

Sermon Therfield Chapel

23rd July 2006 AM

This passage is about faith

It's a record of people who triumphed in life in spite of problems and difficult circumstances – because they trusted God

It's a very relevant passage to anyone living as a Christian today – especially those who are going through difficult times

Life is not easy – anyone who thinks it is hasn't lived very long or has been very fortunate

Some people treat life as a big joke – never take anything seriously – it's a way of handling life

Such people may distract us along the way but they can't help us in the end – they only have a temporary coping mechanism

We need answers of substance and depth – answers that inspire us and give us hope and help us endure to the end

This passage is very helpful in this respect

The first thing to note here is the context of the passage – why was it written

Why is the writer discussing faith and giving examples of people who exercised faith?

The reason is that the people he was writing to were experiencing difficulties

It is a letter written to Christians who were in danger of giving up

Some had shrunk back from their earlier allegiance to Christ

Many of them had experienced fierce persecution, many had had their homes plundered, some had been cast into prison and others faced ridicule in public

We know from history that worse was to come

It seems that many were in danger of compromise or even of giving up on Christianity altogether

Now we may not be experiencing the same things as these Christians were – we are unlikely be put in jail or thrown to the lions because of our allegiance to Christ

But we may be experiencing other trials

If we live long enough we will probably all face difficulties of one kind or another:

- We or someone we love may end up with some debilitating or fatal disease
- Our marriage may go through hard times
- We may have a child who is the most precious thing in the world to us who gets sick and suffers before our eyes
- We may be crushed by some besetting sin that we cannot seem to conquer
- We may get chronic fatigue and run on 20 percent of our usual energy 90 percent of the time
- Our children may disappoint us – perhaps they reject their childhood faith and move in with their girlfriend or boyfriend
- We get fired at 45 and have no prospect of finding another job – on the scrapheap in our mid-forties

These things are the lot of humanity – we may as well face it

What do we do when they happen? Are we tempted to give up like some of the Hebrews were or do we find a way through in spite of our difficulties?

Do we handle them differently to other people around us because we are Christians?

Do we consider the fact that the difficulties themselves may have a purpose - one that may not be obvious to us now but may be one day?

In several places in his letter, the writer to the Hebrews warns his readers of the dangers of giving up – he explains to them the serious consequences of retreating back into Judaism

But here in this passage he changes tack and encourages them by providing them with examples of God's people, who like them, experienced difficulties, and yet overcame and triumphed in spite of them

So this section is about encouragement – the writer was spurring his readers to go on

So this chapter is all about faith – about people who exercised faith and triumphed despite their circumstances

So I want to begin with a few thoughts about faith and then move on to think about Abraham who is described as an example of one of lived by faith

Chapter 11 begins with a definition of faith:

1 “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for.”

JB Phillips puts it:

“Now faith means putting our full confidence in the things we hope for; it means being certain of what we cannot see”

Now if the world of matter is all there is – the physical world – what we see with our eyes - life would be very cruel.

The strong and powerful so often get what they want at the expense of the weak and poor

Loved ones can be taken from us at any time and for seemingly no reason and we would never see them again

We can be the victims of crime and the perpetrators get clean away with it

There can be so much seemingly pointless pain and suffering

The world can be so unfair

No wonder people say things like, “life’s a bitch and then you die”

Or as Thomas Fuller wrote: “We are born crying, live complaining and die disappointed”

Or “It’s a good thing that we are born crying, so we can get used to what we’ll spend most of our life doing”

For all our achievements and pleasures, we can’t change the fact that we get old and frail - “We born dribbling and we die dribbling”

And for these Hebrews, life was becoming pretty difficult

For them it was tempting to follow the line of least resistance, to give on all this Christian stuff and blend back into the society around them – like chameleons

But the writer wants them to see that the physical world around them is not all there is – there is an unseen world whose existence and reality changes the rules of this world totally

In other words, the realities of the unseen world, reverse how we will finally judge *this* world

There is an unseen world and its existence completely changes the criteria for how we judge success and failure; right and wrong; winners and losers

For example, so often we judge success in this world by a person's wealth; but there will come a time when our wealth will be worthless and even a hindrance to what really matters: One day an eternal kingdom will be established and our wealth will not help us one jot to get us into it

Our society judges countries by their GNP per capita and by the size of their armies

We judge people by how many degrees they have or how beautiful or sexy they are or the brands that they wear, or the size of their house or the make of car that they drive

By in the end these things will count for nothing: it is the priorities of the unseen world that count

The true measure of things is the standards of the Kingdom of God – the coming of that kingdom will bring to nothing the values of our fallen world and impose a new and radically different value system

And that means that giving loyalty to the values and priorities of the world around us is not only pointless but it is stupid – we'd end up on the losing side

We had better learn now before it's too late

So the author here is exhorting the Christians to live by faith – by the unseen world and not by sight

Faith is bring sure of things hope for;

It is the proving of things not seen.

