

# Conceiving the Eternal

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Faith is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see.<sup>2</sup> The elders in the past were approved because they showed faith.<sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the universe has been created by a word from God so that the visible came into existence from the invisible.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was going to receive as an inheritance. He went out without knowing where he was going.<sup>9</sup> By faith he lived in the land he had been promised as a stranger. He lived in tents along with Isaac and Jacob, who were coheirs of the same promise.<sup>10</sup> He was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.<sup>11</sup> By faith even Sarah received the ability to have a child, though she herself was barren and past the age for having children, because she believed that the one who promised was faithful.<sup>12</sup> So descendants were born from one man (and he was as good as dead). They were as many as the number of the stars in the sky and as countless as the grains of sand on the seashore.<sup>13</sup> All of these people died in faith without receiving the promises, but they saw the promises from a distance and welcomed them. They confessed that they were strangers and immigrants on earth.<sup>14</sup> People who say this kind of thing make it clear that they are looking for a homeland.<sup>15</sup> If they had been thinking about the country that they had left, they would have had the opportunity to return to it.<sup>16</sup> But at this point in time, they are longing for a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God isn't ashamed to be called their God—he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:1-3; 8-16

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Swedish researchers recently did a study on respiratory sinus arrhythmia. That's the relationship between a person's heart rate and breathing. Apparently we've known about the phenomenon since the 1800's but we are only just starting to understand it. The researchers knew that the pace of an individual's respiration and heart rate are linked, so they invited a local high school choir into the lab, slapped some electrodes on them and measured their heart rates as they sang. Not only did they confirm that taking a breath once every 10 seconds resulted in the strongest relationship between respiration and heart rate, the researchers also discovered that singing together caused the singers' heartbeats to become synchronized. When we sing together our hearts beat as one.

It struck me that God designed human beings with this unique capacity for physiological unity, that the possibility for humans to share a common heart beat existed long before we even knew it. It reminded me of a verse from Ephesians, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." What a fascinating theology. God has set out before us possibilities for good. Just as God established the foundations of the world, God created real possibilities for love, unity, beauty, and compassion. Even now, in a world that is quite often none of those things, God calls us forward to walk in that way.

This is the essence of faith, to trust that God has prepared good things for the world even when that goodness remains unseen. "Faith," as the author of Hebrews puts it, "is the reality of what we hope for, the proof of what we don't see." By faith we pursue the unseen possibilities of God and make them

flesh and blood realities. By faith we imitate the life of Jesus Christ trusting that God is already bringing about peace and reconciliation in the world through him. By faith, we live into what God is already accomplishing.

Faith then takes courage, a willingness to see God's promises from a distance and welcome them into the present. Faith requires the kind of trust and confidence we learn from Abraham and Sarah.

### COMFORTABLE

Abraham and Sarah were not always wandering Arameans. For a long time, they were settled Arameans, well-to-do residents in the town of Haran. Abraham had spent most of his 75 years herding livestock and building a home. Sarah was nine years younger than Abraham but she had seen her fair share of new born lambs and run away foals. And while they never had kids together, children I mean not goats, there were plenty of goats, Abraham and Sarah were happy. Abraham's nephew Lot had recently taken over the daily operations of the family business. They had paid off the mortgage years before, and had enough wealth saved up to make life comfortable. The house was full of sturdy furniture and personal decorations. Sarah had every pot and plate and pitcher she could ask for in the kitchen. As a blessing to his home, Abraham had even been able to afford a few idols. The newest one was his favorite. It was 24 inches bigger than the other idols and it didn't need a base or a stand to sit on; it just hung on the living room wall. Surrounded by family, secured by wealth, and amused by the idols of their day, Abraham and Sarah were quite content to be comfortably retired.

### CALLED

Abraham was enjoying his hard earned comfort one night, rocking on the porch swing and gazing at the stars. The heat of the day was lifting into a clear night sky, and the evening breeze carried hints of autumn coolness. There, beneath the sparkling canopy of heaven, Abraham sat in awe. With all the busy-ness of years laboring in the fields and building a home, he had never stopped to notice the stars like this, to rest beneath them and drink up their splendor. The great brilliant dome stretched out above him made him feel small, not insignificant mind you, just humble, like a stranger in a universe he had never seen before.

In the magnitude of the moment everything faded away, the bigger barns, the stored up wealth, the comfort and security of a sturdy house. It was like the radiance of the stars reignited something in his heart, something spirited and alive, something restless and hopeful. Whatever contentment Abraham had when he first sat down was quickly melting away. There was something great for him still to do, something real calling from the stars.

Sarah's touch startled him. She was sitting next to him on the swing. For how long he wasn't sure. He simply looked up and said to her softly, "We have to move."

### CHANGE

Sarah must have seen the new light in Abraham's eyes because when the sun rose the next day Sarah and Abraham began packing up their old lives. They took down the pictures and the old idols from the walls and stacked them on the curb. Lot stuck a little sign on the pile that said "Free". Sarah rummaged through the kitchen packing boxes for her relatives, the 12 piece dinner set to cousin Debbie, the serving bowls to her niece. She took only the basics and only what she could carry. Abraham sorted

the flocks, distributed tents, and latched the sheep gate one last time. The next morning, shocked relatives gathered with Abraham and Sarah in front of their empty house.

Men of the city took Abraham aside by the elbow and whispered words of common sense in his ear. “You’re 75 years old Abe, are you sure you want to start again? You’re staking everything to the stars Abe. Are you just going to leave the home that you built?” Stay put, Abe. Don’t rock the boat. Take it easy in your golden years. These things made sense to folks who had never sat beneath the stars and learned that all that is seen was made from that which is unseen.

“The foundations of heaven will be my home,” Abraham replied, “and God will build for me a city.” With that, Abraham, Sarah, Lot and their great small caravan headed south to destinations unseen.

### PROMISE

The adventure was long and meandering. The first few years were especially tough. The patchwork tents quivered in the wind and leaked like sieves. Sand settled in the most unpleasant of places, and blisters bubbled on weary feet. Tensions grew between Lot and Abraham until the whole caravan had to be divided. Lot settled in the east, and Abraham continued wandering west. Down in Egypt, Sarah and the Pharaoh were mired in scandal. Let it be enough to say, Sarah was old but she wasn’t undesirable. Farther north, the entourage was threatened by larger more established tribes. And through it all, the dry empty desert reminded Abraham and Sarah of her barren, empty womb.

Yet, Abraham could see what others could not conceive. His tents were not staked to the sand, but anchored to eternal architecture. His caravan did not just trace the face of the earth, but marked a route of blessing for generations to come. Abraham was not chasing a future, that far off and murky thing. Abraham was living into a reality that was already achieved, a foundation laid out by God.

### FAITH

There were many long and unbearable days for Abraham and Sarah, but the stars kept them going. They liked to sit together outside their tent door and gaze into the sky. There, as the stars shimmered like crystals of sand, Sarah would rest her head against Abraham’s chest and ask him to share God’s promises. He would dutifully recite: Our children will be as many as the stars and our tents will be like cities and we will be a blessing to all God’s children.

“Abe,” Sarah would ask “do you think it will ever happen?” Abraham would chuckle and tell her what he told himself in times of doubt, “all that is seen was made from that which is unseen.” Then, laughing together at his wisdom, they would retire hand-in-hand to their tent where the laughing faded to sighs and the sighing to intimate silence.

By faith they conceived the promises of God. May we too have eyes to see the unseen and faith to wander in it. Amen.