

## 4 - Abraham // Hebrews 11:8–10, 13–16 // Hebrews 11: Broken People and Famous Faith #4<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

We are in a series where we are **walking through one of the most** powerful chapters in the Bible—Hebrews 11, often called the “Great Hall of Faith.”

And **this week we come to a man regarded** almost universally as **“the Father of faith,”** Father Abraham. Three major world religions all claim Abraham as the father of faith: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. *Father Abraham, had many sons, and many sons had Father Abraham, I am one of them...*

**In Abraham’s life, we see exemplified the faith of Hebrews 11:6,** the faith without which it is impossible to please God. That faith, we saw, has three primary convictions:

1. God is real (even though unseen, spiritual realities are real)
2. God will keep his promises, and
3. Seeking him is worth the effort

The author of Hebrews **organizes Abraham’s life around three tests** that God put him through to see whether he had true faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Works consulted: Tim Keller, [“Abraham and the Growth of Faith,”](#) October 23, 1994, Redeemer Presbyterian; Tim Keller, [“Abraham and the Test of Faith,”](#) October 30, 1994, Redeemer Presbyterian; Tim Keller, [“Real Security and the Call of God,”](#) April 22, 2001, Redeemer Presbyterian; Tim Keller, [“Real Faith and the Only Son,”](#) June 17, 2001, Redeemer Presbyterian; Sidney Griedanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis*. And others as noted throughout.

**Testing, as you know, is an essential part of growth.** Sometimes when you’re cooking something you have to test to see if it’s done. My mom used to use a little timer when she was baking a cake—the old-school kind where when it got to the end it would go, “ding!”

I always loved that sound because it meant, “Cake is ready!” But you cooks know that’s not necessarily true, so my mom would take a fork and stick it in the middle of the cake to see if it was ready. And if it came out with stuff on it, it wasn’t ready. Which I never understood. I was like, “So it’s a little gooey, so what?”

But to a real cook with a discerning palate, it’s important. I’m like that with steaks: When I’m cooking one on the grill, I time it with my phone, but before I pull the steak off I still press on it with my finger, because if it feels like this part of your hand (when your hand is closed) it’s medium-medium well, which is gross—if you like it that way you should just eat ground chuck and not waste a steak—and if it feels like this (with your hand open) it’s medium rare, which is how God intended it to be eaten. (That’s a poor man’s meat thermometer.)

Here’s the point: When the timer goes off, the cake or the steak *should be* ready, but the fork or the meat thermometer examines the inside to see if the job is really done. And that’s because **it’s possible for things to look done on the outside but still be unfinished on the inside. Amen?**

Trials are God’s “fork” to see whether our faith is really done. God puts Abraham through three tests, and we’ll cover them over the next three weeks. Today, we’ll focus only on the first test.

**Hebrews 11:8:** “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.” (Little bit of context: Abraham was one of the leading citizens in Ur, which was one of the most prosperous cities in Mesopotamia. It was right there on the Fertile Crescent, the Napa Valley of the ancient world.)

Now, Ur was a city given over to idolatry, but Abraham knew the Lord and one day God appeared to him. (By the way, technically at this point his name was Abram, not Abraham—God would later change it to Abraham—but I’m just going to call him Abraham to make it simple.)

God appeared to Abraham and told him to leave Ur, to go—to leave his homeland, his friends, his prosperity, and travel to another place God would direct him to. God didn’t even tell him where yet. He just said, “Go.” (I love how the KJV renders this. It just says “Get out!”) “Go, and I’ll tell you later where.” But he promised to bless Abraham and to make his offspring as numerous as the sand of the seashore, and that he would use Abraham’s offspring as his channel of blessing to nations.

The problem was that Abraham was, at this point, about 75, and his wife about 65, and they had no children. (Not an auspicious beginning to the start of a nation!) At 75 you’re thinking about retirement, not starting a family. **Christian counselor Pete Scazerro, who wrote the book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality***, says that after years of observation he’s convinced that your 70s are your greatest decade, and that your 80s are your second-greatest decade, and your 60s your third-greatest decade. I don’t know exactly what he means by that but I hope it’s true, and I look forward to finding out. That said, most people don’t start new careers or new families in their 80s. And that’s the very thing Abraham is being asked to do. We all love rags-to-riches stories; this is a riches-to-rags (and diapers) story.

