

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson #34 November 24, 2019

Noah, Abraham

Hebrews 11: 7-10

Noah

v. 7

I don't know if you have ever considered this, but do you realise that Noah has a uniqueness and similarity to Adam – from Noah has descended every person alive on earth now and those who went before us. His direct family members and himself were the only 8 survivors of the Flood.

He is the third example of victorious faith leading up to the flood in chapter 11, and the Bible spends a lot of time painting the picture of his effect on humanity – in fact, his story is specified in Genesis 5:28-9:29 – in more detail than even Adam & Eve or anyone else leading up to his era. In Gen. 6:8,9, the Bible tells us that he had 'found favor' in God's eyes, that he was righteous, blameless, and like Enoch before him, he too 'walked with God'. We must understand that this praise for Noah is not invoked as a result of his own self-generated righteousness. Yet, that seems to be the way Eugene Peterson interprets Gen. 6:8 in his version of the Bible, "The Message". Here is what he says; "*But Noah was different. God liked what he saw in Noah.*" This is such an unbiblical spin that it immediately made me lose my desire to read much more of "The Message"! In truth, God's grace was the sole source of Noah's faith, and any characteristics he exhibited. And this is what motivated his faith! In fact, in our immediate text of Heb. 11:7 (the last part of the verse) – "*By this he [Noah] condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.*"

Ezekiel 14:14 also mentions Noah's righteousness alongside that of Daniel and Job. In 2 Peter 2:5, Noah is described as a "herald of righteousness." As a result of God's hand in Noah's life, he stood out in his generation as a contrast and challenge to the wanton sinfulness and wickedness that characterized virtually every other person on the planet! Cf. Gen. 6:5-7. This is the condition that prevailed and it became the "contextual background against which Noah's faith was tested and prevailed."¹

Hebrews 11:7a

The events of Noah's life are full of immense theological significance. It is in his life that we learn of God's inherent right and full authority to do as He pleases with His Creation and His creatures, establishing very early that when He says He will bring judgment, then He means what He says! Also – it is here that we first encounter the theological terms, "righteousness" (Gen. 6:9), and "grace" (v. 8). The ESV translates it "favor". Further, his ark provides us with a symbol of salvation – cf. I Peter 3:20.

¹ Philip Hughes, Hebrews, p. 463

Noah's life of faith is a categorical depiction of Hebrews 11:1 – “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Noah believed God's warning (things not seen) of a great flood which would wipe the earth clean of all of its corruption, and (things hoped for), himself and his family's salvation by means of an ark, that he himself would build at God's command and instruction – cf. Gen. 6:13-18 – and of course, inherent in all that was the promise of a new world, and a new start.

Genesis 6:3 gives us the timeline expressed to Noah – 120 years. Noah's God-given task was to believe God's promise of judgment and salvation, and react to his promise of salvation by building a huge boat, an ark, built to God's specifications. This immense boat, to be constructed many miles from any deep water was to be the size of a lake freighter at 300 cubits (450 ft.) long x 50 cubits (75 ft.) wide x 30 cubits (45 ft.) high (Gen. 6:15). Compare that to the Edmund Fitzgerald, probably the most famous and largest lake freighter, which was 729' long x 75' beam with a 25' draft.

To build this ark, in the face of the obstacles before him. Noah would have to exercise every ounce of faith and strength God had supplied him with. There were no lumber mills, only primitive hand tools, and perhaps Noah enlisted (certainly) his 3 sons, and maybe even some men from the community to work with on this herculean task, but if, so, he'd have had to be in a position to pay them. Faced with a lengthy but perilous deadline, God would have had to work all that out. In any case, by the time the flood was imminent, the ark was built, stocked with provisions, and loaded with the people, and animals that would repopulate the earth after the flood.

