

HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS THROUGH FAITH IN FUTURE GRACE I

Hebrews 11:8-16

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Mary sits at the table with her eyes fixed on her plate, playing with her food. Her husband Frank cheerfully asks the kids about their day and talks about their upcoming vacation, oblivious to her cold silence. When he says, "Honey, please pass the salad," she gives him an icy stare and through clenched teeth says, "Don't you call me honey." Finally seeing her seething anger he asks, "What is the matter?" Unable to contain her rage she tells him he is the most insensitive man ever born and that he is only concerned about himself. How could he have forgotten that today was the first anniversary of her mother's death? He hadn't said a word to her or asked how she was. She storms away from the table, leaving her family in a state of confusion.

What would be some ways that Christ being a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, his sitting at God's right hand interceding for us, his taking away sins through his once for all sacrifice could help this family?

Honestly, does the gospel of Jesus appear to you to have much to say to these sorts of relational and emotional situations?

I think most people when encountering these sorts of relational and personal crises do not think that the gospel offers much help. Most would argue these people need a therapist, not a preacher. The author of the letter to the Hebrews is convinced that the person and work of Jesus Christ is the most powerful force for transforming humans and their relationships. It is the claim of this author that human beings who have a true faith in Christ persistently love God and others. Christians live by faith in Christ and thus have what it takes to resolve conflicts, to bear with the insults and insensitivities of others and to assist others in their times of crisis. He aims to demonstrate that faith

in Christ enables us to persevere in a life of suffering love for God and others because of what faith is and what it does.

STUDY

1. In 11:1 to what do the two clauses "things hoped for" and "things not seen" refer? See Heb. 3:6, 14 9:28, 10:23, 25, 11:7.

"What we hope for" and "what we do not see" are both referring to the return of Christ when he will create the new heavens and the new earth and give his full salvation to all of his people. These events that will occur when the whole universe is restored to its proper condition and function and when all who belong to Christ will be given immortal bodies and made perfectly holy are hoped for, not presently seen events.

2. How does faith then function in relation to the things we hope for and do not see?

So what v. 1 is saying is that faith is sure because these events are sure. Faith is certain because these events are certain. Faith views these future events as absolute reality, completely guaranteed and thus faith acts in the present on the basis of that coming reality. Faith acts as if the promised future good is a certainty even though the present circumstances do not reflect that reality. Faith is fixed upon the certainty of the future good promised, not on the difficult present experience. Faith then acts now as if that promised future good is already present.

3. What is it that Abraham did by faith according to v. 8?

While Abraham was living as a happy idol worshipping pagan in Ur of the Chaldeans, which is modern southern Iraq, God called him. God chose him out of all the pagans living at that time and called him to himself. When God called him he also gave him a command to leave his country and his people and his father's house and to go a place that God would show to him. Abraham obeyed. He did as God told him to do. He packed up his belongings, his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and headed west to the land of Canaan. When he went out

from his home he did not know where he was going to settle. The point of v. 8 is that Abraham believed in God and in his ability to lead and to give what he promised, a land to live in. He, like Noah before him, had no evidence that there was going to be a secure future. He simply took God at his word, believing that what God said he would perform and so he acted in accordance with that word.

4. How would Abraham's leaving home and family and security to go live in an unknown land help the people this letter is written to in light of the losses they have faced and may again face (10:32-34)?

In the context of this letter you can see how helpful would be the example of Abraham. By trusting in Christ these people were leaving behind their family relationships, the security of their communities. Just as Jesus said while he walked the earth that he did not come to bring peace but a sword, "For I have come to turn a man against his father and a daughter against her mother... a man's enemies will be the members of his own household." As we saw in 10:32-34 some of them were going to lose their homes and possessions. To be a follower of Jesus meant leaving behind a life of security for a life of insecurity, just like Abraham. Abraham left behind a life of security for a life of insecurity as a nomad in a dangerous world because he believed God and what God said. He was secure because of who God is and what God promised. He believed that losing home and family relations and stability was to lose nothing when compared with the gain of knowing God and gaining the inheritance that God promised to him.

