**GOD IS NOT ASHAMED TO BE CALLED GOD OF ABRAHAM**

June 14, 2015

Hebrews 11:8-22

Key Verse 11:16 “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.”

Have you ever stopped to think about how you get God’s approval in life? Can you gain God’s approval by being nice to others? No. Can you gain God’s approval by doing good deeds? No. Can you gain God’s approval by keeping the Ten Commandments? No. There is only one way that we can please God. In Hebrew 11:6 we learned that, “… without faith it is impossible to please God.” There are only two ways to live. One way, by far the most common, is to live by sight; to base everything on what you can see. The other way, far less commonly taken, is to live by faith; to base your life primarily and ultimately on what you cannot see. That is the Christian way, the Bible way, that is the way that the people of God have always lived. In the previous passage, we looked at what faith is and what faith does, namely, worship, walk, work, and wait. We saw how faith caused Abel to worship God, Enoch to walk with God, Noah to work for God, and Abraham to wait on God. Today we study the faith of Abraham more in detail.

Among many heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11, it is Abraham who is the centerpiece of the chapter. When we read Genesis and look at Abraham’s life, it seems, compared to other heroes of faith, that he was not the sharpest person or the most admirable person. He lied about Sarah being his wife--twice; he was doubtful and afraid; and even after he received God’s promise, he tried to start a family with Hagar in the very next chapter. Yet in spite of all these things, he is considered the father of all who believe and the outstanding example of faith in this chapter. How is that? It is because Abraham pleased God with his faith. Though his faith started out small, it grew to be great. I pray that through today’s passage we might be encouraged to know that God is not looking for perfect people. He is looking for faithful people who through their faith in God can be used to do great things for his glory. I pray that each of us may be commended for the faith we show in God’s promise and that we may pass the tests of life through trust and obedience to God.

I. By faith Abraham obeyed and went (8-10)

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.” Genesis 12:1 tells us that God called Abraham and said, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.” This was the first test of Abraham’s life. Verse 8 implies that this was difficult and took faith because he did not know where he was going. Actually it is ridiculous to leave your home without knowing your destination. Probably his friends and family ridiculed him for such recklessness.

It reminds us of Ruth’s decision to leave her homeland and go to a foreign country where she would be despised and she would have no chance of getting remarried. She said to Naomi, “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.” She could go to a foreign land because she trusted in the God of Israel and believed that God would take care of her future. As a result, she became a great grandfather of King David.

Abraham left all that was known to him and walked into the unknown by faith in God’s word and his promises. While the theme of this passage is faith, notice that the second most common word in this passage is promise. 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.” The life of a stranger in a foreign country is not easy. There are issues with language, culture, future security, and food. In many ways, Abraham was helpless. To endure this life when he could have comfortably stayed at home required faith in God and his word. If we think about missionaries, we may understand what it means to hold on to God and his promise in a strange land. Language problems. Yes. Cultural problems. Yes. Food. Of course. Future security issues. Definitely. For examples, our missionaries in Russia have to extend their visas every 6 months. It means that they have to go out of Russia every 6 months and extend the visa. They have to spend thousands of dollars every 6 months. Also they have to live with fear that they would be deported. Missionary Deborah Lee in Chicago told me that when she came to USA, she had $10 in her pocket. She came knowing nothing except that this was the land God had shown her and that God’s promise was the only thing she had to hold on to. God blessed her abundantly. I stayed with her family during one summer and played with her son. Now her son is a medical doctor in Springfield, Illinois, and a chapter director.

God’s promise to Abraham was a promise to bless and more importantly a promise to make him a blessing. Like Isaac and Jacob, we too are heirs of God’s promise. We need to claim the promise of God to use us as a source of blessing in this generation. We do that by being obedient to his word and by leaving behind anything that may hinder our faith and distract us from God. Without obedience, Abraham would have never received God’s promise. Without cutting off worldly security, he would never have learned what faith is.

We live in a world that is made to distract us from God. Things are also designed to make our life easier and more convenient. I see young people talking or watching TV on cell phones constantly. They simply do not have time or room for God in their hearts. Yet God is calling us to focus on him and to live as strangers in the world. He is calling us to do what does not come naturally, that is, to be a blessing to others by sharing with them the gospel of Jesus. His calling is not easy and it is not convenient. It is not always enjoyable or cool. But it is blessed and it is forward looking, to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. C.S. Lewis wrote, “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next world; all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.”

