

Live by Faith in God's Promise

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 11, reading from verse 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.

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. And by faith, even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was unable to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.

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.

[1 : 07] All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised. They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

Instead, they were looking for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He, who had embraced the promises, was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. And so, in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. Amen.

[2 : 13] This is God's word. Please keep that page open. We're going to be looking at that chapter together. And we'll pray as we do that for God's help.

Our Father, we thank you for the promise of your word. We thank you that it is trustworthy and true. Lord, that it is the same today as it has ever been. And Lord, we put our trust in your word now.

And ask that as we have it open before us and as we hear it, that you would speak and we would listen. Lord, change our hearts, we pray.

Give us a fresh desire for you. And set our hope on the promises you give us in Christ. For we pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Well, today, as I say, we come to the end of our series in Genesis 12 to 25, which we have called The Promise.

We know it's the end because Abraham, the character at the heart of the story, dies. And those of you who are keen might have seen, as we read from Genesis earlier in our service, that in the next verse, that is 25 verse 12, we have our seventh bookmark in Genesis.

[3 : 31] That Hebrew word, the generations of, the family history of. It's to tell us Genesis is moving on in the story.

Very shortly after that, we get to our eighth bookmark, the family history of Isaac, Abraham's son. And then we kick off into the next big chunk of Genesis.

But we're going to take a pause and come back to Genesis another time, probably sometime next year. And it's a good opportunity, as we press pause, to ask, what have we taken away from this big, important section of the book of Genesis?

If this is your first Sunday with us, you might be thinking, this is a terrible Sunday to come to this church. The end of a series, why have we come for this? Well, actually, you're getting the prize that everyone else has had to wait for and has been begging for, okay, the point of the series.

What have we been looking at for this, these past, almost the beginning of the year, we started looking at Genesis. Don't worry, we will be starting something new next Sunday.

[4 : 43] And if you're a new student here, I think in your freshers bag, you'll get a clue as to what that series will be. But today, we're going to do a retrospective on the promise.

You might have seen something like that. When somebody dies, often they'll get people who knew them to kind of speak about their life. They might put together a documentary to help look back on the life and time of this important person.

And that's what we're going to do. We're going to take a look back, not so much at the life of Abraham, but certainly at his time, because Genesis doesn't give us the life of Abraham.

But it is concerned, rather, with the unfolding of God's promise to this man through his life. So what have we learned through it?

Well, whenever we're in the Old Testament, it helps us to know what the writers of the New Testament see there. And there's lots of places in the New Testament we could go to.

[5 : 46] I've listed them at the bottom of your service sheet, if you're interested in following up later. It tells us how important these chapters of Genesis are, that they are looked back on so very often by the New Testament.

It tells us they are very relevant for us as Christians today. But we're going to root ourselves in one of those chapters, those passages, Hebrews 11, because it helps us to see what Genesis wants us to see.

And it presses into our hearts and lives what Genesis wants to press into our hearts and lives, which is this. We've got one point that unfolds this morning, and it's this.

It says, live by faith in God's promise. Live by faith in God's promise. Those are our two big words in our Hebrews chapter, faith and promise.

They both come up five times in these verses. It shouldn't surprise us to read about faith. It's the heartbeat of this whole chapter, which begins in verse 1, Luke.

[6 : 51] Now, faith is the confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

So, there's a definition of faith, and the whole chapter is going on to prove that thesis. So, verse 3, by faith. Verse 4, by faith.

Verse 5, by faith. Verse 7, by faith. You get the picture. This chapter is here to say that God's people, all the way back to the beginning of the story, all the way back to creation, and the very first family have lived by this definition of genuine faith.

That is, confidence in what they hoped for, sureness in what they could not yet see. Now, perhaps that is new to some of you today.

We might have picked up a version of the story that says that God's people in the Old Testament lived by works. They were saved by keeping God's rules.

[7 : 55] But the new thing now that Jesus has come, that we live by faith. We're saved by trusting in his death and resurrection. But Hebrews chapter 11 says that that is not the story at all.

It tells us that God's people have never, ever been saved by rule keeping. All the way back to the beginning of the story, the people who God has accepted have come to him, not because they've done enough to get into his good books, but because they have come to him trusting in who he is and what he has said.

By faith, Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith, he was commended as righteous when God spoke well of his offerings. The fancy way of saying that is that they were justified by faith, not by works.

And so it's no surprise when we get to Abraham in verse 8 that the story begins by faith. By faith, God promised him a new home, so by faith he went.

God promised him a big family, so by faith they waited. God promised to be their God, and so by faith they worshipped.

[9 : 10] He lived by faith from the time God called him in chapter 12 to the time he died in chapter 25. And he was saved through faith. It's one of the most important verses in the whole Bible.

