

Week 9 Devotional™ Reading

## **A Daily Devotional on the Book of Hebrews**

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## Faith Defined and Demonstrated

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. – Hebrews 11:1-3 ESV*

What exactly is faith? How do you know when you have it? When do you know that you are living by it? The author of Hebrews, like Paul, spent a great deal of time defending the doctrine of faith. They both believed it was essential to salvation and non-negotiable. The author of Hebrews even goes so far as to say, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Hebrews 11:6 ESV). Both Paul and the author of Hebrews quote from the passage in the book of Habakkuk, “but the righteous shall live by his faith”, to support their position on faith. For both men, faith and righteousness were inseparable. You couldn’t have one without the other. To attempt to achieve the kind of righteousness God demands, apart from faith, would be impossible and illogical. He had given the law to the people of Israel to show them the extent of the righteousness He required and the utter futility of trying to live it out on their own. They couldn’t do it. And because God knew they would not be able to keep the law, He provided them with the sacrificial system to atone for the sins they would inevitably commit. And as the author has already revealed, the law and the sacrificial system were “but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities” (Hebrews 10:1a ESV). The people sinned and the offered sacrifices for those sins, year after year. And the author broke the news to his Jewish audience, “it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near” (Hebrews 10:1b ESV).

The law was intended to reveal God’s righteous standards and expose man’s sin. Paul explained, “For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are” (Romans 3:20 NLT). The sacrifices demonstrated that God’s wrath against sin was real and required the shedding of blood to atone for those sins. “In fact, according to the law of Moses, nearly everything was purified with blood. For without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22 NLT). But while the blood of bulls and goats could provide temporary atonement for sins, God sent His Son to provide a permanent solution to man’s sin problem and a way to escape the sentence of death hanging over his head. But God’s plan of salvation would require faith – “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV).

Faith is always forward looking. It is based on the yet unseen and the as yet unfulfilled. Peter gives us a wonderful glimpse of what faith should like for us as believers:

*So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So*

*when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls. – 1 Peter 1:6-9 NLT*

The author of Hebrews has told us, “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water,” (Hebrews 10:22 ESV). We are to “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” (Hebrews 10:23 ESV). He praised his readers for having “joyfully accepting the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Hebrews 10:34 ESV). In other words, they were willing to put up with loss in this world because of their confidence in the promise of God that assured them of great gain in the world to come. They were “not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” (Hebrews 10:39 ESV). Their faith was future-oriented. They believed the promises of God. They had an assurance of things hoped for and a conviction of things not seen.

That is exactly what Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth to keep doing.

*That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, **we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen.** For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever. – 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 NLT*

If we remove the hope of God's future promises, we will find it hard to endure the present trials of this life. If we live as if this is all there is, then we will grow weary, disappointed and disillusioned with our salvation. But God's salvation includes our future glorification. There is more to our faith than simply the assurance that we have been saved and our sins are forgiven. We will one day be redeemed and given new bodies. We will be freed once and for all from our battle with indwelling sin. Our faith must always have a future focus. The apostle John, like a loving pastor, reminds us, “Dear friends, we are already God's children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is” (1 John 3:2 NLT). That is our hope. That is the basis of our faith. And the author of Hebrews will spend the rest of this chapter demonstrating what this kind of faith looks like in real life, using the Old Testament saints as examples of living, breathing faith lived out in real life.

