

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ
SERMON: **God's Hall of Faith: The Gallery of the Patriarchs**
SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 11:8-22
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
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I have always loved to visit the great museums of the world. I once spent an entire week just going from one museum to another in Europe. It's probably because I have always loved history, and it's in museums that history has been preserved for posterity.

Most museums are arranged by galleries. If it's an art museum there may be a Gallery of the great Italian Renaissance painters, a Gallery for the Dutch Masters, a Gallery for the Impressionists, and a Gallery for Modern Art.

If it's an historical museum, like the Cairo Museum, it will have a Gallery for the Old Kingdom, a Gallery for the Middle Kingdom, a Gallery for the New Kingdom, and a special Gallery for King Tut, not because he was the most important of the Pharaohs—quite the opposite—but because his tomb was discovered intact and therefore there is a large amount of artifacts to display.

In a sense Hebrews 11 is a museum of faith, or perhaps better, a Hall of Faith, which the believer is invited to explore. There are a number of galleries, starting with the Gallery of the Ancients which Josh introduced us to last week, exploring the faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah. Today we enter the next Gallery, which I would call The Gallery of the Patriarchs.

Traditionally the patriarchal period of Israel's history is viewed as the 300-400 years between the call of Abraham and the bondage of Israel in Egypt. Then there were another 400 years of captivity before the Exodus. The four great patriarchs were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We don't know their exact dates, but almost certainly they were alive, respectively, in 2100 B.C., 2000, 1900 and 1800. The lives of these men and their families consume the book of Genesis from chapter 11 through chapter 50, so there is a great deal of information we can appeal to as we wander through this gallery beyond the specific details offered by the writer to Hebrews.

Oddly, however, we discover as we study Genesis that lack of faith is almost as prominent as the presence of faith in the lives of two of these men, Isaac and Jacob. Even Abraham himself was remarkably faithless at times, as when he twice claimed his wife was his sister for fear that the Egyptian Pharaoh and King Abimelech, respectively, would kill him and add her to their harems.

Why does God single out these men display in His Hall of Faith? Apparently God has a measuring stick for people of faith that doesn't include perfection and doesn't measure their lives by the same yardstick we would use.

Our Scripture text today, Hebrews 11:8-22, was quoted a few moments ago:

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

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. 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.

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. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 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.

By 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, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.

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

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

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

Abraham is given more attention than anyone else in the entire Hall of Faith.

Abraham is the preeminent person of faith in all of Scripture.

He was justified by faith (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-3) When the Apostle Paul wanted to establish the doctrine of justification by faith as the premier theological truth in his *magnum opus*, the book of Romans, he used Abraham as the paradigm example. In Romans 4 we read,

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter (as to whether a person is justified by faith or works.)? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? (Gen. 15:6) 'Abraham believed God (i.e. he had faith in God), and it was credited to him as righteousness.'"

Paul's point seems to be that if it were possible for any person ever to be justified by works, then Abraham of all people would have found a right standing with God, because he exhibited so many great works of obedience. But in fact it was his faith in God, not his works, that was credited to his account as righteousness. And Paul goes on to prove his point by showing that God declared Abraham justified (i.e. declared him to be a saved man) in Genesis 15 even before

some of his greatest act of obedience (Genesis 22).

The author of Hebrews, however, is not so much concerned with Abraham's justification by faith (i.e. with when he became a saved man) as he is with his perseverance in the faith.

He also lived by faith. (11:8-19) As you are well aware by now (if you have been with us throughout this study of Hebrews), the theme of the book is perseverance in faith. Too often we evangelicals think of saving faith as a single act of receiving Jesus. We call it our "conversion." But saving faith is more than that—it is a life of faith. Saving faith receives Jesus in order to go on trusting Him. The last verse of chapter 10 is the transition point into the Hall of Faith: "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." Friends, the evidence of saving faith *is* its perseverance.

Our author pinpoints four major events in Abraham's life which he views as hallmarks of persevering faith. They cover the gamut of his life, from the point where we are first introduced to him at age 75 until he is well over 100 years old.

1. Abraham demonstrated faith when he left home blindly. (8) Perhaps you remember the story. Abraham was born as Abram, the son of Terah, in Ur of the Chaldees (probably present-day Iran). He married his wife Sarah there, but they had no children. For a reason not revealed to us, Terah decided to move his extended family to Canaan, but he only got as far as Haran (probably northern Iraq today) and settled there, and that's where Terah eventually died.

Then one day, according to Genesis 12:1, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'" God made some great promises to Abram, and the next thing we read (verse 4) is, "So Abram left, as the Lord had told him." He was 75 years old.

