

Faith and Heaven

- ⁷ 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**.
- ⁸ 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**.
- ⁹ 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**.
- ¹⁰ For he was **looking forward to the city that has foundations**, whose designer and builder is God.
- ¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had **promised**.
- ¹² 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.
- ¹³ 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**.
- ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are **seeking a homeland**.

¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.

¹⁶ 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."

³⁹ And all these, though **commended** through their faith, did not receive what was **promised**,

Hebrews 11:7-16, 39

Secularism—The Here and Now

SECULARISM. SECULARIZATION. What comes to your mind when you hear these words? It is fascinating to read various definitions of them on the internet. The *Wikipedia* article begins:

Secularism is the principle of the separation of government institutions and persons mandated to represent the state from religious institutions and religious dignitaries. One manifestation of secularism is asserting the right to be free from religious rule and

teachings, or, in a state declared to be neutral on matters of belief, from the imposition by government of religion or religious practices upon its people. Another manifestation of secularism is the view that public activities and decisions, especially political ones, should be uninfluenced by religious beliefs and/or practices.¹

This fits the second *Your Dictionary* online definition which says, “Secularism ... the belief that religion should not be part of the affairs of the state or part of public education.” Its first definition, however, is quite different. “Secularism is a belief system that rejects religion.”² Secularism was a term coined around 1851 by a British writer who wanted to promote a social order separate from religion, “without actively dismissing or criticizing religious belief.”³ So secularism focuses on the politics and social order of our day, seemingly apart from religion.

“Secularism” comes from the word “secular,” and part of this idea can be derived from that word, but not necessarily

¹ “Secularism,” *Wikipedia*, last accessed 6-7-2016.

² “Secularism,” *Your Dictionary*, <http://www.yourdictionary.com/secularism>, last accessed 6-7-2016.

³ *Wikipedia*.

the other part. The etymology of “secular” comes from the Latin *saeculum* meaning “age, span or time.”⁴ Thus, Ken Myers writing in *TableTalk* magazine writes, “To be secularized is to become more interested in affairs of this age than those of the next.” What he says next however may shock you. “Ironically, secularization can coexist with deep religious convictions. This happens when religious concerns are not so much forgotten as spread out too wide and too thin.”⁵ This is exactly what we find wherever secularism has gone. We do not find the eradication of religion from public life, but the infiltration of other religions in the place of Christianity.

What these religions all have in common is their undeterred, unflinching, resolute, unflinching, unwavering commitment to all things here and now as opposed to the life to come. Hence, secularism. It doesn't matter if it is hedonism and the worship of pleasure, or environmentalism and the worship of nature, or nationalism and the worship of country, or socialism and the worship of utopian equality,

⁴ “Secular,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

⁵ Ken Myers, “Signs of the Times: Hollywood and Heaven,” ed. R. C. Sproul Jr., *Tabletalk Magazine*, June 1993: *Heaven: The Pearl of Great Price* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1993), 60–61.

rationalism and the worship of human reason, or postmodernism and the worship of relativism, or celebism [to coin a term] and the worship of celebrity, all these things focus on this age rather than the age to come.

Myers continues,

Philosopher and historian Eric Voegelin has suggested that the key to understanding modern culture is to see ways in which we have *sacralized the secular*. Sacralizing the secular means expecting to see the fullness of the kingdom in the here and now. Marxism and the social gospel movement are two ideologies that could be described as sacralizing the secular.

While all of life is lived before God, and under the rule of God, Scripture recognizes that some aspects of human experience are rightly recognized as holy, while others are common. Augustine and others contrasted the city of man (the common habitat of humanity, redeemed and unredeemed) with the city of God, the peculiarly holy community of the faithful. The city of man decays and perishes, while the city of God becomes fulfilled and glorified.

In bringing up **the City of God** here, Myers has touched upon something that is key to our passage today. Abraham was looking for a city, **Hebrews 11:10** says. Later on it calls it “a homeland” (14) and “a country” (16). This city, country, and homeland is something that a lot of people—a lot of Christians—are not looking for today. They are far too taken with the affairs of this world to even begin to start thinking about it.

