

Final Prayer

Lord God of all glory, open up our hearts to all the possibilities of faith, both within this life and beyond it. Help us to trust you for the past, the present and the future, so that we are at peace with You, and do not lack any good thing You would do either through us, in us of for us. We praise You, Lord God: AMEN

Prayer

Thank You, merciful Lord, for truth of Your forgiveness and saving grace that sustains us each day. May we both receive this gift from You and also practice it by forgiving those who have offended us. May we put love into practice in our own lives, and demonstrate the Gospel truth of salvation applied to real life. To Your praise and glory, Lord Jesus, we pray: AMEN.

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Education

Pray for the schools near where you live and work. If you know any pupils or teachers there, then pray God's blessing on them and their work, throughout the day.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for Morocco, where people died in a crush at a music event*
- *Give thanks for your liberty; pray that freedom in this world will grow*
- *Pray for Burma, and the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi*

Meditation

Shadows pass us by, almost unnoticed;
The suffering of the victim of a rape, unspoken,
The bullied child or office worker, petrified,
The sick, whose pain is always there, constant.

But the shadow leaves its moment's mark;
If it stirs up true compassion in a stony heart,
If it switches on a light within a stubborn mind,
If it shames a rigid man or woman into bending.

Then, when the shadow moves, it has not gone;
For Christ has stirred the passions of a soul,
For human hearts have felt the Spirit's breeze,
For God has made His mark on consciousness

And something of the pain of those who suffer
Will never be the same if someone notices, and,
If for just one moment, the shadow of the Cross
Reminds one human soul to stop, and help another.

Bible Study - Hebrews 11:8-16

⁸ *By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place he would later receive as his inheritance; he set out not knowing where he was going.* ⁹ *By faith, he lived as a nomad in the land he had been promised, as if in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise.* ¹⁰ *He was looking forward to the city whose architect and builder is God.* ¹¹ *By faith, Sarah who was barren, received the ability to conceive even though she was past the age of childbearing; since she considered the one who had made the promise to be reliable.* ¹² *Therefore to*

one man, and he as good as dead, were born descendants 'as many as the stars of the heavens and as the countless grains of sand on the seashore.'

¹³ *All of these died in faith without receiving what was promised, but having seen them and greeted them from a distance, and having accepted that they were like strangers and foreigners on earth.* ¹⁴ *People who speak like this are demonstrably seeking a homeland.* ¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come, they would have had opportunity to return.* ¹⁶ *However, they were looking for a better homeland, that is, a heavenly one. So God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has certainly prepared a city for them.*

Review

Abraham was one of the most important figures in the book of Genesis because he had the faith to respond to God's call to leave his home and travel to Canaan (Gen 12:1f.). As all Jews and Christians have known from the earliest days of their faith, Abraham was the man God chose to be the forefather of Israel, and the reason God was able to work with him was because of his faith. Hebrews 11 lists the important figures of the Old Testament, explains the nature of their faith and holds them up as examples for us, with Abraham as the next great character after Abel, Enoch and Noah (11:4-7). Hebrews is the second letter of the New Testament to describe the importance of Abraham's faith, the first being Romans (chapter 4), and both explain that Abraham's faith was an essential foundation stone for God's work of salvation.

Hebrews spends more time explaining Abraham's faith than that of anyone else in chapter 11, and we can learn much from a careful look at this. Firstly, Abraham's initial faith was blind faith. He set out 'not knowing where he was going' (11:8). God gave him a promise that if he was obedient, he would be personally blessed with many descendants (Gen 12:2), be a blessing to others (Gen 12:3), and receive a land in which his descendants would live (Gen 13:14-18). These three great promises are intertwined, but little is made here of the promise of being a blessing to others; nevertheless, the story of the other two, especially how God gave Abraham descendants, give us powerful examples of faith.

In the middle of our reading (11:11,12), the writer explains something about the faith that accompanied the first of these promises, but it was not merely the faith of Abraham, it was shared with his wife Sarah. The story of how these two elderly people were able to conceive a child in their old age is one of the better known and most beautiful stories of the Old Testament. There is a great deal of confusion about verse 11, because the Greek is unclear about who is being described, whether Abraham or Sarah, and I compare my version with the NIV below:

By faith, Sarah who was barren, received the ability to conceive even though she was past the age of childbearing; since she considered the one who had made the promise to be reliable. (as above)

By faith Abraham, even though he was past age--and Sarah herself was barren--was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. (NIV)

The issues of translation are complex, but in the end, it does not matter which one is described, because the two were man and wife, and one before God. The sentence about faith is 'she/he considered the one who had made the promise to be reliable' (11:11), which tells us that true faith accepts God as completely trustworthy. This may sound simple, but faced with Abraham and Sarah's old age, many of us would be cautious about trusting in God for children! We might stand back and say 'if it be Your will ...' because we are frankly

uncertain! The faith of Abraham and Sarah blindly accepted that God had told them the impossible would be done, and after some initial hilarity at the thought (Gen 17:17; 18:12), they trusted that God would do what He said. They remain an inspiration to us.

The main feature of Abraham's faith, according to this passage, is his acceptance of the promise of land. Abraham never saw this promise fulfilled in his own lifetime, and had to leave this to future generations (11:9,13). He lived a life that was less than ideal, but he and Sarah passed on to their children God's covenant promise that they would one day have a homeland. Only a special kind of faith looks beyond one's own life for fulfilment, and this is the essential component of faith taught to us by Abraham and Sarah.

Many people today cry out to God for answers to their prayers for healing, for example, to take place now. They feel instinctively that God will answer us now if we pray appropriately. However, as much as we believe that God does indeed heal now, the complete healing of many Christians may well come in heaven, and the renewal for which they long may only come when the Lord returns in glory. However, none of us should give up on faith just because it is not always rewarded in the present. Indeed, the anticipation of a glorious future in Christ can often be sufficient healing, renewal and hope in itself. There is a great deal more to be found in this passage, and even more if we read through the whole story of Abraham in Genesis (chapters 12 to 22).

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How would you feel if the Lord asked you to leave everything you possessed and seek a new life under His direction?
2. To what extent do Christians look forward to a future when God's promises are fulfilled, or expect them now? What is the difference?
3. How does this passage of Scripture assist the faith of present day Christians?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Faith is trusting God, because we have a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. It is therefore like trusting someone you know to be faithful to their promises. Faith is therefore something that grows with time and something that needs to be nurtured. Too often, we presume our faith will hold in all circumstances, but when difficulties come, we realise too late that we have not fostered it, and it is not as strong as we thought, perhaps unable to support us at times of trial. We can best nurture our faith by talking about it, by praying to the Lord and by seeking to put it into practice.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Reflect on this passage and what this teaches you about faith. It is too easy to put our feelings about faith onto others, but not accept that they apply to ourselves. However, the Lord does not want us to be pointing the finger at others or ourselves, but rather, just living by the faith that He gives. If you feel you lack something, then ask Him to help you.*
- *Pray for a renewal of faith amongst God's people that will see a great transformation amongst them, and lift up hearts.*