It is Genesis 15, verse 6. So listen to this. He trusted in God's word, and from then on God considered him righteous.

That is not because Abraham was good enough, but through Abraham's faith in the goodness of God himself. Abraham did not become right with God because he kept the rules, but because he put his trust in the God of the promise.

And friends, that is still the only way we become right with God today. What has changed is not how we respond to God's promise, but the fact that his promises now have been fully revealed and fulfilled through the life, death, and resurrection of his son Jesus Christ.

So verse 13 says, God's people in the Old Testament saw God's promises and welcomed them from a distance. So it's as if you can imagine all these people in this chapter, Abraham, Sarah, everyone else, squinting their eyes to see the horizon where the cross and the tomb of Jesus are.

[10 : 43] They made it out, but from a far off distance. They saw Christ through the shadows of the birth of a promised son, or the ram with its head caught in the thorns that God gave for a sacrifice, or through the buying of a burial plot in the promised land.

The difference for us is that we see God's promises up close and personal. We stand at the foot of the cross and at the mouth of the empty tomb. We see Christ in history, in the gospels, and so we put our trust in him up close and personal.

That is the difference. They trusted from a far off distance. We trust up close. And God promises whoever we are, wherever we're from, whatever we've done or not done, that if we do put our trust in Jesus, we will be accepted by him.

I think it would shock your friends to hear that, wouldn't it? If you've moved here for uni, you're meeting a lot of people. When you tell them you're a Christian, what do they think?

Maybe lots of things. I reckon way up there would be something like this. You get told what to do, and you get told what to think, and your life is about following the rules.

[12 : 07] Would it shock them to know that at the heart of what a Christian is, is not someone who follows rules like their life depends on it, but someone who trusts in God's promises like their life depends on it?

I know lots of us find that conversation hard to have, saying I'm a Christian. Rico Tice calls it crossing the pain line. It's painful.

We fear maybe how people will see us from then on. But friends, what an opportunity that is to tell people what actually being a Christian is, because you can bet that they won't really know unless they have met somebody who trusts in God.

What do you think it is to be a Christian? Tell me what you think being a Christian is about. What is it about? It's about living by faith in God's promises, to which Jesus is the yes and amen.

There are three strands of that promises that Hebrew draws out here. We'll touch on others in a moment. But just to tease out the promise of God for us today, what do we set our certain hope on when we trust in Jesus?

[13 : 22] Well, Hebrews says Abraham set his hope on a city. You see that in verse 10, Luke? He lived in a tent, for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

He knew that the dust and fields and rocks and caves of the promised land were not the fullest fulfillment of God's promise. He had his hope set on a heavenly city built by God himself.

Now, is that our hope in Jesus today? Well, John says it is in Revelation chapter 21, verse 2, I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband.

That is the Christian hope God promises us, a heavenly home, an eternal city, where we will live with Christ forever. What else? Abraham and Sarah set their hope on a family, verse 11.

By faith, even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was unable to bear children, because she considered him faithful, who had made the promise.

[14 : 39] And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and countless as the sand on the seashore. Hebrews is ruthless, isn't it?

This man was a walking corpse, it says. But he hoped beyond hope in God's promise that he would have a family, more children than there are, stars in the sky and sand on the shore.

Is that our hope in Jesus today? Again, listen to John in Revelation chapter 7. After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count.

From every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. That is the hope of God's people. He promises us a bigger family than we could ever possibly count.

From every corner of the earth, gathered to the throne of God, where we will live in his presence. What else? Abraham set his hope on a resurrection.

[15 : 45] You spot that? This is the most surprising one, I think. God told Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, and Abraham went to do it. Why does it say he went to do it? Verse 19 tells us, Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead.

And so in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead. He knew that the promised son could not stay dead, and so he set his hope on a resurrection.

Tell me that's not our hope today. John, again, in Revelation chapter 20, I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the book of life.

God promises a bodily resurrection on the last day because he raised the promised son, Jesus Christ, from the dead for our salvation.

See, friends, if we are Christians today, understand that we live by faith in these very same promises that Abraham set his hope on so long ago, we set our hope on their fulfillment, their fullest fulfillment, in and through Jesus Christ, secured for us by his life, death, and resurrection.

[17 : 09] And that is the big point here in Hebrews. It's the big point in Genesis 12 to 25, that big chunk of a book we've looked at. We live by faith in God's promises.

And for the rest of our time this morning, I only really want to press that in. By using two questions, a why and a how.

Firstly, why trust in God's promises? Because they are certain. Now, you might have been thinking, as we looked at those wonderful promises of a resurrection and a family and everything, you might have been thinking, that is a lot to hope for.

Is this actually a realistic way to live, with all my trust and hope resting in God's promises, however precious and however great they are?

