

Title: Looking Forward
Text: Hebrews 11.8-12
Theme: Marks of the people of God
Series: Hebrews #39
Prop Stmt. The people of God are marked by faith in what is unrealized
Aim: To call my people to persevere in a faith-driven obedience

Read Text:

Last Sunday one of our families was out in Colorado on vacation and attended church where the pastor was trying to describe the unexpected shock of Christ coming to the earth. He said it would be akin to God showing up in Detroit. The dad said that he spoke with the pastor after the service.

When we hear those things, we want to defend our home turf – don't we. And yet, we are also aware of the fact that things are not exactly great. I recently saw an ad for a business called, Detroit Bucket List. The slogan was: "Things to do in Detroit before you die." I think that we would all agree that that company has its work cut out for them. If you had a bucket-list (things that you wanted to do before you kick the bucket) what would you have on it?

Think of this. The people of 11.8-11 all had a bucket list that was given to them by God. Most of the things that were on their list, they did not get before they died (13). When we read this, we are tempted to think that somehow they were cheated. Look at all that they did. They followed God and still did not get what was promised – how frustrating is that? And yet, is that not the lot in life of the people to whom this book is written? Does that not describe the circumstances of many of you? You did not envision your life to be like this. You thought that you would be in a different position than you are. And for these recipients of this book, the reality of living for Christ in a world that is hostile to grace is harsh and difficult. When you look at life and you begin to realize that it is one series of trials after another, and the smooth plain and the still waters are going to remain out of reach, you want to say – what's the point?! I didn't sign up for this. I thought that God was going to come through for me! To people like this and people like you, this book has been written. And here in chapter 11, the author of Hebrews is holding up before us, the very people whose lives were used by God to define what it means to be the people of God. They are the heroes of the faith who did not live long enough to get what was promised to them. But, hold the phone! Look at the end of v.16. Don't feel sorry for them. Feel sorry for the people who live as if all of life is here and who make bucket-lists and fulfill them that have nothing to do with the gospel.

Here are the people who started by faith, lived by faith and ended by faith, which means that what they lived for has outlived them in such a way that they will one day enjoy with us the fruit of their faithfulness and the fruit of our faithfulness and it won't be on a bucket list to be completed but in a world without end to be enjoyed – forever!

The text shifts our attention once again to Abraham. He's somewhat popular in this book. This man stands at the fountain-head of the people of God. He is not only an excellent example of faith, but God uses his life in so many different ways to show us what the people of God are like. Abraham is the patriarch of the people of God. He lived in the ancient city of Ur (map – "Abram travels to Canaan) when God spoke to him and called him to leave to go to another land where God would make from him a great nation. Without knowing where he was going, but in a faith-driven response to God's Word, Abraham left and eventually came to the land of Canaan. His life is marked by faith-driven obedience to God. His faith is not perfect, but it is the dominant characteristic of his life and he really lives out for us, what faith really is. "*Faith is that which securely fastens the believer to the reality of the promise of God that is not yet seen because it has not yet been fulfilled.*" Therefore, the people of God are not those who are related to Abraham by blood, but those who by virtue of faith like Abraham are related to God and therefore related to Abraham and in his line. That was an enormous stumbling block for the Jews of Jesus' day. They were trusting in their ethnicity. They were trusting in the label – Jew, instead of trusting in God.

John 8.39-59

Now, look at what happened. The Jews took what God had revealed and twisted it into a religion of privilege. They were so focused on the fact that they were Jews, they became blind to their need. Their rejection of the Savior resulted in God raising up the church. But, the history of the church has been pot-marked by the exact same scenario. In time, people of faith, become proud of their faith and turn the gospel into a means of assuring themselves of their own goodness and wisdom which completely undermines the actual message of the gospel. We saw this happen with Christianity in the Middle Ages during which time the light of the gospel was almost completely snuffed out. A German priest, named Martin Luther staged a revolt that was intended to reform the established church, which it did not, but instead it rescued the gospel and reclaimed the true church by starting over. But what happened in Germany? Many Germans were so proud of their ethnic relation to Luther, that this became their identity and security instead of the gospel of Christ.

In his fascinating autobiography (Notes from a Wayfarer), Helmut Thielicke tells the story (p.134) of when he was pasturing a church during Hitler's reign of terror. One year on Reformation Sunday, Hitler ordered mass civil meetings, which meant that people had a very difficult choice to make. If they went to church, instead of the local Nazi rally, they would be identified by the Gestapo as not being supportive of the Third Reich. If they went to the Nazi rally instead of church, they would miss Reformation Sunday, which was a celebration of their history as German-"Christians". Sad to say, most caved into the fear and went to the rallies. There were very few in the congregation and almost no one in the choir. Since they had missed singing, "A Mighty Fortress is our God" in church on Reformation Sunday, the people in Helmut's church all wanted to sing it the next Sunday, which they did – sort of. When the congregation had finished singing the 3rd verse, Helmut stepped into the pulpit and stopped the song. He then said to the congregation that their decision to live in fear of the government instead of faith in God

made it clear that they really did not believe in what they sang and their actions were nothing less than a denial of the faith. He could not and would not permit them this year to sing, “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also – The body they may kill; God’s truth abideth still: His kingdom is forever.” “Therefore,” Helmut said, “the organ will now play the verse on its own while we remain standing and consider our failure. Woe betide anyone who sings alone!” The organ then played the last verse in a rather muted way and the congregation, profoundly shaken began to weep.