## By Faith

*By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. – Hebrews 11:4 ESV*

This chapter of Hebrews opens with the familiar words, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” But as 21st-Century Christians we struggle understanding exactly what the author means. Faith is a nebulous and sometimes mysterious thing to us. We say we have it, but we’re not exactly sure what it is or what it looks like. We’re not sure if it is something we have to muster up or if it is given to us by God. When we think we have it, we wonder if we have enough of it. So, while we would define ourselves as a “people of faith”, we regularly wrestle with the concept. So, the author of Hebrews has given us the content of chapter 11 to help us. He starts out by telling us that “by faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God” (Hebrews 11:3 ESV). We weren’t there. We didn’t see it happen. So, we have to take God at His word – by faith. The book of Genesis tells us how the universe was created by God, and we must believe that it happened just as it says it did. When we do, we are exhibiting faith. We are giving evidence of a “conviction of things not seen”. Faith involves trust. It requires belief. And it is based on hope. But we tend to use the word “hope” in a purely speculative sense. We say things like, “I hope I win the lottery!” or “I hope I he asks me out!” Our hope usually lacks assurance or a sense of confidence. It tends to be little more than wishful thinking. But that is not what the author of Hebrews is talking about. So he gives us further evidence of faith from the lives of the Old Testament saints.

Nineteen different times in this chapter, the author will use the phrase, “by faith”. His point seems to be that faith was both the motivator and the power behind the actions of those individuals he lists. What they did was done because of faith. Faith in something hoped for and as yet unseen. Faith is God-focused and future-oriented. It has its roots in the faithfulness of God. It gets its strength from the promises made by God. So, when Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, is said to have “offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain”, faith is central to understanding the difference between his sacrifice and that of his brothers. It has less to do with the content of their individual sacrifices than the hearts of the men who made them. The question we have to ask is why either of these two sons of Adam and Eve were making sacrifices to God at all. Where did they learn to make sacrifices? We don’t see evidence of this practice in the Garden of Eden. We see no command given by God to Adam and Eve to offer up sacrifices to Him. So why were their sons doing so? If you go back to the original story in Genesis, which the author’s Jewish audience would have known well, it tells us:

*Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. – Genesis 4:2-5 ESV*

The phrase, “in the course of time” would seem to indicate that this was a regular occurrence, that the first family had established a habit of offering sacrifices to God. There is no indication that this was something that God required of them. It appears to be wholly voluntary. And each son brought an offering that was consistent with his area of expertise. Abel brought the firstborn of his flock and Cain brought the fruit of the ground. One brought animals while the other brought produce. The issue does not seem to be with the quality or quantity of their offerings. It does not appear to have anything to do with the content of their offerings. The issue was their faith. Cain gave an offering of the fruit of the ground. He most likely gave grain, dates, figs, or whatever else he had grown. But keep in mind, he gave “the fruit of the ground.” He did not give God the tree from which the fruit grew. So, he was assured of having more fruit to replace what he had given. It also does not say that he gave God the *best* of his fruit. He simply gave God a portion. And yet, of Abel it is said that he gave the “firstborn of his flock and their fat portions.” In other words, Abel gave the best and he gave them God permanently. He didn’t just offer them to God, he sacrificed them. Abel would never benefit from them. They would never breed and produce more sheep. They would not grow up and produce milk. They would never serve as food on the table for Abel’s family. He had given them to God and placed his faith in God that He would provide.

We know that Cain went on to kill his brother. Why? The author of Hebrews tells us that Abel’s offering was “commended as righteous” because he made it based on faith. The apostle John provides additional insight into what is going on. “We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous” (1 John 3:12 ESV). If Abel’s offering or deed was commended as righteous because of his faith, then it would seem that Cain’s deeds were deemed unrighteous by God because of his lack of faith. He was not trusting God for His future provision. He wasn’t giving God his best and trusting God to provide for his future needs. He was simply going through the motions. And when God rejected his offering, Cain became angry. God asked him, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:6-7 ESV). What did God mean by “if you do well”? It would seem that He was talking about faith. Cain hoped for more crops. He hoped for abundant fruit. He wanted success. His concern was for future provision. But rather than trust God, he chose to trust in his own effort to supply his needs. He lacked faith in God and his offering demonstrated it. His offering required no sacrifice, no dependence upon God.

By sacrificing the lives of his firstborn flocks, Abel was putting his hope of future provision in the hands of God. There is no doubt that he wanted his flocks to grow, but by offering his firstborn to God, he was having to place his assurance in God, not his flocks. He was showing that his faith was in God, the one who created the entire universe. Abel’s faith was in the God who had created his flocks. Cain’s faith was in the fruit he had grown and his own ability to grow more. His offering was more of a statement to God of “look what I have done!” Abel’s offering was an expression of thanks to God for all He had done and a statement of faith in all that God was going to do in the future.