Of Things Unseen

As we continue our way through Hebrews 11, we come to a series of verses that have as a main focus the idea of “**promise.**” The word appears five times (**11:9** x2, **11**, **13**, **17**). That which is promised is something that is “**unseen**” (7). As such, this touches at the very heart of the definition of faith, which is the great subject of our chapter. As you recall, that definition stated, “**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen**” (**11:1**). Do you want to know what it means to have faith in that which is unseen? Then look no farther than the three heroes of old whose busts line the biblical hall of faith.

Their conviction was so strong, so certain, that these people did absolutely crazy things for God in demonstration of this faith. Today we will see this with [Noah](#), [Abraham](#), and [Sarah](#). What kinds of things? Obedient things. Those are things Christians “do.”

In a coming week, we will focus our attention very specifically on the “doing” of the people in this chapter. It is a very important topic. For the sake of this sermon, in part because their “doing” actually has great impact on this age and thus could take away from the main point I want to get across today about secularism and its antidote, I want us to stay focused on where their eyesight was fixed that helped them obey. What was it that was unseen for the Patriarchs? What were they seeing with faith that they could not see with their eyes? And why was it so all-consuming to them when it seems like the only thing we are consumed with in our day is that which we can see?

Noah

As we remember, Hebrews 11 is laid out in such a way that it lists a select set of “heroes” of the faith by name and in

chronological order of their living on this earth. This began with **Abel** (after we were introduced to Jesus at **creation**). Then came **Enoch**. There, the focus was on their **being commended** as righteous by faith. Next in line is Noah, and without giving up the former (as if those were the only two who were commended; cf. **vs. 39**), the focus turns to the unseen. “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” (**Heb 11:7**).

Noah sees something by faith. What does he see? It isn't called a promise here, though it is in fact a promise. It is called **a warning**. There is good news and there is bad news in the Bible. The bad news is a warning. It deals with sin, with death, and with eternal punishment. We read in Genesis, “And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth’” (**Gen 6:13**). Now, we all know what came, but do we really stop and consider the time frame that was involved in this warning?

This wasn't like the movie *Deep Impact*, where Elijah

Wood's character has his telescope pulled out and accidentally discovers an asteroid that scientists quickly learn is going to destroy the earth many months hence. We don't know that God shows Noah any physical sign. It simply doesn't say. We are left with the impression that the man simply believed the Word of God. Furthermore, the warning will not be fulfilled for another 120 years (this is what vs. 3 means when it says "His days shall be 120 years").⁶ A lot can happen in 120 years. For example, in our own country, 120 years ago, virtually no one had electricity or an automobile. There was no radio, no television, no computers, no internet. There were no airplanes, rockets, or satellites. No air conditioning, vacuum cleaners, or even crayons. It is almost impossible to imagine the world only 120 years ago. Why then would Noah believe anything that he was told about a future this far distant? No one else in the entire world believed it. Noah had faith. Faith believes God. If God says it, then it is true.

Noah was given 120 years in order that he might do something with his faith. "Make yourself an ark of gopher

⁶ As the Targum puts it, "Did I not put my holy spirit in them that they might perform good deeds? But behold, their deeds are evil. Behold, I gave them an extension of a hundred and twenty years that they might repent, but they have not done so."

wood ... For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth” (Gen 6:14, 17). Basically, a man one hundred years older than John Calvin would be today (b. 1509), but still living, was told to make a boat the size of a football field, the height of a stadium, miles from the nearest land, spend 120 years making it and preparing it, and then suddenly out of nowhere a gigantic catastrophe would crash down upon it and all life, killing everything outside of the ark, but saving those inside. Put that way, it is a wonder Noah believed and did anything at all. It takes great faith to even believe the story, which is why so many today don't. This all rests on believing God about something utterly unseen or even unknowable by human reason or experiment or science.

