

Faith in Exile

[Announce Text] Please keep your Bibles open to Hebrews 11:8-22 (pp. 1007-8).

[Scripture Introduction] My name is Brett Sweet and I'm one of the pastors here. We're in a series on the book of Hebrews- which was written to Christians who weren't quite sure they wanted to continue to be Christians.

[Prayer for Illumination] Please pray with me...

[Illustration] Wouldn't it be great if you could just travel? Then in your travels you meet another traveler. His clothes are dirty, his shoes worn out. His wallet empty. And you start sharing your travel plans and he asks some questions: "So you go to the mountains? What do you do there?" "Well we just, kind of look at them." "You go to the ocean- so you can catch fish and eat them right?" "No, we just like to lay in the sand." And it gets a bit uncomfortable so you ask him about his travels. "Well, he says, I'm mostly looking for food and a safe place to stay. I don't go to the city because I'm bored- I go there because there's more food in the garbage cans there. But what I'd really like to do is go home. But I can't. I was part of a different regime and when the new leader came in, I was told to leave or be killed- so I'm here by permission of your government as an exile."

The original audience of Hebrews, and many of us came to Jesus thinking that Jesus would be the friendly receptionist at a travel agency. "Hi! I've been waiting for you! It's my birthday, so I made a bunch of cupcakes for people like you- would you like one? I've got the travel plans of your life ordered up: First stop is good health then you'll head on to a model spouse and layover with your dream career with a side trip of obedient kids. But that will be short, you'll have an extended stay of wealthy retirement in your dream home- with lots of travel until you have a peaceful and painless death and arrive in Heaven. Thank you for choosing JC Travel Agency and remember your referrals are our greatest compliment"

But reality has set in for the Hebrews and many of us in the Christian life. But we've been sold travel agent Christianity. Destination Christianity. So just like we take a dose of ibuprofen for the back pain and a dose of Tylenol for the headache, we take a dose of fake before we come to church. Because travel agent Jesus says we should be having a good time- and we better look like it. But the Hebrews and

us are now looking in the mirror and we realize that we're the ones with worn-out shoes of suffering and our wallets seem to be full of loneliness, sickness, and disappointment and we realize we're not the leisure traveler, we're the exiles. So we change our thinking and ask what do we need to live as exiles?

[Proposition] We need faith while we live as exiles.

But what's interesting is that in Hebrews 11 we're shown that from the earliest days, God's people have never lived luxury travel Christianity. So in the true story of Abraham, the forefather of the faith, we see an exile who lived a life of faith. He foreshadowed Jesus Himself who said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And we're called to follow Jesus and live like Abraham. And from Abraham's life, summarized in Hebrews 11:8-22 we see three big characteristics of the faith exiles like us need: faith that believes God's promises, faith that seeks an eternal homeland, and faith that faces death with hope. Faith that believes God's promises, faith that seeks an eternal homeland, and faith that faces death with hope.

[Main Point 1] Exiles like us need faith to believe God's promises.

Faith believes in something or someone. The faith that father Abraham had was faith in the God who would come and fulfill the promises made to him through Jesus Christ. What does believing God's promises look like?

[Subpoint 1] Faith believes God by obeying when we're sent.

Look down at vv. 8-10

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 to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Highlights of Abraham's life are told in Genesis chapters 12-25. Abraham was called by God to leave his family and homeland and he was sent somewhere that he didn't even know. And he obeyed. This would be the equivalent of leaving your family, your bank account, your house, your support network and just supplanting somewhere else. People probably said that he was crazy. And do you think he

wanted to give his children a difficult life? No, he was like you with your children. But sometimes making our kids' lives easier isn't obeying God. But Abraham had a faith that obeyed God. He went where he was sent. So he and his offspring lived in tents as exiles on this earth.

The faith that exiles like us need is one that believes God and obeys when we're sent. But Abraham's life also shows

[Subpoint 2] Faith believes God will work supernaturally.

Look down at vv. 11-12

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.

Even though both he and Sarah were very old- they would be the oldest couple in here- when they became first-time parents to Isaac. For it to happen, God had to work supernaturally. Genesis tells us that it was physiologically impossible for Sarah to carry children and Abraham himself was so old that, as far as reproducing children is concerned he "had been put to death" as the phrase "as good as dead" could mean. Yet they had faith. Faith that God could overcome physiological barriers. Faith that God is not limited by nature. Faith that believed God can and would work supernaturally. They were exiles with a faith that believed God's promises.