Richard Phillips comments;

“Indeed, what God demanded of Noah was far greater than what he asks of us. God required Noah to believe something that had never happened before, something totally unprecedented and seemingly unlikely. By contrast, God asks us to believe things that have already happened, namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – things that were done not in a corner but in the full light of history and recorded in the Bible.”²

Hebrews 11:7b

Our text next says, “[*by faith Noah*], *in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household.*” There should be no confusion for Christians with regard to the relationship between faith and works, but unfortunately there is. Some of that confusion arises as a result of the seeming contradiction between 2 verses – Romans 4:6 and James 2:17-18. What Paul means is that faith is not the result of works, and James is stressing that when one has real faith, it results in works. Consider these verses: Ephesians 2:10; Galatians 3:11; (cf. Habakkuk 2:4; Hebrews 10:38; Romans 1:17); Philippians 2:12, etc. It is this aspect of faith that the entirety of Hebrews 11 is stressing.

² Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 427

John Calvin pointed out:

“We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. True and saving faith is always accompanied by obedience, which flows from faith like water from a fountain.”³

Alexander MacLaren concurs;

“If faith has any reality in us at all, it works. If it has no effect, it has no existence.”⁴

The upshot of this is stated of Noah in Gen. 6:22. Noah’s ark provided the people of that time period with a stark visual symbol of what Noah undoubtedly ‘preached’ to them as he built the ark – it was evidence that Noah had ‘the conviction of things not seen’, warning of the flood (and preparing for it) many years before that first rain drop fell. Unless Noah built that ark, he understood by faith that the flood would come, and he too, along with his family, would perish along with everyone else. Here it is demonstrated how faith and works fit together – if Noah had not started working on the ark, chopping trees, shaping lumber, making sketches, measuring wood, and figuring out angles and how to make it all watertight, then it would be easy to assess that he really did not believe God’s warning. But Noah did believe, he did have faith, and therefore, he acted in faith and built the ark under the deadline of a far off prophecy, thus exhibiting and revealing real faith!

Hebrews 11: 7c

“By this faith he condemned the world.” This genesis account provides us with a black and white picture of the contrast between faith and unbelief. We can be sure that Noah was condemned by the world around him, by the jeering, loud-mouthed ‘experts’ who would have surely ridiculed him and his helpers day after day for decades! They all lived their lives in ‘party mode’ as Noah instead worked feverishly to get this ark of safety constructed. Note 2 Peter 2:5; and 3:4-6, as well as Christ’s stark warning in Matthew 24:36-39, which depicts not only the people of Noah’s time, but also those who precede the return of Christ.

Ray Stedman points out;

“We may rightly visualize the mockery and jeering which Noah must have daily faced as he built a huge ship. He was a hundred miles from the nearest ocean, with a ship many times too big for his own needs, and when he had finished, he filled it with animals! Had he lived in our day he would have been dubbed, “Nutty Noah!” Yet Jesus used the ‘days of Noah’ as representative of the condition of the world before his own return, and indicated that his followers must be prepared to face the same kind of scornful hostility that Noah met day after day.”⁵

There is no question that Noah did not silently build the ark. Peter calls him (II Pet. 2:15) *“a herald of righteousness”*. He would have explained his actions, why he was building such a thing as this ark, and surely, almost to a man, his neighbours would

³ IBID, p. 428 (cited in Richard Phillips)

⁴ IBID, p. 430

⁵ IBID, p. 430

have mocked him mercilessly. Quite likely, he offered them a path to safety on the ark, which no one took advantage of. It is significant that once the flood was imminent, the people would have been alerted, too late, - note Gen. 7:11-6 – but significantly, God closed the door! Noah, as merciful as he may have desired to be, could not reopen it. Their fate was sealed. Those whom God had purposed to save were in fact, saved inside the ark, and those outside, who were in a sense, passed over, were doomed. (cf. Romans 9:22-23). I shudder to think of the same scenario as Christ returns and the bulk of people on earth (“*every eye will see Him*”) at that time are also eternally doomed.