In building the ark, three things happened. First, **he saved himself** and his household. Eight people went into the ark alive. Eight people came out of the ark alive. He saved himself in the ark he built, although it was God who saved him. Second, **he condemned the world**. No one else lived through the Great Flood. Noah became the father of us all. If Noah had not built the ark, he would have died along with everyone else. Noah built the ark because of faith. His faith led him to build the ark. His faith caused him to obey God.

His faith made him do that good work. How could he do otherwise if he *really* believed God was telling the truth about the future? Why would he do it if he didn't believe God? To disobey would be to prove that he didn't believe.

In one sense it was the simplest test of proving faith in the history of the world, because the consequences were so vivid and opposite. Build and live. Don't and die. Of course, in another sense, the obedience this took would have been mind boggling. The ridicule, the planning, the work, the effort, the construction, the mocking – and that is just from his own family! If the Flood didn't kill him, maybe preparing for it would! No one ever said it would be easy.

Third, **he became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.** The phrase is literally “**the righteousness through (kata) faith.**” There is a double thought here. First, righteousness comes through faith. That is, a person is righteous because of faith. Faith is the instrument God uses to declare a person righteous. Faith and faith alone. It is righteousness through faith. This is justification.

Second, through faith, Noah did something. He didn't sell all he had and go live on the rooftop of his house waiting for the Rapture to take him away (and if anyone could have

thought this might happen it would be the great grandson of Enoch). What he did was obey God. He was told to build an ark. He built an ark. His obedience was accepted thereby **commending** Noah (“**all these were commended**” vs. 39) and **condemning** the world which perished for lack of faith. Good news and bad news. Thus, Noah’s righteous status began to work itself out in the *already* of his life in a way that righteousness actually became part of what he did. Noah did righteousness because Noah was counted as righteous.

We see this with all of the saints in this Hall of Faith. But again, my focus today is actually on something else. It is on **the future**. There is good news in the Bible. A lot of it. Noah was warned about the future, and so Noah spent 120 years *preparing for the future*. This vision allowed him to persevere through the most difficult of circumstances. His eyesight was focused squarely on the future. Everything he did was spent in preparation for the future. His work was all *for* the future. His work mattered in the here and now. But it was because of the future that he worked here and now and didn’t abandon everything and become one of those dusty old homeless guys with the sign saying, “**The End Is Near!**” He may have preached that (he was a preacher of righteousness;

2Pe 2:5), but he also had a job to do and he did it. Because his eyes were set on the future.

Where are your eyes set? You go off to work every day. You have children you deal with every day. Every day some new task or some new thing to do crosses your path. Often, it is many times a day. Why do you do what you do? Are you doing it in preparation of the future? Or are you only focused on the here and now, not caring about the coming disaster that will consume the enemies of God? I'm not suggesting that everyone has to quit their job and become a street preacher. I'm not saying that the only valuable work is work that literally prepares for the end of the world. I'm saying that whatever you do, you had better be doing it with the future in mind, for if you do not, you are squandering your time and you are not preparing yourself or your family for the coming days.

If you are not a believer, those days are grim indeed. Peter says the world is soon to be destroyed with fire. Therefore, we are to live in light of that truth now. But for the believer, we pass through that fire like Daniel's three friends and we come out the other side *in heaven*. Did you know that God was gracious enough to give Noah a glimpse

of heaven even in that flood? He did it by the ark.

If you have seen any movie or thought for five minutes about life with 10,000 animals in a closed off area for a year, you probably aren't thinking this would be heaven. But it wasn't life *in* the ark that was heaven. It was the ark itself. Here is what I mean.

God didn't just have Noah build a boat to save himself. It is more than a boat. God had Noah built a replica replica of the tabernacle in heaven. Hebrews has talked about the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle being “copies” of the heavenly tabernacle. “Make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits. Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks” (14-16).

