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THE NITTY-GRITTY OF FAITH

Hebrews 11:8-12

By

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September 26, 2004

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The Nitty-gritty of Faith Hebrews 11:8-12

Webster defines *nitty-gritty* as “what is essential and basic: specific practical details” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* [Merriam Webster], p. 800). If it is impossible to please God without faith (11:6), then we need to be clear on the essentials or basics regarding faith. Our text reveals some of the nitty-gritty of faith.

To learn about faith, it makes sense to go to Abraham. He is extolled in Scripture as “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11). Genesis 12-25 chronicles his story. The apostle Paul uses Abraham as his prime example of justification by faith alone, apart from works (Romans 4; Gal. 3:6-18). He makes the startling assertion that it is not Jews by physical birth that are Abraham’s descendants. Rather, those who believe are the true children of Abraham. He says, “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.... And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:7, 29).

It is not surprising that in the great faith chapter, Hebrews 11, Abraham receives more verses than any other person. His life illustrates verse 1, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen.” Our text reveals three essentials of faith:

Faith obeys God’s call, lives as an alien in this world, and overcomes insurmountable problems by God’s power.

1. Faith obeys God’s call (11:8).

“By faith, Abraham, when he was called, obeyed....” In Genesis 12:1-3, God called Abram to leave his country, his relatives, and his father’s house, and to go to the land that God would show him. Genesis 12:4 records Abram’s response: “So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him.” God called; Abraham obeyed.

A. God’s call initiates our obedience.

Before God called Abram, he lived in Ur of the Chaldees, in what today is Iraq. He was a pagan in a pagan city, descended from

a line of idolaters (Josh. 24:2). He was about 70 when God called him. While people lived longer then than they do today, he was not a young man. We are not sure exactly how God called Abraham, but Stephen (Acts 7:2) states, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran." Apparently, Abraham obeyed God by leaving Ur, but he settled in Haran for a few years until his father died. Then God issued the call of Genesis 12, and Abraham again obeyed by moving on to Canaan.

But the point is, Abraham did not concoct on his own the idea of moving to Canaan. He was not following his own dream. He was following *God's call*. God's call was primary; Abraham's obedience was a response. This teaches us that we should not act on our own, apart from God's word. Faith must rest on His revelation in Scripture. Christianity is not a faith based on the religious speculations or philosophies of men, but rather on God's revelation, recorded in Scripture (2 Pet. 1:20-21).

The word *call* or *calling* is used often in Scripture with regard to salvation, in two different ways. Sometimes it refers to God's general call to everyone to repent and believe the gospel. In this sense, Jesus said, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14).

But also it is used in a more specific sense to refer to what theologians label, "effectual calling." Paul uses it this way in Romans 8:30, "and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified." In a similar manner, he wrote that God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim. 1:9; see also, Gal. 1:15; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Heb. 9:15; 1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:3). When God calls His elect effectually, He works through His Spirit to draw them to faith in Christ (John 6:44).

It was in this effectual sense that God called Abraham to follow Him. He did not issue the call to the entire city of Ur, and not even to Abraham's father or brother. He called Abraham specifically, and responding to this effectual call, Abraham obeyed.

B. Obedience is the response of faith.

“By faith Abraham ... obeyed.” Genuine faith *always* obeys God. We are saved by faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. By its very nature, it results in obedience. If someone professes, “I believe,” but does not obey, his faith is superficial and worthless. For example, if you say, “I believe that seat belts save lives,” but do not buckle up and you’re involved in a crash, your “belief” was worthless. If you *really* believe that seat belts save lives, you *will* buckle up. Buckling up demonstrates the reality of your faith.

Genuine saving faith is *obedient* faith. Paul refers to it as “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26; see John 3:36, NASB). Jesus warned, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*” (Matt. 7:21). He told the Jews who claimed Abraham as their father, but sought to kill Him, “If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham” (John 8:39). Obedience proves that faith is genuine.

Abraham’s obedient faith caused him to go “out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8). God didn’t tell him until later that the destination was Canaan. He didn’t send color brochures picturing the bountiful harvest of the land or describing the pleasant climate. There was no home awaiting him when he arrived from the long journey. He had to leave his culture, his familiar way of life in Ur and later in Haran, his friends, his family, and his earthly inheritance. It was a long and dangerous trip, made without U-Haul or Interstate highways. But Abraham obeyed, risking everything on God’s word of promise.

Obedient faith abandons all to follow Jesus Christ. When Jesus called Levi, the tax collector, to follow Him, Levi “left everything behind, and got up and *began* to follow Him” (Luke 5:28). The call to follow Jesus is identical with the call to salvation: “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). In the context, Jesus is talking about gaining or losing one’s soul for eternity.

Sometimes a person must make a break with family, as painful as that is. Jesus said, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke

14:26). He did not mean that we should despise or needlessly alienate our families. The Bible commands us to honor our parents and to love our families. New Christians especially need to be sensitive and show respect to family members who oppose the faith. But Jesus did mean that if our closest loved ones stand between us and Him, our choice is clear: We must follow Him.