And Alexander MacLaren adds;

“No doubt there were plenty of witty and wise things said about him...And then, one morning, the rain began, and continued, and for forty days it did not stop, and they began to think that perhaps, after all, there was some method in his madness. Noah got into his ark, and still it rained...I wonder what [they] thought about it all then, with the water up to their knees. How their jibes and jests would die in their throats when it reached their lips!”⁶

Hebrews 11:7d

This leaves the last phrase of verse 7 to observe regarding Noah – “*and became an heir of righteousness that comes by faith.*” This phrase brings out two important elements: inheritance and righteousness that comes by faith. Perhaps one of the best places in the NT to see the theology of the second point above, is in Phil. 3:7-9. Paul decries his pre-salvation attempts to be ‘saved’, and here is convinced that he has finally found the real source of righteousness – from and in Christ. He recognises his own works to be righteous under the law, as seriously and fatally flawed and thus as useless as waste to provide him or anyone with salvation. Elsewhere he summarises that in Romans 3:19-20. Paul also sees that thinking of the problem of OT and Christian era Judaism – see Romans 10:1-4. Verse 3 is the key verse of prime importance in this passage to support the point of Hebrews 11:7.

One more passage, in II Corinthians 5:21, shows us that we receive this necessary righteousness (cf. Matt. 5:20) via a glorious exchange of our sin – which Christ takes on as our sin-bearer, and His righteousness which is then imputed to us. Notice in v. 21 whose action is involved – “*He made Him*”(It is God the Father).

Back in Heb. 11:7d, “*became an heir of righteousness.*” Means that Noah received this righteousness, IOW, he had, by God’s grace alone become a child of God, and was destined to inherit God’s blessings. In the language of John 1:12-13, “God [the “He” here] gave the right to become children of God, who were born ...of God.” IOW, by God’s will, not man’s. Titus 3:4-7 also sheds light on this concept, as it shows redemption both accomplished (by God), and applied (by God) to us. Inheritance means that the source of the gifts of inheritance are established not by Noah’s own

⁶ IBID, p. 431

resources and abilities, as significant as they may have been, but from the One who granted the inheritance. Faith is a gift of grace!

Paul points out in Romans 4:16a that our righteousness (the “it” here) depends on faith, so that the promise (of an inheritance – cf. v. 13) may rest on grace, and grace alone, *“guaranteed to all his offspring...”*; therefore our declared righteousness in Christ, received as an inheritance by faith, cannot be lost or taken away! (cf. John 10:27-30; Romans 8:27-39).

A key lesson for us is that we must believe God, and as a result of that belief and trusting in Christ as a direct result of that belief and disposition of our lives in His hands, we act accordingly. Peter Lewis makes great sense here; “Believe, God says to the world through our faith, that a judgment is yet to come. And believe that in the cross of Christ – an ark as wide and long and high and deep as Noah’s ever was – everyone who believes will find safety through the storm. Peter Lewis says it well: “Christ Jesus is our ark now; big enough for the whole world, strong enough to withstand the shocks of life, the rising waters of death, and the upheavals of the last judgment. There is safety here in the Son of God, sent to be for us all the shelter, the salvation, that we so desperately needed; our ark and safe passage into the new world God has planned. From that ark we will emerge to inherit a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1).”⁷

The Obedience of Abraham to the Call of God vv. 8-10

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Abraham in the Bible. The account of his life is one of the lengthiest in the OT, running from Genesis 12-25. Through him, God gave the covenant (Abrahamic) by which salvation comes to so many people for generation after generation. His weightiness is seen by the esteem by which his memory was cherished by the Pharisees of the Gospels, by his designation by Paul as *“the father of all who believe”* (Romans 4:11), where Paul, in Romans 4 uses him as a model of justification by faith. He is the first person in the OT to be literally commended for his faith (Gen. 15:6). It is clear from the times that Jesus mentions him – usually in debates with the Scribes and Pharisees – that He saw Abraham as a great model of faithful life...e.g., John 8:39-40,56, yet condemned the Pharisees for using him as an idol.