At first, this sounds like God is just giving directions to build a boat. Of course he is doing this. But he is doing more.⁷ When we read the Bible together as a whole, other things start to become clear. Noah's ark also has some

⁷ The Epic of Gilgamesh demonstrates this when it describes the Flood Heroes ark as looking like a gigantic rubric's cube. This also demonstrates that “temple” idea of the boat.

fascinating parallels with **Solomon's temple**, which is a permanent copy of the tabernacle. These blueprints for the ark are like early blueprints for temple, except that it doesn't float. The height and length of both are the same. Similarly, Noah's ark has **three stories**: a lower, second, and third deck. The area surrounding the Solomon's temple is also divided into three stories: bottom, middle, and third (**1 Kgs 6:6**). Then we have the idea of a place to **store food**. Noah is told **"Take with you every sort of food that is eaten, and store it up."** Sure, with all those animals you would need a place for food. But curiously, the temple also had storehouses (**1 Kgs 6:8**). Finally, There is the **door** on the ark. This door goes on the **"side."** This is said in proximity to the "roof" of the ark. Solomon is likewise told to finish the roof (**1 Kgs 6:9**), and in the very same paragraph he is told to put a door on the right side (**1 Kgs 6:8**).

Noah's ark shares a geometric relationship with the **ark of covenant**, which is part of that earthly tabernacle that is modeled after the one on heaven. Exactly 80,000 little arks would fit into Noah's ark.⁸ Finally, consider Noah's obedience is done in proximity to the ark. It says, **"Noah did**

⁸ For more see my sermon "Build Me an Ark," Exodus 25:9-20.

this; he did all that God commanded him” (Gen 6:22). This phrase is repeated over and over again with Moses, especially when it comes to finishing the tabernacle.⁹

Through all of this unseen stuff, Noah had his eyes set firmly on heaven. Even when he didn’t realize it, God was providing a little heaven for him to make it through his wrath, as a foretaste of heaven to come. His eyes were fixed on what he could not see. Where are your eyes fixed?

Abraham

We move next to consider Abraham, sometimes called the father of our faith. “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” (Heb 11:8). The immediate focus is on Abraham’s obedience. By faith Abraham obeyed. Again we see the proper order of the thing. Obedience comes from faith. Abraham did what God told him to do because he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

But what did God tell him to do? He was called to move

⁹ Ex 38:22; 39:1, 5, 7, 21, 26, 29, 31; 40:16, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32).

out of his permanent home, his comfort zone, his country, the place where he had grown up, and go ... he had absolutely no idea where he was going. “Go to the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Why didn’t God tell him where he was going? Well, maybe it is because if he had, Abraham might not have gone. It was far away. It was unsettled. It was dangerous. But the main idea seems to be that his faith had to apprehend that which it did not see. This is just like Noah.

The only thing this verse calls this place is Abraham’s “inheritance.” This is classic ancient language of God giving peoples a land to inherit. Even the Greeks knew this (Acts 17:26; cf. Plato, Critias). This is exactly why the story of Abraham follows immediately after the Tower of Babel, when the Most High gave the nations their “inheritance” and divided them up according to the number of the sons of God (Dt 32:8). In the next verse in Hebrews, this is called “the land of promise” (Heb 11:9). Unlike Noah who was promised merely an ark, Abraham was promised a land. Hence, to this day we call Israel the Promised Land.

Now, a man is given an entire land to be his, all his! That would make him king. So he lived like a king, becoming a glutton, womanizer, warrior, statesman, politician, judge,

engineer—like Solomon after him. That isn't what it says. Look at how he lived. “As in a foreign land.” Even though he was being given this land for the rest of his life (after returning from Egypt, Abraham would never again leave the Promised Land), even though it was his permanent inheritance, he treated it like a foreign land. American slaves used to understand this well. “This world is not my home. I'm just a passin' through.” This takes us into the heart of the introduction this morning. Secularism seems to have created the exact opposite mentality from slavery. Has it come to the point where the only home we know and think about is the world, and we are doing everything in our power to make sure we never leave it?