II. Longing for a better country (13-16)

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.” The saints held on to their faith to the very end because their faith was based on their trust in God and his will, not just in what God would do for them in this life. This verse implies that we may be tempted to give up faith based on the negative circumstances of life or when it seems as if God is unresponsive to our need. If God promised to bless me, why do I have so much trouble at school, at home or at work? Maybe faith isn’t worth it. However, faith is always worth it. Our prayer as Christians should be: “God, whether or not you answer my desperate prayer, my faith is in you. Help me to trust in you and do your will. Amen.” Because they longed for a heavenly home, Abraham and heroes of faith could pray this kind of prayer. They had confidence that God would fulfill his promise in the future and that their time on earth was like a planted seed that would blossom when they were gone.

Look at verse 16. “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.” There are two instances in the Bible where God is not ashamed to be called their God. First, in Genesis, note that God becomes the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is proud to identify himself with them. Second, in Job, we see that God is very proud of Job. He said to the devil, “Have you considered my servant Job?” It is like a father proudly showing his new child to everyone around him. God is proud of him. Whether or not you like to admit it, we all enjoy recognition from our father or mother. It never gets old to hear them tell us good job or that they are proud of us. Now multiply that feeling by thousands and thousands and you may have a sense of what it might feel like if God were to be proud of you. Imagine if God endorsed you. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob… I am the God of Sheila, Wah Paw and Samuel. In the heavenly realms, imagine if God proudly says, “Have you considered my servant Luke?” This is the most awesome blessing; God identifying himself with us; with me, a sinner. Actually, this is God’s desire to give us the best gift of all, himself.

We can be encouraged to know that when we make sacrifices for God in the present, we please God and store up treasure in heaven. There are moments in each of our lives where we may need to make small decisions of faith like when you’re tired from a long day and you debate whether or not to go to Bible study that night. For those who choose to go, imagine God saying to the angels that’s my servant Paul. And sometimes there are moments where we need to make big decisions of faith like when you decide to pursue your career right away or postpone it to do a year of overseas missions. Imagine God saying to the angels that’s my servant when you decide to serve in a foreign country. Faith means knowing that God is worth any and every sacrifice we can make in this world; including our very lives. I pray that we may all hold on to God and his word all the time and to the end of time. May we please God with our decisions of faith and may he not be ashamed to be called our God.

III. The test of faith (17-22)

Look at verses 17-19. “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.” More than any other instance this final exam solidified Abraham as a great man of faith. God finally gave him a son and fulfilled his promise. But just as soon as Abraham received him, God asked Abraham to give him away. If leaving your father’s household without knowing the destination seems ridiculous, this is beyond ridiculous; ludicrous, crazy. But amazingly we see no complaining from Abraham. No demand for an explanation. No pleading. Actually, it’s almost peaceful the way Abraham obeyed. When Isaac asks him on the way, “Father, where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham does not break down into tears but calmly and with faith says, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” How could Abraham be so obedient and responsive to God?

I believe it is because Abraham came to know God. He knew God so personally and intimately that he didn’t have to think twice about doing what he commanded. His whole life of faith seems as if it was leading up to one point: the birth of his son, Isaac. When he finally got his son, he was ecstatic and overjoyed. But his joy was not limited to the child. His delight was in God. They had taken an incredible 25 year journey together and God had shown himself personally to Abraham. Abraham knew that God was just, faithful, loving, trustworthy, powerful. Abraham’s thought process was probably like this: God said he would bring descendants through Isaac. Well, God can’t break his promise because he is faithful. So even if Isaac dies, I know God is also powerful and can do the impossible. So he will have to bring Isaac back from the dead. Abraham fully submitted to God’s will because he was confident in who God is.

Man grows and knows God through the circumstances of life around him. More specifically, we know God by submitting to his will and obeying him by faith. How can we know God if we never put our trust in him or sacrificed anything for him or if we always lived in accordance with our own will? Abraham’s life of faith was a progression; acts of obedience that revealed a little more about who God is to him, so that when the ultimate test came, he was ready. I pray that each of us may grow in our faith like Abraham and come to know God very personally. This may mean challenges and struggles in life. But that is how we come to know who God is. How do you know a true friend? Not in the good times, but in the bad times. God is the true God because he is sovereign and he will never forsake or abandon us.

In conclusion, though Abraham was not perfect and had human limitations, God is not ashamed to be called his God because of Abraham’s enduring faith and obedience. May we too follow the example of Abraham and seek to please God. May we know God through decisions of faith.