A heritage of faith can be a great gift if one truly understands the faith. But when our faith is in our heritage instead of in Christ, then we become more concerned about carrying on a convenience, a tradition, a family or cultural identity and we presume to be related to God because of our label, our history, our traditions, and our efforts. But a person who is truly a follower of God, is a person who is related to God by faith, walks by faith (not by sight) and follows God even when it goes against the grain of human wisdom. The founding Father of the faithful shows us what it means to be the people of God. Do you see how this would be of great encouragement to the people (Hebrews) to whom this epistle was written? They were being accused of being traitors to the Jewish faith, when in reality they were fulfilling what God had intended for his people to be all along.

The People of God are those who:

1. **Obey when Called** – 8

The emphasis of verse 8 is on the fact that Abraham responded with obedience to the call of God. Notice the relationship between faith and obedience. “By faith Abraham obeyed.” This is a great example of what I call “faith-driven obedience.” Now, this is very, very important that you understand this.

Back in Romans 3.28 – “*For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*” That is the big idea that Paul is seeking to hammer home in this text. He then (in chapter 4) appeals to Abraham as an example of this and quotes the Old Testament when he says in Romans 4.3, “For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.” In the rest of this glorious chapter he argues that Abraham was counted righteous, (declared to be righteous – justified) because of Abraham’s belief and not because Abraham had earned the favor of God through his own effort. All of which builds up to 4.22 which says, “That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness.”

All of which sounds great, until you read the book of James. In this book, James appeals to the exact same passage about Abraham that Paul does. James then comes to the conclusion in 2.24, “*You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*”

And we look at that and go –what?! Beloved, here is why you cannot reduce the gospel down to slogans that fit on bumper stickers. Paul and James are both speaking about faith, but they are answering two different questions. In Romans, Paul is focusing on the

fact that our works cannot earn our salvation because our works are tainted by our condition as sinners. Any work that we would offer to God as meritorious, that is, in an effort to earn God's favor through our merits, is unacceptable because any work that we do is defiled by our sin. The only way we, or anyone can ever be forgiven and declared righteous is by being credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ, and this can only happen when we by faith alone, trust in Christ alone. But, like any good doctrine, people try to reduce that down to something that it is not and turn this into telling people that all they have to do in order to go to heaven when they die is believe in Jesus. Now, there is a measure of truth in that, but without explaining what it means to believe in Jesus, people assume that because they believe in the historical fact of Christ, or they believe in the historical accounts of the cross that they are now all set and can go to heaven. Years later when this person shows no appetite for the Word of God, the people of God, or the things of God, and someone calls them out on it, most of us have probably known several people who say, "Oh I believe in Jesus." Something is drastically wrong with that. And that is the issue that James is addressing.

Paul is saying that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, but, if our faith is a genuine faith, then the evidence of an authentic faith will be seen in the fruit of our lives. And this is where so many religions have completely lost their way. They switch the obedience and the faith. They say, do this and it will help your faith. But that is not how the Scripture presents it. The Scripture calls us to hear the Word of God, consider it, treasure it, esteem it, believe it and act upon it. What we cannot see is the true condition of the heart. The evidence of esteeming the Word of God will be seen in actions that put this believing on display. And that is what James is saying. "Faith" that does not obey, is a dead faith, just as works that are done to earn God's favor are scum. But, when we by faith in God's Word, put that on display in obedience – it is a beautiful thing. And that is what the AH is pointing out here in v.8.

"By faith Abraham obeyed" that is, his faith in God's Word was put on display by what he did. And what he did made it really clear that he really believed God. In fact, God did not tell Abraham everything there was to know, but God told Abraham all that Abraham needed to know. Abraham left his home and took his family to a land that he not only had never seen before, but it would be a land that he would not receive as his own in his lifetime.

A gripping scene is presented to us in Genesis 23. Abraham's wife, Sarah, dies and Abraham, after all of these years does not even have a piece of land in which to bury her. So, he goes to the Hittites and says, "I am a sojourner and foreigner among you..." He then asks them if he can buy a piece of land in which to bury his wife. And there, after all of these years, Abraham finally gets a piece of land that is his! But, when we, now looking back, read this account, our faces cannot hide the smile because we know that this is just the beginning.

The truth is, Abraham in his lifetime, never experienced the full realization of God's promises. He never SAW them come to pass, but he acted as if they were SEEN. God's

call was enough for him and Abraham responded by faith evidenced by an obedience that pleased God. And friend – that is all that matters. People of God are people who...

