

"THE FAITH OF THE PATRIARCHS"

**I. Introduction**

- A. Last week, as we began our study of this great chapter, we learned three things about faith.
- B. Faith directs us to far off things that we do not yet possess.
- C. Faith is the basis of all knowledge, including our knowledge about the origin of the universe.
- D. And faith is the only means by which we can receive commendation, or approval, from God.
- E. To make that last point, the writer cited the examples of three saints from the early chapters of the book of Genesis: Abel, Enoch, and Noah.
- F. In today's passage, the writer directs our attention to what we can learn about faith from the lives of Israel's patriarchs.

**II. Taking God at His Word (8-12)**

- A. The bulk of our passage focuses upon the faith of Abraham, the father of the people of Israel.
  - 1. The first thing that the writer mentions about Abraham's faith is that it was displayed by his obedience to God's call to leave his home in Haran and go to the place that he would be given as an inheritance.
  - 2. Abraham had no idea where he was going, but he went anyway.
  - 3. All he had was God's promise, and he was willing to leave everything in order to lay claim to that promise.

4. As one commentator puts it, “to Abraham the promise of God was as substantial as its realization.” [Bruce, 292]
  5. Abraham’s prompt obedience was the fruit of his faith in God’s Word.
  6. He underwent voluntary exile in response to God’s call.
  7. Notice how this shows us that faith cannot be present without God’s Word.
  8. Faith is a matter of hearing God’s Word and acting upon it.
- B. When Abraham got to the land to which God led him, he had to live there as an alien.
1. Though God had promised to give him the land as an inheritance, the only part of it that Abraham ever owned during his lifetime was the small plot in which he and his wife were buried.
  2. It would have been tempting for Abraham to conclude that God had deceived him, especially when famine came upon the land.
  3. He had left everything in response to God’s call, but in this life he only received a small token of the promised inheritance.
  4. Yet through it all, Abraham clung to God’s promise.
- C. The writer also makes mention of Isaac and Jacob at this point, referring to them as “heirs with [Abraham] of the same promise.”
1. The thing that enabled Abraham and his heirs to cling to the promise while living in tents in a foreign land was that they were looking forward to the city that has foundations, the city whose designer and builder is God.
  2. That heavenly city stands in sharp contrast to every earthly city, all of which are transitory and fleeting.

3. We are easily dazzled by the things that great cities have to offer, but we should always remember that in the end they will fade away.
  4. Only the heavenly city will endure forever.
  5. And the reason why it will endure is because it has not been designed and built by man, but by God himself.
- D. Notice that the writer does not commend the patriarchs to us as examples of godly living but as examples of faith.
1. If you are at all familiar with the book of Genesis, you know that these men were far from perfect.
  2. On two occasions, Abraham put his wife in jeopardy by saying that she was his sister in order to save his own neck.
  3. And when God's promise of a son through Sarah didn't materialize soon enough, Abraham took measures into his own hands by having a son through his wife's servant.
  4. As for Isaac, he played favorites with his sons and followed his father's example by trying to pass off his wife as his sister.
  5. As for Jacob, he tricked his brother out of his birthright and played favorites with both his wives and his sons.
  6. These men were not commended by God because of their works but because of their faith.
  7. The same is true of Abraham's wife Sarah.
  8. Sarah's faith is commended even though she laughed in unbelief when she first heard God say that she would give birth to a son.
  9. Her faith was mixed with unbelief, yet she responded to God's correction by persevering in faith.

- E. We should be greatly encouraged by the manner in which this passage speaks of these deeply flawed individuals because we too are deeply flawed.
1. There are many things that we say and do and think that we are not proud of.
  2. There are many times when our unbelief overshadows our faith.
  3. The fact that the patriarchs were commended by God for their faith assures us that God also commends us as having pleased him when we hold firm to his promises in faith.
  4. This does not mean that God counts faith itself as our righteousness, but only that the faith that he works in us is the means by which he imputes the obedience and satisfaction of Christ to us.

