

The Way Home Hebrews 11:8–16

Last year I read Robert Louis Stevenson’s classic *Treasure Island* for the first time. Being a young boy with an active imagination, I think it would have been one of my favorites. Libraries, bookshelves, and reading nooks didn’t make it into the first several years of my world. As I stared at the picture of my mother in my office this week thinking about today’s occasion, I thought about a few of the ways she was an example to me and my siblings. Cultivating a love of reading in her children wasn’t her cup of tea, but she did model for her children endurance and hard work. She held down too many jobs to count, and it would be hard to summarize all the challenges of being a single parent with three small children. She never deserted us and never shied away from motherly affection. She deserved more praise than what I gave her while she lived.

Stevenson was also well-loved by his parents growing up in Scotland, but that love was not reciprocated. Sometime in his university studies in Edinburgh, he turned away from the faith he was nurtured in and never looked back. In his multi-volume set of letters, Stevenson candidly wrote that his parent’s prayers “were addressed to nothing better able to hear and answer than the chandelier.”¹ In another place, we discover an unexpected irony from him when he wrote, “the sod covers us, and the worm never dies, the conscience sleeps well at last, and life is a pilgrimage from nothing to nowhere.”² The man who wrote *Treasure Island* defined life with those words—from *nothing to nowhere*. We don’t have to guess that many in our world hold the same bleak and hopeless outlook on life.

But we find better in Hebrews. We find hope. We find glory. We find both grounded in Jesus going before us, into God’s full presence. There, He remains to this day our justifying righteousness, our gracious Intercessor, and to borrow language from today’s text, the Architect of our eternal resting place. For those who live by faith, life is a pilgrimage from something significant to somewhere more significant. We are moving from a home with tensions that shape us, to a home that is free of all tension.

The parade of the faithful continues in verse eight.³ Matt led us to consider the faith of Abel, Enoch, and Noah last week. But the author is not done.

I. Life’s uncertainties provide opportunities to walk by faith

The Hebrews 11 tour guide begins at a most natural place—the beginning of the world. A starting point which the author pressed his readers on was the trustworthiness of God’s Word in relation to creation. And he reasons from there: If you believe God spoke and created all things in the beginning, will you not rely on God’s word that He is exalting His grace through His Son, to the praise of His glory? But he’s not exhausted his exhortations to perseverance from Genesis. He begins to move through it to solidify that the very ones his readers likely honored from the past were commended by God because of their faith, especially in difficult situations. Faith was the nexus point of God’s approval and nothing had shifted from those exemplars of the ancient world to the world of the author and his audience. It holds true for the modern world as well—without Christ-directed faith it’s impossible to please God.

¹ As quoted by John Piper, *The Satisfied Soul: Showing the Supremacy of God in All of Life*, 59.

² *Ibid.*

³ Thomas Schreiner, *EBTC: Hebrews*, 350.

Today will echo what we considered from the life of Abel and Noah, that the life of faith has its share of difficulties. Struggle and striving are encoded into Christianity. We mustn't ignore faith's triumphs such as Enoch from last week's text, or the falling wall surrounding Jericho, or the humble Daniel among the pride of sovereignty-swayed lions. But per capita, faith's struggles dominate the biblical landscape. Yet, we still struggle to fully embrace this biblical reality, especially when difficulty makes it into our own inbox.

There are factors. With overvalue the instantaneous. We want sanctification to be a series of 10-yard dashes, which start with a bang and end with blessed affirmation all around. But growing in the LORD is tree-like—pounded by a thousand storms through the years, while its floodwaters aid its roots to grow even deeper. We can also get sucked into joining everyone in appealing to our rights, when, according to holy scripture, we were children of wrath like the rest, deserving the worst possible scenario. Thoughts of our own goodness can arise in our minds, subtly putting aside that we are natural born enemies of human flourishing and God-glorifying, sickened with the deadly disease of sin. And, overlooking the comprehensive efforts of the powers of darkness to keep wandering eyes away from Christ is folly. Living by faith is a hard life, a life that sometimes invites trouble. Near the end of this chapter, we see the brutality that can befall those who live by faith.