Why do we live our lives like that as Christians? I'm not talking about the Reformed understanding that the world is very much God's world, that he has put us here to have dominion and to advance the kingdom. I'm not talking about Luther saying that if Jesus would return tomorrow, he would plant a tree today. I'm not talking about being so otherworldly minded that we are no earthly good. I am talking about why it is that heaven seems so far from our minds and has such a little impact on what we do with our

bodies. Obviously, that isn't everyone. But when you hear something like this, is it convicting to you? Are you living like Abraham did, an alien in a strange land? Hebrews 11 is given at least to some degree to show the examples of the saints so that you might do what they did.

It gets even more pointed in this regard. “**Living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.**” A tent is a temporary dwelling. Yes, it is true that there are transient societies that move about from place to place. The American Indian was very much like this. In some ways, our own culture is becoming like this too, as people move here and there, rarely staying the same place, the same job, or even the same family for very long. But maybe this says more about our discontentment than anything positive like the need to find food and shelter and provide for our families.

What this says about Abraham and his sons and grandchildren is striking. Abraham had a home. He was quite settled. In my opinion, there is good reason to believe that the man was quite well to do and that he was permanently settled in Babylon, perhaps even as a priest. He knew earthly contentment. He knew luxury, money, and power.

Then he was taken from his home. He was taken from

his job. Taken, yet he went willingly. He was told to go he knew not where, and when he finally got there, he refused to settle down. He didn't build a city (Cain's sons did that). He didn't build a house. He lived in tents. His sons lived in tents. His grandsons lived in tents. All this and it was their land! Yet Abraham seems to have taught his children that this world is not ultimately their inheritance. Something else is. We get the impression here that he taught his family not about loving the world or settling for its treasures, but loving God and looking forward.

To what? “For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). This amazing verse describes a city which is permanent, rather than transient. This is the purpose of saying it has foundations. Those foundations are rooted in eternity itself. Calvin says, “In the world there is nothing but what is transitory and fading ... in earthly buildings, the hands of men make use of materials, the workmanship of God is not unfitly set in opposition to them. Whatever is formed by men is like its authors in instability; so also is the perpetuity of the heavenly life, it corresponds with the nature of God its founder.”

Calvin is calling this city with foundations “[heaven](#).” Abraham was looking forward to heaven! That is why he lived in tents. In [Revelation 21:2-3](#), a city comes down out of heaven from God. It then says that the tabernacle of God is with men, thus linking the city and the tabernacle and heaven together. His gaze on eternal things made his love for temporary things wane. He just didn’t care. Ironically, God made the man extremely wealthy, which would have made it even harder to gaze upon heaven. Yet, Abraham never made his wealth an end to itself. If he had, he would have settled down, built his own city like everyone else, and enjoyed his life in the here and now. Not that he didn’t enjoy his life here and now, but this was not his reason for living. Brothers and sisters, what does Abraham tell you about the kind of faith that you presently have? Where are your priorities?

Many Christians are called to settle down in this life, to raise families, to get regular jobs, and this is good. But you can do this without neglecting heaven. Indeed, you can do these very things with heaven in mind! If you work for the glory of God rather than yourself. If you work to show the mercy of Christ, the honesty and integrity of a godly person,

even the lasting nature of the kingdom of God by giving hints to them of what eternity will be like. If you raise children with the express intent on continuing the faith through them. You will settle for nothing less. You believe the promises of God and that he loves to save families! Your goal isn't just to get them out of the house. It isn't just to get them in sports and give them opportunities to succeed in school. Those are fine and good, but that isn't why you raise them.

More than this, some of you need to contemplate doing things actually related directly to the kingdom in terms of short term missions, pastoral service, elder, deacon, teacher, missionary, seminary training. Many of you are qualified and even gifted at such things. But life is pulling you away from them. Some of you are gifted and may not have even once considered them. Yet, there not a whole world out there in desperate need of the very special calling of church life and all it entails. God calls some to secular vocation, some to special ministry, but all to the end—not of this world, but the next, not of this age, but the age to come. Too many are not thinking properly or rightly about these things. Put your eyes on what's beyond the Jordan, as the spirituals all call you

to sing in joy.

