

THE PROMISE-DRIVEN PILGRIMAGE

Hebrews 11:8–16 • Pastor Luke Herche

Turn with me if you would in your Bibles to Hebrews Chapter 11. Our sermon text for this morning will be Hebrews 11 verses 8 through 16. And before we read that together, let's pray together:

Our Lord Jesus, we pray that you would speak to us through your Word and, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that you would use your Word effectively in our hearts to shape us, to convict us, to convince us, to convert us to you, to draw our hearts nearer to you, to cause us to see Jesus and all his glory, to put our eyes on our heavenly inheritance, and to hope in that great day, when Christ will return. Father, use your Word this morning for your good purposes in us by your Spirit. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Again, our Scripture reading for this morning is Hebrews 11 verses 8 through 16, and you may have noticed that we read Hebrews Chapter 11 this week for the Scripture reading. We read it last week for the Scripture reading as well. That's because there is a wholeness to Chapter 11. It stands together and is saying really one thing: commending faith to God people. So, I want us to hear the chapter as a whole, even as we look at individual parts of it. So, we've heard the chapter as a whole, now I'm going to read just the section that we'll be looking at this morning: Hebrews Chapter 11 verses 8 through 16:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were

strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

What is it that drives the Christian life?

We could answer that question in a lot of ways, I guess. We could say grace, grace drives the Christian life. Apart from grace, there is no Christian life. We need God's free, forgiving love to take even one baby step along the path of the Christian life. We could say the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, we can't see grace, much less receive grace. And of course, we could say Jesus drives the Christian life. There is no Christian life apart from Christ. But the answer that we're going to look at this morning is in our text is God's promise. The promises of God fuel the Christian life. Those are promises which are ours by grace, promises which are given in Christ, and promises which we can receive only by the work of the Spirit within us. But those promises are the point at which the grace of Jesus, by the power of the Spirit touches our hearts. So, they are a gift of God to fuel our faith, our hope, and our obedience. A Christian life is a promise-driven pilgrimage. We're going to look at the Christian life in its many relations to those promises this morning, and you can see that in our outline. One point is a little bit different than what you have in front of you if you're looking in the bulletin, but the five points are stand on the promises, move toward the promises, wait for the promises, trust in the promises (that's the one that's a little bit different), and then walk in the promises.

So, standing on the promises, moving toward the promises, waiting for the promises, trusting in the promises, and walking in the promises.

So, point one: stand on the promises:

The promise-driven Pilgrim walks in faith. If the Christian life is driven by the promises of God, then we must know and stand on those promises. We must take God at His Word and take His Word into our hearts. And just think about the options. If you don't have the promises of God, then you either despair because the future looks bleak, lie to yourself ("the future looks just fine, thank you"), or buy into the promises of this age and the promises of this age are of course tempting. Things that seem intuitively obvious; if you only work hard, you'll succeed in life. If you make a lot of money, you'll be happy. If you go to college, you can secure a good future. If you follow the rules, everything will go well for you. These promises are ultimately empty, and they give us a false hope for the future. Or sometimes we cling to what

we think are the promises of God, which also gives us a false hope for the future. So, we think that God promises to make me happy, or that God has promised my best life now, or that God has promised I won't have to suffer, or that life will be easy, or that overcoming sin will be easy, or that life in the church will be easy. And then life is hard, and we think God promises have failed.

Well, the first part of our pilgrimage is walking in faith in the promises, which means knowing the promises of God, and standing on them; taking God at His Word, trusting Him to be faithful. And you'll notice all the language of promises throughout our passage, and particularly verse 11, where we're told Sarah **considered him faithful who had promised**. You see, if you want to live the Christian life, if you want to progress on this pilgrimage, you need to know the promises of God, you need to know as well the God of the promises. See, when you know the faithful God, you will trust his promises as Sarah did. And as I pointed out last week, of course, the best way to come to that point is by looking to the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus proves the faithfulness of God. Psalm 16: 10 says, **For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption**. And Peter, on the day of Pentecost, says when David wrote the Psalm, he was speaking about the Christ, the Messiah. And God in Scripture promised not to abandon Jesus to the grave, and He didn't; He raised Him up. And there are dozens of other Old Testament passages which promised this, and were fulfilled when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended up into heaven. And if you want to know if Christianity is true, that is the event you need to deal with: the Resurrection. And if you want to be motivated to trust the promises of God, that is the event you need to deal with: the Resurrection. Because if God has raised His Son Jesus from the dead, then all of His promises are beginning to come true. So what promises are you believing? If you want to live the Christian life, stand on the promises of God. Know them, read them in Scripture. Take them into your heart and walk in faith, considering the one who promised faithful.

