

The Patriarchs of Faith

by A.B. Simpson

The sermon explores the lives of the patriarchs in the Bible, highlighting their faith and its various expressions, from the faith that saves to the faith that suffers.

Scripture: Genesis 4:4, Genesis 5:24, Genesis 6:22, Genesis 12:1, Genesis 21:2, Genesis 32:28, Genesis 50:20, Romans 8:28, Galatians 2:20, Hebrews 11:2

Topics: "Faith", "Examples of Faith"

Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the significance of faith as demonstrated by the patriarchs in Hebrews 11, illustrating how their lives reflect a divine power that transcends mere human virtue. He contrasts biblical figures like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph with mythological heroes, highlighting that their achievements stemmed from faith in God rather than personal merit. Each patriarch exemplifies a different aspect of faith: Abel's faith that saves, Enoch's faith that sanctifies, Noah's faith that separates, Abraham's obedience of faith, Isaac's enduring faith, Jacob's disciplined faith, and Joseph's overcoming faith. Simpson encourages believers to draw strength from these examples, recognizing that true faith connects us to God's power and purpose. Ultimately, he points to Jesus as the ultimate author and finisher of our faith.

Transcript

"For by it [faith] the elders obtained a good report" (Heb. 11: 2).

That is to say, the men of old, the patriarchs of ancient times, made a record and obtained witness to their high character and achievements only through faith.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is a star cluster in the firmament of inspired biography. It is more: it is a whole Milky Way crowded with constellations of light and glory. Think a moment of the difference between the heroes of mythology and ancient secular history and the characters of this inspired cluster, and you will be struck with the self-evidencing power of the Bible. Just as the character of Jesus Christ is the supreme evidence of the divinity of His teachings, so these ancient lives bear witness to a source of power and goodness infinitely higher than mere human virtue. Look for a moment at the divinities of heathen religions: the coarse and brutal Ram, the household god of India; the cruel Kali, their Supreme female divinity; or even their venerated Buddha himself, who was but a dreamer. Look at the heroes of Greek and Roman history, Aeneas, Romulus, Achilles, Hercules; or at their fabled deities, the imperious Jupiter, the licentious Venus, or any of the real or ideal figures that loom out of the gray antiquity of the world's

traditions. Then contrast with them the humble faith of Abel, the holy walk and glorious translation of Enoch, the magnificent spiritual courage of Noah, the overshadowing grandeur of Abraham's life, the triumphant fortitude and splendid coronation of Joseph's sufferings; and note how the very ideals themselves transcend the characters of human history and tradition as high as heaven is above the earth, and prove to us that back of these conceptions there must have been some greater reality that inspired them and some supernatural power that impelled them.

And this really is the secret of the difference. Man's ideals are but human and reflect the imperfection of the human; back of these lives there is divine power, and they are but reflections of God's goodness and God's strength.

In fact this is the essential difference between the heroes of human history and the examples of the Bible. The character of a Washington, a Dewey, or a Lincoln stands out in bold relief, and men hold up to the rising generation the virtues and achievements of these distinguished examples as patterns of what we can attain by energy, patience, courage, and genius. But the characters of Holy Writ stand forward in the light of something greater and better than themselves. They make no claim to personal superiority. They tell us at the outset that they were but weak and fallible men without strength or virtue, and that all they became and all they accomplished was due to a power behind them.

Take, for example, Jacob in the Old Testament. The one lesson of his life was unlearning, undoing, and suppressing his own self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Take the character of Paul in the New Testament. The very watchword of his experience is: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." These men exhibit not themselves but the grace of God through which they overcame. Thus they became examples of faith, for faith is just that organ that touches God and brings Him into our life, enabling us to cease from our own strength and draw our life and strength from Him alone.

Let us look at this galaxy of holy character and victorious faith, and as we do so we shall find that it consists of a series of groups each complete in itself, and rising to a climax by successive stages.

The first of these groups consists of the eight witnesses taken from the book of Genesis and reaching from Abel to Joseph. We shall find that these eight patterns cover a complete series of progressive steps in religious experience.