And if you are being persecuted by an evil regime you need to be encouraged by the Christian hope

What is the Christian hope? What do we expect to happen in the coming age?

- The ultimate victory of truth and good in the world
- The judgment of evildoers and the establishing of righteousness in all the earth
- Compensation for all the travail and sorrow and pain of today
- A world with no more pain, tears or heartache or bereavement
- The building of the City of God with a new value system where the first will be last and the last first; where there will be no injustice or deceit or bribery or exploitation

These are the things we should sigh for; things we should long for – especially if we are suffering

Faith is being sure of these things – being persuaded that they are true so that we live differently - it is judging the world and what matters with a different eye to those around us

Faith, we are told is also the proving of things not seen

What are the things not seen?

- The reality of God on His throne – He is more powerful than any other forces that would seek to have the final say over our lives and eternal destiny
He will bring about the things we have talked of – this new order – this new value system – this new radically different kingdom
- And even now God working is behind the scenes causing all thing together for our good

Faith is proving by our lives the reality of these things

Faith is the proving of God's faithfulness and care even though we do not see Him with our physical eyes

It is as of the writer challenges his readers, not only to give intellectual assent to God's faithfulness, but to prove it on a daily basis

Faith lays hold of God's promises and lives by them

True faith produces action

So what keeps us going in life? What is our driving force? Our motivation to carry on?

What keeps us going on those difficult days when all seems dark and bleak?

When life doesn't work out as we would like it to?

Is it temporary pleasures such as watching a favourite TV programme or buying a tub of Hagen Dazes or going to Spain for a holiday? Or by the thought that the good days outweigh the bad?

As Christians we are called to keep going by faith – to motivated by faith - to prove by the way we live that that God is faithful.

Faith is believing God

Faith is living by revelation – by God's revealed truth

Faith is trusting in the promises of God when sight (feelings and circumstances) scream at us that there is no hope, no purpose, no meaning, no goal to work towards, no hope of justice and peace

Faith looks at the words and promises of God and believes them

Faith believe that He is on our side; that He really cares for us and loves us; that He is for us

We are called to live by this principle

This is revolutionary living

Now the author of the letter then turns to examples of OT men and women who were people of faith to demonstrate the true nature of faith

The Book of Hebrews was written for Christians who had been converted from a Jewish heritage and would be familiar with Old Testament characters

Often we don't get inspiration from ideas and words but by looking at people who inspire us – people we can aspire to be like - heroes

So he looks at people who were motivated by faith

People who demonstrated their faith by their actions – people who we sure of what they hoped for and proved by their lives the reality of what they could not see

These were people who didn't only agree with God's words but acted upon them

They were people who didn't live for the passing moment but realised that there was more to life than the immediate and temporary scene

Last week Paul looked at various OT figures – Abel; Enoch and Noah (verses 2 – 7)

We now come onto the life of Abraham – another example of a man who lived by faith

We will consider two aspects to his life

(1) Abraham left Ur at the command of God

Here Abraham showed his faith by obeying God

In verses 8-10 we read

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. 9By

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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Here we have an account of Abraham being told by God to leave his home city (called Ur of the Chaldeans) and go to a land that God would show to him

He was told that the land was for him and his descendents to inherit

So he left friends and family and probably his business – Ur was a highly sophisticated society with lots of culture and creature comforts

And he set off and lived in tents – he became a stranger, a pilgrim: with no map, no programme – he just went out believing that God would be with him

God’s command may have seemed absurd – but it didn’t daunt him – he went

Interestingly he had no idea where he was going – God didn’t seem to tell him until he arrived that he was in the right place

All we know is that, as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, he looked for a city whose architect and builder was God

We are told in the NT that Ur was a place of idol worship – that was its foundation – the worship of false Gods

The city that Abraham looked forward was to be founded on different principles – godliness, righteousness, the worship of the living God

His faith led him on an adventure – it was an act of obedience

He trusted that God knew what was best even though it wasn’t an easy option

And when he arrived in the Land, there was no sign saying WELCOME ABRAHAM, YOU’VE ARRIVED AT THE LAND OF PROMISE.