## Death-Defying Faith

*By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. – Hebrews 11:5-6 ESV*

We don't know a whole lot about Enoch. Other than what we read about him here in Hebrews, the only other mention of him is found in the book of Genesis. He's part of a genealogical list that shows the line of man from Adam all the way to Noah. "When Enoch had lived 65 years, he fathered Methuselah. Enoch walked with God after he fathered Methuselah 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were 365 years. Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:21-24 ESV). He lived to the ripe old age of 365. But his time on earth was short compared to that of his father (962 years) and son (969 years). Enoch, as the genealogical list suggests, lived in the days before the flood. While there have been many suggestions to explain why men lived so much longer in those days, no one really knows why. But we do see that, over time, the longevity of man diminishes dramatically. Most likely as a result of the ongoing effects of sin and the curse of death on the human body.

But Enoch lived over three centuries. In our day, it is rare for anyone to make it to the single century mark. But the remarkable thing about Enoch was not his lifespan, but his departure from this earth. The Genesis account tells us "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament says he "was not found" He was on this earth for 365 days and then one day, he was gone. But unlike very other man listed in the genealogical record found in Genesis 5, he didn't die. He is the only one in the list whose name is not followed by the words, "and he died." Enoch was taken. He would have lived longer, but God took Enoch to be with Him. The author of Hebrews explains, "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death." Enoch was spared the fate of all men ever since the fall. He was glorified and received his redeemed body without having to suffer the inevitable and inescapable reality of death. He was there one day and gone the next. The Scriptures simply tell us "he was not found, because God had taken him." Why? Because of his faith. But we are told that Enoch's faith showed up in the way he lived his life. "Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God" (Hebrews 11:5b ESV).

Two times in the Genesis passage, we are told that "Enoch walked with God." The Hebrew word for "walked" is *halak* and it can be used to refer to literal walking or physical movement, but it can also be used to refer to living life. So, in other words, Enoch lived his life *with* God. It is the same idea expressed by God to Abraham in Genesis 17. "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless'" (Genesis 17:1 ESV). God was commanding Abraham to live his life with the awareness that he was doing so in the presence of God. And when God told Abraham to be blameless, He was not demanding perfection. The Hebrew word for "blameless" is *tamiym* and it means "complete, whole, entire, sound" (Hebrew Lexicon :: H8549 (KJV). Blue Letter Bible).

Abraham was being told to live his entire life, his whole life, with the constant awareness that God was watching. There was to be no compartmentalization, no hidden areas. He was to live as if God was with him at all times, because He was.

And that is how Enoch lived. He lived by faith, believing that God was with Him every day and in every circumstance. Enoch couldn't see God, but he believed in Him. The author of Hebrews explains that "without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6 ESV). Enoch believed God existed even though many around him did not. That genealogical record found in Genesis 5 gives us an abbreviated glimpse of mankind's trajectory from the fall of Adam to the days on Noah. In the very next chapter of Genesis we read, "The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So, the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart" (Genesis 6:5-6 NLT). By the time we get to the days of Noah, we find that "God saw that the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence. God observed all this corruption in the world, for everyone on earth was corrupt." (Genesis 6:11-12 NLT). The path from Adam to Noah was not an easy one. It was filled with increasing sin, violence, godlessness and wickedness. The further man got away from the garden, the dimmer his recollection of God became. And in the midst of this downward spiral, Enoch stood out like a bright light. He was a beacon of faith in the midst of the darkness of man's increasing sinfulness. He believed God existed and that He would reward those who please Him.

