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Sermon Notes

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The Faith of Abraham: A Stranger in a Foreign Country

Hebrews 11:8-10

Living as a resident alien in Japan... American passport... missing my homeland

Alien sights, alien sounds, alien smells... especially alien foods

Walking down the street in Tokushima and having little kids stop in their tracks to stare at me: they would point their fingers and shout “Gaijin da!!” (“There’s a foreigner!!”)

Having well-meaning Japanese friends constantly complimenting all my efforts at speaking the Japanese language... all it ever did was remind me that I would never be able to speak Japanese like they did

Terrified when the phone rang at the prospect of talking Japanese to whomever was on the other end of the line

Constantly knowing that I was not in my native land...

It makes today’s themes overwhelming... for the Bible tells us that we are all ALIENS AND STRANGERS here on earth... that our citizenship is in heaven and that we are just passing through

Abraham was the first person called on to live like this by faith... and his walk of faith is the focus of our study today

I. The Origin of Abraham’s Faith: The Sovereign Call of God

A. The Significance of this Man Abraham

1. The Author has already shown the essential unity of all of God’s people throughout all of history
 - a. Abel was justified by faith
 - b. Enoch was justified by faith
 - c. Noah was justified by faith

2. BUT with the Call of Abraham, we have the beginning of a whole new era of Redemptive History
3. The New Testament presents to Gentile believers in Christ a simple but stunning assertion:

Galatians 3:7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

4. Abraham is given to us as a pattern of faith... we are called on to walk in his footsteps!!

Romans 4:11-12 So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

5. Of special note for Hebrew Christians: Jewish Christians will universally esteem this man Abraham... he is the quintessential father of the Jewish nation
 - a. For this reason, his life of faith in the promise is of special value for these Jewish Christians
 - b. He will be the prime exhibit to them of their need for faith in this world, despite all the trials and sufferings they are going through

B. The Origin (Genesis) of His Faith

1. Abraham is going to be the focus of this chapter from verse 8-19
2. In all those verses, we are going to probe very deeply the essential nature of Abraham's walk of faith... we are going to see very clearly marked for us the "footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had while he was still uncircumcised
3. But here, at verse 8, we begin with the origin—the Genesis—of Abraham's faith
4. No baby is born with faith... faith must ENTER the soul at certain time as a gift of God
5. Abraham also lived as a pagan, a Gentile, an unbeliever until a decisive moment came into his life

C. The Call of God

1. The call stated

Genesis 12:1-3 *The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. ² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

2. The difficulties of timing

- a. It is difficult to harmonize the various accounts of when this call came
- b. In Genesis 12, it seems to come after he has settled in Haran with his father Terah (Genesis 11:31-32 have Terah and Abram living in Haran in Mesopotamia)
- c. BUT Stephen in Acts 7 had a slightly different account

Acts 7:2-4 *The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ³ 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' ⁴ "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.*

- d. I think the best way to harmonize them is to say the original call came in Ur of the Chaldees, but Abram got sidetracked by his pagan father and settled in Haran; the call then came renewed in Haran after Terah died

3. The component parts: a command and a promise
4. The command: *Leave your country, your people, your father's household and go to the land I will show you*
5. The promise: *I will make you into a great nation...*
6. Stephen adds a divine APPEARANCE... God in some way "appeared" to Abraham in the call... perhaps with some display of His glory
7. This was perhaps Abraham's first encounter with Christ

John 8:56 *Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."*

D. The Immediate Difficulties: Pagan Heritage, Earthly Comforts

1. A moment ago, I said Abraham was a PAGAN... a GENTILE... an UNBELIEVER
 - a. How can I substantiate that?
 - b. Key verses: Joshua 24:2 and Romans 4:

- i) Joshua 24 says Abraham lived as a pagan idol-worshiper with his father Terah in Haran

Joshua 24:2-3 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac.

- ii) Romans 4 says Abraham was justified by faith while still UNCIRCUMCISED... and circumcision came much later

Romans 4:9-11 We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

- c. Thus we see the IMMENSE spiritual difficulties God had to overcome in Abraham's heart

2. The Command: Leave everything of comfort!!!

- a. Leave your family... your father's household... leave all your people behind
- b. Leave your country... your home area... leave the life you have known, the physical comforts that bring you pleasure
- c. Leave your comfortable home, your own culture, your language... leave the life you have known your whole life
- d. Follow me

3. "Go to the Land I will show you... " no certain future; nothing visible... just a life of walking by faith in the God who has appeared to him

E. God is a Jealous God: Total Renunciation Required

1. Later: the Ten Commandments will make this plain

Exodus 20:2-3 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me."