I said that "Abraham demonstrated faith when he left home blindly," but I don't entirely like the term "blindly," for to some it calls to mind "a blind leap in the dark," and that is definitely not what faith is. Trusting God is never a leap in the dark but always a move toward the light. But the term "blindly" is useful in another sense, in that God called upon Abraham to leave his home and go to a land which God would show him, but not in advance. In that sense Abraham trusted blindly, i.e. without seeing where he was going.

If you don't think Abraham's action took courage and faith, just think back to the last time you made a move, if ever, from one part of the country to another. I doubt if any of us packed up our family and headed to Wichita simply on the basis of a still small voice that said, "Move." Chances are we had a contract for employment, we knew what the school system was like, and we had made one or two house-hunting trips to make sure this was the right place. Not Abraham. God said, "Go," so he went.

You know something? Being willing to give up the security and comfort of the life we have always known is never easy. In fact, it is one of the greatest obstacles for some people to come to

faith in Christ in the first place. And it is also one of the greatest obstacles to faithful living once we are “in Christ.” The pleasures of the old life are well-known and very visible, while the blessings of the Christian life are not always obvious in advance. Many take the view that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and they are unwilling to risk the seen for the unseen. But Abraham turned his back on his homeland, friends, culture, and security, and he went in the direction God told him to go.

2. Abraham demonstrated faith when he sojourned in the Promised Land. (9-10)

“By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents.” If you've ever been to France you have undoubtedly enjoyed the history, the beautiful countryside, and the great cathedrals, castles, and museums, but I am almost certain you never felt at home. The French have very subtle ways to let Americans know that they are strangers in their country. Abraham was always a sojourner, never a permanent resident in Canaan—not because the people of Canaan tried to make him feel that way but because he chose that as his lifestyle. Notice, too, that Abraham lived in tents. A tent is easily taken down and transported, and it automatically speaks of the temporary and the transient.

I'm fascinated by the strange juxtaposition of terms found in verse 9: “he made his home . . . like a stranger.” But isn't that how God calls us to live in this world? We are to be in it but not of it. We are to work, rear our families, impact our culture, pray for the city, etc. Yet I believe God wants us to always feel like we don't quite belong here. Paul says in Philippians 3:20: “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” And Peters adds in 1 Peter 2:11, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul.”

Abraham could be satisfied to live like a sojourner because “he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” A tent doesn't have foundations, but a permanent home does. Abraham wasn't opposed to permanence; he was just convinced he would never find it in this life. So he put his focus on heavenly real estate. His faith was in the eternal, not the temporal, in the spiritual not the physical. More about that a little later.

3. Abraham (and Sarah?) demonstrated faith when they believed God for an heir.

(11-12) God promised Abraham and his wife they would have a child, but they were long past their child-bearing days. In your outline I have placed Sarah's name in parenthesis and with a question mark, for the KJV, the NASB and the ESV all speak of Sarah's faith in verse 11, but the NIV speaks of Abraham's. I think it might be well to put two versions next to one another. ESV: *“By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.”* NIV: *“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.”*

It is a matter of considerable dispute as to which reading is correct and whose faith is being addressed in this passage. The problem is that the pronouns translated “she” in one version and “he” in the other are ambiguous.

I'm inclined to the NIV translation for several reasons. (1) Since Abraham is the subject of verse 10 and 12, it is most natural to see him as the subject in verse 11 also. (2) Furthermore, the Greek verb translated "to conceive," (ESV) really means "to deposit seed," referring more naturally to the father's part in the generative process, not the mother's. (3) Still further, as you may know, the book of Genesis doesn't present Sarah as a woman of faith at all but says she was so disbelieving that she laughed out loud in scorn of the promise God had made.

However, none of these arguments is conclusive, and if Sarah's faith is being highlighted, it would be because her laughter eventually turned to joy and she, too, trusted God, at least to some extent. Remember, our faith is often imperfect, yet God thankfully counts even imperfect faith as righteousness.

Verse 12 describes Abraham as "as good as dead." God isn't speaking about his general health here, for though 100 years old, Abraham still had 80 years to go. God was speaking of his reproductive ability. And even if by some stretch of the imagination one might acknowledge the bare possibility of Abraham becoming a father at his age, there was no human possibility of 90-year-old Sarah bearing a child. Yet God was faithful to His promises, and the result was they had a son named Isaac, and a great nation with innumerable descendants came from this couple. By faith Abraham was able to become a father, that is by faith in a faithful God.

(Parenthesis explaining the faith the patriarchs). (13-16) Abraham is not mentioned in this paragraph, but the author will return to Abraham in verse 17. Because he introduces the paragraph with the words "All these people were still living by faith when they died," I am assuming this is a parenthesis describing or explaining the faith of the patriarchs as a whole. Let's read beginning in verse 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. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 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."