The text tells us, "before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God." He had lived a life that pleased God, by faith. He was not self-seeking, but God-pleasing. He lived as if God exists and as if God was walking with him every moment of every day. His God was not distant or disinterested in his life. His God was near and lovingly involved in every aspect of his daily walk. He lived to please God, by faith. He lived to obey God, by faith. He lived to bring glory and honor to God, by faith. To walk with God requires faith in God. You have to believe that He exists and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. You have to believe that He sees and that He cares. Enoch longed and hoped for the reward of God without ever really knowing exactly what the reward might be. It is likely that Enoch would have lived many more years on this earth, just like his father and son. But God rewarded Enoch by taking him in mid-life, and by sparing him the pain and suffering of death. He also didn't have to endure what would have had to have been a prolonged period of old age should he have lived. In those days before the flood, men enjoyed long life, but they still had to face the inevitable reality of sin.

Enoch had faith in God, and he was rewarded by God with escape from the curse of death. "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death" (Hebrews 11:5a ESV). That is the ultimate reward of all those who place their faith in God by trusting in His Son's sacrifice on the cross on their behalf. As Jesus told Mary and Martha at the graveside of their brother, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die" (John 11:25-26 NLT).



Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. We are to live our lives on this earth, believing that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him and that His ultimate reward is a death-defying escape from this world into eternal life in His presence.



## Flood Assurance

*By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. – Hebrews 11:7 ESV*

The state of affairs on planet earth have not always been as bright and cheerful as they are today. Believe it or not, there was a time when things got so bad that God decided He had had enough and decided to take a mulligan. He was going to wipe everything out and take a do-over. We read about it in the book of Genesis.

*The Lord observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil. So the Lord was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart. And the Lord said, "I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them." But Noah found favor with the Lord. – Genesis 6:5-8 NLT*

Now before we get smug and pat ourselves on the back for not being near as bad as our antediluvian ancestors, the only reason we haven't experienced the same fate is because of the covenant God made with Noah promising to never destroy the world by water again. But there's another reason we should refrain from thinking that we are somehow better than our pre-flood relatives. Paul tells us in Romans, "even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction. He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory" (Romans 9:22-23 NLT). It is simply because of God's desire to shower His mercy through the gift of His Son that He has not chosen to destroy each and every one of us. But back to Noah. Notice what it says at the end of the passage in Genesis. "But Noah found favor with the Lord". In the midst of all the human wickedness on the earth, Noah had managed to remain in a right standing with God. We might ask our selves why. Why had Noah kept faithful to God when everyone else was headed in the opposite direction morally and spiritually? What kept him from giving up and giving in to the peer pressure around him? The author of Hebrews tells us. As he did in speaking about Enoch, he opens his short essay on Noah with the words, "By faith..."

Noah was a man of faith. He believed God existed and was a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). Moses, under the inspiration of the Spirit, wrote, "Noah was a righteous man, the only blameless person living on earth at the time, and he walked in close fellowship with God." (Genesis 6:9 NLT). Noah wasn't perfect or sinless. The word "blameless" simply means that he was whole or complete in his devotion to God. He lives his entire life before God with no hidden areas or compartmentalization. He had managed to remain faithful to God because he believed God was faithful. And we're told that Noah was "warned by God concerning events

as yet unseen”. God shared with Noah some bad news concerning His decision to destroy mankind. We read about it in the Genesis account.

*Now God saw that the earth had become corrupt and was filled with violence. God observed all this corruption in the world, for everyone on earth was corrupt. So God said to Noah, “I have decided to destroy all living creatures, for they have filled the earth with violence. Yes, I will wipe them all out along with the earth!” – Genesis 6:11-13 NLT*

In one sense, God was not telling Noah anything he did not already know. He knew the world around him was corrupt and filled with violence. He knew his neighbors well. He had been living his life surrounded by an ever-growing climate of sin. But he had to have been blown away at the news of God’s plan to wipe out everything and everyone. But the good news was that God was going to spare Noah and his family. Now here comes the part where Noah’s faith was going to come into play. God gave Noah one more detail concerning His plan that was going to have a dramatic, life-altering impact on Noah.

