed showed years of decline, followed by times of revival. Never again did God require so great a trust, and yet so often the people stumbled over a lower hurdle, where Abraham had soared over the highest. So often this is the way with us. If God was to ask us to do something immensely dramatic we would probably obey, and yet when He requires an ordinary obedience day by day, we fall. Like Abraham, though, the whole of our relationship with God is based upon trust. Do we accept that God knows best, that He desires our best, that He knows the end from the beginning? We may never be called upon to make the sort of sacrifice that Abraham was called to, but we are called to display the same kind of trust.

One cannot begin to understand how Abraham must have felt as he made the return journey with Isaac, who had also shown remarkable trust in his father. Massively relieved for sure. And yet I cannot help but feel that in a tiny portion of his heart, there must have been a sense of anticlimax, of disappointment and confusion. Had he misunderstood God's calling? He had been ready to give everything to God, and yet it hadn't proved necessary. Perhaps there have been times when you have been ready to make some sacrifice to God, only for the door to be slammed in your face. I do not suppose Abraham ever forgot that day, not for the remaining 60 or so years of his life. Much of his life must have seemed a bit of an anticlimax after that. And yet, Abraham never ceased to show that same confidence in God. Through the loss of his Sarah and the marriage of his son, Abraham never lost sight of the dream he had received so many years before. And he continued.

As we trace the ways of God with Sarah and Abraham, we can see God leading them on, drawing them out of themselves and into a more meaningful relationship with Him. Firstly, as they leave home, they are called upon to give up all that was familiar. This was no naïve “let go and let God”, but rather a counting the cost and knowing that to stay was to beggar themselves. How important it was for them to learn the lesson that God was more than able to take care of them. Then, in the birth of Isaac, they have to learn the lesson that to fully obey God, they had to do things in His time and in His way. Finally, in being ready to offer Isaac up in sacrifice, they learn the lesson that obedience is better than understanding. What mighty lessons these are! Today God would have us learn these same three lessons also, that we may also be people of faith. There is no shortcut, no painless quick fix to growing the kind of faith that so powerfully drove Abraham and Sarah. But if we can take those first hesitant steps along the road, then who knows where it will end? But surely if we needed any motivation to begin, then the thought that “God is not ashamed to be called their God”, verse 16, should be all that we need. What a joy, what an honour to have God proud to be associated with us. What a greater privilege to know that we are intimately associated with Him!

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