The author of Hebrews pays a lot of attention to Abraham. He appeals to Abraham’s patient faith in Heb. 6:13-15, and here in Hebrews 11, the account of Abraham runs from v. 8 to v. 19, then picks up again in vv. 17-18 – using statements to begin each section, *“By faith Abraham...”*. Here in vv. 8-10, our text starts with his obedience to God’s call – *“he went out...”* when God called him to leave his home and family, even though, *“not knowing where he was going.”* Verse 8 describes not only the beginning of Abraham’s salvation, but an important start in the history of God’s redemptive plans and purposes.

⁷ IBID, p. 434

In Abraham, we observe, as we did in Noah's case, that real faith results in acts of obedience in response to God's call. It is God's initiative being emphasized as Abraham's obedient sojourn begins – God's sovereign grace, God's choice of Abraham to be the foundation of a people God would call Israel, and that would ultimately lay the groundwork for a people of many nations who would faithfully follow and trust in Christ, who would be a descendent of Abraham -according to Gal. 3:1-9, and note also Gal. 3:16.

But why did God choose Abraham to be saved and to be such a key element of His redemptive purpose. Richard Phillips is helpful here;

"It is important to realize that Abraham was saved not because there was anything special about him, but by virtue of God's sovereign choice. Abraham was not singled out because of his faith, but because of God's grace. We might think that he was picked because he was a good man. But the Bible argues otherwise: "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord: look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isa. 51:1-2). Isaiah's point is that nothing in their ancestry commended them to God apart from God's gracious initiative. Joshua 24:2-3 is even clearer: "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the River Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods."⁸

Abraham was saved then not because he was particularly good, not because he stood out as a righteous man above all his pagan peers, but because God chose him. Notice farther along in the OT, God's words regarding how He came to choose His own people – Deut. 7:6-11. The Hebrews 11 account of Abraham begins in v. 8. Tom Schreiner makes an excellent point here;

"Hebrews summarizes what occurred in the words, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed." It is obvious he obeyed, but Hebrews adds that Abraham's obedience flowed from his faith. It is clear from what the writer tells us here that Abraham's first act of faith did not take place in Gen. 15:6, even though Gen. 15:6 is the first time we are told that Abraham believed. He dared to leave his homeland only because he trusted in God. Such a comment does not contradict Paul's declaration that Abraham was justified by faith in appealing to Gen. 15:6 (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6). In fact, it confirms what Paul teaches, showing that faith is the root and obedience is the fruit.

Abraham was promised a land (Gen. 12:1), which would be his inheritance (11:8), but he wasn't told the location of the land when he set out. He trusted that God would reveal the place of his inheritance and that God would give it to him. Faith, the author instructs the readers, does not see the end at the beginning. Faith always trusts in the promises of God, even when it looks as if they won't be fulfilled. The readers should do the same: they must always cast themselves entirely on God and believe he will give them the final inheritance."⁹

⁸ Richard Phillips, p. 436-437

⁹ Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 350

In every case of salvation, faith begins with God revealing Himself to someone lost in sin, who, up to that point, is ignorant and unconcerned about God. But once enlightened, and brought from death to life, from spiritual darkness to light, they follow God – they follow Christ – cf. JN 10:27: *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”*

As Abraham obeyed the call of God, and left his house and family behind, surely somewhat confused, not knowing what or where the end of this journey would take him, he still went. Certainly, this was at some great cost to him personally, but he obeyed and went out. Even the NT martyr, Stephen, in his last speech in this life, brought up Abraham’s obedience and foundational life of faith – Acts 7:1-8. Faith always demands action, and always manifests itself in obedience to God’s commands. This was true of Abraham, Noah, Stephen, and is true of us.

In v. 9, Abraham went out, and with setbacks and difficulties, all meant to teach him who God was and that he could be fully trusted. He arrived at Canaan. This verse captures decades of Abraham’s life, mentioning Jacob and Isaac (grandson and son), Isaac not even being born to Abraham until he was 100 years old!