Sarah

Finally, we move to Sarah, the wife of Abraham. The first remarkable thing about Sarah is that she is **a woman**. In the ancient world, women were very much disparaged. It is really very difficult in our age, where a woman has just received the nomination from one candidate for President of the United States, to understand just how different most viewed women. In that reservoir of sewage that is Gnostic heresy, New Agers love to quote one of their primary texts as being an original gospel. This is the Gospel of Thomas. Saying 114 says, “**Simon Peter says to them: ‘Let Mary go out from our midst, for women are not worthy of life!’ Jesus says: ‘See, I will draw her so as to make her male so that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter the Kingdom of heaven.’**” It is almost as difficult to understand why feminists support this stuff as it is seeing them supporting males going into women’s restrooms where they can do very serious harm, or joining girls track and field teams where they beat

the stuffing out of the fairer sex and win medals. But they do and they are. Such is our mad, mad world.

The point is, Sarah is being held up, not as a piece of dirt, but as a hero of our faith! A woman! Indeed, for she is the grandmother of Christ and what it says next foreshadows his own mother's pregnancy. God loves women. He created them in his image. He gives today's women models of faith that they can understand on a personal level. "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised" (Heb 11:11).

This verse takes us back to that remarkable conversation in Genesis 18. The Angel of the LORD—Christ preincarnate, comes to the tents of Abraham with two other angels. After having a feast prepared for them, Yahweh and Abraham are in a tent having a discussion over his future son where Sarah would be the mother. Yet, she was in her nineties! Women can't have babies when they are that old, even in Abraham's day. Sarah overhears this conversation in the tent next door and starts laughing.

Where the story becomes interesting is when you realize that the LORD had come to Abraham in the previous

chapter and told him the same thing. In that chapter, Abraham was the one laughing. Abraham's laughter is difficult to understand, as is Sarah's. It is probable that he was laughing because he was incredulous. "Come on, Lord. Really? That just isn't possible." But certainly, Abraham had to of told his wife this story so that when the Lord returns and she overhears it, it is not the first time she has heard this news.

When you read the story, it can easily seem as if Sarah is laughing for the same reason that Abraham is. It almost seems like a lack of faith. However, given that she knows who the LORD is and has surely known about this promise, is it not possible to take her laughter in a more positive light? Yes, she denies that she was laughing when she is confronted. But maybe it is because she was embarrassed on being caught!

What seems to be happening in Hebrews is that he is reading the story through the eyes of faith. If she had not believed, she could not have conceived. However small or weak or large or strong her faith was or was not, Sarah believed the LORD. That is what Hebrews tells us. She received the power to conceive because of faith. Perhaps this says that Sarah's faith was actually stronger than Abraham's!

(She is the one who believed the promise earlier, which is why she gave Hagar to Abraham. It was misguided, but it was certainly done out of belief in the promise).

Sarah is remarkable for another reason. She becomes a type of the forerunner of Christ. It says that Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past the age of childbearing (**Gen 18:11**). But this is the same thing it says of John the Baptist's mother Elizabeth: Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month (**Luke 1:36**).

So Sarah, who is the mother of Christ, is also the type of the mother of John the Baptist—the prophet who told the world about him. This woman holds a high and exalted place in the hall of faith. And why? The focus is again on the promise. “She considered him faithful who had promised.” Against all odds, even after her own moral failures with Hagar and Abraham, she still believed God. She heard him speak with her own ears. She talked to him face to face. She knew his power over her past. And she believed.

When you look back on your own life and think about God's providence in over your sin and stupidity and the fact that he has still never left or forsaken you, does this not

encourage your faith? No, the passage is not predicting that God will give you a child when you are ninety years old (would you even want one?). It is not saying that you and Sarah will have the same kind of life. It is much more basic than this. This beautiful woman of old simply believed God and took him at his word. Even though it was impossible. When God promises something, is he not able to do it for you? Consider the promises of God anew in the holy Scripture, think upon when you think it is not possible for him to do something. Think about your own sinfulness, the places where you fall short, and his promises to help you overcome those—and believe him.

Then be encouraged at what he did for Abraham and Sarah. After it was impossible, “**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 th sand by the seashore**” (Heb 11:12). You can read this on two levels.