But I want you to hear me: Whenever God wants to bless you, he calls you away from what is familiar and secure to an unknown place where you have to depend on him. And so Abraham (vs. 8) “**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** (Abe had been a rich man before this, living in a nice, big permanent house; now he’s living in a tent, he’s going backwards);

**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.”**

**In vs 11, the author shifts the focus of the story to Sarah**, who will get her own week next. But here’s what it says: “**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 (that’s the author’s summation of Abraham’s sexual virility), were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”** (Again, we’ll come back to that next week.)

Vs. 13, the author summarizes Abraham and Sarah’s faith: “**These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar (in other words, they never saw the fulfillment of their faith, only a portion of it), and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. (In other words, they never felt totally fulfilled here. Abraham never got to live in a paradise on 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, and he has prepared for them a city.”**

God told Abraham to leave everything familiar and comfortable and simply “get out.”

*Here’s the question: Why did Abraham say yes?*

Well, the answer, of course, is that he recognized that God was God, but vs. 16 gives you another important clue: “**But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”**

Abraham saw something BETTER being offered to him than he had in Ur. Vs. 10: “**For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”**

He was looking for a city with *better* foundations. He first realized:

***The cities of this world have no foundation***

Ur was a prosperous city, but, impressive as it was, it had no lasting foundation.

**Tim Keller** said that one of the things that brings a lot of people to seek the Lord is realizing that their “cities” have no foundations. **You start to realize the impermanence of everything.**

- **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** became one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century. Before that, however, he’d been a promising young medical doctor, on track to become one of England’s finest. He’d been trained at the best British medical school and was now the protégé of the most well-known surgeon in England at St. Bart’s Hospital in London, which was England’s version of Duke Hospital.

Being a chief of medicine in a hospital like that accorded you the highest possible status and privilege. But just as Lloyd-Jones was getting to the apex of his career, one of his colleagues, another rising star, was dating this young woman who unexpectedly got sick and died. “A few days later,” Dr. Lloyd-Jones said, “this man showed up at my door and asked if he could come in and sit by the fire.” Lloyd-Jones said, “We sat together by the fire for two hours. The man never said a word and never took his eyes off the fire.” Dr. Lloyd Jones said as he watched this, *“It had a profound effect on me. I saw the vanity of all human greatness.”* It so messed with him that he left medicine to become a preacher, because he realized that even the best medicine, valuable as it is, can’t stop death. (That’s not at all to say that my career is better than you men and women who have gone into medicine, just that if you did it to chase success or fame or worldly acclaim, it’s a fool’s errand.) That city has no foundation.

- **The cities of this world provide no “relational” foundations:** Have you noticed how hard it is to keep groups of friends together? Someone is always moving on. It seems especially hard here in the Triangle. About the time you find a group and think, “This is perfect,” somebody leaves. Or, maybe you had a group you really liked but somebody got mad and left the group. Or even died. It’s hard to keep even your family together. Eventually children leave. Families scatter. People pass away. You say, “Not me, I’m keeping my family really close by.” You won’t be able to do it.
- **Our beauty and our talents lack “foundations.”** I saw an interview with a supermodel who said, *“Eventually, you can’t keep your waistline together.”* I’ve never felt more seen. I think it’s Brian Regan, men, who talks about how over time the little band on your underwear just kind of flaps downward for no reason. Over time, even models get heavier, and many are devastated by it. I’m no supermodel, but we all know the difficulty of trying to hold on to youth.

**A lot of philosophers come to understand that without God,** there aren’t really solid intellectual foundations.

- Today’s scientific breakthrough sometimes turns out to be tomorrow’s junk science.
- One hundred years ago, for example, after Western intelligentsia got rid of the idea of God, they concluded that matter was eternal. I mean, something had to be primal. But then, in the 1960s, Penzias and Wilson’s discovery of cosmic microwave background radiation proved that the universe couldn’t be eternal and that everything had started from a fixed, finite point and would ultimately unravel, overturning the idea that matter is eternal.
- Or, 100 years ago, Christianity was attacked by Enlightenment thinkers for being too pessimistic about human nature. Progressive thinkers at the time said humanity is basically good, and thus reason, education, and science are all we’d need to achieve a perfect society. Enter WWI, WWII, Communism, the Cold War, institutionalized racism, and the #metoo movement in the most educated and scientifically progressive nations in the

world, and now we're more convinced than ever of man's innate depravity.