Richard Phillips says,

“We have seen how difficult it is to obey God’s call. But many a Christian has learned how much easier it is at the beginning of the life of faith and how much harder it is to live that life of faith over a period of many, many years.”¹⁰

This long journey that Abraham had trustingly embarked on took many years, and notice v. 9, *“he went to live in the land of promise as in a foreign land, living in tents...”*. When he got to Canaan (the promised land), what would be much later, Israel, and not finally subdued until Joshua – he found it already inhabited with idolaters, those who knew or served this God he was following. He was living in tents, impermanent dwellings – no illustrious city, no massive, safe walled compound that he could call ‘his’. He had the promises, but had not yet received the promised inheritance. This is what is called the “already and not yet” quality of faith. But this is what Hebrews 11 laid out for us in the definition of faith isn’t it? *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

It is even the case that when Abraham’s beloved wife, Sarah died, that he had to purchase a plot of land in which to bury her! He was a pilgrim, a sojourner in the land promised to him and his progeny – cf. Gen. 23:1-20. Notice the honour that these people of the land paid to Abraham in this account.

From beginning to end, the life of faith operates outside of the use of sight. Quite often, in our own Christian journey, we are reminded by circumstances that we are not yet home – cf. Heb. 11:13, 39.

¹⁰ Richard Phillips, p. 439

Philip Hughes on Abraham's perseverance;

"He who begins by faith must continue by faith, for faith is the principle not only of initiation but of perseverance. The life of faith did not cease for Abraham when he left Ur of the Chaldees behind him or when at length he set foot on the territory toward which he had directed his steps. Indeed, the situation into which he moved on his arrival in the land of promise was a more severe trial of his faith than was the call to leave home and kindred, and it was easier for him to live by faith as he journeyed toward a goal as yet unseen than to do so upon reaching the goal and finding that the fulness of all he had been promised was "not yet". To live like an alien, with no better or more permanent shelter than the insecure covering of tents, in the very land in which the promise was associated – an existence, which, by all worldly standards, contrasted far from favorably with the stability he had enjoyed in the civilization of Chaldea – demanded an outstanding degree of faith on the part of Abraham."¹¹

V. 10 – But we wonder, how could Abraham maintain his trust in God when even by the end of his life, the promise of the land was not realized? Verse 10 helps us to understand the answer to this question. And v. 16 is also helpful. This 'city' is what Abraham (and so many others) set his sights on. He knew that when he finally received this promise, it would be glorious. See what Hebrews 12:28 says.

Somehow too, according to Jesus' words in John 8:57, Abraham, perhaps in a dream or vision (we are not told) – "saw Christ's day", and was glad. Perhaps, somehow, as a result of that truth, he was satisfied with God's promise, as yet unfulfilled. Perhaps, in a similar way, that is also expressed of Moses in Heb. 11:26.

It is clear from Heb. 11:10 that Abraham had a highly developed sense of his own spiritual situation. He compared the cities he had surely seen in Canaan, which were not his, in the land promised to him, to the city to come, the one of which was planned and built by God Himself. His heart was set on that city, and he put his hope on this unseen reality, his convictions on God who had promised to give it to him¹².

In his case, as in ours, we long for that heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22), though we may not comprehend all the implications of it at this time, and of heaven as the place we will inherit to spend eternity, and we trust by faith that being in Jesus' presence for eternity will be worth every pitfall of this life, every broken relationship, every grief, every bout of suffering, every difficult and trying circumstance. We trust Christ. What else do we have? All we have is Christ! We do not have a huge amount of glimpses into heaven in the Bible (Heb. 12:18-24 and Rev. 21 & 22 are the main ones, with glimpses in Isa. 6:1-13; Ex. 24:9-10; I KGS 22:14-23; Gen.28:10-22 – the first mention of heaven in the Bible; Zech. 3:1-10; and Job 1 & 2),

¹¹ Philip E. Hughes, Hebrews, p. 469

¹² The promise of the land was technically given to Abraham for his descendants to inherit it – note Gen. 15:18; 17:8; 22:17 and significant portions of the land were not inherited by Israel until the book of Joshua!

but we are led to see our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ on virtually every page. Persevere to the end! That's the message of Hebrews 11.