In 1974 Jan and I moved from Kansas City to Hollywood, FL when I accepted a teaching position at Miami Christian College. We loved the weather and the job, but that's about all. Being Midwesterners all our lives, we had a very difficult time adjusting to the lack of seasons and sand and crime and traffic. And of course, our families were all back in Kansas. We definitely felt like strangers in southeast Florida. Unlike the patriarchs, we thought *a lot* about the country we had left, and when this church called us back to the Midwest after just a year we took the opportunity to return.

The patriarchs, on the other hand, didn't mope around or live in the past. They knew God had sent them from the country they had left, and since the place they were now, Canaan, wasn't

ready for them, they decided to focus their attention on the next place God was preparing for them—heaven—called here “a better country.”

Heaven is so far into the future for most of us (or at least we think so) that I suspect few of us think much about it. The elderly do some, but most of us are so busy and so focused on survival in this world that we really don't long for heaven. Randy Alcorn's book entitled simply “Heaven” is a great read for anyone who recognizes a deficiency in their perspective regarding the future. He is so thorough and so biblical in his description that heaven becomes almost tangible.

Look at the end of verse 16: “God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” You know what that implies to me? There are some people about whom God *is* ashamed to be called their God—perhaps those who are so wrapped up in the things of this world that they have little concern for what He has prepared for them. That's certainly a sobering thought!

Following this parenthesis the author offers us a fourth demonstration of Abraham's faith; in fact, the greatest one:

4. Abraham's greatest demonstration of faith was when he offered up his son Isaac as a burnt offering. (17-19) You know the pathos-filled story, how God said to Abraham, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” God has received more bad press from this one story than perhaps any other in the Bible. Nor do I profess to understand it entirely. I had enough trouble just releasing my sons to go off to college—I can't even imagine what God is asking Abraham to do here.

And God Himself seems to make it worse when He calls Isaac “your only son,” and “the one you love.” Furthermore, this is the very same son of whom God earlier had promised, “It is through Isaac that your offspring shall be reckoned.” To obey God in this must have felt like the end of a dream.

Apply this to your life. Does obedience sometimes seem like the end of a dream for you? Is it possible you hear God telling you to stay married (though you're miserable) or stay single (though you desperately want to be married), to stay in a job you hate or leave one you love, to refuse to compromise your standards, to become a missionary? You've considered every human angle of the situation and it seems impossible that it could turn out well for you. Well, then you know what it was like for Abraham. Yet Abraham rose early in the morning and proceeded to do what God commanded.

Some have a hard time excusing God for this test, even though we know He stopped Abraham as the knife was in the air. But who are we to suggest that God was wrong in testing his servant in this fashion? Who knows but that God will test us almost as severely, allowing pain for which there seems no rational explanation. Perhaps a much-loved son or daughter will be taken in

death. Possibly your spouse will abandon you and your children. Maybe you will lose your home in a fire or tornado. Why should this happen, we ask? What good can possibly come from such tragedies? But Abraham didn't demand that God explain Himself. He didn't believe a creature had the right to demand such from the Creator.

A reporter once asked Mrs. Einstein if she understood the theory of relativity. "No," she replied, "but I know Albert, and he can be trusted." Abraham knew God and trusted Him even when he couldn't understand what God was up to.

What was it that enabled Abraham to demonstrate this kind of faith? Verse 19 tells us that "he reasoned that God could raise the dead." The word for "reasoned" denotes inward conviction, persuasion, not just an opinion. This wasn't hope against hope; it wasn't a flight of his imagination. He was persuaded that a God as great as the God of the Patriarchs could bring Isaac back after he was sacrificed, and that he would!

Friends, grasp this! Abraham did not agree to offer up his son because he suspected God would stop him as the knife was on its way down. No, he expected Isaac was going to die. But He so trusted the promises of God that he expected Isaac to come back to life. But here's something even more amazing! Do you realize that at the time of Abraham there is no record of God ever having raised anyone from the dead? Not one person of faith—not Abel, not Enoch, not Noah—had ever witnessed a resurrection, yet Abraham believed God could and would do it. That's what you call faith!

Is there any doubt that Abraham deserves his place in Hebrews 11 as the paradigm example of faith in all of Scripture? I don't think so. But there are three more patriarchs mentioned in Hebrews 11, and we want to speak of them briefly.