But before those more blunt realities are presented to us, notice what difficulties Abraham had to come to grips with in verse 8, ***By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.*** In the author's lineup of faith, Abraham was the next man up from the Genesis account. And we're met quickly with the cost of his obedience. We read of Abraham's first encounter with God in Genesis 12. Being ***called*** to leave Ur and how God lays those details out possesses a sting, even to a more Western, less-community oriented mind like our own. "*Go forth from your country, and you're your relatives, and from your father's house to the land which I will show you.*"⁴ I mean, I'm tempted to lose my emotional composure when my daughter leaves to go 3 hours away for a few weeks. This was not that! You almost feel the words, don't you? The knife driven deeper with each one—***leave your country, relatives, father's house.***

Even if Abraham knew *about* the land of Canaan, the word ***place*** in verse 8 expresses the uncertainty about his destination. Jessica and I are going to a place in a couple of weeks that I only know through pictures or second hand, Niagara Falls. I'm uncertain how the mist, the roar, and the view will affect my senses or to what degree. Right now, it's just a place. Yet, after June 2nd I anticipate that it will be more than that. The unknown future is what the author is seeking to emphasize.⁵ That's where Abraham is choosing in faith to take his next step. In a sense, we always are stepping into the unknown future, aren't we? Abraham's trust in God is motivating this life-altering obedience.

Part of the difficulty for Abraham and his family in leaving Ur were the people they were leaving behind. Again, we're talking about people in traditional, Eastern cultures who get the bulk of their identity from living up to family expectations and making their community proud. Some version of that is still the case in Middle-Eastern cultures.⁶ People in individualistic Western societies, like our own, get their identity and self-worth through self-expression—creating, identifying, and fulfilling

⁴ Genesis 12:1

⁵ Sigurd Grindheim, *PNTC: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 560.

⁶ Kenneth Bailey, who spent 40 years in the Middle East teaching theology and writing on how that culture interplays with the scriptures, wrote in 2005, "The Middle Eastern peasantry has survived through the ages almost unchanged...the manner of life is rooted in a granitelike conservatism" (*The Cross and the Prodigal*, 17.). Much has changed in 20 years, but I suspect to a much lesser degree in the rural places, especially in regard to worldview and the underlying, long-established philosophical and religious aspects.

dreams and desires. As radically different as these two cultural mindsets seem to be, they are both self-saving/self-preserving strategies. In the more eastern/traditional cultures, acceptance of others is the end all. In western cultures, crafting your own identity and carving your own path is the way to the highest freedom and peace. And, along comes the gospel with power to uproot them both to offer a better identity, a better status, a better pursuit.⁷ In Abraham's case, along comes the One, true God, commanding him to displace life as he knew it away from the larger community. And Abraham, with no questions or resistance, *went forth as the LORD had spoken*.⁸ To leave the stable and familiar was an act of faith.

Verse 9 shows us more of Abraham's faith, ***By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents...*** Abraham not only left a potentially sore situation, but he took his family into less than desirable conditions. Some of you know the painful things that attend such obedience. Jesus Himself taught the sting of being attached to Him. The rich young ruler was called upon to forsake his amassed wealth because it controlled him, and a better Treasure was being offered.⁹ Our dearest relationships sometimes collapse in light of Christ's rule and worth.¹⁰ Jesus redefines what is most sacred. And, recall the house of Jason in the book of Acts, where they were telling others that Christ was the King of kings, and for doing that they were placed in harm's way.¹¹ The life of faith will have its share of uncertainties, but mixed in those uncertainties we should expect, and we will know, difficulty.

Martin Luther captured the essence of Abraham's trust, "This is the glory of faith, namely, not to know where you are going, what you are doing, what you are suffering, and, after taking everything captive—perception, understanding, strength, and will—to follow the bare voice of God and to be led and driven rather than to drive."¹² With humility, Abraham had to release the reins of control.

The double reference to the social taboo-ness of being an *alien* in a *foreign land* is intended to give perspective to these new Jewish Christians reading this sermon-letter. They often felt abandoned and alien-like among their own people. The *tent* imagery was also meant to connect their own instability to Abraham and his descendant's nomadic way of life. These new believers in Jesus felt far from settled, even as they most likely lived alongside other fellow Jews in whatever community God had placed them.

Abraham lived with that status of *alien*, or foreigner, for the rest of his natural life. He lived and passed that status down to his posterity, to *Isaac, Jacob*, and his *descendants*. Verse 13 takes it a step further—they *confessed* that status. They acknowledged it as a fact of life in Canaan. But God had good plans for Abraham. But Abraham wasn't alone.