*“Build a large boat from cypress wood and waterproof it with tar, inside and out. Then construct decks and stalls throughout its interior. Make the boat 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high. Leave an 18-inch opening below the roof all the way around the boat. Put the door on the side, and build three decks inside the boat—lower, middle, and upper. “Look! I am about to cover the earth with a flood that will destroy every living thing that breathes. Everything on earth will die. But I will confirm my covenant with you. So enter the boat—you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring a pair of every kind of animal—a male and a female—into the boat with you to keep them alive during the flood. Pairs of every kind of bird, and every kind of animal, and every kind of small animal that scurries along the ground, will come to you to be kept alive. And be sure to take on board enough food for your family and for all the animals.” – Genesis 6:14-21 NLT*

There are a number of things we have to keep in mind when we read this all-too-familiar account. First of all, Noah had never seen a boat before. In fact, there is no indication that Noah had even seen a body of water large enough to float a boat before. And there are those who believe that Noah had never seen rain before. They arrive at this conclusion from a passage earlier in Genesis that describes conditions on the earth before God had made man. “When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground” (Genesis 2:5-6 ESV). On top of all this, we know that Noah was nearly 600 years old when he received this devastating news from God. He was being asked by God to build a massive boat *and* collect two of every kind of animal, all under a looming deadline that was bringing the destruction of the entire planet. Oh, and as if there wasn’t enough pressure on Noah, this boat was going to be his only means of salvation. So how did Noah respond to this unbelievable and seemingly impossible assignment from God. Moses tells us, rather matter-of-factly: “So Noah did everything exactly as God had commanded him” (Genesis 6:22 NLT).

What was the description of faith given to us in verse one of Hebrews 11? “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” There is no indication that Noah questioned God or tried to talk God out of His plan. He didn’t complain about the scope of the project or the impossibility of the assignment. He simply did what God told him to do. Why? Because he believed God. In “reverent fear” he went about construction the ark that would prove to be the means of his salvation. It all sounded implausible and impossible. The task before him had to feel overwhelming and insurmountable. This was not a typical do-it-yourself project. He wasn’t adding a deck onto the back of his house. He was building a massive boat. And all on blind faith. Yet he had an assurance of what he was hoping for – that he and his family would survive the flood. He had a conviction of things unseen – that this boat would float and that this entire project would not end in disaster. Because he had faith in God.

When all is said and done, Noah was saved by faith, not a boat. Actually, Noah was saved by God. But it took belief in the plan of God for Noah to experience that salvation. Had he never built the boat, he would have died, along with his entire family. But he listened, believed, and obeyed. And he was saved. Noah had to believe in the wrath of God as well as the mercy of God. He had to believe that God, in His justice, would destroy mankind because of their sin. But he also had to believe that God was offering him a way of escape, a means of salvation – by faith. And we read the sobering words in Genesis: “All were destroyed. The only people who survived were Noah and those with him in the boat” (Genesis 7:23 NLT). Noah’s actions, based on his faith in God, resulted not only in his salvation, but in him becoming “an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” (Hebrews 11:7b).



## Not Seeing is Believing

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. – Hebrews 11:8-10 ESV*

The first four words of this section of Hebrews 11 are critical: “By faith Abraham obeyed.” It would be easy to put the emphasis on the latter half of the statement, making the obedience of Abraham the point. But the author is clearly out to build a case for his opening statement: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). Abraham’s obedience, while important, takes a back seat to his faith. It is a byproduct of his faith. As the author said in verse six, “without faith it is impossible to please God.”

We have to go back to the Old Testament book of Genesis to see the complete story of Abraham’s call and his subsequent obedience to that call. He was living in Haran with his father and the rest of his family. They had moved there from Ur. And it was while he was living in Haran that God came to Abram (his original name), and said, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and **go to the land that I will show you**. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3 ESV). What’s important to notice is that the text indicates that God had not told him exactly where he was going. Even the passage in Hebrews says that Abram “went out, not knowing where he was going.” This is an important part of the story. All Abram knew was that God had called him and he was offering to give him some land and to make him a great nation. While some pretty impressive promises, let’s admit that they *were* a bit vague. Anyone would naturally want to know *where* and *how*. Where do you want me to go? How are you going to make me a great nation? But the point is that, “by faith Abraham obeyed.” He had no idea where he was going or how God was going to pull off what He had promised.