Does it seem to us like hoping beyond hope, or a shot in the dark? Why would we live our lives by faith in God's promises? Well, because time and again, God has proved himself faithful to keep his promises in the past, and so we can be sure he will keep his promises now and forever.

[18 : 30] Think about all of the ticks next to his promises way back in Genesis. For those of you who haven't been with us, we sort of gathered God's promises in Genesis under three Ns.

If you have been with us, I won't ask you what they are, but you will hear them again when we come back to Genesis. So keep these in mind. What were the three Ns that God promised?

To multiply Abraham, give him children, to magnify Abraham, make him great, and to make him a mediator of God's blessing, so that God's grace and favor would come to every family of the world through this man and his family.

And God has been as good as his word, even in the hundred or so years that those chapters have covered in Genesis. Has God multiplied Abraham?

Well, he promised he and Sarah they would have a son, and finally in chapter 21, Sarah conceived and they had Isaac. And while he's only one child, Genesis is up front about the sheer impossibility of even that one child being conceived and born without God's special intervention.

[19 : 51] So I had a look online. Medical advancement today has brought the age of the oldest new mum in recent history up to the age of 73.

Now that's impressive, isn't it? But it's still a good 20 years off Sarah, who gave birth 4,000 years ago, a long time before medical treatment for that was available.

She gave birth age 90-something. Genesis is clear that Isaac is nothing less than a miracle baby. Now that's a tiny tick, but against every natural possibility, Abraham's family has grown in the way and at the time that God promised it would.

Okay, second M, has God magnified Abraham? Well, he's on the property ladder in the promised land. He has eye-watering wealth.

He's incredibly well respected by the people in the land too. And remember, this is despite him having not taken his chances. So he and Lot ran out of space and he said to Lot, his nephew, you pick, you pick where you go.

[21 : 06] And Lot eyed up the land, remember? And Lot chose what looked to all the world like paradise, a well-watered place like the garden of the Lord. It was a new Eden and Lot chose there to go and live.

And Abraham stayed in the drier and dustier part of Canaan. So it looked like he lost the deal. But for this, the deal breaker is that God had promised Abraham and his family that land and that he would bless them there.

And God did bless them there while the cities of the plain where Lot went to live end up as heaps of smoking rubble. Or think of the battle of the kings in Genesis chapter 14.

Abraham charges out with 300 men after these four great kings and their armies and he overthrows them and defeats them on the battlefield. And he rescues Lot and brings back everything and everyone that was stolen.

And the king of Sodom comes and offers Abraham to keep everything that he's reclaimed. All the wealth, all the goods, all the plunder would be his.

[22 : 18] And what does Abraham say? No. With raised hand, I've sworn an oath to the Lord, God most high, creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, I made Abraham rich.

He passes up the chance to become rich beyond his wildest dreams because he trusts God's promise to him that he would magnify him and not the kings and the rulers of this world.

So who has made Abraham great? True to his word, it is God who has magnified Abraham and his family. Again, a small tick and short-lived in history, but in human, worldly terms, an incredibly counterintuitive tick against the flow of history.

It could only be God who had made him great. And finally, the third M, has God made him a mediator as he promised back in chapter 12?

This is the big one, the one that the other promises serve, I think. I will bless those who bless ye, and whoever curses you, I will curse, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

[23 : 35] That was God's promise. Has that happened? What we saw above the cities of the plain in Genesis 18, God stood ready to bring judgment down on Sodom and Gomorrah, but he shared his plans with Abraham, who then pleads for the righteous people in those cities for God to save them.

So God puts this man between himself and the world to intercede for the world on their behalf. He acts as a mediator between God and humanity.

Now often, he's got that so wrong. He goes to these different nations, these places that God intends to bless, and instead, he's brought God's curse on them.

In ridiculous ways, he's told the king that his wife is really his sister for fear of his life. The king goes to marry her, and God punishes him. That happens not once, but twice.

Or think of Hagar, the Egyptian servant in their house. Abraham and his wife use her for their own purposes, and then when it all backfires, they send her away into the wilderness to die.

[24 : 51] And the Lord has to go himself to bring her back and rescue her and bring her back into the family. Abraham hasn't always been a very good mediator of God's blessing, but a mediator he has been to bring the nations of the world into contact with their creator.

True to his word, God has put Abraham and his family between himself and the world to bring his grace and blessing to them. Three M's, three big promises, and God has made good on them all.

And so what we see in our retrospective, I'll look back on these chapters of God's word, is one big record of God's faithfulness.

We see that God is nothing if he is not relentless and unswerving and undeterred in his commitment to keeping his promises to his family.

He would quite literally move heaven and earth to do what he says he will do for them. And brothers and sisters, we need to know that nothing has changed for us in Christ.

[26 : 09] In fact, we know God's faithfulness all the more fully. The God who put his own son between himself and the world and heaped on him the guilt of all who would trust in him to bring us the grace and blessing and life that he promised his family so long ago.