Sometimes, even those from Christian homes face subtle or even direct pressure *not* to follow Christ fully. Sometimes parents want their children to get high-paying jobs (which excludes most Christian service). Some parents don't want their children to go to the mission field, because they want them and the grandchildren nearby. But the Lord makes it clear: If it comes to love for Him versus love for family, we must follow Him.

God's call often entails other difficulties. Remember, by God's call, I'm not referring to some special call for service that comes only to some. I'm referring to God's call to salvation. It may result in rejection or persecution. It will involve bringing all your possessions and money under His lordship (Luke 14:33). It requires obeying God's Word when it's inconvenient and difficult. It means seeking God's will rather than your will in every decision.

Have you done that? You may be thinking, "That's risky!" But actually it's riskier to run your own life than it is to obey God's call by faith. God knows everything about you. He is committed to work all things together for good for those who love Him and are "called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28; note, *called*). If you're calling the shots, you don't know what is best in every situation, and you have no ability to control the outcome of things. But God always knows what is best and He has the power to work it out for your ultimate good. Imitate Abraham, who by faith obeyed God's call.

2. Faith lives as an alien in this world (11:9-10).

A. The life of faith is a pilgrim life (11:9).

"By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise." This is the only verse in the Bible that refers to Canaan as the promised land. The irony is, Abraham, the *heir* to the promised land, never owned a foot of ground in it (Acts 7:5), ex-

cept for the Cave of Machpelah, which he had to *buy* at full cost to bury his wife.

Kent Hughes pictures it as if God promised you and your descendants the land of Guatemala. In obedience, you traveled there, but then you had to live the rest of your life in your camper! Not only you, but also your sons' families lived in their campers, moving from place to place (*Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* [Crossway], 2:97). John Calvin asks, "Where was the inheritance which he had expected? It might have indeed occurred instantly to his mind, that he had been deceived by God" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], Hebrews, p. 279). He goes on to point out that just after Abraham arrived in the land of promise, there was a famine that drove him from the land. But he returned and lived in the land *by faith alone*.

The application is that as people of faith, we often must live in this world with conditions that seemingly contradict God's promises (see 11:35b-39). The "health and wealth gospel" does *not* square with Scripture. Sometimes God's people face tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and even death (Rom. 8:35; see also 2 Cor. 6:4-5; 11:23-28). Paul described himself "as having nothing, yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6:10).

Abraham, the alien in a foreign land, dwelling in tents, stands in contrast with his nephew Lot, who moved to Sodom and lived in a *house*. Although Lot was a believer, he became tainted by the godless values of Sodom. Abraham, the alien, was involved with his neighbors in Canaan, but he always remained distinct.

As pilgrims, we need to adopt the mindset of pilgrims. When you travel in a foreign country, you stand out as different. They can spot you! They know that you are not one of them. You may temporarily adopt some of their local customs, so as not to be offensive, but on most things you think and live differently, according to the customs of your homeland.

As God's people, our homeland is heaven. We're just passing through this earth. Our mindset toward success, possessions, and purpose in life should be radically different than the mindset of the natives. The natives' hopes center in this life only, and so they try to accumulate all of the things and engage in all of the activities that they think will bring them happiness in this life. But pilgrims'

hopes center in Jesus Christ and their eternal inheritance in Him. So they hold the things of this life loosely. They enjoy all that God provides, but their real treasures are in heaven (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

B. The life of faith focuses on eternity (11:10).

Abraham "was looking for the city which has the foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (The Greek has the definite article before "foundations.") The city with *the* foundations stands in contrast with life in a tent, which has no foundation. Since God is both the architect and builder of this city, the foundations are solid and secure. It refers to the city above, the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), the eternal dwelling place of all of God's saints (Rev. 21).

The author of Hebrews is saying that when Abraham went out from his father's country to Canaan, he was not just counting on God's promise for that piece of real estate. He was looking beyond it to the promise of heaven. God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants (Gen. 17:8) and He later gave them that land (Josh. 23:13-14). But the land was never the final or full realization of the promise. It was only an *earthly picture* of the full promise, which is the eternal city that God has prepared for His people (11:16). Abraham viewed himself as a stranger and sojourner in the land of Canaan (Gen. 23:4). His focus was on heaven, and so should ours be.

Abraham's life shows us that faith obeys God's call; faith lives as an alien in this world. Finally,

3. Faith overcomes insurmountable problems by God's power (11:11-12).

Abraham and Sarah were unable to conceive children. God promised them not only a son, but also *nations* of descendants. To underscore the promise, God changed his name from Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of a multitude"). Then God promised, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you" (Gen. 17:5-6). But the problem was, not only were Abraham and Sarah unable to conceive children; also, they were both past the time in life when anyone normally could conceive.