I. ABEL, OR THE FAITH THAT SAVES

"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts." Abel began at the beginning. This is more than a great many are willing to do today. Rather they are learning to climb up some other way and get into the life of Christ a little beyond the cross. The other day a clergyman in the old orthodox Southland flung aside a hymn book with a gesture of impatience because of the hymn, "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood," which he said was coarse and unfit for refined ears. The idea of a bath of blood was an outrage on good taste. Happily there was another minister present who was brave enough to get up and read a passage of Zechariah speaking of a "fountain opened . . . for sin and for uncleanness."

The first thing about Abel's faith was that it recognized his sin. He came as a guilty sinner needing atonement, and bringing a sacrifice. Cain came as a gentleman to exchange compliments with God and present some fruits and flowers as a visitor on equal terms. But God would have nothing to do with him.

Faith always takes the sinner's place and then claims the sinner's Savior.

The next thing about Abel's faith was that it brought a bloody sacrifice as the type of the dying Lamb of God. This must always be faith's first acceptable act, to present the blood of Christ as the settlement for our sin and the ground of our acceptance. It was for the sake of this that Abel was accepted, God testifying not of him but of his gifts. God did not look at Abel, but He looked at the lamb, and he, like us, was "accepted in the beloved."

The third thing that happened to Abel was his justification. He was declared righteous. He was recognized as standing in exactly the same relation to God as his great Sacrifice and Representative. And so God pronounces us righteous and treats us as if we were as righteous as His Son and had obeyed every commandment of the law even as He.

And finally Abel received all this by faith. He did not feel it or wait to feel it, but he claimed it simply because it was God's prescribed way. He counted upon it. He took his stand upon it and God made it good to him. And so he was saved in exactly the same way as every poor sinner is today, by coming in simple faith as a sinner, claiming the promise, putting his weight upon it, and going out to act as if it were true for him. There is no finer illustration of the faith that saves than the simple testimony of Hedley Vears the moment he accepted the blood of Christ to cleanse him from all sin and went forth saying: "If this be true for me I act from this moment as a man who has been cleansed from all sin in the blood of Christ."

II. ENOCH, OR THE FAITH THAT SANCTIFIES

This is the natural order. Having found Christ as a Savior we next want to walk with Him as our Sanctifier and very life. And so we find the second step of faith in Enoch's life. The first thing we see about him is his walk. He has begun, now he is going on. This takes in every department of our life, our inner experiences and our outward conduct. It is all to be by faith and under the influence of God.

Next we see Enoch's companion. We are not told so much about Enoch as we are about the One with whom he walked. It was not his holiness that was so marked, but that of his Friend. This is the New Testament conception of holiness; fellowship with Jesus, union with God, Christ in the heart, "Abide in me, and I in you." There is no simpler, deeper, higher definition of the life of faith unless it be the Pauline edition of that truth: "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him." Sanctification is the Christ life; it is to know Him, to be with Him, to have Him in us, to look to Him every moment, and to lean upon Him for everything, drawing our life moment by moment entirely from Him.

Next we are told that he pleased God. The will of God was the rule of his life. The divine acceptance was his constant aim and joy. His supreme purpose was his Master's example, His Master's Word. We can please God too. The best part of it is to want to please Him. A little child full of imperfection can have a perfect heart to please its mother, and even amid all our errors of judgment and stumbling steps our hearts can still turn to Him as the needle to the pole and say: "Lord, thou knowest that I love thee."

And finally we are told how Enoch pleased God and walked with God and had the testimony that God accepted and loved him. It was by faith. He just believed in the love of God. He walked with Him in confidence. He looked to Him as a little child. He leaned hard upon His presence and dwelt in the very love-life of his Lord. So let us by faith realize the Master's precious words: "As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love."

III. NOAH, OR THE FAITH THAT SEPARATES

"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is by faith." The difference between Noah and the people of his age is this, that they were living for the present world, building their houses, investing their money, forming their attachments as though the existing order of things was to go on forever, while Noah believed that his present age was condemned and soon to pass away, and all his plans and works had reference to the age beyond on the other side of the flood. They were "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage," but Noah was building that house of refuge that was to bear him across to his true inheritance on the shores of the new world which faith continually saw before. Thus Noah's was a separated life and it was separated by his belief of the great fact which God told him respecting the destruction of the world by the flood and the new age that was to follow.

