

THE NEED FOR AN UNCOMMON FAITH (Hebrews 11:8-19)

I'm curious. Is there anyone here today who has a hero other than Jesus? Is there anyone you look up to and aspire to be like? Heroes are not just for kids. I believe adults need to have heroes, as well.

Back in 1970 a country singer named Bill Anderson released an album. The title track was, "Where Have All Our Heroes Gone?" The question posed by that song is just as timely today as it was when it was when the song was recorded 52 years ago.

Where can we go and where do we look to find heroes worth having? It seems that most sports and entertainment superstars are more about money and living lavish lifestyles than anything else. We have a host of big-name politicians but very few, true statesmen.

Let me tell you two stories about two men each of whom did something truly heroic. Consider the story of Butch O'Hair. He was a fighter pilot back during World War II and was stationed on an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific.

One day, his squadron was sent out on a mission. Not long after taking off, he looked at his fuel gauge and realized no one had topped off his fuel tank. Knowing that he would not be able to complete his mission, he turned around and headed back for the aircraft carrier. On his return trip, he saw a squadron of Japanese Zeroes heading straight for the American fleet. All the American fighters had been sent out leaving the fleet virtually defenseless.

Immediately, Butch dove into the formation of Japanese planes in a desperate attempt to divert them away from the fleet. After a frightening air battle, the Japanese airplanes broke off their assault. They retreated. Butch's tattered fighter limped back to the carrier. He was recognized as a hero and was given one of the nation's highest military honors. O'Hare International Airport in Chicago is named after Butch O'Hare.

Story #2: You have heard of the Chicago mobster Al Capone. His mob was heavily involved in bootlegging alcohol, running a prostitution ring, and they routinely murdered those who got in their way. Capone had a lawyer known as Easy Eddie. It was his job to keep Capone out of jail. Easy Eddie was good at what he did; so, he was well-compensated and amply rewarded. He lived like a king on an estate so large that it covered an entire city block in Chicago.

Easy Eddie had a son. Because of the money he made working for the mob, Easy Eddie was able to provide his son the newest clothes, the best education, anything his son might need or want. There was one thing, however, that he couldn't provide his son as long as he worked for the mob—a good name. That realization weighed on Eddie's heart, and it led him to make a decision, a tough decision. He decided to clear his name and that of his son by turning in Al Capone.

Easy Eddie went to the authorities. He told them what they needed to know, and he testified in court against Capone and the mob. He knew there would be a price to pay, but he wanted to leave his son a good example and a good name. Those who rat out the mob don't usually die of natural causes at an old age. Sure enough, within a year of testifying

against Capone, Easy Eddie's life was taken in a blaze of gunfire on a lonely street in Chicago. It was at a great price he was able to give his son what he would not have had otherwise.

Let me connect the two stories. As you might have guessed, it was Easy Eddie's son who grew up to be a war hero and whose name was given to one of the busiest airports in America.

King Solomon wrote, "A good name is better than precious ointment" (Ecc. 7:1a).

The men and women we encounter in Hebrews 11 have good names, but they earned those good names at great price and sacrifice. This chapter teaches us that it was their faith in God that led them to undertake and accomplish what they did. Truly, they are heroes worth emulating.

Undoubtedly, the greatest hero recorded in this chapter and the one about whom more is written than any of the others is Abraham. Abraham was an unlikely figure for God to call. There was nothing particularly special about Abraham; yet, God used Abraham in a spectacular way. Today, all those who trust in Christ are said to be the children of Abraham. He is the father of the faithful. Abraham had an uncommon faith.

There are basically two ways to live life. **The first way to live life is by sight.** When we live by sight, we base everything on what we can see, hear, or touch. People who live by sight look for empirical evidence on which to base their decisions.

The second way to live life is by faith. Living life by faith is the opposite of living by sight. When we live by faith, we make decisions based on what we do not see. Have you ever seen God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit? Have you ever seen heaven or hell? The person of faith lives life and makes decisions apart from what can be verified by one's senses. That is exactly what we are told in v. 1 of this chapter. It is faith that gives us certainty about unseen reality.

Scripture consistently portrays Abraham as the supreme example of the life of faith. He is the pattern we are to follow. Using Abraham as the model we are going to explore what an uncommon faith looks like and why we need such faith. Let's begin with Hebrews 11:8-10.

We Need an Uncommon Faith for the Unknown

We are told in Genesis 11-12 that God called Abraham while he was living in the city of Ur. Abraham left Ur and traveled to Haran. After having settled in Haran for some time, God again called Abraham. In obedience to God, he left Haran and traveled to a foreign land, the land of Canaan.

