Running the Race: A Hopeful Faith

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 I’ve always loved the Olympics. I’m not really sure why. Maybe it was because of the fact that it was something my parents and I would do together, a common interest we shared through the years. Maybe it was because of my long-standing love of watching athletic competition. Maybe it was because I really enjoyed rooting for the athletes wearing the colors of my nation. Whatever the reason, I would tune in faithfully every two years for the Summer and Winter Olympics.

 Inevitably, there would be a story or two that would stick with me from the Olympic Games. Sometimes, it was a story of drama and triumph, such as when Michael Phelps swam for the record in Beijing in 2008. Other times, it was a story of panache, such as the saga of the Jamaican bobsled team. Sometimes, it was a story of incredible courage and tenacity far beyond the field of competition, such as this year’s Yusra Mardini, a refugee swimmer who saved twenty people during her harrowing flight from Syria. Year after year, decade after decade, the Olympics unite us around human stories and athletic competition, and they Games can leave us inspired, patriotic, or simply entertained.

Yet in the midst of the stories of victory and triumph are more stories of defeat and heartbreak. So many young people put years and decades of training into their Olympic dreams, and most of the athletes at the games never come home with a medal. Even more never make the cut to even go to the Games. The unfortunate reality is that most, if not all, of the young people we saw in the video earlier won’t ever be able to say that they are American Olympians. They may never find their hopes fulfilled. Yet they keep on striving – working out for hours day after day, perfecting their techniques, watching their diets and maintaining a disciplined lifestyle – because they are Olympic hopefuls. They have faith – a hopeful faith – and they look forward to a day when their hopes will be fulfilled.

Faith is one of the strongest elements of human existence. Faith doesn’t just drive Olympic hopefuls to pursue their dreams; faith holds marriages together, faith motivates soldiers to serve their country, faith inspires parents and comforts children, faith draws out the best in us. And, of course, our faith in God and in Jesus Christ gives us strength, comfort, hope, peace, and much, much more as we face the trials and travails of life. But just what is faith?

The final chapters of the book of Hebrews describe what the Christian faith is all about, and it starts here in chapter 11. In its opening verse, we find this powerful statement: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is a verse we’ve probably heard a thousand times, a definition of faith we’ve internalized. But what does it tell us about the faith we hold? It starts with the very word, “faith.” In Greek, this is the word “pistis,” and the best definition is “trust.” Faith, in the biblical sense, is all about trust.

This can be a difficult realization for us, because we live in an age of broken trust. Many of our families have experienced the breaking of trust, whether between spouses, between siblings, or between generations. Many of us have experienced broken trust in our workplaces. Many of us have experienced broken trust from our community leaders and national leaders. Even many of the institutions we have trusted – that we’ve had faith in – like banks, governments, and corporations have broken our trust at some time or another. And then the Bible more accurately describes “faith” as “trust.” What do we trust? Who do we trust?

The author of Hebrews has an answer: the Christian faith is a HOPEFUL faith. Our trust is based in hope. The things we hope for – that God is on the side of justice, that Jesus is interceding for us, that the Spirit is working in our world – these are things we can’t always see. But the good news of Hebrews is that such things ARE happening, even now, and will be fulfilled in time. This, then, is the content of our faith: the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Now, that’s a hard sell for Hebrews to make, particularly in our skeptical and cynical world. We’ve experienced so much letdown and betrayal in life ourselves – or at least seen it in the lives of others – that we’re not likely to trust much of anything or anyone we haven’t seen prove themselves. We don’t take people’s word for much of anything anymore, and taking a business offer or a statement of fact on faith is a mark of naiveté in today’s harsh reality.

The author of Hebrews knew this, because people in his day were just as skeptical and cynical. Remember, they lived in an era where 90% of people were mired in soul-crushing poverty, the average human life expectancy was somewhere in the mid-30s, slavery was rampant, and there were absolutely no checks or balances for corrupt emperors, power-hungry fanatics, or even just local strongmen. Trust had such a checkered reputation that one of the foundational Greek myths – the story of Pandora’s Box – saw the spirit of Pistis (trust) abandoning humanity when Pandora opened the lid. When Jesus wonders, in Luke’s Gospel, “Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?”[[2]](#footnote-2), he was asking this question to a Greek-influenced culture that believed the spirit of Pistis (or faith) had already left. Thus, the writer of Hebrews had a difficult task. He was asking people to maintain their faith in a Jewish rabbi who had been crucified by the Roman governor of Judea at the request of his own people. That was asking for a lot of faith, trust, hope in what they couldn’t see. So the author of Hebrews backs up his declaration of Christian faith with some examples from his people’s past.

By this sort of hopeful faith, he says, the ancestors of his readers found approval from God, purpose in life, and the strength to endure in a hostile world. Indeed, much of the rest of chapter 11 is devoted to these historic examples. The remainder of our text today looks at one of these heroes of faith, someone we might consider the champion of hopeful faith, the patriarch Abraham.

