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Afternoon Lesson For Sunday, May 10th, 2020

The Nitty-Gritty Of Faith (Hebrews 11:8-12)

Scripture:

So, we can say with confidence, *“The LORD is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?”* - (Hebrews 13:6 NLT)

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 (Hebrews 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 spiritual father of all who have faith”* (Romans 4:11). Genesis 12-25 chronicles his story. The apostle Paul uses Abraham as his prime example of justification by faith (Romans 4; Galatians 3:6-18). He makes the startling assertion that it is not Jews by physical birth that are Abraham’s descendants. Rather, those who *have faith* that 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”* (Galatians 3:7, 29).

It is not surprising, then, that in the great faith chapter of Scripture, 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”*. This 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 (Hebrews 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 (Joshua 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 (2nd Peter 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"* (Matthew 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"* (2nd Timothy 1:9; see also, Galatians 1:15; 2nd Thessalonians 2:13-14; Hebrews 9:15; 1st Peter 2:9; 2nd Peter 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, 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 are 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”* (Romans 1:5; 16:26; see also John 3:36). 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”* (Matthew 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”* (Hebrews 11:8). God did not tell him until later that the destination was Canaan. He did not 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 do not 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 am not referring to some special call for service that comes only to some. I am 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 is 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 to live 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”* (Romans 8:28; note, *called*). If you are calling the shots, you do not 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 (Hebrews 11:9-10).

A. THE LIFE OF FAITH IS A PILGRIM LIFE (Hebrews 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), except for the Cave of Machpelah, which he had to buy at full cost to bury his wife. Scripture 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*.

The application is that as *people of faith*, we often must live in this world with conditions that seemingly contradict God's promises (see Hebrews 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 (Romans 8:35; see also 2nd Corinthians 6:4-5; 11:23-28). Paul described himself *“as having nothing, yet possessing all things”* (2nd Corinthians 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 are 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 that they can 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 (1st Timothy 6:17-19).

B. THE LIFE OF FAITH FOCUSES ON ETERNITY (Hebrews 11:10).

Abraham *“was looking for the city which has the foundations, whose architect and builder is God”.* 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 (Hebrews 12:22), the eternal dwelling place of all of God's saints (Revelation 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 (Genesis 17:8) and He later gave

them that land (Joshua 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 (Hebrews 11:16). Abraham viewed himself as a stranger and sojourner in the land of Canaan (Genesis 23:4). His focus was on heaven, and so should ours.

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

3. Faith overcomes insurmountable problems by God's power (Hebrews 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*" (Genesis 17:5-6). But the problem was, not only were Abraham and Sarah unable to conceive children; they also 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 Genesis 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 (Hebrews 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 does not 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 believers 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 have 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”* (Ephesians 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 (Hebrews 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 did not 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 numerous as the stars or the sand. The only piece of Canaan that he owned was a burial plot. As Hebrews 11:13 states, he *“died in faith, without receiving the promises”*. As we have 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 do not fit with God’s promises. But from His time frame, He who promised is faithful.

Conclusion

I came across this sub-biography of a man named George Muller:

I know of a man who 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*, 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.

As the story goes, this man 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 this man came to see him. This man told the captain that he had to be in Quebec by Saturday afternoon. The captain replied, *“It is impossible”*.

“Very well”, said this man, *“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 this man had escaped.

“The captain 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”, was the reply.

The two men knelt down and prayed simply. When this man had finished, the captain was about to pray, but this man put his hand on the captain's 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 the man 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. (Excerpted and Edited 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 through obedience. Live as an alien in this world by faith. Ask God by His power to overcome the insurmountable problems you face by faith. Yes, even a pandemic! Or even Fascist Rulers who deny us our civil rights! Or even the fear mongering by a headline-seeking press that loves to fuel fear and chaos. *"But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world."* (1st John 4:4).

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