



Sermon Growth Guide

January 26, 2025

God Makes a Covenant



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Hebrews 11: 8-19

Key Verse: Hebrews 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.”

Big Idea: When we trust the promises God has made to us, we can go confidently to the places He sends us.

Foundations

The Letter to the Hebrews has been described as a great encouragement to those seeking to live faithful lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. Throughout the letter we are urged to listen to the voice of God which is heard in Jesus Christ. We are warned against procrastinating in our faith journey. We are cheered on as we run the race of faith. And, in Hebrews 11, we are given examples of less than perfect people who lived in hope of the promises of God.

In today's reading, we focus on the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah. We know that their lives were not morally perfect, but we know that they took risks, leaving the comfort and security of an earthly city to live a transient life. Promised land and descendants that would make a great nation, Abraham died having one heir and owning only his burial grounds.

Abraham had to live by faith, hoping that the promises of God would be kept. God promised him a forever home and that his descendants would be a great nation. And while Abraham trusted God, God then asked him to give up the only sign that the promise would be kept. In providing the ram and saving Isaac, God proved His trustworthiness in the face of the impossible.

We live in a culture where our first instinct is to doubt what we read or hear. Hebrews 11 is an historical record that shows that faith feeds hope, and hope moves us forward.

Understanding God's Word

Read together Hebrews 11:8-19

How would you describe the different aspects of faith you see described in the life of Abraham and Sarah?

C.S. Lewis has written: “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” How do you think this thought relates to our experience of hope?

Applying God's Word

Abraham is promised a city designed and built by God, but he lived his life in tents. What do you think this detail tells us about how we should live in relation to earthly matters as we seek to trust the promises of God?

Witnessing God's Word

Tom Long, in his commentary on Hebrews said this: Faith as an inward reality sings “We shall overcome,” while faith as an outward reality marches on to Selma! Where, in your life, can your singing – your belief that something is true, lead to marching – acting on that truth so that Jesus is revealed to those around you?

We have had some fun wedding stuff in our family. Last month, my Dad got married. I was the minister for my father's wedding. This month, my son got engaged. I'll do that wedding in August. I will be the only guy I know who married his father and his son in one year. A marriage is more than a promise. A promise can melt away when plans change, or the cost gets high. A marriage is more than a contract. A contract is an agreement to mutual benefit by exchange of goods and services. If one fails to deliver, it ends. Marriage is a covenant; it is meant to go on for life. "As long as we both shall live." When God makes a covenant, it is as solid as could be. We learn a lot about God by studying the covenants He makes with us. God's Mission Has a Church. The church doesn't have a mission and enlist God for support. The church exists because God has plans, God has a purpose for it, God is using it for His mission. Today, we see that God's mission includes gathering a people to Himself through a covenant. God Makes a Covenant. The covenant with Abraham.

Hebrews is a letter to a community that was about to give up. They were so discouraged they were close to cashing it in. Hebrews says, "Hold on. Your story is part of a bigger story and that story will resolve for good in the end." Martin Luther King Jr said: "We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice." King was a mortal like any other. How did he know where the arc bends? He knew the One who bends it. You know where it bends if you know where it ends. God's story will end with justice and goodness for His glory. When we know we are part of that story, we can hang on.

In the Hall of Faith, we come to Abraham. "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." (Hebrews 11:8) Faith is a way of life, submitting your will to God's will. Absolute surrender. Martin Luther said faith is not knowing where you are going. "Finally, something I'm

good at!" "Faith is not knowing where you are going, what you are doing, what you are suffering, but to follow the bare voice of God and to be led and driven rather than to drive." God said, "Get up and go." Abraham said, "Where?" God said, "I'll tell you later." What did Abraham do? This is faith, absolute surrender. "God use my life as You will. I'm tired of playing God. You are much better at it than me. I'm yours." So, he went. "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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (Hebrews 11:9-10) Faith is trusting in the coming city, the real city that is on the way. Ancient cities revered their city-founders as if they were gods. Our city founder is God.

God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have children, but they were older than that. Still, it happened, and Isaac was born. "And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." (Hebrews 11:12) Then God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham was tested. "Do I truly believe that God is there and rewards those who seek Him? Can I trust You, Lord, in absolute surrender?" "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death." (Hebrews 11:19) On one level, Abraham displays faith as a way of life. He does what God is calling him to do. He leaves his father, resides as a foreigner in the promised land, tries to trust God's promises of children, and trusts God's hand when the hardest sacrifice of all is called for. In another way, we can see the second level. Abraham prefigures eternal life, life that springs from one as good as dead, resurrection when Isaac is saved from the clutches of death, and the longing for the eternal city that only Jesus will bring in the end. Like Jesus, Isaac is born supernaturally, laid on the altar, brought to new life—but

unlike Jesus, Isaac didn't die. Father Abraham did not lose his son. He points to another.

