

By Faith...

Sermon by David Reed

CrossRoads May 4, 2008

Hebrews 11: 11-16

If you were here last week you will recall that we prayed for Dave and Jean Stratford as they prepared to move from La Paz to Oregon and a new life. Of course as they move they go headlong into the unknown. We prayed "By faith we trust God will go ahead of them, provide a new faith community, that we would see them again...all knowing that God is as sovereign in Oregon as he is in La Paz.

The main idea of that prayer came out of Hebrews chapter 11. In it we remembered a litany of those who have gone before us in the faith. People who held onto God's promises while facing uncertainty. People like Abel, Abraham and Noah, Isaac and Moses and the people of Israel all of whom were given promises by God and many of whom never saw those promises fulfilled. Even though they never witnessed the fulfillment God reminded them it was still a promise God would be faithful to and they... "being sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they had not seen" (Hebrews 11:1) lived and died holding onto them by faith. They were able to because the promises were given by God and by faith they believed God.

Here's a small part of the chapter:

**11** By faith, barren Sarah was able to become pregnant, old woman as she was at the time, because she believed the One who made a promise would do what he said. **12** That's how it happened that from one man's dead and shriveled loins there are now people numbering into the millions. **13** Each one of these people of faith died not yet having in hand what was promised, but still believing. How did they do it? They saw it way off in the distance, waved their greeting, and accepted the fact that they were transients in this world. **14** People who live this way make it plain that they are looking for their true home. **15** If they were homesick for the old country, they could have gone back any time they wanted. **16** But they were after a far better country than that - heaven country. You can see why God is so proud of them, and has a City waiting for them.

There's a bit more to this story. Three weeks ago, while I was still in Arizona a pastor and missionary colleague called and invited me to come to his church to share about our work here in La Paz. He asked if I would preach. I said I didn't think I was up to preparing a sermon but would be glad to share about what God has been doing down here as we serve. Not needing to prepare a sermon I didn't sit down to put a few thoughts together until Saturday morning. As I sat I was reading from Hebrews chapter 11 specifically those verses 11-16.

As I sat something happened that is very unusual for me, in just a few minutes an outline flowed onto the paper with stories of people and faith to go along with the passage. I sat back and felt strongly I was going to preach and not just share about our work. I said OK Lord, if that is what you want and you open that door tomorrow I will follow.

The next morning I arrived at the church early and found the pastor setting up for worship. We greeted each other and he handed me a bulletin for the morning. Then he said...”I want to ask if you have more to share this morning that you please go ahead. In my prayer time this morning I felt strongly that you were going to preach. I left the house without my sermon”.

### **God had opened the door. I didn't know why until later.**

I believe there is something here for each of us this morning. In our fast passed, fast change, instant everything, and everything disposable culture we no longer think like people did 2 and 3 thousand years ago. It sounds rather obvious and you might say, **“Of course we don't...we have TV! We don't need to think!”!**

However, consider this for a moment...in those 2-3 thousand years God, God's message, God's purposes, God's promises, and the basis for God's relationship with us have not changed...at all. Then, it would seem that the whole world has changed around us...except for the universal human need for love, family, work, health, community, friends, stability, hope, justice, purpose, a spiritual center, and except for the universal human need for forgiveness of sin and a relationship with our creator.

I guess not much that truly matters has changed in the last 2-3 thousand years after all.

What has not changed since a human being breathed with life is God's desire to be in a loving relationship with his creation. The Bible and our experience tells us we are created to be in relationship with God. Without it we are lost. God says we are created for God's glory and God will share his glory with no other.

The matriarchs and patriarchs of the Christian faith had a very clear understanding and experience that we no longer maintain very clearly. It is that they were in a covenant relationship with God. It is this Covenant relationship that defined Israel as God's people and was full of promises by God. It is covenant that defined how each person of God's chosen people – Israel - lived. And it is through the covenant relationship that God fulfilled every one of his promises and Israel received every one the blessings God had for them.

I believe it is this Biblically centric and foundational **covenant relationship** we still have with God that we have lost touch with. It is this covenant relationship that connects the old and the new testaments and us to them. And by the way, “Testament” means

“covenant”. The covenant relationship is God’s way of working out our God’s own requirement to be righteous or in right relationship with God. God demands the guilt of our sin be somehow justified. It’s all worked out in relationship with God through a covenant.

A covenant is basically an agreement on how to enter and stay in good relationship. There were three kinds of covenant. One was a business like covenant made between equals for mutual benefit. God has not made any of those with us.

A second type of covenant was a “Royal Grant”, a perpetual and unconditional gifting to a favored servant, family, or people. The receiver and their heirs benefited only as they continued in loyal service. This was the kind of covenant that God set up through Noah, Abraham, David, and Jesus. The promise remains forever for all whom God has chosen to be faithful. Our acceptance or denial does not change God the covenant. More specifically for us today, God’s promise remains for all who call on the name of Jesus for forgiveness of sin. God has declared unconditionally “I will be your God and you will be my people, I will rescue you, save you, restore you as my people, forgive your sins through Jesus and bring you to eternal life in heaven”.

The third kind of Covenant was conditional. It was an agreement that regulated the relationship between a King or God in our case, and the people of the kingdom. Like keeping the law attempted to do for Israel. The King claims absolute high sovereignty, demanded total loyalty and service, and provided blessings conditional on the subjects loyalty and faithfulness. This type of relationship stipulated “if you do this – I will do that”. The promise or promises are cut off in event of unfaithfulness on the part of the people. This was the kind of covenant that God established through Moses and the law.