2. Live as Pilgrims – 9 -10

Abraham left the city of his birth, boyhood and ancestors in order to go to a land in which he would live, but never settle down. Settling down is a desire and to some extent a God-given need. God made us with the a longing to belong, to find our place, to fit in, to put down roots, to become part of a people, part of a community, to have a story, and to have traditions. Traditions give us a sense of order and security that things are still okay. I have great empathy for families that have to uproot and move. Every time you move, you leave a part of you until it seems there is nothing left to share. Neighbors have become like riders on an elevator. Why bother to invest the time when they are going to be getting off at the next floor anyway? As a culture, we are so busy going that we never arrive.

As followers of Christ, we recognize that the world, as it is, is not our home – yet. Sometimes, God allows us to experience a taste of that rootedness by providing us the opportunity to live in the same place for a long period of time. But, even then, we are still strangers and pilgrims in this land. I followed the legislation in congress that overturned the “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for the armed forces, which the president signed this week. It’s so sad. It is so remarkable that we as a nation would so boldly and brazenly accommodate and eventually champion a sinful lifestyle that for centuries has done nothing but openly invite the judgment of God. I look at some of you who are veterans and wonder, “is this the freedom that you fought for?” Did you fight and did thousands die so that we as a nation could so fundamentally rebel against our Creator? At what point, is this no longer our land, or our home?

And yet, we do not lose hope. Like Abraham, we live now, with only a taste of what life will be like some day. Like Abraham, we live, looking forward. We know that we are strangers in our own land. We do not go to school expecting to be accepted by all, nor go to work expecting to be approved by all, nor relate with people expecting to be understood by all. We live with this tension that although we are here, our hearts are longing for another reality. This one has had some memories and some smiles, but it also is littered with funeral homes, hospitals, nursing homes, cemeteries, and tank plants. When you come to faith in Christ, you become part of the people of God, who live in this world, only as a taste and a foreshadowing of the one that is to come. In the world to come, there is a city, whose builder and maker is God. She cannot be destroyed. So, beloved, look at the blight in our city and mourn. Look at the devastation in Port au Prince, Haiti and grieve. Look at your own dwelling, your own land and realize that it too is temporary. There is something that has so much more value and endurance, and as the people of God, we live for that.

The Christmas holiday can be a very lonely time because we look back on how things used to be. Grieving is looking back. People tell us to be thankful for the good times and think of those and we can do that and re-live things and laugh. But, as followers of Christ – we have so much more. We look forward to life in a place where sin is banished, where

death is outlawed, where frustration is banned, where joy is forever, where truth is adored, and where Christ reigns. We are not there yet, but by faith we can see the light of that city. And that city, in contrast to this world has foundations that cannot be shaken. That city in contrast to our existence is permanent, fixed, rooted and eternal. Abraham lived in a tent, never pouring footings because he did not yet find what he was looking for. We live now, without footings in this present world, not letting her mark us as her own, for we belong to another.

A beautiful building gives glory to both the architect and builder. Cities like Washington, D.C. and Paris reflect a plan and design that cause us to appreciate and marvel at the insight of those who envisioned it. But, if you have ever been involved in construction you know that most of the time there is a constant war that goes on between the architect and the builder. The architect is often trying to tell a story and the builder just wants to get the job done the cheapest way possible. But, to live in a city whose designer and builder is God, who not only takes on this project as an expression of his very glory, but also for the good of his people and with unlimited resources under his authority, speaks of a beauty and reality that is beyond our grasp. Can you imagine what this city will be like? No, you cannot! But, beloved, this unshakeable city, this eternal kingdom is ours forever in Christ. We live as pilgrims now knowing that we have a home to which we are going and in which we will dwell – forever.

3. **Believe God against all odds** – 11 - 12

The final “by faith” statement in this section (v.11) is similar to the one before it in that it has both a “by faith” statement followed by a note of explanation in the following verse.

Abraham and Sarah had no children together and yet God had promised to them a land and a nation. At different times, God reminded Abraham of this promise and renews his covenant with Abraham. Eventually, when it was biologically impossible for them to have a child together, God, in order to make a statement about his power, but also to make a statement about the future, over-ruled natural law, and Sarah conceived and bore the promised son. God gave physical, regenerative life to aged bodies that were long past time when they were able to produce life. And from this (v.12) one man, (and him as good as dead) God did an incredible thing.

Last week, I spoke of living in the gap between promise and fulfillment. Abraham and Sarah knew the gap all too well. They did not believe perfectly in that gap. They had times of great doubt and embarrassing lapses of faith, but in the end, they believed God. God knows it is not easy to believe him in the face of “common sense” and the logic of this world. In fact, following God appears to be a high-risk move. It only appears to be a high-risk move when we focus upon the “logic” of the broken, decaying kingdoms of this world. However, when we consider the promises of God, the power of God, the character of God and the track-record of God, then we begin to see that the risk is not in following God, but the risk (certain failure – actually) is found in NOT following God. The people of God are those who believe God against all odds, because there is no chance with God. When God gives a promise, you are never left with trying to figure out what the odds are

of it happening – it always happens. If not in your lifetime, as you know it, it will nonetheless happen in your life, since your life in Christ is forever.

Concl. After the birth of Christ, what happened? For 30 years – not too much.