

We crave certainty, don't we? Insurance companies know we do – and they've built a multibillion dollar industry on the fact that we crave certainty. When it comes to what's important in life – our cars, homes, health, our loved-ones wellbeing in case we should die...we crave certainty that we'll have those things, so we're willing to pay good money to ensure them.

And isn't this even more true when it comes to the most important thing in life – our eternal salvation? Where we will go when we die? We don't just crave certainty, we need it. This is really what the Reformation was all about. A Roman Catholic monk named Luther who longed for certainty. But he was looking for it the wrong place, because the church in his day *told* him to. That if he wanted to be sure he'd be in heaven, he had to work, work, work at it. And so he worked, worked, worked at it, but the more he worked, the less certain he was. In fact, the more he worked, the more certain he became that it was never enough.

And then he found this truth in Scripture that we're celebrating today: That God saves through faith alone. That salvation doesn't depend on what you do, in any way shape or form, but on what Christ did for you. That heaven is what Jesus won for you and God gives to you for free through faith, and faith alone. Through that truth, God gave Luther certainty. He gives us certainty.

In fact, as the writer to the Hebrews tells us, this is really what faith is: a God-given certainty. About our salvation in Christ and everything else that God has promised us. But as the very definition shows us, it's not something that comes naturally to us. We tend to believe what we see, not what we don't; we tend to be sure of what we have in our hands, not something that's far off in the future. So faith is something we need God's ongoing work in our hearts to maintain, and that's exactly what God does for us. Listen as God reminds us that Faith is being sure! 1) a certainty that comes from faith's object, 2) a certainty about faith's future.

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. ² This is what the ancients were commended for.

⁸ By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. ⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹² And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

1. *Certainty that comes from faith's object*

It's good that God defines faith for us here. Because, to be honest, there are a lot of wrong ideas about faith out there. People will say, "Just have faith," when what they really mean is "just be optimistic – wish and hope for the best." Another common myth about faith today is that "it doesn't really matter what you believe, just *that* you believe."

But God sets the record straight. Faith isn't just wishful or hopeful thinking – it's confidence, certainty, being sure. And it *does* matter what you believe. In fact, this is the most important thing about faith – it's where it's certainty comes from! It's object. You can never be confident in something that isn't sure! You can never be certain about something that isn't a guarantee. I hope the Astros will win the world series, but I can't be 100% certain, because the outcome is up in the air. Someone could believe with all their might that the tooth fairy is real – but believing doesn't make it so.

But when what I hope for is what *God promises me*? When I am certain about unseen things *God says are real*? God does not lie! He speaks, and then acts; he promises and fulfills. God's word is 100% reliable, so I can be 100% certain of it, even if I don't see it. Even if I haven't experienced it yet. In fact, I can be certain of it *even when what I see and experience seems to indicate the opposite*.

That's how it was for Abraham, the writer to the Hebrews says. While he was living in Ur – modern day Iraq – God appeared to him and said, "Leave your country, your people, your father's household, and go to a land I'll show you." Just think about that. Quitting your job, selling your house, packing the U-haul and leaving...without knowing where you're going? Experience tells us that's not gonna end well. But God – God told Abraham, "I will bless you." Sure of God's promise, Abraham left.

And as soon as he got to that land, Canaan, God said, "I'll give this land to your descendants." But that's not what he saw. What he saw was that every foot of this land already belonged to people who weren't his descendants. In fact, even by the end of his life, the only land he could pass along as an inheritance was a burial plot. But he was content to live in tents like a stranger, because he was sure God would keep his word.

Of course, that would mean he'd have to have descendants. And God had promised him more than the stars in the sky. But by age 99, he didn't even have a son. Decades of trying told him they couldn't – Sarah was barren. The old man, good as dead, that Abraham saw in the mirror told him he wouldn't. But God promised they would. And they did! Because they **considered him faithful who had made the promise**.