II. In those uncertainties, God shows He is faithful

¹¹ ***By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised.*** To be clear, Sarah started off on the wrong foot with God's purpose for her and Abraham's life. We know that she attempted to short circuit the plan by insisting that her husband take Hagar as the woman who could bear him a son in Genesis 16. And it's

⁷ Tim Keller, *Preaching*, 61.

⁸ Genesis 12:4

⁹ Luke 18:22

¹⁰ Matthew 10:34-37

¹¹ Acts 17:5-9

¹² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Vol. 29*, 238, as quoted by Grindheim on 561.

hard to hold her laugh of unbelief against her from Genesis 18, considering her old age to bear a child. But this is what we see in the biblical records—imperfect lives marked by faith. Abraham himself was amused by the thought of bearing a son in old age in Genesis 17. Further, he failed to show trust in the Lord’s governing his life by lying to foreign kings about Sarah being his sister. But in time Sarah accepted God’s good plan, as did Abraham. In other words, like all who live in Christ, their weak, seedling faith eventually grew roots, branches, and leaves, with knots and all. And through God’s sanctifying work, the shade of their example can give both a refuge and a shot in the arm to our own immaturities.

Sarah trusted in the *faithful* God. He *promised* a particular son and made good on His promise with the miraculous birth of Isaac in her old age. But He promised more than that, and more that they would never see—a harvest of descendants, verse 12, *AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE*. We see the improbableness of that unfolding in the same verse, pointing out that Abraham was *as good as dead*. But God brings life from death. It’s His way.¹³

The author is leading us into this tension of God working and blessing to give to Abraham a son, a place for him to raise his children, and for their children to raise their children, and so on while at the same time helping us to understand there’s more. Even with God’s rich gifts of family and place, these are not the high points of God’s plan for His people. And, neither are they thoroughly satisfying. This is precisely what the author meant when he expressed that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob *died in faith, without receiving the promises*. Land, children, and grandchildren are the source of much joy. Yet, all of these good things are touched by sin, erode by time, and can disappear under terrible circumstances in a moment’s time. There were promises God kept for Abraham’s family on earth, but they paled in comparison to verse 13’s *promises*.¹⁴

So, the question remains, what would drive a man to pack it all up and head 850 miles northwest of home, completely unaware of what awaits him and his family? We can conceive of what many must have felt, or the questions that plagued their minds at first. Will the people be hostile to our presence? Will the land be hospitable to our animals? “Master, what of your servants and their livelihoods?” “Abram, are you sure about this?” “Sarah, I’m sure.”

III. Through those uncertainties, God will lead us all the way home

¹³ *All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but...* Another conjunction *but* that completely swivels the mind to God’s glory, God’s provision, God’s saving heart. God is saving the best for the end! *...but having seen them*, referring to the ultimate promises pertaining to eternity, they *welcomed them from a distance*.

Verse 10 tells us where Abraham’s eyesight was ultimately fixed, *for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God*. The word for *looking* signifies waiting earnestly. It’s the same word used back in Hebrews 10:13 for Jesus, who is waiting for his enemies to be made His footstool.¹⁵ Christ is ready and able to rid the world of opposition to Him as I preach, but

¹³ John 5:24, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.” Other forerunner accounts to John 5: I Kings 17 and Elijah; some have argued that Jonah experienced an actual death/resurrection, while others argue that he was at least a type, like Isaac in verse 19 of this very chapter under consideration; Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones; the Resurrection of a dead Nazarene by His Spirit’s power

¹⁴ Hebrews 8:6, “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on *better* promises.”

¹⁵ Peter O’Brien, *PNTC: The Letter to the Hebrews*, 413.

He is also mercifully patient in seeing His grace reign in human hearts. Likewise, Abraham is eager for more than a land of promise and a promise of progeny. He was eyeing a land not requiring bloodshed, a land not susceptible to drought and pestilence, a land which required no sweat equity, a land that wouldn't remind him of Genesis 3, "*Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you...*"¹⁶ The physical land under the curse was never intended to be the answer for God's people. A cursed land and a tent that, by nature and structure, has no **foundation**—those who pitch them must do so over and over again.