- The irony is that Christianity's attackers now repudiate the Enlightenment and try to associate Christianity with it, saying Christians are too positive about human nature. Morality is all about power structures and critical theory and social dynamics. But already you're seeing the new Woke Movement collapse in on itself. And it's not even Christians doing the criticizing! Other secular academics are saying, "Woke theory doesn't work."
- Twenty years ago, the New Atheists, guys like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris wrote bestselling books claiming that belief in God was not just unnecessary and wrong, it was poisonous. But now, there's a huge societal reaction against that, with people like Jordan Peterson and Tom Holland and Joe Rogan and even Richard Dawkins himself, none of whom are Christians yet, saying things like, "Yeah, without the backdrop of Christianity, people can't seem to find meaning and we lack a good basis for things like human rights." Jordan Peterson shows up in the Triangle and his lecture immediately sells out.

**The point is every generation attacks the previous generation's ideas because they don't work.** Christianity stands with a solid foundation in the midst of all this chaos.

**On a less philosophical, but more personal level:** I said this a few weeks ago—have you noticed that when you look back at yourself 10 years ago, some of the ideas you had that seemed so wise and cool now just seem silly? I told you that every version of J.D. looks back at the J.D. from the previous decade and says, "Man, that guy was an idiot." Every generation looks back at the previous generation and thinks, "Man, how could they have been so wrong about that?" Think back to some of the things your grandparents believed. Not to mention your great-grandparents. Do you really feel like 100 years from now people will be looking back and saying, "Man, my great-grandparents really had it together"? No, they're going to be embarrassed by what we believed.

**The point is, our perceptions and best wisdom are always in flux.** You can't hunker down and say, "This is my security." Everything is crumbling, no matter what it is. We need a city with better foundations. That's what Abraham realized.

Like Tim Keller said, for many people, this realization is an important part of their journey to Christ. **A couple of summers ago I read a book called *A Severe Mercy* by Sheldon Vanauken**, a student at Oxford who had been led to Christ by C.S. Lewis. He was this really gifted, intellectual student who bantered with Lewis about faith. But then his fiancée died and he started to see the emptiness of all his intellectual philosophy. He and Lewis exchanged these letters that are just fascinating, and one day he told Lewis, "It's like I was standing on this cliff, and over there was Jesus, but to get to him I'd have to leap, to take a leap of faith, which I didn't want to do ... but (and here's the key) when I looked down I realized that the cliff I was standing on was also crumbling. I had a choice. I could jump out to something that seemed uncertain, or stay standing on something even more uncertain. Either way it was a choice."<sup>2</sup>

I've heard several people, in their process of coming to Christ, talk about something similar. Physically, relationally, intellectually, you realize you have unstable foundations. **And so Abraham (vs. 10)** went "looking for a city that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

**Maybe that's where you are this weekend.** By the way, might I ask you, What if that's what God, right now, in his mercy, was doing with you? You're in here this weekend wondering what God is doing in your life because things in your life feel like they are crumbling: your family, your health, your intellectual foundations. What if God was shaking you to wake you up, saying, "**You need a better city!**"

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<sup>2</sup> My paraphrase!

I love the **story of the lumberjack** who was preparing to cut down every tree in a certain section of a mountain forest. Well, just before he began, he noticed a bird building its nest atop one of the trees. Not wanting to harm the bird or its young, the lumberjack took a mallet and pounded on the base of the tree until the bird (quite annoyed) flew to another tree and began to build its nest there. But since the lumberjack knew that tree was coming down too, he repeated the process with that tree. And so the bird moved to a third tree, which the lumberjack knew was coming down also, so he did it again. He knew that every tree in this part of the forest was coming down! So the bird and the lumberjack repeated this dance a half dozen times, until the bird, again highly annoyed, flew away and built its nest on the side of a rock face. **The bird probably never understood why the lumberjack attacked each tree he attempted to build his nest in**, but the lumberjack's motive was not cruelty but compassion. The lumberjack knew that every tree in the forest was about to come down, and he wanted the bird to build its nest in a place axes couldn't touch it.

**What if that was what God was doing with you? You see, before God can bring you to himself, he has to deliver you from you.**

**Abraham didn't see what he was doing as a sacrifice; he saw it as an upgrade.** He was giving up something unstable for something solid; trading something he couldn't hold onto anyway for something he could never lose.