So, beloved, our lives must be separated from this present age. "This I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none ; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world [that is, the stage show which is merely being acted for an hour] passeth away." The only power that can lift us into this and keep us there is the blessed hope of Christ's coming believed and realized. It will make the next age so real that the present age will lose its power of attraction and we shall live under the "power of the age to come." It is one thing to hold the theory of the Lord's coming; it is another to believe and realize it and constantly live under its power. This can only be effected through a realizing faith, a faith that condemns the world as unworthy of our affection and confidence, and gives us our inheritance in the age to come.

When the old city of Rome was abandoned as the capital of the great Roman Empire, and Constantinople was selected as the new site, then every man who was in the secret would doubtless hasten to exchange his old possessions in the Ancient City of the Caesars, for a little strip of barren sand on the shores of the Bosphorus, for he knew that in a little while the value of the latter would infinitely surpass and supersede the former. And so if we are truly believing in the Lord's return we will be turning all things into the currency of the coming age and investing our lives yonder. Are we doing so, and have we the faith that separates us from this present evil age and leads us like them to live as strangers and pilgrims and look "for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God"?

IV. ABRAHAM, OR THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

"By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went." In a sense Abraham combines in his own life all the other qualities already represented. He is the overshadowing figure of ancient faith and holy character, the father of all that believe, and, as someone has said, the Christopher Columbus who first stepped out into the new realms of the spiritual world and discovered new continents of faith and blessing. The first thing about Abraham's faith is that he obeyed God. Here we see faith not trying to get God to do something for us, but faith doing something to please God. Beloved, if you stop and think you may find that the reason you do not get more from God is because God has been waiting a good while to get something from you. Have you learned the obedience of faith? Have you responded to the call of Abraham's God? Let us take in some of the meaning of this great act of faith. Modern research has taught

us that Ur of the Chaldees, where Abraham dwelt, was no semi-barbarous haunt, but a cultivated, wealthy and important city in ancient Chaldea. In fact, it was a great university town, and to this day there are remains to attest its importance and its culture. Here Abraham had dwelt in the midst of every earthly attraction. Probably he had a position of influence, for everything about his subsequent history attests the dignity of the Arab chief, the man of weight and culture. But he was called in a moment to part from all this and go out into a dismal desert across more than four hundred miles of barren sands, without even knowing the land to which he was to go, or one step of the way. All he knew was that God had said: "I will be with thee." But that was all he asked to know, for the next thing about Abraham's faith that we should note is the fact that he believed God. It was not merely the promise of God, the attraction God held out to him to recompense him for his obedience, but it was God Himself he believed. To him God was a personal reality, and it was enough for him to have God's Word, God's presence, God's guiding hand. Then when he trusted God it was easy to trust His Word. Beloved, back of true faith there is more than a truth, more than a promise, more than a creed. There must also be the living personality and the conscious presence of God Himself. This was what satisfied Abraham's faith and made it easy for him to go out, not knowing whither he went, so long as he was going out with God. This is faith. Beloved, is it our faith?

But again, Abraham had next to learn to believe God's word, for the promise grew more definite and explicit, and soon it became the promise of a country and the promise of a child. But even then it was a promise that, humanly speaking, seemed impossible. The promised child was to be born in his old age contrary to nature, and yet Abraham believed and waited even when men laughed him to scorn, and his faith certainly seemed the wildest fanaticism. He even dared to assume the new name of Abraham, "the father of a multitude," when it would only make him the jeer of all his friends. But still he trusted God and waited for the fulfillment of His word, and in due time the promise was fulfilled. But once again his faith had to be tested in the severest way, and the very thing that God had given him had to be surrendered and given back, although it seemed that it was necessary for the very honor of God Himself that it should be retained. Isaac, through whom the promised seed was to come, had to be laid on the sacrificial altar and God's own very word appear to become a contradiction. But still he wavered not until every test was confirmed and Abraham stood before the ages the supreme example of faith in God and the father of all that believe.