Isaac, Jacob and Joseph demonstrated faith when facing death (20-22)

I put these three together because there are only 3 verses about them—ten for Abraham, but only one for each of the others. Isaac and Jacob are, of course, not the top two biblical characters one would think of in a discussion of faith. Both had significant faults and both seemed to have abnormal appetites for the material as opposed to the spiritual. But, though their faith sometimes wavered in life, it was strong and confident in death. As we have said several times already, the author of Hebrews is not looking for perfect people as examples of faith. He's interested in ordinary people who at some point in their lives exercised extraordinary faith. And with all three of these patriarchs he finds that kind of faith—on their deathbeds.

Isaac promised future blessings on his sons in the order specified by God. (20). All our text says in regard to Isaac is that "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future." Nothing is said here about the deception that was perpetrated by Jacob and his mother, which resulted in Jacob receiving the blessing that was intended for Esau, the eldest son. To his credit Isaac made no attempt to revoke that blessing, for he realized that God Himself intended for the line of promise to run through Jacob, and he confirmed that, while at the same time

reserving a blessing for Esau as well.

Jacob did the same thing for his grandsons. (21) The event the author of Hebrews focuses upon concerns the blessing on Jacob's two grandsons through Joseph. The details of this interesting story are found in Genesis 48. Joseph brought his sons Ephraim and Manasseh to his father to receive his blessing, purposely putting Ephraim on Jacob's left and Manasseh, the older son, on his right. But Jacob, though nearly blind, crossed his arms and put his left hand on Manasseh's head, but his right on Ephraim's head, so as to give the greater blessing to the younger son.

When Joseph saw this he was displeased and tried to move his father's hands. But Jacob refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He too (speaking of Manasseh) will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations."

The point here is that God chooses not as we choose, and Jacob was willing to accept God's choices. He put his faith in the promises of God.

Joseph predicted the Exodus and made certain his bones would be returned to the Promised Land. (22) Joseph was an incredible man of faith throughout his career, but the one event the author chooses as a demonstration of his faith was that "when his end was near, he spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones." Joseph had spent his entire life in Egypt from age 17, but Egypt was never home to him. He wanted to be buried at home. Now he could have asked Pharaoh to let his family take him back to Canaan and bury him immediately. After all, that's what Joseph had earlier done with his father, Jacob, when he died in Egypt. An entire caravan made the journey.

But even though this was nearly 400 years before Moses, Joseph believed so strongly that God would keep His promise to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and he believed so strongly that the Promised Land would eventually be theirs, that he said, "Take my body with you when you go." Listen to the last two verses of Genesis:

"And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.' Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.'" So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt."

The Jews never embalmed people; they still do not today. But Joseph was Prime Minister of Egypt, and the custom there was to embalm their leaders, so Joseph was mummified. Of what significance is that? Well, it was the preservation of his body that enabled his last request to be fulfilled. Had he been buried without embalming, as other Israelites were in Egypt, there would have been nothing left of him to carry back to the Promised Land when Moses led the people out of Egypt nearly four centuries later.

But as it was, his faith was honored. In Exodus 13 we read that when Pharaoh let the people go, “Moses took the bones of Joseph with him.” Joseph’s mummy was carried across the Sea of Reeds. It was with them when they spent a year at Mt. Sinai. It was with them when they arrived at the doorstep of the Promised Land at Kadesh Barnea. It his mummy was carried through the desert for almost 40 years while the Israelites wandered due to their disobedience. It was carried across the Jordan River by Joshua. And eventually he was buried at Shechem in the homeland from which he had been sold as a slave by his brothers 500 years before! Persevering faith, honored by God!

Conclusion: Persevering faith is the kind of faith that is demonstrated at conversion, it is demonstrated during our sojourn here on earth, it is demonstrated when God makes incredible promises, it is demonstrated when God stretches us to the breaking point, and it is demonstrated on our deathbeds. True believers live well. True believers die well. True believers have persevering faith.

Let me go back to verse 16 and suggest that you put your own name in that verse. How does it sound? “Dorothy Watkins is longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called Dorothy’s God, for He has prepared a city for her.” “Al Regier is longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called Al’s God, for He has prepared a city for him.” Can you put your name there?

And what a city it is! I think some of us live in such protected communities that we may not fully appreciate John Piper’s description of that city, but imagine for a moment that you lived at 13th and Grove or in the heart of Hilltop or in East St. Louis or in Caracas:

No pollution, no graffiti, no trash, no peeling paint or rotting garages, no dead grass or broken bottles, no harsh street talk, no in-your-face confrontations, no domestic strife or violence, no dangers in the night, no arson or lying or stealing or killing, no vandalism and no ugliness.”

The city of God will be perfect because God is its architect and builder, because Jesus is there. We enter that city by grace, through faith in His name.

Andy has prepared a worship song that has that very theme. Andy, come with the worship team and lead us.