There is a difficult interpretive issue in our text, reflected in the difference between the NASB, which makes Sarah the subject

of the sentence, and the NIV, which makes Abraham the subject. The problem with making Sarah the subject is that the phrase "received the ability to conceive" is literally "power for the laying down of seed" (NASB, margin), an exclusively male function. Without getting too technical, probably the sense of the NIV is correct, even though Abraham is not named in the verse (in Greek). There is a textual variant that describes Sarah as "barren." If it is original, the sense would be, "By faith, even though Sarah was barren, he [Abraham] received power to beget ..." (*A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, Bruce Metzger [United Bible Societies], 4th ed., p. 602). The final phrase would read, "since he considered Him faithful who had promised."

This view also alleviates another problem, namely, that in the account in Genesis 18, Sarah is rebuked for her unbelief rather than commended for her faith. When the Lord confronts her, she denies, rather than confesses, her unbelief. Probably, in spite of her initial doubt, she eventually came to believe God's promise as Abraham did. But if Abraham is the subject of 11:11, then the emphasis is on his faith, not on Sarah's faith. There are two lessons in these two verses:

- A. Rather than focusing on human impotence, faith focuses on God's power and faithfulness (11:11).

In Genesis 18:14, the Lord rebukes Sarah's unbelief with the rhetorical question, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" He goes on to restate the promise, that at the appointed time the next year, Sarah would have a son. She and Abraham rested on God's faithful character. Since He promised, He would do it.

We need to be careful in applying this. It is easy to misapply promises in the Bible out of their context, and then become disappointed when God doesn't do what *we think* He promised. The problem does not lie with God, of course, but with our misunderstanding of how to apply His promises.

For example, many Christians claim that if we have faith in God, He has promised to heal us from all our diseases. I have heard of these mistaken saints going to the bedside of a terminally ill Christian and accusing him of not having enough faith to be healed! That is cruel! God has not promised healing from every

disease to those who believe. If He had, people of faith would live forever. I've never known of a faith healer that lived past 100! In fact, several prominent ones died relatively young!

At the same time, we would be wrong not to trust God to do far beyond our human abilities. Nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). He is "able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20). Our faith is not in ourselves or in our faith, but in God who is faithful.

B. Rather than focusing on answers in this life, faith trusts God to keep His word in His time (11:12).

What did Abraham get *in this life* for his life of faith? He was uprooted from family and friends, never to see them again. If he had a house in Ur or Haran, it was his last. He lived the rest of his life in tents, moving from place to place. He lived to see Isaac, the son of the promise, born. He lived 15 years after the birth of Jacob, but he didn't see any of Jacob's sons. He did not live long enough to get even a hint of the fulfillment of God's promise to multiply his descendants as the stars or the sand. The only piece of Canaan that he owned was a burial plot. As 11:13 states, he "died in faith, without receiving the promises." As we've already seen, Abraham's faith was focused on eternity, not on this life only.

One of the most important lessons in the school of faith is to learn that God's time is not our time. From Abraham's time frame, even though he lived for 175 years, God's promises failed. He died with one son and two grandsons, hardly an innumerable nation! But from God's time frame, the true children of Abraham, those who believe in Abraham's seed (Christ) number in the billions! From our limited time frame, certain events don't fit with God's promises. But from His time frame, He who promised is faithful.

Conclusion

George Muller of Bristol exemplified the nitty-gritty of a life of faith. After being a wild youth, he was converted in his early twenties. He obeyed God's call by living a life of faith and obedience. He lived in a manner that the world could not fathom. He and his wife sold all of their earthly possessions, founded an orphanage, and lived by faith alone, making their needs and those of

the orphans known only to God in prayer. They often faced insurmountable problems that were overcome by faith in God's power.

In 1877, Muller was on board a ship that was stalled off the coast of Newfoundland in dense fog. The captain had been on the bridge for 24 hours when Muller came to see him. Muller told him that he had to be in Quebec by Saturday afternoon. The captain replied, "It is impossible."

"Very well," said Muller, "if your ship cannot take me, God will find some other way—I have never broken an engagement for 52 years. Let's go down to the chart room and pray." The captain wondered what lunatic asylum Muller had escaped from.

"Mr. Muller," he said, "do you know how dense this fog is?"

"No, my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, Who controls every circumstance of my life."

Muller knelt down and prayed simply. When he had finished, the captain was about to pray, but Muller put his hand on his shoulder, and told him not to: "First, you do not believe He will; and second, I believe He has, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it." The captain looked at Muller in amazement.

"Captain," he continued, "I have known my Lord for 52 years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get an audience with the King. Get up, captain, and open the door, and you will find the fog is gone." The captain walked across to the door and opened it. The fog had lifted. (From, Roger Steer, *George Muller: Delighted in God* [Harold Shaw Publishers], p. 243.)

I wish I could tell you stories like that from my own experience, but I cannot. But George Muller and Abraham should challenge us to grow in the life of faith in the God who is faithful. Obey God's call to salvation by faith. Live as an alien in this world by faith. Ask God by His power to overcome the insurmountable problems you face by faith.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the call to discipleship (following Christ) different than the call to salvation? What difference does it make?
2. Why is saving faith *necessarily* obedient faith? How would you answer the charge that this confuses faith and works?
3. What are some practical implications of living as a pilgrim?
4. How can we know if specific promises in the Bible apply directly to us today?

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