Point two move toward the promises: that the promise-driven pilgrimage, or the promise-driven pilgrim, walks in hope.

Promises, by their nature as promises, are not fulfilled. Once they are fulfilled, they aren't promises anymore, they are reality. There is this great series of commentaries on the Old Testament called the Gospel According to the Old Testament, and the commentary on the story of Abraham in Genesis is called, "Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality." And the very word "promise" then orients us toward the future. Something is coming that isn't here now. And there are two sides to this: the first is our eyes are looking forward. The imagery in our text is that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Sarah were strangers and exiles (verse 13) and some translations use the language of "pilgrims" and "sojourners". And the point is not that they do not have a home, but that they aren't home at present.

Abraham left Ur of the Chaldeans and lived in the land of Promise, as in a foreign land (verse 9). But he was looking forward to something he was looking forward (verse 10) **to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.** He was seeking a homeland (verse 14), a better country (verse 16), a heavenly one. His life was a journey, a pilgrimage home. When Jacob met Pharaoh near the end of his life, he said in Genesis Chapter 47, **The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning.** [Genesis 47:9]. You see, he characterized his life and the life of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac, as sojourning; a journey, a pilgrimage. Now you might suggest that this was just because they had not yet conquered the promised land; it was a function of where they were in redemptive history. They were still in the time of promise, not in Canaan in the time of fulfillment, and that sounds good. Eventually, Joshua did conquer the promised land, and through many generations, the nation of Israel settled in the land. Eventually, they set up a king in the land, and you might say they were no longer sojourners, but citizens of the Promised Land.

And yet they themselves did not see it that way, oddly enough. David prays in Psalm 39, **Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers** [Psalm 39:12]. David, the King of Israel, saw his life in this world as a sojourn; he was a pilgrim. And he explains why he sees life like this earlier in the Psalm in verses four and five of Psalm 39. He says, **O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath! Selah.** *Selah* of course means to stop and think about this; pause and reflect. Our lives are a mere breath; they are temporary. "This world is a journey," David is saying, "it's going somewhere it won't last forever." In fact, the emphasis there, and the emphasis with Jacob, as well as the shortness of this journey. At the end of his life, David prayed similarly concerning Israel in 1 Chronicles Chapter 29, he said, **For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding** [1 Chronicles 29:15]. This life is a journey. It is temporary and it is heading somewhere. As for Abraham, so for us. As for David, so for us. As for Israel, so for us.

And part of the writer's point here in Hebrews Chapter 11 is that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Sarah, and also David and Israel and so on; they were all believing the same promises as us, and looking forward to the same fulfillment as us. Abraham was not looking for Canaan, pure and simple. David was not looking for Jerusalem, they were (verse 10), **looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.** Their faith is the same as ours. Their hope is the same as ours. Those who say that the Old Testament saints have kind of a different

expectation for us, they're actually contradicting the writer of Hebrews right here in Chapter 11. He teaches that they, and we, have the same hope, the same expectations, the same longing a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. It's not that they were looking for an earthly Jerusalem and we a heavenly one. No, we are both looking for the same city: the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Verse 16 tells us that God has prepared a city for them. And remember, Hebrews 11 is this exhortation to us to have faith, just as they did. Well, how can we do that? Because God has prepared that same city for us. Paul calls it "The Jerusalem above" in Galatians 4. Our writer calls it "The Heavenly Jerusalem" in Chapter 12. the Book of Revelation calls it the "New Jerusalem" in Chapters 3 and 21. All of God's people have always had this hope set before them, not of an earthly country, but of a better one, a heavenly one.

The writer mentions in verse 15 that **If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.** See, Abraham was a stranger, a sojourner a pilgrim; not because he had left Ur, but because he was headed toward the New Jerusalem. See, our temptation is always to settle; to think that what we have is good enough after all. Let me say, don't settle; this world is not your home; this life is not all there is; this present age is not the pinnacle of existence. Something better is coming. Keep your eyes on the better. Desire, the better. Too often, we settle for what we have here, and we actually claim that it's right, that it's good, that it's somehow Christian to be content. And there is a godly contentment, but there is an ungodly contentment. A contentment that says, "I'm happy with this life and not looking forward to the one to come." We should look forward and long for what is to come. We are pilgrims and strangers and aliens on the Earth. Look forward to the better. Long for it. Are you looking forward? Are your eyes there? is your hope on what is to come? Now, a good barometer of whether you are truly looking forward is your frustration with the present age. See, when we are looking there, when we are looking here, that is on the present age, we get frustrated with our circumstances; angry at people; disappointed with life. We begin to feel hopeless about the present because we are not hoping in the future. And so there's this tension: we're not content with the present age, and yet, we're not disappointed with it either because we're not looking for too much from it because we're looking for the age to come. Walk in hope and good things to come.