And if he sent his son to the cross to keep his word to us, and if he did the impossible by raising him from the dead, then how will he not with him also give us all things?

Friends, we can rest the whole weight of our lives on God's promises and live by faith in his word because of the certainty of God's promises, because of the faithfulness he has to his own word.

When we doubt that, as we do, we only need to look back at his track record in history recorded in his word to see once again that he has never once broken a promise.

He has never once forgotten to be true to his word, and he never will. And so finally, our second question, how?

[27 : 30] How do we live by faith in his promises? Lastly, let us see the boldness of our faith. If God's promise is so sure, well, how sure can we be as we trust him?

Hebrews 11 and Genesis itself shows us what genuine faith looks like, and it is this, trusting obedience or obedient trust.

It shows us we live boldly by faith when our faith works itself out in visible and concrete ways. Hebrews points us to a few times we see that with Abraham, so in verse 8, look, by faith Abraham when called to go to a place, he would later receive his inheritance, obeyed and went.

Or verse 9, by faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country, living in tents. Or verse 17, by faith Abraham when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

By faith in God's promises, Abraham did all those things, left his home, lived in a tent, offered up his son, not because, as I said, obedience got him anywhere with God, but because his faith in the God of the promise worked itself out in his life in obedience to his word.

[28 : 54] Brothers and sisters, when we trust in God's promises, we boldly follow his word. Another place in the New Testament that looks back on Abraham's faith is James chapter 2, where James writes, Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless?

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

Again, his obedience didn't add anything to his right standing with God. The point is, his faith and his life went hand in hand. when God told Abraham to offer Isaac, imagine, imagine, if Abraham had said this, Lord, I do trust your promise that Isaac will inherit the promises you've made to me.

And Lord, I do actually even believe that you could raise him from the dead, but I'm not really comfortable with doing that. It's a step too far, really. In fact, I'm just not going to go there.

I'm just not going to do it. But I really value your great and your very precious promises. That's really wonderful. Thank you, Lord. Well, we could wonder, couldn't we, whether Abraham really did trust God to keep his promise.

[30 : 21] We might think, actually, mightn't we, he doesn't really trust God to do what he says he'll do, does he? That's why James and Hebrews look at what Abraham did and say he did it by faith in God's promise.

And I wonder, brothers and sisters, as we go, can people see in your life by the way that you live that your hope is set on a better country and on a new world?

Do you live life with a camping mentality on your way to somewhere better or have you settled down? Do you confess to being a stranger and a foreigner here in the world or are you blending in?

Are you living for the here and now or for the there and then? Could the people in your life tell by the way that you live who your faith is in?

Friends, living by faith in God's promise is not something we can do in a theoretical way or only in our hearts or in our prayers. We cannot trust in God's promises but go on living as if nothing had changed.

[31 : 35] God's promises change everything for us. Jesus changes everything for us. That is why James can say faith without works is dead because faith that doesn't affect the way that we live or the decisions that we make isn't really faith in God to make life the way God wants.

It's faith in us to make life work the way that we want. And so as we close this series and we leave Genesis for a while let me urge us together as a church family to live as children of the promise.

To live as children of the God of the promise. And like Abraham our father in the faith embraced the promises of God. Let us look forward to a city built by God's own hand.

Let us be confident in what we hope for and sure of what we cannot see because God has given his word and his word became flesh and dwelt among us and lived and died and rose again to be the yes and amen to all of God's promises past, present, and future.

So let us embrace Christ. Let us set our hearts on the things above where he is and let us boldly trust him with every part of our lives as we walk with him from here.

[33 : 04] Let us trust and live by faith in God's promise. Let's pray for that together now. Let us pray for that in the name of God.

Gracious Father how we thank you for your precious and very great promises to us. Lord we thank you that your word is unfailing.

We thank you for Christ who is the word become flesh. Lord we thank you that in him we see your faithfulness to all that you had ever promised to your people.

Father we thank you that he lives that he is the anchor of our souls our hope within the inner place. And Father how we pray that you would help us who trust in him to hope in him and to live for him.

Father you know we believe help our unbelief we pray. Lord help us to be those who live by faith in every promise of your word. Father we pray that we would be and confess to be strangers and foreigners here in this world.

[34 : 16] Lord living for something better that you have set in our hearts. And Father we pray for those of us who as yet do not know that promise and don't trust in Christ our saviour that you would give a new heart and a new hope and a new love for him and a trust in him.

Lord that is beyond what this world can offer and beyond what we can see and touch and feel or the hope set on your promise in Christ.

Lord these things we pray and ask in his name. Amen. Well we're going to close by singing what I suppose has become a bit of an anthem for us in the course of this series.

By faith we live as children of God's promise. let's stand together and sing out these words and encourage one another with them.