2. God reveals Himself to Moses as a "jealous God"

Exodus 20:5 I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God

Exodus 34:14 Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

3. He will brook no rivals in our hearts
4. He delights in severing ties to created things... cutting us loose from it
5. The first step of a life of faith: SELF-RENUNCIATION... deny yourself, deny what makes you comfortable, what brings you pleasure

Matthew 16:24-25 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

6. The only way this is possible is if the glory of God comes and floods our hearts and makes us realize God is INDEED greater, more desirable than any earthly treasure

Acts 7:2-3 The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ³ 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

7. This is the beginning of faith: clear revelation to the heart of the greatness of God, followed by God's jealous command to leave everything for Him

Marriage vows for a bride: "Forsaking all others, to keep yourself only for him!"

F. The Sovereign Call of God: Creating What It Commands

1. Look how powerful is the call of God... it CREATES what it CALLS!!!
2. Here we see the sovereign power of God in the call of Abraham... when He calls to Abraham's heart to leave, God also creates within Abraham's heart the necessary faith to obey that command
3. Abraham was a pagan idol worshiper when the call first came; but God created faith inside Abraham's heart and compelled him to obey this otherwise outlandish command
4. It is the sovereign call of God alone that makes believers distinct, different from unbelievers

G. The Church of Christ: Also Crafted by the Sovereign Call of God

1. We Christians were also CALLED by God out of darkness into the marvelous light of His Son, Jesus Christ
2. God called us by the gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit

3. So the Apostle Paul speaks clearly and often about this call

***Romans 1:6-7 And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.
⁷ To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints***

Romans 8:29-30 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 4:17 the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

H. God is Better Than Anything You Leave Behind

1. The centerpiece here: God revealed Himself to Abraham as a glorious God, infinitely better than anything he could possibly leave behind
2. God, by revealing Himself in the call, makes Himself the object of our lifetime of faith... of seeking Him above all else
3. He becomes the treasure hidden in the field; He becomes the perfect pearl worth selling everything you have to obtain

II. The Effects of Abraham's Faith: Surprising, Costly, Lasting Obedience

A. Initial Obedience: Abraham Obeyed and Went

Hebrews 11:8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went

B. Genuine Faith Always Produces Obedience

1. Simply put... God is a King; the essence of our sin is rebellion against His Kingly authority, His right to command us
2. Jesus commands us in His gospel appeal

Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

3. Jesus' command is simple: SUBMIT to my Kingly rule and you will be content and peaceful at last!!
4. Therefore, genuine faith ALWAYS produces a lifestyle of obedience

Romans 1:5 Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

Romans 16:26 so that all nations might believe and obey him

5. James makes this link very clear

James 2:26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds (i.e. obedience) is dead

C. Surprising Obedience: All Natural Affections Subdued

1. Abraham's obedience to God would have been shocking to his relatives, friends, and neighbors
2. A lifestyle of true faith, resulting in radical obedience, always looks bizarre to unbelievers
3. Abraham had to subdue his natural affections—for family, friends, material comforts, earthly security—in order to obey this initial command: ***“Leave your country, your father's household, your people, and go to the land I will show you”***
4. It is also surprising obedience in that so much is unknown when he sets out for the Promised Land... and that is unlike the way we usually are; we usually want everything spelled out in advance
5. But here was our father in faith, Abraham, stepping out in surprising obedience, costly obedience

D. Costly Obedience

1. One pattern of the faith-filled life is that God demands costly sacrifices
2. This is the first step for Abraham in which very valuable things are being asked to be laid on the altar for the glory of God
3. This pattern will only be consummated in Abraham's life when God commands him to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved

E. Lasting Obedience

1. The life of faith is not a once-in-a-while thing; God wants people who will step forward boldly and never look back
2. Abraham cut his ties with Ur of the Chaldees and with the life in Haran: he would NEVER go back there again

3. He wouldn't even let his son Isaac go there to find a wife for himself
4. Furthermore, God was going to be leading Abraham step by step, day after day, for the rest of his life; he would require full obedience in Abraham as the natural outflow of faith for the rest of his life
5. So Jesus makes a similar call in the gospel:

Luke 9:62 "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

III. The Challenge of Abraham's Faith: Obstacles

A. God is Glorified by Faith Overcoming Obstacles

1. God delights in making it, in one sense, as difficult as possible!!
2. He loves to give a man or woman the gift of faith, and then testing that faith to the uttermost
3. He desires to EXERCISE our faith for His own glory
4. And so Abraham's life of faith was met with obstacles from the very beginning and all the way through

B. First Obstacle: "I Don't Know Where I Am Going!"

1. Two great issues in Hebrews 11 about the life of faith... first, God withholds a lot of the information, and commands us to trust Him fully in spite of Him not revealing what is to come
2. Secondly, God withholds the promise so that we don't receive it in this lifetime...