*Abraham sought a city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*

In **Matthew 13:44**, Jesus said the same thing, in one of my favorite of his parables: **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *with joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."**

That's it; that's the whole parable. Jesus compares discovering his kingdom to a man who unexpectedly finds a great treasure hidden in a random field. I love this story. Basically, you've got an ordinary dude walking across a field when he stumbles onto a treasure ... he stubs his toe on it or whatever.

*By the way, what Jesus described here was not that uncommon. It seems kind of random to us, but in ancient times people didn't use banks; they kept their savings in the form of possessions they kept locked up in their house. Well, if your town was being attacked, as happened quite often back then, you didn't want the invaders to take your life savings so people regularly would bury it somewhere before they fled the city, hoping to come back to it later after the invaders had left. (One of the archaeological digs at Qumran revealed a map with 64 places that people in that community had buried treasure to hide it from invading armies.) But often, of course, people would die or the invaders would take up residence in the town, and the people never returned for these treasures. So first-century Jewish people lived with the excitement of finding old buried treasures in random places. It's like finding an old hard drive in a storage closet and discovering there's 1,000 bitcoin hidden on it.*

Well, this guy, after discovering this treasure, can't just take it—that would be stealing, because Jewish law said that any treasure discovered in a field belonged to whomever owned that field. So this man does something shrewd ... a bit shady, actually. He covers back up the treasure and goes to find the landowner, who doesn't know about the treasure, of course, and then asks if he can buy the field the treasure is in without telling the landowner about the treasure. The landowner is like, "Why do you want that field?" And the guy's like, "I dunno. I was hoping to build a ... sheep pen or a fish camp, or whatever." The landowner shrugs his shoulders, and because he doesn't need to sell it, he quotes some astronomical price. And before he can even get the price out of his mouth, the guy yells "Sold!" and runs off to get the money. But because the price is so large, he has to sell everything else he owns to get it—he's gotta liquidate all his other

properties—his chariot, his nice clothes, his collection of Air Elijah Retro 3 sandals, his Rolex Sundials, or whatever they had back then, in order to get the money to buy this field. Now, he's giving up everything he owns! Is this a sad experience? Hardly. Jesus summarizes this man's emotional disposition with two revolutionary words: "with joy." (13:44: **"WITH JOY he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."**)

**Yes, he's giving up everything he owns, but in his view what he is gaining is far superior to, better than, anything he's giving up.**

I often think of **the emotions I had the day I got married**. I'd dated other girls before I married Veronica, of course. But when I stood at that altar on July 28, I wasn't thinking **about any of those girls**.

- Had one of them been there in the audience that day, I wouldn't have been like, "Oh man, in just a minute when I say 'I do,' my shot with her is over. That's sad; I'll never know what it's like to be married to her." If that's you on your wedding day, I'd suggest you slow down that marriage. No, on that day my heart was so full of joy with the one I was gaining that I had no thought of the ones I was "losing."
- **"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then *with joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."**

**Yeah, you give up a lot to come to follow Jesus. Like Abraham, you have to walk away from all of it; at least, you give up control of all of it. But what you gain is so infinitely better than what you lose that you scarcely even notice it.**

**Abraham sought a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder was God.**

So, let's ask:

**How was the eternal city Abraham sought better than the earthly one he left?**

Well, **it is infinitely better in...**

**(1) ...its satisfaction:** God is not just the most valuable thing in the universe; he's what we're missing deepest in our souls. **The human heart, I've often told you** (repeating the words of Blaise Pascal) has a gigantic hole in it and we spend all our lives trying to figure out what goes in that hole, but nothing on earth ever works because that hole is in the shape of God's love. We find some things that *temporarily* work, but they ALWAYS, ultimately, leave us empty, alone, and worse off. **"Our hearts remain restless,"** St. Augustine famously said, **"until we find our rest in Thee."**

**I often tell high school students: Jesus + nothing = everything.** And **Everything - Jesus = nothing.** **In fact, let me say to our high school students directly**—I know you think I'm just making this up as preacher talk, but I'm deadly serious: ***If I had 10,000 lives to live, I'd live every single one of them for Jesus Christ.*** Every single one. I wouldn't hold back one. The joy he gives, the security, the purpose. If I had 10,000 lives to live, I'd live every single one for Jesus.