5. What are some ways you have or are obeying God's word by faith, leaving behind security and trusting God to care for you even though you don't know how he will do it?

6. What does God promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 15:7 & 18-21, 26:3 & 28:13?

He promised that he would give the land of Canaan to them and to their descendants forever.

7. How did Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob) live when they arrived in the land of Canaan? How is this an example of faith?

When he arrived in the land God promised to give to him and his descendants, the land of Canaan, he lived in that land he owned by divine fiat as if he was living in a foreign land. He lived in tents, as a nomad rather than living in permanent dwellings. This is the main point, he owned the land but he lived in it as if he did not own the land. Not only he but also his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, both of whom were given the same promise that they owned the land by God's gift, lived like foreigners in tents. The author to this letter concludes that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in tents as foreigners, not because of necessity but by faith. They knew, as v. 10 points out, that the physical land of Canaan was not what God was promising to them. God was promising to them an eternal city that he designed and built, not a piece of property on the face of planet earth. The land of Canaan was only a type, a symbol of that eternal city of God. They continued to live in tents and to live as if they had no property rights in the land of promise because they knew it was not their home. They knew that God's promise to them was for an eternal, indestructible land. Therefore they lived in this world, in the land that God promised, as if it was not their home. They lived as if it was only a temporary residence, not their permanent home. They did this because they knew on the authority of God's word of promise that their ultimate residence was in the city of God.

8. What are some ways that we show that we live in this world, which God has given to us as our present home, by faith in "the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God."?

Before I talk about what this means for us I want to make sure we understand what this is not saying. Abraham living in a tent and not in a house and not owning any land except for the burial plot he bought to bury Sarah does not mean that it is wrong for Christians to own land and houses. Also, just because Abraham left his home and went to live in Canaan as in a foreign land does not mean all Christians are called to be cross cultural missionaries. Finally, Abraham living as a foreigner by faith does not mean we are to treat this physical world with contempt, as if it doesn't matter at all. We are not to treat this world like a garbage dump or to live in this world like a monk who possesses nothing. This world matters to God and how

we treat it and live in it matters to God as well. We are not simply waiting for the end, indifferent to what is happening in this world. Rather the point here is that no matter where I live on this planet I am to make use of this world as if this world is not my home. Abraham made use of the resources available in the land of Promise, he related to the inhabitants of the land with cooperation and courtesy, he engaged in commerce but he did it in a fashion that communicated that Canaan was not his home; he was only a temporary resident. One of the best ways to demonstrate that our faith is in God's city and not in this world is to engage in a disciplined, growing giving away of money and time coupled with a fierce resistance to piling up debt in order to buy the toys and trinkets of this age. We should not be satisfied with the amount of money we're giving away now but should be looking for ways to give away more. The goal is not to give away 10% of our gross income but to give away an increasing amount each year. Giving away time is equally important to show that we are not just thinking about how to build our own kingdom but we are invested in building God's kingdom. We have to courageously evaluate where our affections lie by observing which enthralls us more, looking at catalogues or reading God's word, going shopping or going to church, getting new furniture or giving a large sum of money to support some missionary endeavor, thinking about the joys of retirement or thinking about the joys of heaven, spending time meticulously manicuring your lawn or spending time helping another person repair his house. We are to use the resources of this world to assist us and sustain us on our journey to the next. We are to use the resources of this world to display the superior worth of the city that God designed and built through our generosity and hospitality and investment in the kingdom of God.

9. What do you think makes this hard for us to do?

If you compare English translations of v. 11 you will see that there is a debate about who received the power to have a son in their old age, Abraham (NIV) or Sarah (ESV). The problem is that the main verb in the sentence does not have a stated subject and so you have to decide whether Abraham, who is the subject of vv. 10 & 12 is the subject or Sarah who is mentioned in v. 11. Personally, I think v. 11 says that Abraham who was "as good as dead" when it came to having a child,

is the one who received the power to have a son even though Sarah was both sterile and past menopause. (Compare Romans 4:18-21).

10. Regardless of whose faith is referred to here, what exactly was it that was believed? How does the results of faith mentioned here differ from the results mentioned in vv. 8 & 9?