In a message based on Genesis 12, Pastor Ray Stedman remarked, "**Everyone is living in one of three places—Ur, Haran, and Canaan.**" According to Stedman, **Ur stands for the world and its ways.** Just as Abraham had to leave Ur in order to go with God, we have to forsake our attachment with the world in order to live for Christ.

Worldliness is, basically, an attitude; it is an attitude that says, "I want to be like the world and have the things the world has." The Bible teaches that we can't love the world and love Jesus at the same time. We will have to forsake one or the other.

Abraham left Ur, but **he settled in Haran** for a good length of time. The word “Haran” means *parched*. Stedman pointed out that many people have left the world and joined the church. Outwardly, they have religion, but inwardly they have not truly committed themselves to Christ. Such people are parched; they are barren on the inside. Don’t get side-tracked. Don’t let anything prevent you from going on with the Lord.

We normally think that the original colonists who settled America were all church-going people with a strong faith in the Lord. History tells us otherwise. Of the 101 colonists who came over on the Mayflower, only one dozen were members of the first church. Only about one-fifth of those who founded Boston were professing Christians.

In the Puritan churches of New England, a person had to relate his/her conversion experience in a satisfactory manner before being allowed to join the church. Few were able to do so. As time went by the church was getting smaller rather than larger. To remedy the problem, in 1662 the Halfway Covenant was adopted. This Halfway Covenant allowed people to obtain a halfway membership into the church. This meant that a moral person who had not yet had a conversion experience was allowed to be baptized, but they couldn’t partake of the Lord’s Supper. As time went by, it became apparent that most people were quite satisfied with their halfway membership, and the church got even weaker than it had been before.

When the Lord calls you, it is not enough to only go halfway. We must go with him all the way. The chorus, “Where He Leads Me,” should be our theme song: “Where He leads me I will follow, where He leads me I will follow, where He leads me I will follow, I’ll go with Him, with Him all the way.”

It takes patience and perseverance to go with God. **The third word is Canaan.** We must leave Ur. We must not settle in Haran. Instead, we move on to Canaan. Canaan symbolizes the fullness of the Spirit and God’s blessings. It represents maturity and fruitfulness.

One person commented that Christian maturity is simply being able to do what we want to do. The interesting thing is that the worldly Christian does what he wants to do, too. The difference is that the mature person wants what God wants. Do you want what God wants? That is the one thing that differentiates the mature Christian from the immature one.

Consider the story of Merhan Karimi Nasser. It is said that for eleven years he was a man without a country. For eleven years he lived in a Paris airport. He had no passport. He had no citizenship. He had no papers that enabled him to leave the airport or fly to another country. He had been expelled from his native country of Iran. Then, he was sent away from Paris, France, because he lacked documentation. He said his Belgian-issued refugee document had been stolen. He flew to England but was denied entry and sent back to Paris. When he was returned to the Paris airport in 1988, airport authorities allowed him to live in Terminal 1, and there he stayed for eleven years, writing in a diary, living off of handouts from airport employees, cleaning up in the airport bathroom.

Then in September of 1999 the situation reversed. French authorities presented Nasser with an international travel card and a French residency permit. Suddenly, he was free to go anywhere he wanted. But when airport officials handed him his walking

papers, to everyone's surprise, he simply smiled, tucked the documents in his folder, and resumed writing in his diary. They found he was afraid to leave the bench and table that had been his home for eleven years. As the days passed and Nasserri refused to leave, airport officials said they would not throw him out of the airport, but they would have to gently and patiently coax him to find a new home.

Don't get so comfortable with this world that you make it your home. For the Christian, the world isn't much more than an airport terminal. We are just passing through in route to our real home. We do not know exactly what the future holds, but we know that the Lord is in control, and He will see us through.

Abraham teaches us something else about faith. Look at Hebrews 11:10-12.

We Need an Uncommon Faith for the Unlikely

Abraham was 75 years old when God first told him that he would become a father. At 65, his wife was no spring chicken. Sarah was a more likely candidate for the geriatric ward than the maternity ward.

God's word, however, teaches us about the power of faith. We read in Mark 9:23, "Everything is possible for him who believes."

One man wrote, "Faith sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, touches the intangible, and accomplishes the impossible."

Have you heard the story of George Danzig? He was a senior at Stanford University during the Great Depression. All the seniors knew they would be joining the unemployment lines when their class graduated. There was a slim chance that the top person in the class might get a teaching job. George was not at the head of his class, but he hoped that if he were able to achieve a perfect score on the final exam, he might possibly earn a job.

He studied so hard for the math exam that on the day of the final that he overslept and arrived late to class. When he got to class, the other students were already hard at work. He was embarrassed and just picked up his paper and slunk into his desk. He sat down and worked the eight problems on the test paper; then he started on the two written on the board. Try as he might, he couldn't solve either of them. He was devastated. Out of the ten problems, he had missed two for sure. But just as he was about to hand in the paper, he took a chance and asked the professor if he could have a couple of days to work on the two he had missed. He was surprised when his professor agreed.