What God has never included in any covenant was the possibility of people forming, determining, or defining the terms of the relationship or its boundaries. God never gave the people the option of having other god’s to worship, serve and obey. God never made himself less than completely sovereign...yet God never stopped loving his people. God is a jealous God. He is jealous for our hearts. He can not and will not give room for anyone or anything else as Lord and Master of our hearts and lives. We should be eternally glad for that. God created us for himself and no other. That is what a covenant relationship with God means for us.

There were 7 covenants God established, each building on the previous and all leading to the last and best in Jesus.

Jack Hayford writes that covenant... "is one of the most theologically important words in all of scripture, appearing more than 250 times in the Old Testament....In Genesis 17:7, we see the greatest statement of the Abrahamic covenant. This is the foundation of Israel’s eternal relationship with God. All other Bible promises are based on this

**covenant** God made with Abraham." (Hayford, J. W., & Bauer, R. H. *The Spirit-Filled Family: Holy Wisdom to Build Happy Homes*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson) (Bolding Added)

**Genesis 17: 1** When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. **2** I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." **3** Abram fell facedown, and God said to him,

**4** "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. **5** No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. **6** I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.

**7** I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. **8** The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." **9** Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. **10** This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Andrew Murray writes, "One of the words of Scripture, which is almost going out of fashion, is the word '**Covenant**'. There was a time when it was the keynote of the theology and the Christian life of strong and holy [people]. It made mighty [people], to whom God, and His promise and power were wonderfully real. It will be found still to bring strength and purpose to those who will take the trouble to bring all their life under control of the inspiring assurance that they are living in **covenant** with a God who has sworn faithfully to fulfill in them every promise He has given. Covenant was above all to give [humanity] a hold upon God as the Covenant-keeping God, to link [humanity] to God Himself in expectation and hope, to bring [humanity] to make God alone the portion and the strength of His soul." (Andrew Murray, "Two Covenants" [people] added for "men" [humanity] added for "Man").

**Kay Arthur** in "Our Covenant God" adds "by the grace of God's Spirit (you will) experience...a security you have never known, as you realize that everything God does is based on covenant." (Arthur, Kay: Our Covenant God)

**Covenant is how God has and continues to define our relationship with himself. I will be your God and you will be my people. I will be your God and you will be obedient to my law, my will, my word. I will be your God and you will believe my son and through him you will know forgiveness of sin and be righteousness – live in right**

**relationship – with me. The Covenant relationship is everything. It is not a deal among equals but one where we accept God’s terms, submit our lives to and experience God’s promises, all of God’s rich blessings.**

So, By Faith, Sarah and Abraham believed the one who had made the promise – because they believed the one who had promised was faithful. God was faithful. They had hope. Our covenant relationship with God gives us hope upon which we can make plans and build our lives.

Romans 5:1-5 **1** “Since we have been made right with God by our faith, we have peace with God. This happened through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** who has brought us into that blessing of God's grace that we now enjoy. And we are happy because of the hope we have of sharing God's glory... **5** And this hope will never disappoint us, because God has poured out his love to fill our hearts...”

John W. Ritenbaugh said, “Our hope does not disappoint or bring us to shame because it is based in the reality of God and His promises. The common hopes of man may or may not come to pass because they are fragile and frail at best and in many cases utterly false. Yet, the believer's hope is no fantasy because it is firmly anchored in the person and promises of the Creator God. (**John W. Ritenbaugh** The Elements of Motivation (Part Three): Hope)

And at the end, the writer of Hebrews has history to look back on and see that God has been faithful to every one of his promises to Israel over fifteen hundred years. And he would tell us the same today. The one who promised is faithful...

(By Faith Pete and Cher Gato, Gemenis...)

The one who promised...

- To be our God and claims us as his people...is faithful
- To bless generation after generation and all the families of the earth...is faithful
- Not to flood the earth again...is faithful
- That nothing can take us out of his hand...is faithful
- To rescue us from slavery and bondage ...is faithful
- To write his word on our hearts...is faithful
- To lead us to his future with power and mighty acts...is faithful
- To send a savior...is faithful
- To forgive sins...is faithful
- To give rest to the weary and burdened heart...is faithful
- To send the Holy Spirit and continue to lead us...is faithful
- To give the peace Jesus had and guard it in Christ...is faithful.
- To never leave us...is faithful
- To return and take his followers home...is faithful

- To prepare an eternal place for every believer in heaven...is faithful

So I preached that Sunday three weeks ago. I talked about the faithful who have gone before...believing God even though they never received the promise themselves yet they made plans in their lives as if they had. “Being sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they had not seen” they lived their lives and made plans knowing the promises were secure. They believed God was faithful to all his promises based on a covenant relationship initiated, defined, and kept by God.

What I did not know was that the church had come to the place of accepting that they were dying. They had given up on God’s promises of life and living water in their church. They had accepted a fruitless future. They needed to be reminded of God’s promises and unfailing faithfulness. Suddenly there was new hope for many that morning.

I asked that congregation question I now present to you.

- What plans for life are you making based on God’s promises?

Is there some part of your faith, or relationship with God, or your life as a child of God that might be dying this morning? A part of you that needs reminding – we live in a covenant relationship with our God, a relationship formed, defined and kept by God, a relationship where God calls us his sons and daughters and welcomes us into his arms of everlasting love. A relationship that comes with promises and God keeps his promises. God is faithful.

It isn’t possible to cover all of God’s promises to you as his son or daughter, as a follower of Jesus his son. But you can know them simply by reading and believing what God has recorded in his word

We, along with the writer of Hebrews can look at history and find a great cloud of witnesses that God is faithful to keep all his promises. God’s final promise is that Jesus is coming back to take his loyal followers to heaven for eternity. And he who made the promise to you is faithful to keep it.

Remember "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"— Corinthians 2:9