By the way, **that statement is not original to me.** I first heard it from the original drummer of Hootie and the Blowfish, who left the band to go into student ministry. Some magazine, I'm pretty sure it was *Rolling Stone*, asked him if he had any regrets about doing that considering how big the band had gotten, and he responded with, **"If I had 10,000 lives to live, I'd live every single one of them for Jesus Christ."**

Listen: I've never known anyone who got to their deathbed and said, **"I regret giving my life to Jesus."** No one. I've known a lot of people who regretted *not* doing it. He left for a better city, a city with foundations, a city whose builder and maker is God.



### *The eternal city is infinitely better in...*

**(2) ...its certainty:** It's not subject to the changing winds of culture or capricious vicissitudes of public opinion.

- As I said earlier, today's scientific breakthrough sometimes turns out to be tomorrow's junk science.
- (And again, I want to be clear, I'm **not anti-science in any shape, form, or fashion**. Far from it. Just that even the best science is unequipped, by itself, to give us a solid foundation upon which to build our lives.)
- In the same way, today's moral progress might be tomorrow's embarrassment.
- And even the decisions we feel so confident in today, a mere decade from now might leave us scratching our heads at how we could have been so naive.

**But in the midst of all that, we have a more certain word.** Something unchanging, verified not by the latest insights, but verified by an empty tomb. The Word left by the resurrected Jesus is **a rock on which you can build your life** that stands the test of time.

- I remember seeing this picture of a church bell tower. This was all that was left standing after a tornado tore through a small town in Nebraska. The tornado literally destroyed every building in its path, except for this church tower—because it was made of brick and anchored firmly into the ground. I **thought it was a pretty good metaphor:** The winds of time eventually blow everything away, but God's Word remains forever.

This morning, many of our campuses quoted together **the Apostles' Creed**, and over the last few weeks all of them have. What I love about it is this is what Christians have believed in every generation.

- It's what the Bible writer Jude called "**the faith handed down once for all to the saints.**" Meaning, it's unchanging. Parts of it have been unpopular in different ways in every generation, but followers of Jesus have held onto it throughout time.

- Our faith rests not in the ebb and flow of popular wisdom. It's anchored in an empty tomb.

### *This heavenly city is infinitely better in its satisfaction, its certainty...*

#### **(3) ...its security:**

- One of the things about other foundations is they are conditional, meaning they say, "*If you obtain me, I'll take care of you. If you fail me, I'll curse you.*"
- I just finished up the fascinating biography of Andre Agassi, the most famous tennis player of my generation. He constantly lived with the worry of losing his edge; it's like he lived balanced on a razor trying to hold it all together. Success told him, "Obtain me, and I'll bless you. If you fail me, I'll curse you." **Riches, marriage, family, reputation ... all work the same way.**
- But **the foundation of this city is different.** Your acceptance by it is guaranteed. And God communicated that to Abraham in the most amazing way. Ready to have your mind blown?
  - **God repeated** his covenant to Abraham in **Genesis 15**, and there he directed Abraham to **seal it with him through a ceremony.** But it was a really **weird and bizarre** ceremony.
  - Genesis 15:9, **God said to Abraham, "Bring me *five animals*: a 3-year-old cow, a 3-year-old goat, a 3-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon.** Then cut them each in half and put either half on either side of a little makeshift walkway, so that their bleeding bodies make a little river of blood down the middle..." (You're like, "What?" Go read it. Genesis 15:9.)
  - *Now, to be fair, this was not altogether uncommon in those days. It's how you made a covenant.*
    - **We live in a written age**, so when we want to get a guarantee, we want a written contract. A contractor quotes you a price to work on something in your house and you ask for it in writing, so if he comes back and says, "**Actually, I've decided to charge this instead,**" you say, "Ah, but here's your name on the contract guaranteeing *this price!*"

- Well, in Abraham's day, instead of signing a contract, they **cut a few animals open** and walked through the "river of blood" so that it splashed up on their robes, and it meant, "If I don't keep my end of the covenant, may this happen to me!"
- The **Hebrew word for covenant** literally means, "to cut." You "cut covenant." Honestly, **I just feel like this would be more effective with my contractor.** "How much are you charging me for painting that room? I don't think so, my friend. I've got the bloody robe right here to prove it."
- **So God and Abraham agreed** to make this covenant at sundown, which means they will walk down this river of blood together, both promising, **on their lives**, to keep up their end of the covenant: **Genesis 15:12:** "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram, a dreadful and great darkness fell upon him... [17] And a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch (which represent God's presence; the same images used when God appears on Mt. Sinai)<sup>3</sup> **passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram."**
- **OK, so God went through the pieces; who didn't pass through?** Abraham. God had made a deep sleep fall on him. That means God made the covenant by himself.
  - **The meaning** (Listen): God made himself responsible for both sides of the covenant. He walked down the river of blood *alone*. If **God failed to keep up his side of the bargain**, he would pay with his blood. BUT ... if Abram failed to keep up his side of the bargain, God would also pay with HIS blood.
  - God said, "I'll pay the price if **I fail to keep up my end** of the covenant and I'll pay the price if you don't keep up yours either."<sup>4</sup>
- **Isn't that beautiful? It's all about Jesus.**