George rushed home and plunged into those equations with a vengeance. He spent hours and hours, but he could find the solution for only one of them. He never could solve the other. It was impossible. When he turned in the test, he knew he had lost all chance of a job. That was the darkest moment of his life.

The next morning, a pounding on the door awakened George. It was his mathematics professor. "George! George!" he kept shouting excitedly. "You've made mathematics history!"

George didn't know what his professor was talking about. The professor explained. Before the exam, he had encouraged the class to keep trying in spite of setback and

failure. “Don’t be discouraged,” he had counseled. “Remember, there are classic problems that no one can solve. Even Einstein was unable to unlock their secrets.” He then wrote two of those problems on the blackboard. George had come to class late and missed those opening remarks. He didn’t know the problems on the board were impossible to solve. He thought they were part of his exam and was determined that he could work them. And, sure enough, he solved one!

He did the impossible.

That very morning the professor made George Danzig his assistant. He taught at Stanford until his retirement.

What is it that you have thought is unlikely that you would ever be able to do? Remember what God’s word teaches: “We can do all things through Him who gives us strength.”

We Need an Uncommon Faith for the Unreceived

Look at Hebrews 11:13-16. Neither Abraham nor any of the other patriarchs ever possessed the land that God promised them. They lived in tents all of their lives; they never built houses in the land of Canaan.

At the time Abraham died, the only piece of property that he owned in the land he had been promised was a cave and an adjacent field near Hebron. He bought it in order to have a place to bury his beloved wife Sarah after she had passed. Later, Abraham was buried in that same cave. That was all the land that Abraham could call his even though God had promised the land would belong to his family. The fact is that it would be hundreds and hundreds of years before that land would belong to Abraham’s people—the Jewish people.

Can you think of anything that God has promised you that you have not yet received? God promised that we would be conformed to the image of His Son, and I can assure you that I am not yet there and neither are you.

When my children were young and they would gripe about something they didn’t have, their mother and I would tell them, “Don’t complain about what you don’t have. Be grateful for what you do have.”

We need to do the same. When you and I become aware of something that God has promised that we do not yet enjoy, we need to focus on the promises that He has already fulfilled. Recognition of those fulfilled promises will help us to see the unseen and greet from afar those things that God is sure to bring our way in His time.

It is also helpful to remember that God hasn’t forgotten what He promised. God never makes rash promises. He never makes hollow promises. God knows what He has promised, and He will most certainly fulfill them at the right time and in the right way.

We Need an Uncommon Faith for the Unwanted

Look at Hebrews 11:17-19. We all know that at various times in our life God tests us in order to help us grow. Those times of testing are never pleasant, but they are always

meant for our good. We would rather avoid them, but God knows we need them.

Come what may, Abraham was determined to trust in God. Someone observed that if Noah illustrates **the duration** of faith then Abraham shows us **the depth** of faith. Abraham just knew that God would find a way to keep His promise.

If you live by sight you will suffer discouragement and defeat time and time again. If you live by faith, however, you will go from victory to victory.

What has God brought your way that you don't want? An illness? A financial setback? A strained relationship? The death of a loved one?

Consider the story of a man named Harland Sanders. He is better known as Colonel Sanders. Those of you who are my age or older will remember him. When he retired from the Postal Service, he sat on his front porch in Kentucky looking at his first Social Security check after it was delivered. You might have thought that he was looking forward to retirement, but instead, he was very, very discouraged. He thought to himself, "Is this what life is going to be from now on—sitting on the porch waiting for my check to arrive?"

Right then, he decided that he wouldn't settle for that; so, he made a list of all of the things he had going for him, all the blessings and the capacities, the unique things that were in him. The list was long because he listed everything he could think of, and on the list was the fact that he was the only person on earth who knew his mother's recipe for fried chicken. She used eleven different herbs and spices.

After making his list he went to a nearby restaurant and asked if he could cook the chicken, and they said "yes." It soon became the most popular item on the menu. Before long, he opened his own restaurant, and then others, and eventually a string of restaurants. Finally, Colonel Harland Sanders sold his Kentucky Fried Chicken business that had franchises all across America.

He retired a second time and continued in the service of the company as a public relations representative for a quarter of a million dollars a year until his death.

Now there was a man who did not allow himself to be defeated by discouragement.

We will not be discouraged and defeated either if we will follow God with an uncommon faith.

So, where are you today? What are you facing . . .

The Unknown,

The Unlikely,

The Unreceived, or

The Unwanted?

Regardless of where you are, trust God. Trust Him with that faith that is unique to His children.

It is one thing to have a hero. It is another to be someone else's hero. Live such a life of faith you become a hero to someone else.