Hebrews 11:13 All 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.

3. So, it's "TRUST ME, even though you don't know where we are going!" and "TRUST ME, even though you won't get it in this world!"
4. The first obstacle, then, to Abraham's faith was included in the original command: ***"Go to the land I will show you."***
5. God wants to test our faith, and see if we are willing to follow Him in some senses blindly... walking by the light of His character, rather than by some roadmap He gives of exactly where we are going

6. So it is for us today: God unfolds His purposes for us gradually, not telling up anything that He is intending to do to us, for us, or with us
7. Imagine Abraham packing up whatever of his belongings that he wasn't selling, and getting ready to leave; family members and friends and neighbors are deeply troubled by his actions and ask "Where are you going?" And Abraham has to answer, "I have no idea, but God wants me to go and I will follow Him!"

C. Second Obstacle: "The Promised Land is Already Owned by Others!"

1. Once Abraham arrived in Palestine, he would soon find out that the land he would receive as an inheritance was already inhabited by other people!! They liked living there and were not showing any signs of leaving
2. The Canaanites and Perizites and Amorites and all the others were in possession of the land... and God was promising that land to Abraham and his descendents
3. Throughout his life, Abraham would have to say "If you don't mind" or "would you be willing" or "if it's not too much trouble"
4. Even when his beloved wife Sarah died, he would have to dicker with the Hittites for the small cave of Machpelah in order to bury her in the Promised Land... the land that was to be his own inheritance
5. Bottom line: God owns the world and can give it to whomever He wills
6. Everyone is just a squatter and a tenant farmer, a renter, if they are not sons and daughters of God
7. In the end, Abraham was given a far more exalted title... not merely heir of the Promised Land but "Heir of the world"

Romans 4:13 It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

8. So also we are heirs of the world with Abraham

Matthew 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

9. Every hard encounter he had with the inhabitants of the land, the war he had to fight to rescue his nephew Lot, etc. all of those persecutions and trials he endured as a faith-filled stranger in the Promised Land... these he endured because there were still inhabitants in the Land

D. Third Obstacle: "My Body is as Good as Dead, and So is Sarah's Womb!"

Hebrews 11:12 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.

1. Abraham was told that through his offspring, all peoples on earth would be blessed
2. But Abraham looked at his body and realized that it was as good as dead
3. He also considered the womb of his barren and elderly wife and saw that it was similarly as good as dead
4. This was a seemingly insurmountable obstacle... decades of marriage had not produced a single child
5. Romans 4 tells us how he handled this obstacle:

Romans 4:19-21 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead-- since he was about a hundred years old-- and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

IV. The Display of Abraham's Faith: Living Like an Alien

Hebrews 11:9-10 By 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.

A. Living Like an Alien

1. The text says that Abraham "sojourned" in the Promised Land... living as an alien and a stranger in the land God had sworn on oath to give him
2. The Greek word is the same as that used by the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus with the mysterious stranger who seemed to know nothing of what had happened with Jesus of Nazareth:

Luke 24:18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

3. This is a mentality essential to the life of faith: this world is NOT MY HOME...

1 Peter 2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

Hebrews 11:13 All 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.

4. Paul says that by the cross of Christ, the world has become dead to him, and he to the world

Galatians 6:14 May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

5. By faith he lived as an alien and a stranger in the Promised Land

B. Living in Tents

1. Being FULLY AWARE of the impermanence of this world is a prominent feature of a life of faith
2. For Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, living in tents was a visible symbol of this faith
3. Tents are movable, no foundation, no protection from attacks (like a walled city)
4. Living in tents is a powerful testimony to the transitory nature of life... like we are moving through a beautiful hallway to the ballroom where the dance is to be held; the hallway may be lovely, but it's NOT THE POINT

C. Knowing Its Yours... But Not Yet

1. As Abraham looked around Palestine, as he walked over the hills and drank water from the rivers, as he looked at the sky and breathed in the air, as he looked at the sun setting over the sea beyond the mountains, he saw its beauty and knew that God had made it and had promised it to him and his seed... but NOT YET
2. All he had was WORDS... the promises of God
3. So it is with us... all of our inheritance is just words right now... promises of God

