

## **Strangers and Exiles**

### **Hebrews 11:8-19**

Two weeks ago we began our fall series in Hebrews 11-12 and we're back to it today. This series is about How to Live by Faith in Troubling Times, and I think we need this because we're entering new territory. We are watching an increase of godlessness in our society and growing hostility toward Christians and I think the more these increase, the more pressure we're going to feel to shrink back from our faith and conform to the world around us to try to avoid suffering. So we need to learn to live by faith.

The pressure to give in and conform to the world is similar to what the early Christians faced in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Many of them came from a Jewish background and since their religious leaders rejected Jesus as Messiah, they were being persecuted on many levels. Many of them had to flee and settle in different places, including the people the book of Hebrews was written to. They had gone through a lot of suffering because of their faith and it still wasn't easy, and they were growing weary and feeling the pressure to cave in and go back to their old way of life.

The pressure we feel today isn't exactly the same, but I think it's pushing us in the same direction. We aren't tempted to go back to Judaism of course, but we are being pressured to keep our mouths shut about what we believe and to embrace the godless, immoral values and practices of our society. The religion of our age seems to be a mix of atheism, humanism, and paganism, which tosses God aside, along with absolute truth and a biblical standard of morality, and demands not only relativism and tolerance, but the approval of things like evolution, atheism, abortion, homosexuality, and transgenderism. And if we stand against those things and refuse to go that direction we will likely face increasing hostility.

So there's pressure – pressure to keep quiet, pressure to cave in, pressure to conform to the world around us. And the question is, are we going to give in to that pressure, or are we going to live by faith? The author of Hebrews is calling his readers to live by faith, to endure suffering and not shrink back, so we're going to learn from what he says.

I have a memorization challenge for us throughout this series, and that is to try to memorize Hebrews 10:32-39 because it calls us to not shrink back in troubling times but live by faith. Each week we're going to read or recite it together and we're going to use the ESV translation so that it's easy to do together.

Hebrews 10:32-39

*But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, <sup>33</sup> sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. <sup>34</sup> For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. <sup>35</sup> Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. <sup>36</sup> For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. <sup>37</sup> For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; <sup>38</sup> but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." <sup>39</sup> But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*

These verses describe what their faith looked like at the beginning and the author calls them to endure and not shrink back. That last verse is kind of a slogan for this series and I hope for our lives: *"We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls."*

Two weeks ago, we started to see what faith is. Faith is being confident of receiving the things God has promised in the future. It is being convinced that the unseen spiritual realities we believe in are real. It begins with understanding that God is the creator of all things and that he rewards those who seek him. Therefore, faith not only affects the way you think, but it changes how you live your life. We saw that Abel, Enoch, and Noah all had faith, and it changed how they lived, and they were commended by God for it.

This week we're going to look at the next example in Hebrews and it will help us understand what it means to live by faith even more. His example is going to confront us with a very difficult shift that many of us American Christians probably need to make in how we see our lives here on earth. And it's a shift that has to happen if we are going to live by faith, especially in troubling times.

Read Hebrews 11:8-12.

*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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. <sup>11</sup>By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup>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.*

Here we see a couple examples of what faith looked like in Abraham and Sarah's lives. The history of the Israelites begins with these two, and their story is found in Genesis 12-22. It begins with what the author of Hebrews mentions in verse 8 – Abraham received a call from God. I don't know what it looked or sounded like, but at some point when he was about 70 years old and living in Ur of the Chaldeans, which was near the Persian Gulf, and likely worshipping the false gods of his ancestors, he heard Yahweh – the one true God - calling him to leave his homeland, his extended family, and his whole life up to that point and travel to a place that God would eventually show him.

This calling is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3: *“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* So Abraham heard that call and the amazing promises that went with it, and he believed and obeyed, and that was faith.

That's the first example. The second is described in verse 9 and I hadn't seen this until this week. When Abraham finally got to Canaan, which took a few years and was a journey of about 1500 miles, the author points out that he lived there “as in a foreign land, living in tents.” So when he arrived in the land that God promised to give to him and his descendants forever, he lived the rest of his life, which was 100 years, as a foreigner (a stranger, exile) in tents, not permanent buildings.

That was unusual. At that time in history, if that's where he was going to settle, Abraham would have assumed he should build houses, barns, and cities for himself and for his children and grandchildren to live in – that's what most tribal leaders and kings did to claim an area for themselves and provide protection and a secure future for their descendants. So Abraham should have done that in Canaan. How else would he become a great nation and receive the promises God had given? But he never did – not for 100 years! God never led him to build homes and cities but had him live in tents.

And the author of Hebrews points out that Abraham's willingness to do that was because of his faith – he was trusting God and looking forward to something beyond this life. It says in verse 10 that he was looking forward to a heavenly city “a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” So, he was looking forward to the fulfillment of the eternal promises of God. He had the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen, and the understanding that God rewards those who seek him, and he lived by faith. Not perfectly – if you read his story you see he made a lot of mistakes, but he believed God and kept following him.