So stand on the promises and walk in faith. Move toward the promises. Walk in hope. Live your life as a journey headed toward the Promised Land. The promises are a foundation. We stand on them in a trajectory. We are headed somewhere. We want to keep that somewhere in view.

Third, wait for the promises; that the promise-driven Pilgrim walks in patience.

Now, Tom Petty said that "The waiting is the hardest part." I remember one time, Deborah was in the hospital, and she was in surgery and I was waiting. And it was the hardest part. I wanted the waiting to be over. But there was nothing I could do except wait. And as we said a moment ago, promises, by their nature as promises, are not fulfilled. Once they're fulfilled, they aren't promises anymore, they are reality. So the very word "promise" orients us toward the future; something is coming that isn't here now. And we said there were two sides to this, the first we already looked at: that our eyes are looking forward, looking toward the future. But looking toward the future also means waiting in the present. We are not home yet.

Verse 9 says Abraham lived in tents, though in verse 10, he was looking forward to the city with foundations, and notice the contrast, the instability and impermanence of this present life ("tents") versus the stability and permanence of the resurrection life to come, the new creation ("a city with foundations"). And so, to wait means not to demand, it means to accept the instability and impermanence of the present. Sometimes we demand good things now. We want life to go well for us now. We want ease and comfort and happiness now. And when we don't get it, we rage against the machine. We throw a temper tantrum, we pout or we get depressed and we give up. These are all signs that we are demanding the future now. But we must wait. God is faithful. He will do it. But He will do it in His timing, not in ours.

Not only then must we not demand, we must not manipulate. One of my favorite phrases in the Bible (which probably says something about me) are five words in verse 8. Verse 8 begins, **By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.** Now I don't know about you, but I like to know where I'm going. I like to know where I'm going. I like to know how I'm going to get there. And Abraham went out not knowing. Not only did he not know every step, he didn't even know the destination. This is part of the waiting: the not knowing. Not knowing how it's exactly how it's gonna all turn out. I mean, we have the promises of God, we know they're going to be fulfilled, but how are we going to get there? What's the journey going to be like? When is it going to arrive? Not knowing; the hardest part of waiting tends to be there's nothing we can do, nothing we can do to bring it about, nothing we can do to hurry it up. And if there is something that we can do, we stop waiting and we start doing. But if I don't know exactly how this is all going to play out, if I don't know exactly how I'm going to get there, I can't do. I can just wait. And so many of us refuse to wait, and so we begin to act. We try to make the present life into the future. We try to manipulate this age into the age to come. We try to manufacture God's promises in our own strength. You remember when Abraham and Sarah did that rather than wait for Isaac? Abraham slept with Hagar, Sarah's Handmaiden. He was

trying to help God along with the fulfillment of the promises rather than wait. But God's method is not "we give him a little help here and there because He needs it." No, God's method is we wait for Him to bring about what He has promised. And so, we walk in patience.

In the Christian life, have you ever heard someone say or maybe felt yourself, "If God has really promised, then why am I going through this? If God is really promised resurrection, why do I feel like life resembles death? If God is really promised reconciliation with Himself, why do I still feel so far from God? If God is really promised a new people, why is the church such a mess? If God is really promised freedom from sin, why do I still struggle so every single day?" And you see, the answer is not "God is unfaithful," "God has forgotten," "God promises have failed." The answer is one of timing.

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

God is faithful.

He will do it.

And I don't know if you've noticed in Scripture, but God has this thing for 11th hour saves. God waits until the last possible moment to swoop in and save the day. And part of that is otherwise we would A. miss how amazing He is, or B. we would attribute the save to our own ingenuity or strength. And so, God waits. He waits until all human hope is lost. He waits until there is no humanly possible solution, and then He shows up in power and might. And He does that really for our joy. He doesn't need our accolades. God is not some needy diva hoping we see how great He is so He can feel good about Himself. No, he knows our hearts can only be satisfied with His glory. He knows our joy can only be full in the greatness of our God, and so He puts that greatness on display for us. But we must wait for it. We wait for the promises, and we walk in patience, trusting our Father to bring about what He has promised in His timing and for His glory.

And so stand on the promises and walk in faith. Move toward the promises and walk in hope. Wait for the promises and walk in patience. And fourth, trust in the promises; the promise-driven Pilgrim walks in weakness.