The main point, regardless of which person had faith, is that it was physically impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have children and yet they became the parents of an innumerable number of descendants. Out of their deadness came a multitude of living beings. They became parents through faith, through their confidence that God was able to do what he promised. There is a significant difference between how faith operates in v. 11 and how it operated in vv. 8 & 9. In v. 8 Abraham by faith left the security and comfort of his home and family and went into an unknown future. In v. 9 he by faith lived like he was a temporary resident of the Promised Land. However, here he or Sarah trusts that God is able to do what he promised. God is able to give life where there is only death and decades of disappointment. He doesn't give just a little life but he gives life to multitudes of people by means of ordinary human activity that has never produced life in the past simply by Abraham or Sarah resting in his faithfulness. Faith here simply rests in God's promise and does nothing whereas faith in vv. 8 & 9 rest in the promise and then acts.

11. Why would the author draw attention to this occasion of faith in Abraham's life at this point? See Genesis 15:4-6 & Romans 4.

This is referring to that great passage in Genesis 15 where Abram complains that God has not given to him an heir as he promised. Then God promises Abram that he will have as many descendants as stars in the sky and Abram responds by believing God's promise. On the basis of his faith he is counted righteous. Abram didn't do anything. He believed God would do what he promised to do. He simply rested in the promise of God. The apostle Paul uses this incident in Abraham's life to show that salvation has always been by grace alone through faith alone and never based on human work or merit. I believe the author to this letter to the Hebrews has this argument of Paul's in mind as he refers to this justifying faith of Abraham. The reason he

inserts this description of faith in its passive receiving of God's gifts at this juncture is because all the other descriptions of faith he is using show that human action and lifestyle arise out of faith. So he inserts this basic description of faith as trusting God to do what only God can do apart from human effort to remind his readers and us that faith in its essence is always a passive receiving of what God promises to do. It is dependence on God's faithfulness, which always produces an effect in our lives, but the effect is not faith and the effect is not the reason we are accepted by God. We do not do anything to create spiritual life. We are, like Abraham and Sarah, dead and can do nothing to create life. We rely on God to do the miracle of giving his life to dead sinners like us.

12. What is the result of Abraham (or Sarah) “considering him faithful who had made the promise”? To whom does this refer?

As the apostle Paul says in Romans 4 Abraham became the father of all who trust in Christ to justify them. This is the multitude of descendants referred to in v. 12. Abraham is our father and we are all his sons through faith in Christ. We are not related to Abraham by our race or our religious performance but by our faith in Christ. On the last day, when the countless multitude of the redeemed gather around the throne of the lamb who was slain we will all realize that we are there because God was faithful to the promise he made to Jesus to reward his obedience with the salvation of all the elect. Christ will be the center of all our attention and affection because we will see that through him we have been given life. We who were dead in trespasses and sins were made alive through the life giving Spirit who gave to us the gift of faith, which is that resting and depending upon God to count us righteous and fit for heaven on the basis of the work of Jesus.

13. According to v. 13 how did Abraham, Isaac and Jacob die?

Death is the great nullifier, the eraser of all hopes and all certainties and all possibilities. Death is the end of existence in this world. All these, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah died according to faith. That is, they did not die in despair. They did not die bitter that they never experienced what God had promised. They came to the end of their lives and they viewed the loss of all the pleasures of this world as gain

because they knew that death could not rob them of what God had promised. They had seen that coming city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God and they had greeted it from afar. That is, they recognized that the city was yet to come. Death could not keep them from living in that city one day and so they died content and joyful and hopeful because they saw that city and greeted it far in advance of its arrival.

14. How did they live?

In v. 10 Abraham looked forward to the coming of that city. In v. 14 the word "looking for" is actually the word "seeking." Then in v. 16, they were longing for a better country.

15. How did God respond to how they lived and died?

God is delighted to be called their God. He has prepared for them that eternal city that he joyfully gives to all those who trust Christ and by that faith live as if that city to come is the best and highest thing in the universe.

16. How would you rate your “looking forward to” and “seeking” and “longing for” the city of God? How does your longing for that city compare to your longing for this earth’s comforts? How will you respond to this?