

The Triumph of Faith

We live in an age of instant gratification. 'Why wait?' is advertising's powerful slogan. There's no need to save up for anything – you can even buy a car with £1 deposit! Everything has to be NOW! But what happens when what you value in the here and now is passed and gone?

I had a conversation with an elderly gentleman in Bournemouth some years ago, and he felt that all his joys were over. His life was all in the past and there was nothing left in it now or to look forward to. Then I met a group of residents in the Pilgrim Home in Chippenham, and it was so different. They had a sense of joy and hope. The man in Bournemouth and the people in Chippenham represented two different groups. The difference was the one had no hope beyond what he had in his hand, and those were photographs of the past. The heart of Hebrews 11 is verse 13: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.' (AV). This is not just a passing comment, but a statement of triumph. These pilgrims broke the tape running. They did not just have good beginnings, did not just

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have moments of great faith but they continued in faith until the moment they died. It is the supreme triumph of faith in a human life. **The privilege of being involved with elderly believers is being close to those who are breaking the tape running.**

It means living with uncertainty

Genesis 12:1 says that, after being called by God, Abraham went out without knowing where he was going. The command was clear, but the destination wasn't. A lot of our security comes from knowing where we are going, although the truth is that we know much less than we think. We can't be sure that our plans will turn out the way we want, or even whether we'll be alive tomorrow.

How did Abraham cope with blatant uncertainty? Abraham's confidence came from what the Lord had told him (Genesis 12, 1-3) – the heart of faith is not *what* you are sure of, but *Who* you are sure of. We can say, 'I don't know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future.' I don't know how long I'll live, but I know that 'all the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be,' Psalm 139:16. Living with faith in Jesus is not living without uncertainties, but living *always* with Him whatever the uncertainties.

It means living with Insecurity

Now you might have thought that once Abraham got to the Promised Land all would be plain sailing – that he would enter into a glorious life of plenty and delight. It would have made a great book like that! Leaving Ur would all have been worthwhile because in Canaan he would be secure. Far from it. Genesis 12, verses 9-10 speak of a life of permanent insecurity. 'He made his home in the land of promise,' sounds great, but 'like a stranger in a foreign county?' The verb 'made his home' (in the AV 'sojourned'] means to 'live as a stranger'. Another translation is 'visitor'. – Abraham said: 'I am an alien and a stranger among you.' (Gen 23:4). 1 Peter 2:11 describes Christians as 'aliens and strangers in the world,' so we are, actually, rather like him! Let's make this absolutely clear: he left, as God told him 'your country, your people and your father's household,' (Gen 12:1): left Ur of the Chaldees, one of the centres of civilisation in the ancient world, with its famous library and schools; he left his house to live as a nomad in a land owned by others. Acts 7:4 says, 'God gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground.' Only when he was 137 years old, after living in Canaan for 62 years, he bought a cave in which he buried Sarah. It was 685 years after Abraham left Ur before any of his descendants made Canaan their own. Until the day that Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land all that Abraham and

his descendants had to show for the promise of God in regard to the land was a cave full of bones. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had a promise – they had God's Word. Abraham was looking forward to the future, it says in Hebrews 11:10, 'he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.' Abraham was perpetually looking beyond today. He was not investing his hopes in Canaan, in his retirement cottage, his pension plan, and his endless world cruise. You can have all those but they don't have foundations, they can't last. All you will be left with is the photographs. Nothing here will last: 'the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.' (2 Peter 3). All the fine houses and all the great cities will disappear. Abraham was living not for now, but for what was to come. *Are you?* The security of Christians is that we have the promise of God of glory ahead, besides which everything else is peanuts.

It means living with Impossibility

God promised from the beginning to make Abraham into a great nation. (Gen 12:2). For 25 years, as time rolled by, Sarah and Abraham were childless. Gen 12:1 says Abraham was 'past age', about 100 years old, and Sarah, at 90, was barren. How do you live with impossibility? Hebrews 11:11 says – they 'considered him faithful who had made the promise. Or, as Romans 4 puts it, he was 'fully

persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised.' Our situation too, can look impossible. We lay our loved ones in the grave, and say 'dust to dust, ashes to ashes.' How can these live again? How can the body be reconstituted? It is impossible. But God has promised: (John 5) 'The dead in Christ will rise first. After that we who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord'. 1 Thess 4:16-17 'The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed.' 1 Cor 15:52. 'I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed yet in my flesh I will see God. I myself will see Him with my own eyes' Job 19:25 Impossible! But God has promised and God is faithful.

It means living with God

In the case of the men and women of faith, their biographies are only a preface. So although we have reached the death of Abraham, his story is not over. Two important verbs are used in the final sentence of Hebrews 11:16 and they speak volumes. The first is in the present tense: 'God is not ashamed to be called their God'. He is referred to as 'The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob'. It speaks of the present, it is not an historical comment. Remember what Jesus said: 'About the dead rising, have you not heard how God said to Moses I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob? He is not

the God of the dead, but of the living.' There is a present tense written over their names. Just as Moses and Elijah were with Jesus, very much alive on the Mount of Transfiguration, so are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not dead but alive: because faith is not in vain. Then there is a verb in the past tense – 'He has prepared a city for them.' There is a move towards the final city, described in Revelation 21. Not just for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but for all who share their faith, from every language and nation. And Hebrews uses the past tense. The past tense is sometimes used of future events that are so certain that they can be spoken of as accomplished facts.

Rom 8:30: '**Those God predestined, He also called, those He called, He also justified, those He justified, He also glorified**'.

The best is not in the past: the best is yet to be.

So sure, so certain, it is past tense. That is the final, unending chapter for all saints of God, for all people of faith. The best is not in the past: the best is yet to be. It is encouragement and a challenge. 'For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory' 2 Corinthians 4:17 It is a challenge that whether we face uncertainty, insecurity, or apparent impossibility we have a God we can trust. May we break the tape running!

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