Now this goes hand in hand with what we just said, but it's an important addition. So often, we seek to bring about the good life by means of and in our own strength. We use whatever powers we have at hand: our intellectual abilities, our financial weight,

our relational pool, our charismatic influence. We use our powers of manipulation to make this world work, to try to make the future present now.

But notice Sarah again in verse 11 who learned her lesson. Verse 11 says, **By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven.** Sarah and Abraham were beyond human hope; she's past the age of childbearing. She had gone through menopause. Genesis 18:11 says **Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.** There is no human hope of having a child at this point; it would take a miracle. Abraham, we are told, was as good as dead. As good as dead. How would you like someone saying that about you? "He's as good as dead." But again, God wants us to see the extent of His power, which is made perfect in our weakness. Why? Because God wants us to trust Him. He wants us to walk with Him. And think about it, what are your options? You can walk in your strength, which is really ultimately weakness, or you can walk in your weakness and know God strength. The promise-driven Pilgrim walks in weakness and so knows the power of God.

And we certainly see this in another miracle baby. Mary was not past the age of childbearing; she was on the other end of life and had not yet known a man. But again, God power was made perfect in human weakness, and Mary conceives and bears a son, Jesus. But we see this power even more in the Resurrection; the great 11th hour save. All hope is lost. The disciples give up and hide. Paul said that Jesus died in weakness. But God. God steps in. He raises Jesus from the dead. He brings life out of death. And just as God brought life out of Sarah dead womb and Abraham's "as good as dead" body, so God brought life out of the tomb Jesus' crucified and dead body. No human power, just the power of God, made perfect in weakness. See, God actually wants us to walk in power, just not our own. But to do that, we have to know our weakness and walk in our weakness that His power might be seen in us. And when we walk in our own strength like Abraham and Sarah with Hagar, we do not know God's power, and we tend to make a mess out of things. But when we recognize our limits, our weakness, our frailty, God power's is made perfect in the midst of that weakness. And so stand on the promise and walk in faith. Move toward the promises and walk in hope. Wait for the promises, walk in patience. And trust in the promises, walk in weaknesses.

Fifth and finally, walk in the promises; the promise-driven pilgrim walks in obedience.

This section of Hebrews 11 begins, **By faith Abraham obeyed.** And you see, while we stand and move forward and wait and trust, there is something for us to be doing. It is not manipulating and manufacturing, it is not stepping out in our own power and

strength. But we are called to obey; to believe the promises, and so obey. And notice how the promises actually engender and enable that obedience. You know, for Abraham, he left Ur, he left his homeland Ur of the Chaldeans, and he headed out, not knowing where he was going, but trusting God to lead him. Because he trusted the promises of God, he could leave the comforts of home and family. Those things were much more important in that day than they are in ours. You see, there was no police force and no retirement plan you could take with you from job to job. Your family was your security. Your homeland was your retirement plan. And to leave home and family was to leave everything. But Abraham took God at His word and went out, not knowing. Think about how God promises engender obedience there. He could go out because he trusted the promises of God.

And so, think about how God promises engender obedience for us. Why do we disobey? Normally, because we think there is something better found in disobedience than in obedience. "If I obey God, I'm going to miss out. If I if I obey God, I'm going to miss an opportunity. If I obey God, I'm not going to enjoy all that life has to offer me, so I disobey in order to experience all that this world has to offer. But if I trust Him, if I believe that the God Himself will satisfy every longing of my soul, if I believe that God will provide for all of my needs in His timing, if I believe that God will see me through this trial, this difficulty this challenge, to the other side, I can obey. I can do what God is calling me to do, even if it means leaving the safety and security of this life, because I know that God is going to care for me. He has promised and He will do it. God promises enable our obedience. And so, where is God calling you to obey in life right now? Why is that hard? What makes it difficult? Where is he calling you to step out in faith to obey Him, even when it means giving up something this world has to offer? Do you believe that God is sufficient; that He will provide; that He will satisfy? Then step out in faith and stand on the promises and walk in obedience, entrusting everything else to your Father.

What does it look like to be promise-driven Pilgrims? Stand on the promises and walk in faith. Move toward the promises, walking in hope. Wait for the promises, walking in patience Trust in the promises, walking in weakness. And walk in the promises by walking in obedience to your Father who is in heaven.

Let's pray. Our Father, we do pray that you would grant us faith. Grant us faith by the power of your Spirit. Grow our faith, increase our faith that we would look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, that we would see Him arisen and seated in heaven. That we would keep our eyes there as we journey through this life, longing for and waiting for the fulfillment of all of your promises when Christ returns. It's in Jesus' name that we pray Amen.