Along with Abraham is his wife Sarah, and when we think of Sarah, we probably don't think of her as an example of faith because we remember the story when she laughed at the angel's promise that she would become pregnant and bear a son. God had promised that she and Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore but she was old and beyond child-bearing years and didn't have any children. So she didn't believe God was going to carry out his promise by her becoming pregnant. But the author points out she did believe God was faithful and would somehow do it. And because of her faith, God did the impossible and gave her the power to conceive, and it was through her son Isaac that she and Abraham ended up having “descendants as many as the stars of heaven and innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

So Abraham and Sarah, along with the earlier examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah all lived by faith, and as the author of Hebrews continues, he points out something they all had in common.

Read Hebrews 11:13-16.

*<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. <sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> 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.*

There's a key phrase at the end of verse 13 that summarizes the main point of these verses and the key takeaway for us today and that is that all of these people of faith had acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. This was a critical component for them to be able to live by and endure in faith, especially when they faced troubling times. They didn't live like this world was their permanent home. They lived like exiles. They looked beyond this world and this life and were longing for another home.

The author acknowledges that they could have forsaken God's call and gone back to their former way of life. Abraham and Sarah could have gone back to Ur and their families and abandoned God's call. They probably would have been safer and more comfortable and lived in a beautiful house made of stone. But they didn't. They believed God and obeyed his calling. Even though they died before receiving the things God promised they continued to live by faith because they could see the fulfillment of those things in the future.

The author says in verse 16 that they desired a better country, a heavenly one. God had revealed to them that there was something more than this life, something greater than all the comforts and pleasures of this world that was waiting for them if they stayed the course and walked with him in obedience and faith. So they lived not as owners and citizens of earth, but as strangers and exiles. Heaven was their home and that's how they lived. That's why they obeyed and gave up earthly blessings, and therefore it says, "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city."

That's the kind of mindset we need. That's the difficult shift in thinking that needs to take place. And I'll talk more about that, but first I want to finish Abraham's example. Because Abraham had that kind of mindset, he was able

to walk by faith through the most troubling and difficult test of his life, and we see that in verses 17-19.

Read Hebrews 11:17-19.

*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, <sup>18</sup> of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." <sup>19</sup> He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

Abraham had such faith in God, that even when God called him to do the unthinkable and sacrifice his only son, who was probably his greatest earthly treasure, he was willing to obey and he was actually going through with it. It says that he trusted God so completely and the fulfillment of his promises, that if he killed his son, he knew God would raise him from the dead. God had promised that it would be through Isaac that he would fulfill his promises, and Moses believed him entirely.

Moses is a great example of what it means to live by faith because in his story we see clearly the mentality of living as a stranger and exile here on earth. I think the original readers needed to see that, and we do too. For them it hit close to home because the pressure they faced had pushed them out of their homes and communities and they were literally strangers and exiles in the place they lived. They wanted to go back home, but I think the author wanted them to see beyond that – that no matter where we're at in this world and in this life, we are strangers and exiles. We aren't home yet. Heaven is our home.

He reminded them in Hebrews 10:32-34: *"But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, <sup>33</sup> sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. <sup>34</sup> For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one."* Now the author is calling them to have that same kind of faith – a faith that looks forward to our eternal inheritance and home.

Do you have that kind of faith? I think it's hard for a lot of us American Christians to live lives where we truly long for and live for a home other than

this one because this one has generally been really, really good in a lot of ways. We have many earthly blessings and have been free to practice our faith. We've been able to enjoy the good things in this world and practice our faith without pressure. It's been wonderful – generally speaking.

But now we're beginning to enter a time where this world is becoming more difficult for us and we may have to decide if we're going to continue to live by faith and endure suffering or conform to the world to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. How are we going to endure and live by faith? Our passage for today opens our eyes to our critical need to learn to acknowledge that we are strangers and exiles here on earth and this world is not our home. Heaven is. As good as things may be here on earth, they aren't going to last. But heaven will. To live by faith you have to believe the promises of God about our future inheritance in heaven so we walk in obedience to God and live like strangers and exiles here on earth.

I think this requires some thoughtful reflection from us – more than we can do right now. I just want to get the ball rolling, but I encourage you to spend time thinking about these things and discussing them in your small group.

- What does this mean for your lifestyle?
- What does it mean for how you spend your time? How you spend your money?
- Should we be living for earthly accomplishments, possessions, bigger homes, hobbies, vacations, retirement? How much is enough for exiles on earth? Abraham became extremely wealthy, but what was different about him?

The study guide this week has different passages of Scripture to read and reflect on. I encourage you to do that and ask the Lord if any changes need to be made.