V. SARA, OR THE FAITH THAT TAKES SUPERNATURAL STRENGTH EVEN FOR THE BODY

"Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age." There is something very emphatic in the language here. The particle "herself" seems to imply that Sara was the very last who might have been expected to believe, for indeed she had begun by laughing to scorn the promise of the seed. But the time came when even Sara herself could not only believe, but could take into her body a supernatural power that, like Mary, in later times gave her a glorious part in the lineage of the coming Savior. We are not told of the struggle through which she passed until at last she came to believe the word which once she had laughed to scorn, but we know that God had transformed her doubts into supernatural trust and given through her to the ages the first object lesson of that faith that can take the life of God into our mortal frame and renew our youth like the eagle's. This is the lesson which Samson's life afterwards taught and which the great apostle expresses when he says: "The life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh." This is divine healing in its truest lesson, the very life of God Himself lifting us above the human and anticipating even here the coming resurrection.

VI. ISAAC, OR THE FAITH THAT SUFFERS

The patience of faith. This is one of the largest sections of every true Christian experience. God has given us the story of Isaac to illustrate it. His was the faith that could yield up his own life at his father's command and lie down without a rebellious word on the altar of Moriah. His was the faith that could let another choose for him the object of his dearest affections, and the wife of his bosom. His was the faith that could give up his wells as the Philistines pressed upon him and pushed him from place to place. His was the faith that could renounce his choice of his favorite Esau and give the blessing to Jacob at God's command. All through it was a life of self-renouncing faith and love, the love that "suffereth long and is kind," that "beareth all things, ... endureth all things" and "never faileth." Beloved, it is only faith that can teach us patience. It is only when we know that we have something better that we can let the present good go by and the present wrong be forgotten, and wait for God to vindicate and recompense.

VII. JACOB, OR THE DISCIPLINE OF FAITH

Jacob stands before us as the type of a life that began with poor materials and had to be cut and polished at every point by keen affliction until at last "learned he obedience by the things which he suffered," and the man of earth was transformed into the Israel of God. There is no place where we need faith so much as when God is chastening us and the heart grows discouraged and we are tempted think that He is against us. It is then that we need to believe in His everlasting love and lie like plastic clay in the potter's hand, or like the gold in the consuming crucible and say: "When he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold." Are you there today? Trust Him. "Thine eyes shall see thy teachers." Take the lesson He is so severely teaching. Thank Him that He loves you with inexorable love and will not let you go astray, and some day you will bless Him most of all for the things that hurt you most keenly now. It was not Abraham, it was not Isaac, it was not Joseph, but it was Jacob, the chief of sinners and the meanest of men, that became God's patriarchal prince, the head of Israel's tribes, and the one who gave his own new name of Israel to the race that shall endure when dynasties and empires shall have passed away.

VIII. JOSEPH, OR THE FAITH THAT OVERCOMES SORROW AND TURNS THE CURSE INTO A BLESSING

Space will not permit us to dwell on this illustrious prince further than to say that through all the depths of his humiliation and anguish which were not, like Jacob's, on account of his own sin and folly, but simply through the wrongs of others, there was one golden ray of light that illuminated every dark place, and it was this; that God was in it and above it all. "Ye thought evil against me," he could say to these wicked men, "but God meant it unto good." Only when our faith can see His overruling hand, His ultimate and victorious purpose, shall we also be able to rise above our sorrows and "glorify ye the Lord in the fires."

Standing once on the banks of the St. Lawrence during a summer holiday, I threw my little ships of paper and of pine into the stream beside me, and I noticed that they all flowed upward against the stream. At first I wondered, and said, "Am I mistaken, does the river run the other way?" Then I looked into the center of the stream and saw a great log sweeping down toward the rapids a little below. "Why no," I said. I looked again and then I understood. Ah, this is but an eddy on the shore and things are not what they seem. And so, beloved, if you look at the things immediately around you they may often appear to be going in the wrong direction, but if you will look up to God and fix your faith upon the great mid-current of His love and faithfulness, you will find that one unvarying purpose of blessing is running through it all and you will know that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

God gives us the faith of Abel that saves; the faith of Enoch that sanctifies; the faith of Noah that separates; the faith of Abraham that obeys; the faith of Isaac that endures; the faith of Jacob that learns; and the faith of Joseph that overcomes wrong and sorrow and turns every midnight into morning; and finally, above all the faith of Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame."

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