And Genesis tells us that Abram headed out, under the direction of God. Before long he found himself in the land of Canaan, a land occupied by none other than the Canaanites, the descendants of Ham, one of the sons of Noah. Abram was a descendant of Shem, another son of Noah. So, once he got to where God was sending him, Abram found the land already taken by some distant family members. The author of Hebrews reminds us that “**By faith** he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land” (Hebrews 11:9 ESV). And while the occupants of the land were living in houses, Abram and his family were forced to live in tents. They were little more than squatters and vagabonds, moving about from place to place, with no sense of stability or ownership. And this would last for generations, spanning the lives of Isaac and Jacob. He had received a promise of a land but never got to truly live in it or occupy it. The

author tells us that “**he was looking forward** to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10 ESV). The Greek word the author uses is *ekdechomai* and it means “to look for, expect, wait for, await” (Greek Lexicon :: G1551 (KJV). Blue Letter Bible. Web. 4 Feb, 2016. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org>). Abram was waiting for, expecting, anticipating some that had not yet come. He was eagerly and hopefully waiting for God to make his residence a permanent one. His understanding of the promise was that it would include a city made up of bricks and mortar, with walls, ceilings and floors – not a nomadic existence spent living in tents.

But he had to wait. And he had to deal with not only the existence of Canaanites, but the impact of a debilitating drought. It was so bad he was forced to flee to Egypt. Not exactly what he was probably expecting. But through a series of unexpected chain of events, Abram arrived back in Canaan a wealthy man with lots of livestock. In fact, his flocks were so large that he and his nephew Lot had to decide to part ways in order to keep from running into conflicts over pasturing rights. And when he gave Lot the first choice of land, he chose the very best, leaving Abram with the less attractive portion. But Abram was trusting God. He was placing his hope and convictions in the promises of God. So that, even after Abram gave Lot the choice of the best land, God reconfirmed His promise to him.

*Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted! Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you. – Genesis 13:14-17 ESV*

According to God, the land was as good as his – all of it. Every square acre of it, including all of the land occupied by the Canaanites and by Lot. It was Abram’s land. Even though he had yet to take possession of a single foot of it. Abram’s faith was in God and His word. The fact that he did not have a permanent home or the deed to a piece of property in his possession did not diminish his belief that God was going to follow through on His promise. His faith was the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Abram and all the others listed in chapter 11, “died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13 ESV). Theirs’ was a future-focused faith. It was based on a promise. And the promise was assured because the promise-maker was trustworthy. Abram knew that the promise of God was far greater and encompassed far more than just his individual blessing. God’s promise was regarding future generations and had far-reaching future applications. Abram would never live to see the complete fulfillment of God’s promise. He would be long gone by the time his descendants moved to Egypt. He would never live to see them multiply and grow to such a degree that the Pharaoh would become fearful of them. He would not experience the joy of watching God set his descendants free from captivity and led to the promised land. He would not enjoy the thrill of seeing them conquer the land of Canaan and make it their own. He would not see the rise of the kingdom of David or the splendor of the



kingdom of Solomon. And he would never live to see the coming of the Messiah, the one through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

But Abram believed. He had faith. He obeyed. He worshiped. He waited. And he left the future in God's hands. He had future faith because he believed in an eternal God who never fails to keep His word or fulfill His commitments. Paul would have us live by faith as Abram did. He reminds us, "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Romans 8:23-25 ESV).