God made a covenant with Abraham. God made the world and made Himself known to us. We turned from God into destructive disobedience. God went on mission. God moved. He made a covenant with Abraham. It isn't that Abraham is the best guy in the world. It is that God chose to move in and redeem, to seek and to save. The covenant isn't for Abraham alone. It is for all the people, the nation, that come through his line. Way back in Genesis, God said to Abraham, "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." (Genesis 12:2-3) God's covenant with Abraham was not just about him and God, it was God choosing a people. God's mission has a people, a nation. God says, in effect, "I am going to choose a nation of people to walk with, to bless, and they will show this fallen world a little bit of my character, who I am." The point was always to reach the rest of the fallen world by creating this special relationship with the descendants of Abraham; blessed to be a blessing. That's where we get things like, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6) Or, "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." (Isaiah 42:6) God's plan is that His special relationship with Israel would shine so brightly, the spiritually darkened nations who don't know Him would be inspired, and eventually saved.

This sounded great! "God will make us so rich, so successful, people will want to know who our God is." Well...God did bless them. God gave them protection,

guidance, blessings, He gave them His Word, His love, His presence. They were blessed richly. Other nations did notice. Look at Psalm 126, "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy." (Psalms 126:2-3) Nations did notice the blessings. But more often it was a little different than that. It wasn't about how rich and successful the people of God were, it was about how much God loved them even when they failed. The people of God would wind up pleading with God after their disobedience, saying, "Don't destroy us! If you do other nations will see it. Think how that will make You look!" When, for example, the people of God thought it was a good idea to make a golden calf to worship as their god while Moses was literally on the mountain with God receiving the Ten Commandments, God was angry. "But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. 'Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" (Exodus 32:11-13) It is not so much the success on display as God's faithfulness to a people who can't keep it together. God remembers His covenant.

This is part of the Mission of God. God's mission has a church. God takes a people into His care and uses His faithful relationship with them to display His glory. Do you see that? This is what God is doing. This is what God is doing with the church, with us. Are we proud of our successes? Are we puffed up in

our victories? What are the things that make you feel good about being part of First Pres? We have been asking questions like that in listening groups and surveys, assessing our DNA as a church. It's good to reflect on that stuff. We are established. We have been here 152 years. We are a foundation pillar in Colorado Springs, a mighty oak tree whose roots are keeping the life-giving soil in place around here. We have a big building downtown. We have plenty of parking (just bring an SUV for the potholes). These are good things, good gifts. We can get puffed up with pride in them. They can become our golden calves. They can become idols. What does this lost city really need to see in us? We have a God who is faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to Him. We have a God who saves us in every way we need saving. We have a God who has met and saved souls in these halls from generation to generation. We are here, not because we have strength, but because our God is strong—His name is Jesus.

God made a covenant, not just with Abraham, with the people Abraham brought into the world, the whole people he represents. "After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.' ... He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:1,5-6) But Abraham needed more. God said to him, go get some animals and let's make a covenant. In the ancient world, to make a covenant you would cut sacrificial animals in two and lay them out on each side, making a lane in the middle. Then you walked through that aisle toward the person, in effect saying, "look, if I don't keep my oath, let me become like these animals." Puts a new spin on "cutting a deal" doesn't it? Not great for the animals. Someone would say, "Let's make a covenant," and all the animals would groan. "Oh, come on! Can't we just use a notary public?" God had Abraham do this in Genesis 15. Abraham set it all up. But then he

fell asleep. "As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him." (Genesis 15:12) Then he saw a vision: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram..." (Genesis 15:17-18) The Lord made the covenant with Abram. The fire is the presence of God moving down the aisle of covenantal blood, moving through the pieces, God moving toward Abram. "This is my covenant." The Lord makes the covenant. God moves between the pieces. God says, "If I don't keep my end of the bargain, let me be split and spilled out." But he never asks Abraham to do it. Abraham never passes through the aisle. Only God. "If I don't keep my end, it's on me. If you don't keep your end, it's on me. I will pay. I will cover the consequence of your broken promises. I will keep you even when you are unfaithful to this promise. I make this covenant," says the Lord. "It's not on you. It's on me." God makes the covenant, and not without cost. It is sealed on another day when darkness fell: "At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice... 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15:33-34) Jesus on the cross. That is the blood that makes the covenant.

What do you have on display? What do you want others to see? If I am so rich and successful, so together and strong, people will want to know what God I have, won't they? Which God are you using? Our greatest witness is when we, in humility, in weakness, in need, through tears and trembling hands at times, we open up and declare, I have a God who is faithful to me even when I can't be faithful to Him. I have a God who holds on to me when I am falling fast. I have a God who keeps His promise when I have broken every promise I have ever made. His name is Jesus. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (2 Corinthians 4:7)