The first is the level of biology. Consider the Phoenicians, the Edomites, the Jebusites, the Amalekites, the Philistines, and could I not name dozens more peoples who lived in Abraham’s day? Where are they? No one knows, because they have disappeared from history. But Abraham’s

children, the Jews, they are still here. After more persecution in the past 2,000 years than all other peoples put together, they are still here. After more than one attempt to exterminate them from the planet, they are still here. This verse is so easy to understand, because what was true 2,000 years ago when Hebrews said it is still true today. Does this not teach you of the goodness of God to fulfill his promises?

But it can be even more personal, especially if you are not a Jew by descent. Through faith, we are all Abraham's offspring. So the NT tells us in many places. We are heirs of the spiritual promises, because Abraham is our father and the promises were given to us who trust in his God by faith. This fact alone ought to make you stand back and reread the entire story again with fresh eyes.

Seeking a Homeland

As we come to the end, we realize the stark reality of **verse 13**, “**These all died in faith, not having received the things promised.**” Hebrews is not trying to let you off the hook, to tell you that if you just have faith, all your dreams will come true. This is not *Pinocchio* we are reading, and it

isn't Jiminy Cricket who is speaking.

Faith is faith in the face of realizing that it won't see the conclusion to the promises in this lifetime, even if some temporal blessings are realized. Faith **greet**s the promises of God from afar (13), like waving goodbye to a dear old friend who have just visited you, but now must drive their thousand-mile journey back home, knowing that you may not see them again in this lifetime.

Faith remembers that it is a stranger and an exile on this earth (13). Exiles are people who do not belong, and it is a strange thing given that so many of the promises and the commands of God are actually about living in this world. But faith looks to the new heaven and new earth—seeking to obey him in the here and now.

Faith seeks a homeland. Our problem is hardly that we are so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good, like some Christians have been in the past. Our problem is that we are so worldly minded that the driving vision of our Fathers is at best completely out of focus and at worst, not in our eye-sight at all. And yet, it was their all-consuming passion for **heaven** that caused our Fathers in the Faith to do the things that they did—**sight unseen**, as they were

absolutely confident that this **promise** of heaven that awaited them was worth any form of obedience or suffering that God might call them to.

Beloved, faith does not turn around and look back at its home here like Lot's wife did or the children of Israel kept doing, even though they lived in wicked cities and in slavery to kings. Such a thought actually makes Faith laugh out loud, because it is so ludicrous. Therefore, don't long for the things of this world. Too many of the things you love are probably actually not even good at all. But you have become so accustomed to them that they feel like they are part of who you must be. Desire the better country, that is, the heavenly one (16). Do not long for the return of the "old days" (**vs. 15?**) and to return to them.

Do not be infatuated with the world and all of its treasures. Meyers says, "When we sacralize the secular, when we call holy that which is not holy, we forget what the truly sacred is, and we lose sight of heaven. There is a way of applying the claim, 'All of life is religious,' and end up being as *irreligious* as the person who started from the assumption that *none* of life is religious. Because we're so intent on recognizing the "already" of the kingdom, we neglect its

glorious “not yetness.” We become easily attracted to proud schemes to build earthly utopias, even in the name of God. We become easily frustrated at the trials which attend faithfulness, because we forget that we are aliens and strangers on earth. When we sacralize the secular, we cease longing for a better country—a heavenly one.”¹⁰

Look forward to the new days, and make sure you live your whole life to God’s glory in preparation for those. Then God will not be ashamed to be called your God (16). For that is what it says of our Fathers and Mothers in the faith. For he is building you a city (16). That city is here in type form even as you sit with your brothers and sisters in church and are lifted up to heaven in worship. One day, it will be here in full as it comes down out of heaven and covers all that is fading away. On that day, you will see its king rising from his throne to greet you who have faith in him. What will he say to you on that day? “Well done good and *faithful* servant?” Or “Away, cast him out of the city where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?”

¹⁰ Myers ,Ibid.