D. The Life of Faith Put on Display

1. Living in tents = not putting down deep roots in this world... knowing that you're just passing through
2. This became acutely vivid to him when Sarah died and he had to bargain like a camel-trader to buy a cave, Machpelah, from the Hittites who "owned it" at that time

3. The account is laid out for us in Genesis 23, and it seems strange to devote so much time to the haggling over the price and the trouble Abraham had in securing the smallest portion of the Promised Land for something so intensely emotional as a burial place for his beloved wife, Sarah
4. It was stinging, overpowering proof that he was merely an alien and a stranger now in this world, though he was the heir of that land

V. The Outlook of Abraham's Faith: Looking Forward to a Permanent City

Hebrews 11:9-10 *By 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.*

A. The Logical Connection: "For..."

1. Key to understand this is the connection between verse 9 and 10... FOR
2. Because of his faith in the promise he considered this present world of LITTLE RELATIVE WORTH
3. He knew he was going to get something INFINITELY BETTER in the next world
4. Same logic as 10:34

Hebrews 10:34 *You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had a better and lasting possession.*

B. Faith's Outlook: "Looking Forward..."

1. Faith is essentially forward-looking
2. For us, the promises of God are all pointing AHEAD TO THE FUTURE... and the future is infinitely bright and appealing
3. Christians are more than just OPTIMISTIC... we are HOPE-FILLED
4. The present is just a prologue to eternal and infinitely better rewards
5. Romans 8 makes this very plain

Romans 8:24-25 *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

6. Abraham was “LOOKING FORWARD”, so he could put up with living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob... all of them considered themselves merely aliens and strangers even in the Promised Land
7. But... what were they looking forward to???

C. The Focus: “A City with Foundations”

1. The future world is portrayed as BOTH a CITY and a COUNTRY

Hebrews 11:14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.

Hebrews 11:16 they were longing for a better country-- a heavenly one.

2. The Country gives a sense of a whole world... the New Earth... with wide open spaces, like the “New World” was in the 16th century... a vast continent to be explored and settled and developed
3. This verse refers to the CITY WITH FOUNDATIONS... the heavenly city
4. This is an extremely exciting concept... a CITY... the CITY of the LIVING GOD
5. For me as a person raised in the suburbs, who loves the mountains and the outdoors, who loves nature and rivers and trees and National Parks like Acadia in Maine and Yellowstone and Yosemite, and the spectacular Northern California coastline, I have a hard time getting excited about spending eternity in a CITY
6. Revelation calls this city the “New Jerusalem” and describes it for two chapters in Revelation 21-22
 - a. It is like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband
 - b. It shines with the radiance and glory of God; no light of sun, moon, or lamp needed there
 - c. It has a great high wall with twelve gates and twelve foundations
 - d. The foundations are made of gloriously brilliant precious stones
 - e. The gates are each an immense pearl... a single pearl for each gate; the gates always stand open so that the wealth of the nations can constantly flow into it
 - f. The city is immense... a vast cube in size... approximately 1400 miles on a side and 1400 miles high

g. The throne of God is in the center of the city; the river of the water of life flows clear as crystal down the center; and the tree of life is on either side of the river

h. The servants of God will see His glorious face and serve Him continually

D. God: The “Architect and Builder” of the City

1. Architect = the one who makes the plans... thinks through the details of how the city will be laid out and beautified; what building materials will be used
2. “Builder” = the one who executes the plans made... who fulfills them with precision and makes them come to pass
3. All of this is ascribed to God
4. Of course, Jesus Christ executed the plans of God by dying on the cross; he also said

John 14:2 “I go to prepare a place for you.”

5. So also the Holy Spirit is building the city living stone by living stone through the advance of the gospel throughout the world

Ephesians 2:21-22 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

1 Peter 2:5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house

E. Theme Restated in vss. 13-16

Hebrews 11:13-16 All 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. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, 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.

1. Living for BOTH a CITY and a COUNTRY
2. This is nothing less than the “New Jerusalem” AND “New Heavens and New Earth”

VI. Application: Living in the 21st Century for the City that is to Come

1. At the center of a life of faith is knowing that this world is not all that there is
2. The same city with foundations waits for us
3. This world may seem so alive and permanent, but by faith we know it isn't
4. We don't live in tents like Abraham did... so that only makes it harder
5. Tell yourself daily, "Heaven is my home, earth is only temporary... I am an alien and a stranger here!"
6. Focus your heart entirely on Jesus Christ and His Gospel

John 14:1-6 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

7. Paul gives some startling advice:

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

8. Peter also calls us aliens and strangers... and urges us toward HOLINESS

1 Peter 2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.