[Application] Abraham was sent by God and that meant living in tents as an exile. As Jeff mentioned in Sunday school a couple weeks ago, God is a sending God. If you are a Christian you are sent. Some of you are feeling a strong sense that you are sent to the Valley plant in a several months. Some of you are feeling that God has sent you to this location. Be convinced that you've been sent to your neighborhood, this city, your workplace. Are you obeying God or are you disobeying? The faith we need as exiles believes God's promises. If you feel no sense that God has sent you on a mission, seek Him to provide direction. Ask counsel of trustworthy, godly, people around you. Then make obedient decisions that bank on God's promises, even if some people in your life think that they make no sense.

We need faith while we live as exiles to believe God's promises. That's the faith of our forefather Abraham the exile. But let's also notice from him that

[Main Point 2] Exiles like us need faith to seek our eternal home.

If you are an exile, then by definition, you are not in your home. But faith does not mean you mope and sulk, it means you continue to seek your home even when you know it's found in the age to come. Verses 13-16 is a pause in the commentary on Abraham. The author is talking not only about Abraham and Sarah but every great saint throughout history. We've always been seeking our true home by faith. And this

[Subpoint 1] Faith looks forward to heaven.

Read vv. 13-14 with me

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.

This applies to every exile, but it is especially embodied by Abraham. The man had a land promised to him but it was like God was teasing him. Like it was a bait and switch. God brought Abraham to the land of Canaan and told him that the land would be his, but he'd have to be a squatter. He'd have to live in tents. He couldn't build a home. Verse 13 says that they greeted it, or welcomed the promises from afar. They didn't get to give them a hug. They didn't get to look the fulfillment of these promises in the eye and shake their hands. All they were able to do was stand in front of their tents give the promises a wave of welcome while they looked like tiny specks on the horizon. And all this as exiles to the way to the grave. If we're to be like these, we need a faith that looks forward to Heaven which means that we need a

[Subpoint 2] Faith that doesn't look back toward earth.

Read vv. 15-16 with me

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.

Abraham and Sarah gave up everything to follow the call of obedient faith in God. Their farmland, their family, their relationships. There were times when Abraham, twice, nearly gave his own wife Sarah as a wife or sex-slave to kings- do you think then that they wished they would have stayed home? Do you think they sometimes wished they could go back when there was fighting between Lot's shepherds and Abraham's shepherds- or between Sarah and Hagar? Yet they didn't care about land on earth. They looked forward to Heaven, not backward to earth.

[Illustration] When I was a schoolteacher in rural Stevens County there were a family of students in my school who were siblings. They had previously gone to Lewis and Clark High School. Their dad had taken just the sort of risk most of us commend- he started a business. He started a courier business with what little money they had and he was shuttling documents and parcels around Spokane. And like most businesses things were really tight at first. Then, the one main essential to the business- the van- broke down. So they skipped paying a few bills so that they could get it running. But it was unreliable and the last thing a business wants is a courier who's unreliable. So they kept losing money and pretty soon they came home to a house where the water and power had been shut off and the landlord had an eviction notice on the door.

So that's how they ended up in my school. They told the younger kids that they were going "camping." As a family of eight they went and lived in tents in the woods. Blazing heat in the summer months and cold nights in the fall until a social worker was able to place them in a house that could hold them. They were exiles in their own country.

[Application] That is what every Christian should feel like on a regular basis. Are you focused on buying or building a new house? Starting a new business? Saving for a comfortable lifestyle or retirement? None of these things are sins in themselves but they can lead us to think that this world is our home. Instead of living like exiles on earth. Christian Rapper Shai Linne is right when he is critiquing false teachers- "If you're living your best life now you're headed for Hell." But, those, like Abraham, who continue living the life of faith look forward to Heaven,

not backward to earth. The Hebrews who received this letter were starting to look backward, maybe even going backward, but the author is telling us that their father Abraham the exile didn't do that. Does this make sense to you? Or does this seem like madness? Are you living, like Abraham, a life of faith looking to the eternal or are you living exactly like the people around you who only really care about more money, more stuff, more comfort? I've heard it summarized this way: being a Christian isn't about choosing Heaven over Hell- anyone will do that. The Christian, the exile, chooses Heaven over earth. So if you feel like you'd love to just live in basically the same setting you're in now, but with just a bit more health or wealth then you may not be a Christian. You certainly aren't living with the faith that we need as exiles.

Now a few minutes of controversy. Many Christians here are rightly concerned of the pressures coming from the political left- especially embodied in a growing attachment to socialism that will likely have disastrous consequences if implemented. But be sure that, even as you have concerns, that you do not wholly endorse the political right without qualifications. This passage about being strangers and exiles means that if you are a Christian. If Jesus really has a hold on you. Then you are a stranger and an exile yourself. So you better have at least some care in your heart for the stranger- think immigrant. And exile- think homeless. These are complex issues without simple solutions. But are you seeking, somehow, in some way to love them- especially in the context of the local church? Do you recognize that you are far more like these groups than you are different from them? Also, some of us buy wholesale a foreign policy built around a specific plot of land in the middle east. Again, very complicated issues. But, frankly, Abraham didn't ultimately care about that in comparison to Heaven. The country he truly desired was a better one. A heavenly one. So let's let conscience be our guide and pray for wisdom- but let's be sure that our thinking is directed by the Bible- not a political party- whether on the political left or right. And let's grow in the faith we need.