What do you think? Does seeing Abraham's example of faith make you look at your own, and wonder, "What's wrong with me?" Even God's description of faith leads us to do that, doesn't it? Faith is being sure – but mine isn't always so certain. Faith is confidence in what God says - but I'm not always so confident. Abraham trusted God in spite of what sight and experience told him...but how often haven't I trusted the latter and doubted the former?

God promises me that his Word works. But I can't feel it working, or see it working, and so a part of me wonders whether my preaching or devotions will make any difference at all. Same with prayer, right? God says it's powerful and effective – but when I don't see a change, doubts creep in. The fact I often neglect it shows I'm not so certain what God says about it is true. God promises that in Jesus he's working out everything for my eternal good, but if I can't see how that's true, I often doubt that it is true.

Of course, Abraham was no different. Sure, here in Hebrews we see him sure of God's promises. But read Genesis, and you'll see him doubting God's promises, too. Unsure God'll give him a son, so he sleeps with his wife's servant to help God along. Unsure God will keep him safe in Egypt, so he lies to save his own skin. And Sarah, too! At one point, she even laughed at God's promise!

But none of that is recorded here. How did their doubts get erased from God's record? Well, it's because of the greatest promise God gave to Abraham. Not just a son, not just descendants like the stars in the sky, not just a land for them to live in, but that one of those descendants living in that land would erase his doubts – and all his other sins – from God's record.

And he who promised was faithful. 2000 years later, a descendant of Abraham's living in the land God gave to his descendants did just that. And he did what Abraham and you and I could never do – lived a doubt-free life of perfect confidence in God and his promises – so he could give that perfect record of trust to us. And he took Abraham's and Sarah's sins and yours and mine and the whole world's to the cross, where he paid for them all. And because he did, they've been erased from God's record for you, too.

We're saved by faith alone. But we're not saved because our faith is perfect. It isn't! Like Abraham, we're saved because even when our faith is weak, it lays hold of a perfect Savior who won us forgiveness for all our sins, who gives us his flawless righteousness, who did everything necessary for our salvation.

We want more certainty, don't we? We want to live with less doubt and more confidence. We don't get that by focusing on our faith. At the end of this section, the writer to the Hebrews doesn't say, "Let us fix our eyes on our faith." No, he says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." He's what makes faith certain. And as we fix our eyes on him, he grows us in faith until he removes every doubt and turns our faith to sight in heaven.

II. Certainty about faith's future

That was what Abraham was looking forward to. It was just a single verse here, so it might have slipped your notice. He said Abraham was living like a foreigner in tents. But he wasn't looking forward to building a more permanent dwelling for himself in Canaan. No, **he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

By faith Abraham knew that he wasn't just a temporary resident in Canaan. He was a temporary resident in this world, waiting for his permanent home in heaven. By faith, we know the same thing. But we need the reminder, don't we? Sight and experience tell us this life is all there is. We're born, we live, we die – and that's that. So we're surrounded by people living not by faith but by sight as if this world is the only home there is...and their number one priority is to make it as happy and comfortable as possible before they clock out. And isn't it easy for us to lose sight of heaven and start living with our eyes fixed on earth, too? Prioritizing the material over the spiritual? Caught up in comforts or weighed down by its sadness?

We need the reminder, too: This world is just your temporary residence! It and everything in it is passing away. It's not the only home you'll know. No, God promises you a city with foundations – a perfect home in heaven that will last forever. And its glories are so great that they make earth's pleasures seem trivial and its problems light and momentary in comparison.

But how can you be sure it's yours? How could Abraham be certain it was his? Well...because it doesn't depend on us. It's not something we build with our works; it's **architect and builder is God**. It's what God planned for you and built for you through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ on your behalf. Since it depends entirely on him, it's a sure thing! It's God's gift to you...through faith alone.

Until you get there, fix your eyes on Jesus. In the word, in the sacrament, see what a trustworthy Savior you have! See how certain his promises are. And God will make you more and more sure of what's yours in Christ now, and what will be yours in him forever. Amen.