## Faith is Not a Commodity

*By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. – Hebrews 11:11-12 ESV*

The line, “even when she was past the age” is a bit of an understatement. Sarah, Abraham’s wife, was way past the age of being able to conceive. She was close to her nineties and, on top of that, she was barren. We read in Genesis 18, “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” (Genesis 18:11 ESV). And when they were given the news from God that they were going to have a son, both Sarah and Abraham expressed doubt. When God had told Abraham that he would make the father of a great nation, Abraham’s response was, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” (Genesis 15:2 ESV). The only solution Abraham could see was using one of his household servants as an heir. Sarah’s solution was to give Abraham her Egyptian household servant to impregnate. “Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her” (Genesis 16:2 ESV). And, of course, Abraham took her up on her offer. But God had other plans and informed Abraham once again what He intended to do. “I will bless her [Sarah], and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (Genesis 17:6 ESV). Abraham’s response? He laughed. And he said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Genesis 17:17 ESV). But God confirmed His promise and assured Abraham that the impossible would happen. Some time later, when God appeared to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, God gave him exciting news. “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son” (Genesis 18:10 ESV). And Sarah, eavesdropping at the door to the tent, “laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’” (Genesis 17:12 ESV). She had doubts, reservations, and a bit of a hard time seeing how any of this was going to happen. The circumstances surrounding her life seemed to strongly contradict what God was saying.

And yet, Hebrews says, “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive.” This seems like a gross exaggeration of the facts. Both Abraham and Sarah laughed at the news of God’s plan. Both came up with alternative options, plan B’s, to help God out. And yet it says that Sarah had faith. I think the problem is that we tend to put the emphasis on Sarah’s faith, rather than the object of her faith. It says that by faith she received the power to conceive. All Sarah could do was trust the power. Her faith did not bring the power into existence or make the results of that power come about. She had to stop trying to do things on her own and simply rest in the power of God’s promise. She had to take her eyes off the circumstances, her old age and barren condition, and trust God. It was by faith that Sarah had to wait for the miracle of conception and the fulfillment of God’s promise. Remember how this chapter started out. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Genesis 11:1 ESV). Sarah had

longed and hoped for a child for decades. She had desperately desired to have a baby but had been forced to give up on that dream because of her condition. But when God promised to give her and Abraham a child, she had one recourse: to take what God said by faith. She was forced to trust God. He was going to do what He had promised to do, and He was not going to accept any alternative solution, no matter how well-intentioned. Eleazar and Ishmael would not suffice. Adoption was not an option. Sarah was going to have to trust God. And so, it says, "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive."

Sarah had to come to grips with the fact that God was faithful and that He was powerful. He had the character and the power to back up what He said. And it says she "considered him faithful who had promised." After all her conniving, doubting, whining and self-sufficient planning, Sarah determined to trust God. She decided to put her faith in the one who had promised. And in God's perfect timing, "The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him" (Genesis 21:1-2 ESV). She placed her faith in God, and He came through. "And Sarah said, 'God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.' And she said, 'Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age'" (Genesis 21:6-7 ESV). Sarah's faith did not make any of this happen. Her faith was simply a confidence and conviction that the one who promised it *would* happen had the power to make it happen. She put her hopes in His hands. She put her fears and doubts on His shoulders. She quit worrying and started believing. She stopped trying to take matters into her own hands and left them in the highly capable and powerful hands of God. Our problem is not that we don't believe what God has promised, it is that we somehow think He needs our help in bringing it about. Faith is about giving up and resting on God's faithfulness and sufficiency. It is about reliance upon His power, instead of our own. It involves putting our hope in God rather than allowing the circumstances surrounding us to suck the hope out of us. Faith is less a commodity than it is a state of being. It is a place to which we come when we are ready to take God at His word and rest in the reality of His power to do what He has promised. "Therefore from one man [and woman], and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."

