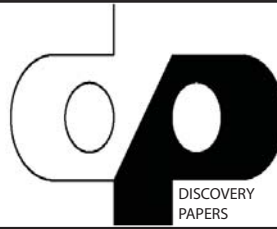


RENEWING OUR PASSPORTS

SERIES: IMMORTAL. INVISIBLE.



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Hebrews 11:8:16

January is a month in which many of us do our best to shrink our waist size and to cut back on spending. By contrast, this series of messages has the goal of expansion: enlarging our faith by encountering big truths about God that will make a difference in our daily lives.

The theme verse for the series is Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

Christian faith is not a course in self-improvement; not a series of insights for getting by in life. We have been born-again for participation in a glorious new world that hasn’t yet arrived (“things hoped for”). Every day we are strengthened and cared for by the divine presence we cannot measure (“things not seen”). In this message we will use the lenses of “future truth” and “invisible realities” with regard to our perception of ourselves, the person we see every day in the mirror.

Most of us have a deeply inadequate view of ourselves—managing disappointment, cover-ups, and hypocrisies. We struggle to believe that God could accomplish something significant in and through us. Reaching back into the earliest chapters of the Bible, Abraham’s story offers us a model of a God-shaped life that points the way to transformation—a new vision of ourselves.

Consider the information found in a passport. It contains personal facts that won’t change: the date and place you were born, the color your eyes are, and your signature.

But on the back pages are visas, government stamps, and evidence of borders crossed. A passport is a record of our life’s adventure—travels that led to risks, rewards, and relationships. And surely these things are more pertinent in forming us than the color of our eyes.

Abraham lived a life of adventuresome self-discovery that began with God’s call to leave his native city, and he was subsequently shaped by divine companionship in the land of promise. Revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Abraham is held up in the New Testament as the prime example of what it means to be a person of faith.

We will use the synopsis of Abraham’s life found in Hebrews 11 to focus on the father of the faithful, that we might follow in his footsteps.

Hebrews 11:8-16:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

¹³All these died in faith not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar. And having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth. ¹⁴For the people who speak thus make it clear that they’re seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is they desire a better country that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for He has prepared a city for them.

This is a beautiful and closely argued section of Scripture. We’ll only be able to consider a portion of what is here, by choosing four phrases for further commentary

The first phrase is, “*he obeyed when he was called to go*”. Any God shaped identity begins with a call to leave what is familiar. We are born self-centered, imagining that we know what’s best for us. Defensiveness and self-promotion are as natural as breathing. Cosmetic cover-ups and a few new habits don’t alter the me-first orientation of our hearts.

To follow the Lord truly we must end old allegiances and bow our knee to a new sovereign. Jesus called his first followers with a simple command, “Follow me.” And they left their boats, dropped their nets, and followed him. Abraham received a call like that, to put God first, and Abraham *obeyed when he was called to go*.

What are some false alternatives to repentance of this sort? Stalling and negotiating are familiar tactics. We offer to obey God on a timetable that fits better with our plans for the future, or we go only part way toward the destination. Abraham did not stall or negotiate and his example should help us act similarly.

Another form of inadequate obedience is to talk a good game and do nothing. Jesus told a parable about two brothers who were sent by their father to work in a vineyard. The first said no and later went, while the second declared his willingness but did nothing. The parable ends with Jesus’ stern rejection of empty religious language. (Matthew 21:28-32)

Finally, we sometimes avoid obedience by resorting to double-mindedness. We want what God offers and what the world offers at the same time. We live as Christians in some places and honor the Lord in some aspects of our lives, while ignoring him at other times. This condition is similar to the aging bachelor who wants the security of being married along with the “freedom” of single life. Double-mindedness ends in ruin.

Abraham obeyed when he was called. He went out not knowing where he was going. And, like the disciples, he left his nets behind in order to follow the voice of God. In order for us to have faith that is as big as it needs to be, we have to say *yes* on those terms.

A second phrase to consider from our text is this: *He went to live in the land of promise—living in tents*.

We have familiar versions of temporary housing: college dorms, short term missions trips, sports teams playing on the road, and business travels; however, Abraham dwelt with impermanence for different reasons than these. He was given title by God to “the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Yet, he was never allowed to build a permanent dwelling; nor was his son or grandson. The three patriarchal generations lived in tents; nomads in the Promised Land. What do we learn from the tension of an unchanging promise combined with uncertain circumstances?

Some people are whimsical by nature—frequently altering their location, convictions, and relationships in an endless search for the end of the rainbow. In these cases, “life in a tent” has nothing to do with faith. Others try to dig in and resist change of any kind, trusting that

a sturdy house built on sand will survive life’s storms. Their faith is a foolish attempt to create security by human effort.

Abraham stands as an example of conviction (I am where God intends me to be) combined with trust (I do not need to know what will happen next). Abraham lived “in the world” but was not “of the world”. He suffered drought and fought invaders along with his neighbors. He built altars and prayed for a wicked city that was destined for destruction. He planted trees, dug wells, made alliances, and buried his wife in the Promised Land. But he never had a permanent dwelling.

Abraham instructs us in the nature of faith: God’s obedient servant fully present in his world, clinging to an unchanging God while living in a tent.

The third phrase I would take from our text is, “*these all died*”. Genesis records the death and burial of both Sarah and Abraham in detail. They lived to great age with God’s blessing and approval. Though their lives ended before His promises were fully realized, nothing had been lost and the divine plan of salvation remained firmly on course. This indicates that, for believers, the authority of death—the last enemy’ (1 Corinthians 15:26)—is limited. The fact of human mortality is acknowledged in scripture, sometimes with tears, but it is not the final word and it need not be feared.

In addition, Isaac’s birth was a type of death overcome. Abraham’s body was “*as good as dead*” and Sarah “*was past the age*”, yet Isaac was born because God intervened. Believers testify in every generation of miracles similar to the birth of Isaac: dead marriages are brought back to life and addictions with a long standing death-grip are overcome. God brings about new life in impossible circumstances now and he is preparing us for resurrection life in the world to come. We read the stark acknowledgement, “*these all died*”, without regret, because the last enemy has been defeated.

This brings us to the fourth phrase that I would take from our text, “*they desire a better country*”.

Living in tents is wearisome business. We often wish for circumstances that are predictable, comfortable, and centered on ourselves. The temptation to resentment and envy are close at hand. Impermanence has one great advantage, however: we are regularly reminded that we were made for some place else, that we have not yet finished the journey home.

As Abraham moved his flocks and family from place to place, his longing for *the city that had foundations* grew greater. Abraham was a sojourner in the Promised Land. It was his inheritance, but it was not his final destination. He knew he could not return to Ur, and he

was grateful for the companionship of God, but he knew there was more to come. He *desired a better country*.

We recall that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. I want to close with a quote from C S Lewis' sermon, *The Weight of Glory*. It is a wonderful reflection on impermanence and longing, on reaching for a future we cannot see:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but . . . they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” . . . At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.¹

Endnotes

¹ CS Lewis, (1942). *The Weight of Glory*.