There was no welcoming committee, no bands playing, no choir

What told him he’s arrived? – the voice of God – and that was enough for him

He stayed there for 100 years – living in tents

He was heir of the promise to possess the land

But after 100 years how much of the land did he own?

A small field with a cave where he buried his wife Sarah

He lived in tents in a land owned by others

He never saw the city – but he believed God, and never went back to Ur not matter how difficult things were

The call from God and the vision that came with it kept him

So Abraham is held up as a man who reveals the essence of faith because he took God at his word and obeyed Him when there was nothing tangible to rely on

Faith enabled Abraham to endure even to the end, certain that God would eventually work his purposes out even if he didn't see it in his lifetime

But he knew that someday his actions and obedience would bring about the realisation of the purposes of God for his descendents (even though for years he didn't have any!)

He also knew that he couldn't possess the land on his own – he wasn't powerful enough - but he knew that in time God would cause it to happen

And it did happen – but the promises of God were not fulfilled for hundreds of years

And through his obedience, the Saviour of the world, Jesus was able to come through his descendents

True faith is obedient to God

(2) Abraham believed that God would provide him with a son

Here again we see Abraham demonstrating his faith by patiently believing that God would keep his word

If you know the story of Abraham and Sarah, you will know that they longed for a son and heir

In that culture (as in many today) being childless was a major embarrassment.

God had promised Abraham that through his descendents he would bless the whole world and that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of the sky and grains of sand on the seashore

But Sarah couldn't have children

And the years went by and nothing seemed to happen

At one point Abraham's faith wavered and he took his servant Hagar and she gave birth to Ishmael – Abraham hoped to engineer a solution

But God was having none of it

The seed would come through his wife Sarah

So Abraham and Sarah just had to take God at his word and believe that His promise would be fulfilled

The text here tells us, Verse 11: “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him [God] faithful who had made the promise. 12 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.”

Abraham and Sarah had to wait decades for the promise to be fulfilled – but it was

They had a son – Isaac

So again Abraham is held up as an example of one who took God at his word and clung onto His promises even when it seemed impossible that they would be fulfilled

But what happened?

God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son to God

To slay him as an offering to God

The one in whom all of his hopes were vested!!

And what did Abraham do?

He obeyed God and prepared to offer his only son to God

The writer to the Hebrews tells us in verse 19

“Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”

So Abraham was so confident that God could raise Isaac from the dead that he was willing to kill him in obedience to God's command

Abraham knew that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens – so he believed that God must have a plan

Obedying and trusting God was the priority

At the last moment a voice sounded from heaven saying,

“Do not lay a hand on the boy...Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son”

So Isaac lives

But the key issue here is that Abraham had such confidence in God that he believed that He could raise him up from the dead

So how did Abraham’s faith triumph?

It triumphed because he refused to see inconsistency or faithlessness in God

He believed that God could and must resolve the problem

So faith turned a way of darkness into a pathway of hope

Application: what can we learn from this great man Abraham?

Like Abraham we are called to live by a different drum beat to the world around him

Again like Abraham, we are called to obey God, believing that He is for us and has a plan for us that is more important than our own preferences and fancies

Often we find ourselves in circumstances that are not of our choosing

There is a temptation to try to wriggle out of these circumstances: to long for what we think is the greener grass in the next field

Often when difficulties come along we think that our lives are turning into disaster zones – all we hoped for and wished for in life is coming to nothing

But like Abraham, we have to learn that God’s control over the world is such that it is often through very mysterious and unexpected ways that God works out his purposes

We would expect that God’s purposes in our lives and our usefulness would be maximised by:

- Straightforward circumstances
- Simple relationships
- A hassle free life

- Things going according to plan and order

Surely these things would give us time to cultivate our Christian spirituality?

But often, it's not like that at all

God takes up the difficulties, the pain, the struggles and uses them to achieve his purposes

Nobody and no circumstances can thwart him

That's why Paul said that being in jail turned out for the furthering of the gospel

It's why Joseph could say to his brothers after they'd treated him so badly, "you intended to harm me, but God meant it for good"

When things seem most wrong they may be most right

There is lots going on that we don't understand – God takes up the seeming mess and chaos of our lives and makes something beautiful

When we know God and his faithfulness to us, we can trust him even through the dark nights and difficult days – he knows what he is doing

Faith sees things other people cannot see and trusts God

Heb 11:8-22

1Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. 2This is what the ancients were commended for.

3By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. 4By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.

5By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

7By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

8By 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. 9By 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. 10For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he^[a] considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12And 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.

13All 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. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16Instead, they were longing 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.

17By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring^[b] will be reckoned."^[c] 19Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

20By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

21By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

22By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.