### III. Desiring a Better Country (13-16)

- A. The next thing that the writer has to say about the faith of the patriarchs is that they all died in faith.
1. That is, they died without fully receiving in this life the things that God had promised them.
  2. They had a small taste of God's grace in Christ, but it was like greeting those blessings from afar.
  3. Nevertheless, they were satisfied and they persevered in faith all the way up to the day of their death.
  4. The thing that enabled them to do this was their conviction that this world was not their true home.
  5. They readily acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

6. They looked beyond this world for their true homeland, something that we need to do as well.
- B. If the patriarchs had been thinking of an earthly homeland, they would not have submitted to living as strangers and exiles in the land of Canaan for all of those years.
1. They would have gone back to Mesopotamia.
  2. They had an earthly home there.
  3. But their faith told them that that was no longer their true home.
  4. They knew that there was no turning back.
  5. When Abraham sent his servant back to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac, the servant responded by asking, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?"
  6. But Abraham answered, "See to it that you do not take my son back there." (Gen. 24:5-6)
  7. And when Jacob had to flee to Mesopotamia to escape the wrath of his brother, God spoke to him in a dream at Bethel and assured him, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:15)
  8. The patriarchs had many faults, but they held firm to God's promise.
- C. The patriarchs' faith also caused them to see that the heavenly country that they had been promised is better than anything else in all the world.
1. This reminds us of the importance of cultivating heavenly-mindedness.

2. We should not look for ultimate fulfillment or ultimate peace or ultimate comfort in this world but in the world to come.
3. There are many wonderful things about life in this world and we should be thankful for them.
4. But we always need to remember that none of these things will last.
5. We need to remind ourselves of this, especially as we live in a consumeristic culture that tells us that we can find happiness through all of the creature comforts that it offers us.
6. Heaven may not seem very interesting compared to the blinding array of what the world offers us, but we should never let ourselves think that heaven will be boring.
7. Heaven is our true home and our ultimate destination.
8. New products and new experiences quickly lose their glitziness, but heaven will be endlessly fascinating.
9. As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, "inasmuch as I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, I shall after this life possess complete bliss, such as eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has entered into the heart of man, therein to praise God forever." [Q. 58]
10. When you breathe your last breath and this world fades from view, you will look upon the One who spoke the entire universe into existence.
11. You will be utterly enthralled by that glorious sight, and you will never want to take your eyes off of him.
12. Best of all, you will rejoice in the fact that he is not ashamed to be called your God.

#### IV. The Hope of Resurrection (17-22)

- A. In the last part of our passage, the writer focuses on the patriarchs' resurrection hope.
1. We see this hope when we consider how Abraham responded when God tested him by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac.
  2. All of God's promises rested upon Isaac, yet the Lord said that Isaac was to be sacrificed.
  3. As Abraham started to carry out God's command, his faith in the promise did not waver.
  4. He kept on believing that God would be faithful to his Word, even if Isaac were dead.
  5. He believed that God's power was sufficient to raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfill his promise.
  6. In Calvin's words, Abraham did not bind "God's power to Isaac's life, but felt persuaded that [that power] would be efficacious in his ashes when dead no less than in him while alive and breathing."
- B. We also see resurrection hope in the blessings that Isaac and Jacob bestowed on their descendants.
1. Because Isaac had not yet come into possession of the inheritance himself, the only thing that he could pass on to his sons was God's Word of promise.
  2. And even though Isaac had been tricked into giving Jacob the greater blessing, Isaac saw this as God's will and submitted to it in faith.
  3. Isaac's favoritism and Esau's status as firstborn caused Isaac to intend to bestow the greater blessing on Esau, but in the end he recognized that it was God's purpose for Jacob to receive that blessing.

4. As for Jacob, his faith led him to give the greater blessing to the younger of Joseph's sons.
  5. He learned the same lesson that his father had learned so many years before: that the Lord is sovereign in the bestowal of his blessings.
- C. We also see resurrection hope in Joseph's instructions to have his bones brought out of Egypt at the time of the exodus so that those bones could be buried in the Promised Land.
1. In giving such instructions, Joseph showed that he believed that the future of the covenant family was not in Egypt but in Canaan.
  2. His faith in the promise was not overshadowed by the heights to which he had risen in Egypt.
  3. Even when he was dying, he saw his own future in the Promised Land.
  4. He believed that God would keep his promise to give Canaan to the offspring of Abraham.
  5. He insisted on being buried in the land of Canaan because Canaan was a symbol of something far greater than the land itself.
  6. It pointed to the better country.
  7. It would not have mattered to Joseph where his bones were buried if he thought that death was the end.
  8. His instructions about his bones demonstrated his faith in God's power to raise him from the dead and to bring him to the city that has foundations, the heavenly Zion.

## V. Conclusion

- A. The faith of the patriarchs is the faith that is shared by all of God's people.



- B. It is a faith that takes God at his Word, a faith that desires a better country, and a faith that looks forward to the day of resurrection.
  
- C. May God continue to nourish and nurture this faith in our hearts, so that we might join with hymn writer Henry Lyte in saying this:

*It is not for me to be seeking bliss  
And building my hopes in a region like this;  
I look for a city which hands have not piled,  
I pant for a country by sin undefiled. [Henry Lyte]*