Remember that the faith exiles like us need means believing God's promises and seeking our eternal home. Now let's also see that

[Main Point 3] Exiles like us need faith to face death with hope.

Our time as exiles on this earth will come to an end. But then what. What does faith look like in light of death?

[Subpoint 1] Faith believes God raises the dead.

Look down at vv. 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, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham was told by God that all the promises made to him in becoming a great nation with countless offspring would come through Isaac. So when God called for him to offer his own son Isaac as a sacrifice he was willing to do so. Abraham told his servants that both he and Isaac would both come back to them. And as he was ready to plunge the knife into his son on an altar- he still believed that God could give life to Isaac somehow- even if Isaac died. Wonderfully, the Lord intervened and stopped the death of Isaac and provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. But our father Abraham the exile still had faith that God could his son from the dead.

Do you have the faith of an exile today? Do you believe that Jesus, the Lamb of God died as your substitute and was raised from the dead- not just figuratively but literally? And that He will raise you from the dead? By turning from your sins and becoming an heir of Abraham you get the promise of life from the dead that’s only found in Jesus. The faith that we need can face death with hope because it believes God raises the dead. It can also face death because

[Subpoint 2] Faith knows that God’s purposes can’t be stopped by our deaths.

Look down at Abraham’s descendants in vv. 20-22

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

I can often fear what’s going to happen to my children if I were to die very soon. But the faith I need believes that God’s purposes continue and don’t depend on

me. These three patriarchs, the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Abraham- Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all lived lives of exiles. They didn't have easy lives. They lived in uncertain times in uncertain lands. But when the footsteps of death came creaking down the hallway outside the flaps of their tent or their bedroom doors they looked to the future in their offspring and God's promises. They knew that their own deaths wouldn't stop God from accomplishing His purposes. They had faith. It was by faith that they did this.

But how? Okay, I get it. We're exiles. I get it, the Hebrews needed faith and we need faith. I get it, faith is the means God uses to preserve us to the end. But what kept these exiles going? They knew God.

[Illustration] Many people who hate camping are willing to live in a camper or a tent in the right situation. One of those situations is when they are having a new house built. I've seen this many times over the years. They can endure the close quarters, the stink of body odor, the lack of a decent kitchen or bathroom knowing that it's temporary. Such people have reliable builders who, once the foundation has been laid on their new home, knew that their homelessness was temporary and that a permanent home awaited them.

[Application] We need faith while we live as exiles. We need faith, like Abraham to believe God's promises and to seek our eternal home and to face death with hope. But in order to do this we need to recognize our eternal home is being built. Here's how these saints kept going by faith- they looked to the God they knew.

How did Abraham live for decades in tents? Why didn't he want a home that could be built by himself or some other human?

v. 10- *For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

God is building a city that has foundations. Christian, you can live in exile. You can live in tents. You have a city that is being built by God Himself. And it's not going anywhere- it has foundation that cannot be moved.

And here is the amazing thing. When you live this way. When you are willing to embrace life as an exile in hope for the city that God is preparing. Something remarkable happens. You gain courage. Immigrants who come to another country often try to do everything they can to fit in in the new culture. To not stand out.

So they knock the hard edges off their lives they hide them away in shame. And we can tend to do that as Christians now can't we? I hope these people don't find out I'm a Christian. I don't want to offend my neighbor by talking about Jesus. I don't want to be baptized in public- people will know. So we hide away in shame. But when we reject the false identities sin has given us and embrace our true identity as heirs of Abraham. When his life starts to make sense. When we really embrace life as exiles something extraordinary happens-

Look at the end of v. 16

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

God is not ashamed of his exiles. He's not ashamed of you, Christian. Let's stop being ashamed of Him. He's building a city. He has a place for you. You can be bold. You can carry your cross publicly even when the people around you think that your life makes no sense. God's not ashamed of you. You might be ashamed of you. Your parents or kids might be ashamed of you. Your boss, spouse, co-workers might be ashamed of you. But God is not ashamed to be called your God. Because you're willing to live like an out of place exile in this world. Because you have faith in His Son.

Let's close by listening to Jesus' comforting words to exiles like us. To people who don't fit in, who feel out of place. People with worn-out shoes and dirty clothes and no sense of home. They are found in John 14:1-3- where He says this so that our faith will be strengthened-

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."