## What Are You Hoping For?

*These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. – Hebrews 11:13-16 ESV*

“These all died in faith.” That statement sounds so odd. It seems to make no sense. These people (the patriarchs), had faith, but they died, “no having received the things promised.” Then what is the point of faith, we might ask. Why bother having faith if it isn’t going to do you any good? But that is not the author’s point. He is juxtaposing our temporal, earthly perspective with one that is eternal and future-oriented. Faith is not a point-in-time experience that takes place once in a lifetime. It is a way of life for a lifetime. We often hear people express their faith story in terms like, “I came to faith in Christ when I was 14-years old” Or “I placed my faith in Christ when I was in my thirties.” Those statements are not incorrect or inaccurate, but they display an insufficient understanding of what faith really is. Faith is a journey, a pilgrimage. It involves this life, but it goes beyond it. As the familiar verse says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 ESV). Our faith or belief in Christ is to have an eternal focus, not a temporal one. Jesus told Mary and Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die yet shall he live” (John 11:25 ESV). Physical death is still inevitable, but our faith is based on the promise that it is not the end of life, but rather, just the beginning.

When the author opened up this section of his letter with the words, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” we tend to read them with a temporal slant. We hope for a lot of things in this life. We hope for success. We hope for good health. We hope our marriage will survive. We hope for a better-paying job. We hope our children will one day accept Christ and live for Him. And then we try and muster up enough faith so that these things will come about. But that is a misunderstanding of faith. Faith is not just another version of the power of positive thinking. In our lifetimes we have seen faith turned into some distorted name-it-claim-it theology that attempts to turn God into some kind of a cosmic genie in a bottle. We come up with our list of hopes and wishes, and then He is obligated to make them happen. But that is not the essence of biblical faith. The apostle Paul would have us understand faith differently. He wrote, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:1-4 ESV). Seek the things that are above. Set your minds on things that are above. Have an eternal-focus and a heavenly perspective. Paul told the believers in Ephesus that he longed for their spiritual enlightenment, “that you may know what is **the hope to which he has called you**, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints”

(Ephesians 1:18 ESV). Ultimately, as believers, our hope is to be on our future redemption and glorification. Paul said, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18 ESV). We live far too often with temporal hopes rather than eternal ones. We place all our hopes in this world instead of the next. We expect and sometimes demand heaven on earth, but God has something else in store. Something far better.

The patriarchs had to acknowledge that “they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” Abraham and Sarah had to live as nomads, moving from one place to another, never having a real home and never getting to live in the land promised to them by God. They never had the pleasure of seeing their descendants multiply into a great nation. By the time that happened, they were both long gone. But they had faith that it *would* happen. They also had faith that they would live in a better country. Abraham left his hometown and headed out for a new land. He had no idea where he was going but was simply trusting God’s word. He believed that what God was offering him was better than what he already had. He left behind his old way of life for a new one. The author says that God “has prepared for them a city” (Hebrews 11:16b ESV), a heavenly city. The ultimate reward received by Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, David, Enoch, Abel and all the other Old Testament saints listed in this passage, was heaven. Their lives spent on this planet were temporary and their days were filled with trials, troubles, setbacks and disappointments. But they maintained their faith in God and His goodness.

As Christians, we must live with a constant awareness that this world is not our home. We are simply passing through on our way to some place better. Like Abraham, we are to recognize our role as aliens and strangers in this “land.” We are not to get comfortable here. We are not to demand of God our best life now. We are not to put our hopes in things that rust, decay, break down, fall apart, get stolen, go out of style, and always fail to bring us the joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment we hoped they would. Remember the author’s description of faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 ESV). We are to be assured of our future place in God’s eternal kingdom, and it is to be what we hope for. We are to have a strong conviction regarding our future glorification and the redemption of our bodies. It is that for which we eagerly wait. Paul put it this way:

*And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for **we long for** our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. **We, too, wait with eager hope** for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. – Romans 8:23*  
NLT

We will all one day die in our faith. But because we have faith, our death will not be the end. It will be the beginning of our eternal life with God the Father and Jesus Christ, His Son. The city in which Abraham and Sarah live at this very moment is far better than any city they could have inhabited on this earth. The descendants they can claim are far greater and more in number than they could ever have imagined, and they include people from every tongue and nation. When we place our faith in God, He does great things. His will is far better than our most

ambitious wishes. His promises are far better than anything we could ever dream up or hope for.