Abraham, we all remember, was one of the founding fathers of the Hebrew people, the common ancestor of the ancient collection of tribes that came to be known by the name of his grandson, Israel, better known as Jacob. More importantly, from the standpoint of the author of Hebrews, Abraham was one of the first to live out faith, or trust, in God. Originally from a place called Ur, located roughly between the modern Iraqi cities of Baghdad and Basra, Abraham first stepped out in hopeful faith when he heard a call from God to set out for a “Promised Land,” a place God would give to Abraham and his descendants. There, according to Genesis 12, God would make of him a great nation, one that God would bless, but that God also wanted to bless others. Indeed, he told Abraham, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

As far as we know, this is the first time Abraham had heard anything from God. He was 75 years old; his father had just died, his wife was barren, and his nephew Lot was under his care. Abraham had lots of reasons to ignore this strange voice beckoning him to leave his home. After all, he had responsibilities! He was a man of means, a nomad to be sure, but a nomad with livestock and slaves. He was part of the local economy, and he had people depending on him! And where was this promised land? Somewhere he had never been, never seen, probably never even heard of before. Yet what does Genesis tell us? “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him...Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired…and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Or, as the author of Hebrews said, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Sometimes, having the hopeful faith we need as we follow Jesus means being ready to try things we’ve never done before, taking a risk and starting out on a road when we can’t see the end. God has all sorts of plans for us – plans, the prophet Jeremiah tells us, not to harm us but to give us hope and a future, but plans nonetheless.[[6]](#footnote-6) Like Abraham, those plans often are for our own benefit – and also for the benefit of others. But rarely will we see the full picture. That’s tough for me; I like to have my plans all mapped out. I like to know what the results of my actions will be, with a reasonable degree of certainty, before I undertake those actions. It might be tough for you, as well. Yet Abraham’s example of hopeful faith shows us that trusting God, having the pistis that Hebrews describes, involves listening for God’s voice…and then acting on that voice, even when it leads us onto unknown paths. Abraham shows us how to take that first hopeful step in faith.

Abraham’s journey of hopeful faith does not stop with his initial response to God’s voice, however. Indeed, despite God’s promise of a land for Abraham and his family, he would go on to live his life as a homeless nomad. He had great wealth in livestock and slaves, but he did not own what had been promised to him. He spent his entire life laboring on the land, wandering from place to place within the land of Canaan, and the only plot he ever owned was a small field near present-day Hebron that he bought as a burial ground for his family. Abraham never received his promised inheritance. Yet Abraham continues to have faith in, to trust in, God. He stays in Canaan, the land of promise, and he looks beyond his present to God’s future: God has promised him a land, and he holds to that hope as the full reality that transcends what he can see and experience in the here and now. He may live in tents now, but he trusts in the vision God has given him: of a city with foundations.

Sometimes, God can call us forward in faith – but the reality he holds out for us is far beyond our current reality or ability to see. And in those moments, we can get so very discouraged. When we feel God has called us to do great things, but our lives are swamped by the minutiae of daily life, we can grow discouraged. When we feel God has called us to speak out for justice, but we face hurdle after hurdle, criticism after criticism, rebuke after rebuke, we can grow discouraged. When we feel God has called us to be a spouse, or a parent, but those dreams are delayed or denied, we can grow discouraged. When we feel God has called us to step into leadership or another position of service, but the door is closed to us, we can grow discouraged. In those moments, we can draw strength from Abraham’s example, looking beyond our current circumstances, trusting in God’s future with tremendous hope.

Finally, Abraham holds onto hopeful faith in the most personal – and the most long-lasting – of God’s promises. “By faith,” we’re told, “he received the power of procreation.” God promised Abraham a son – and Abraham believed that it would happen. Yet all of Abraham’s experience said that it wouldn’t. He was, after all, 75 years old when he set out for Canaan, and Sarah was not much younger. Then, for 25 years, while they wandered the hills and valleys of Canaan with their flocks and herds, Abraham and Sarah were unable to conceive. They tried everything you could do in the ancient world, even choosing a surrogate, but nothing they did fulfilled the promise of God. And so as Abraham neared the century mark, with Sarah not far behind, it must have been tempting to give up hope; God had moved on, he was done with Abraham. Yet he did not give up hope; he continued to trust that God was not through with him yet. God would be faithful in what he had promised, and Abraham would have a big part to play in that.

Sometimes, we can become so discouraged or frustrated by the delays in God’s plan that we can feel left out of our Lord’s work. We can feel we have nothing to add, nothing to contribute. Surely our best years are behind us, our gifts have atrophied, our opportunities are all spent. Or we grow impatient, wanting results now, not in some far-off, future moment of usefulness for God’s kingdom. Yet the story of Abraham encourages us to maintain our hope, for God is faithful. His timing may be beyond our sight. His fulfillment may be beyond our expectations. His faithfulness may be beyond our comprehension. But God is faithful – and trusting in his faithfulness with hope is the best path forward for us, just as it was for Abraham.

Ultimately, our hope is for something that is beyond this life. Like Abraham, and like so many who came after him, we are those who are strangers and foreigners on this earth – we seek a homeland that is fundamentally different than anything we’ve experienced in this life. We long for a place, a city, where justice reigns, mercy flows, and grace abounds. We long for a life where there is no more crying or pain, death or loss. We long, in the most basic sense, for heaven – or, in the words of Hebrews, we “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In this longing, we are in good company – Abraham and Sarah and the other heroes of the faith had that longing as well. And it is natural; as C.S. Lewis, the great Christian author of the last century wrote, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

We were made for another world – the kingdom of God. The Lord, faithful and true, will bring that world to pass. We may not see it in this life, anymore than Abraham did, but like him we can maintain our trust in God, our faith in God’s promise. We can live out a hopeful faith…if we let ourselves. The choice is ours. Will we maintain our hope in our faithful Lord? Will we have a hopeful faith? Let us pray.

1. Heb. 11:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 18:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Genesis 12:3b [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 12:4a, 5a [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hebrews 11:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jeremiah 29:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hebrews 11:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. CS Lewis, Mere Christianity [↑](#footnote-ref-8)