Abraham was looking beyond these. The nomadic circumstances in Canaan were pointing to something more fixed and lasting—a **city which has foundations**, unlike the tents, **whose architect and builder is God**, who has an infinitely greater imagination and uses materials unsusceptible to decay! Yes, let your mind lock onto that often!

This confession by Abraham and his family **that they were strangers and exiles on the earth made it clear**, verse 14, that they were **seeking** a different **country** from what they left behind and from what they would eventually sojourn in. Mesopotamia from which they came wasn't what they had in mind. That's what verse 15 conveys, **indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return**. It's the default of people everywhere in every context—going back to one's roots. Part of the instruction of this text is for us to train our minds to believe that what we can't yet see is better than anything we've ever seen or are seeing now. And that's not easy staring at a newborn, or Niagara Falls, or going back to where you were raised and spending time with the best mom anyone could have. But if a faithful God holds out something better, and you believe Him, then He will sustain you as you persevere by faith in His Son, and in the end, reward you with what is better.

Do you, verse 16, **desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one**? The word **desire** here is in the imperfect tense, suggesting an ongoing longing which pervades the whole of one's life.¹⁷ Do you long for that final stop, with a comprehensive rest from all your labors, your disappointments, your insurgences against God's honor? Heaven is our true home, and the way there is through this One who secured sinners by a death in our place, the Greatest High Priest of all, who went on ahead of us and sits at God's right hand. He is the Ruler and **builder** of a heavenly **city** for His people to dwell in. If you yearn for that with Abraham's faith, Sarah's faith, their sons' faith, this author's faith, then the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be your **God** and you will live with Him in the new heavens and the new earth.

And despite all the shameful things we've ever done, God is not **ashamed to be called** our **God**. Just like Hebrews 2:11, this verb ashamed is in the present tense. Today, now, while we still sin even, He is not ashamed to be called our God. So surely in that great Day when we enter the city **prepared** for us, we'll enter His joy unhindered by shame in either direction! It's an echo from Hebrews 2:11. Jesus, the One who took the punishment we deserved on the cross, is not ashamed to call us family.

As I thought about this **city** of verse 16, I thought about the season of life that it took for Jessica and me to adjust to the city of Memphis and its outskirts, which were themselves larger than anything we'd ever encountered in terms of settling down. Our first attempt at church attendance in the summer of 2001 was interrupted by accidentally learning the 240 loop as we went in circles missing exits. We gave up and came home. But we weren't seasoned city dwellers. Jessica's hometown was larger than

¹⁶ Genesis 3:17-18b

¹⁷ O'Brien, 421.

mine, but smaller than the number of residents in Germantown.¹⁸ It all felt foreign compared to our previous five years tucked away in the hills of Bell County, KY. To say it another way, we weren't prepared for this. But would it have made a difference if the mayor was our dearest friend and a great percentage of its citizens family members?¹⁹ Brothers and sisters, God has prepared a *city* for us, and He is preparing us for that city. He is proving His faithfulness in so many ways. And our responsibility is to live by faith in all our ways.

Conclusion

The favorite tense of Hebrews is the future tense. It calls upon its reader to not fixate on the present circumstances or the past failures. We're not to stick our heads in the sand concerning our circumstances and failures, but if we live in those campsites instead of simply visiting them, then we'll go about with the scuff marks of hopelessness, loneliness, and fear, in time, we just might drift into the lifeless space of unbelief. Won't you place your faith in Christ? While life's winds howl, oh, to have your trust anchored in Him. He doesn't disappoint.

Maybe you've subscribed to Stevenson's words—life is a pilgrimage from *nothing to nowhere*. But who truly *wants* to believe that? Does your heart not hunger for something more? Something better? Something beyond amazing even? I don't have to see inside you to know the answer that. Indeed, you were made to be captivated by the glory of this God of promise.

By faith Abraham and Sarah packed their bags for the unknown, confessed they didn't quite belong where they were, bore a son *beyond the proper time of life*, raised their children, were blessed in doing those things, but longed for more than those things. Our best accomplishments, our most beloved relationships, our greatest financial moves and accumulations, our most prized comforts—they could be gone before tomorrow. But if you're bound for a *better country*, then let that promise stir afresh your faith this day.

¹⁸ Today, according to the 2022 numbers on census.gov, Germantown is double the size of Chillicothe, OH.

¹⁹ Don't forget about angels. They're not family, but I suppose (and hope) they will be great friends in glory.