<sup>3</sup> They are the same words used to describe God's presence on Mt. Sinai.

<sup>4</sup> In those days, if a king made a covenant with a servant, the servant walked through alone because it was assumed that the king would keep up his end. This is the only covenant in recorded history where the king goes through and the servant doesn't.

- You see, just like **Abraham fell into a deep sleep**, we were in the deep, dreadful sleep of sin. The Gospel of Luke tells us that when Christ died, a dreadful **darkness descended** upon the whole earth. And on the cross, **Jesus' blood flowed** out of his side like a river.
- Was God dying because he hadn't kept up his end of the bargain? **No, he was dying because we hadn't kept up ours.**
- **"He took my sins and my sorrows, and he made them his very own! He bore my burden to Calvary, and suffered and died alone!** (Where was I? I should be the one dying! He walked down the river of blood alone.) **How marvelous, how wonderful, and my song shall ever be!"**

***This heavenly city is better in its satisfaction, its certainty, its security and (finally)...***

**...its permanence:** **One day, everything on this earth will pass away.** We already see it happening, don't we? Our bodies, our communities, our families, everything we've built washes away like a message written into the sand on the seashore. But God is taking us to a city with eternal foundations, with relationships and joys that will never end.

Let's be honest: Some of us **secretly are worried about heaven**. We're afraid it's gonna be boring—endless days of purposeless leisure where we sit around in diapers on colorless clouds strumming our harps and sipping non-alcoholic piña coladas. Our only real activity is gathering 2x/day for choir practice. And you think, *"This doesn't sound fun."*

But the Bible describes heaven as a **"renewed heavens and earth,"** meaning that heaven is not so much a replacement of the old as it is a renewed version of it, with all the curse removed and now supercharged with the glory of God.



**That means EVERYTHING you loved down here**—the mountains, the rivers, the oceans, animals, solar systems, and even extreme sports that I never got to experience here—is waiting for you there, *in glorified form*.

**In fact, the Apostle John goes so far as to say, Revelation 21:26**, that God will *“bring into heaven the glory and honor of the nations,”* which means he’ll bring into the new heavens and new earth the best of our cultures—the best Italian food, the best architecture, the best art, **Mardi Gras** (without the debauchery), **Disney World** (without the heat and the lines), the **Jersey Shore** (without the Jersey).

And **that means everything we missed out on here** we’ll get to experience (in abundance!) there. You never got to go to **Hawaii**? No big deal, the heavenly version will be better. Never got to **fly to the moon**? No big deal, you’ll probably be able to fly up on your own up there. Maybe you **missed out on marriage** here, or a **good one**—don’t worry, something better is just around the corner. There’s no marriage in heaven, but Scripture says whatever state we’re in up there is better than marriage. So, **ANYTHING you miss out on here**—friends, good health, anything—you get in abundance there.

*(By the way—I can’t prove this, but I’m pretty sure that in heaven all the foods that are bad for you here are good for you there, and vice versa. There, ice cream is good for the waistline, while cauliflower makes you gain weight. Like I said, I can’t prove that, you know, but these things are spiritually discerned.)*

We **don’t know all that we’ll be capable of physically** in the resurrection, but Jesus’ resurrection is supposed to give us some

hints, and with his resurrected body, Jesus ate meat, could fly, and walked through walls.

- I’ve **always wanted to climb Mt. Everest**. My wife tells me it’s off the table until my kids at least graduate college. And by that time, I may not be physically able and so I may never get the chance. But that’s okay, because in heaven I’m confident I’ll get to climb the renewed one, which will be a lot better anyway. And when I get to the top, I’ll fly over to the heavenly Tuscany for dinner.

Paul tells us, *“What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived—God has prepared these things for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9)*. (In plain speak, that means that if you can think it, it’s not awesome enough. That’s pretty fantastic because I can think of some pretty cool things. Heaven likely will have all of them, plus a bunch of other stuff I can’t even conceive of yet.)

**By the way, remind me—why do I need a bucket list?** Whatever I miss out on here I’ve got eternity to enjoy up there. I seek a city with foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

And of course, the greatest thing about heaven is that God himself, the source of all these beautiful things, is there and we get to be with him forever. That’s the essence of heaven—being with God.

**This is the eternal city you’re being invited to. But to get it—like Abraham—you have to leave behind your earthly one.**

And make no mistake, it’s not easy. It requires faith. Faith in things as yet unseen. And showing that faith is difficult. It was for Abraham.

- Again (vs. 8), Abraham had to leave “not knowing where he was going [to dwell] v. 9, in a foreign land, living in tents,” instead of nice, comfortable nice houses.
- And (vs. 13) “he died without actually possessing it.” Sometimes you never see the earthly fulfillment of your faith this side of eternity. And that requires walking by faith.
- Abraham had to be willing to step out into the unknown with his life as a blank check, trusting in no one but God!
- Are you willing to do that?

I love how **John Calvin summarized God’s call to Abraham:** “Just close your eyes and take my hand.” I love that. *Just close your eyes and take my hand.* (But “God, what about...?” “How will...?” “Just close your eyes and take my hand.”)

- *I see so many people want heaven but they are unwilling to do this.* When considering following God, they want to know, “Well, God, if I surrender everything to you...
  - **Where are you going to make me go?** Do I have to become a missionary?
  - Do I have to **change careers?**
  - Will I have to break up with my **boyfriend?**
  - What if you tell me to **change some part of my life that** I don’t want to change yet?
- *I used to try and answer those questions for people, but then I realized that this was just people wanting to know EXACTLY where God is going to take them before they’ll follow him. But you can’t do that. Following God is not about a WHAT, it’s about a WHO.*
- What should concern you is not WHAT he asks you to do, but the WHO behind the asking.
- *Just close your eyes and take my hand. Are you willing to do that?*

To get this eternal city, you have to be willing to leave everything. And to do that, you have to be convinced that what you’re gaining is infinitely greater than what you’re leaving behind—and to do that (pay attention here), **you have to be convinced of God’s favor.**

Honestly, this is something that I don’t talk about enough. In order to leave all to seek God, you have to be convinced the God you’ll go after will receive you—that he has received you.

- Remember **Hebrews 11:6:** “But without faith it is impossible to please God; for he that comes to him must believe that he exists and that he is *a rewarder of those who diligently seek him.*”
- You have to be convinced he’s worth it. That you possess him.

**Many of us live with an unspoken, silent assumption:** *I’m not sure God will have me. I’m not sure he’s received me. I’m not surrendered ENOUGH. I can never live this Christian life right. I’m too dirty.*

Martin Luther, in his *Commentary on Romans*, said of faith: “Faith is a living, bold trust in God’s grace, so certain of God’s favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it.”

That’s the idea that launched the Protestant Reformation, by the way.

**Are you sure of that favor?** Honestly, I haven’t always been. But it’s the assurance offered in the gospel. Recently, the Holy Spirit really brought me assurance through the story of Jacob. I won’t go into it, but Jacob was a swindler, a manipulator, a rationalizer. Always seeing what he could get away with. And in some ways, that kind of reminded me of me. And I’ve had this assumption: “I don’t know if God really receives me since he sees the real me.” But then I was reading the Bible and thinking about Jacob and noticed that in the midst of his dirtbaggery, God appeared to Jacob at Bethel and said, “I am your God. I receive you.” Jacob just had to believe that and live in light of it. Ironically, that cured him of dirtbagginess. That’s me. That’s you.

**Whoever you are, whatever you’ve done, you’re JACOB:** God has appeared to you and said, “If you’re willing to follow me, I’ll be your God and Savior.” Whoever you are, wherever you are, he’s the Father in the prodigal son story who stands with arms open wide to receive

you. He receives you. Are you ready to come, with full abandon, to him?

## Invitation

### **Where is God calling you to follow that you just need to surrender?**

- What act of faith is he calling you to?
- To leave something?
- To go somewhere?
- To give up something?

Maybe it's your initial act of surrender? To become his follower. To be baptized: ***Just close your eyes and take his hand.***

If that's you, indicate by raising your hand.