

“An Anchor for the Soul: God-Pleasing Faith”

Hebrews 11:7-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 24, 2016

You may have seen in the news or heard the commercials on the radio for a new attraction opening this summer in Cincinnati, Ohio. It's called the Ark Encounter. They have built a full-size replica of Noah's Ark to serve as a museum. The story of Noah and the Ark is probably one of the best-known stories in the entire Bible. But probably because it's so familiar we miss the sheer magnitude of building a wooden boat that's one and a half football fields long, four stories high, taking 120 years to build.

This morning we continue in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews which is often called the “Hall of Faith” because it mentions so many of the people in the Bible. As I mentioned last week, Hebrews 11 actually summarizes the entire Old Testament. The point, though, is not the great things that these people accomplished. The point of Hebrews 11 is faith that pleases God. The key to this chapter is in chapter 10, verse 39: “We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.” John Piper reminds us that there are only two ways to live. We can either “shrink back” from God, rejecting His salvation, which leads to destruction, or we can live the life of faith that preserves our souls. There's no in-between.

Over the past couple of weeks, as we've looked at what it means to have faith that preserves our souls, we have been using this definition of faith: “True faith...is a solid conviction resting on God's words that makes the future present and the invisible seen.” Last week we studied the lives of Abel and Enoch and saw how this kind of faith results in a life characterized by walking with God, with joyful, sincere worship at the center of your life. Faith that results in authentic worship and fellowship and discipleship and service is faith that pleases God.

Today as we look at the faith of Noah and Abraham and Sarah we deepen our understanding of faith as “a solid conviction

resting on God's words that makes the future present and the invisible seen.” We find here that there are four elements of faith, four things that are present in genuine faith.

First, there is the Word of God. God speaks. The beginning of true faith is always God revealing himself so that we come to believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Verse 7 says that Noah was “warned by God concerning events yet unseen.” God revealed himself to Noah. He spoke to him. In verse 8 Abraham was “called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.” Verse 9 talks about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob being heirs of the promise. And then in verse 11 Sarah “considered him faithful who had promised.” God made promises to Noah and to Abraham and to Sarah. He revealed himself to them directly.

God reveals himself to each of us, too. For most of us God doesn't show up and speak to us out loud saying, “I want you to build an Ark.” But he is revealing himself to you just the same. Nature is one of the ways God shows himself. The complexity of nature, the precise way everything in the universe runs, clearly shows that it was designed by God. He also reveals himself through beauty. An amazing sunset, colorful flowers. The very fact that you can appreciate beauty is evidence that God is revealing himself. But he doesn't stop there. God has given us his word. We can hear from God any time. What we discover in his Word are his promises. “I will supply every need of yours according to my riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:19. “I will come and take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” John 14:3 “Abide in me you will bear much fruit.” John 15:5. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among you.” Matthew 18:20. The list goes on and on. Faith begins with God making promises to us. That's the first element of faith.

After hearing God speak to us, through his word or through nature or through the witness of another Christian, the second element of true faith is an inward response. We're going to get to the outward response in a moment but this is something inside. Out of deep reverence for God, Noah built the ark (verse 7). A flourishing faith requires a personal reverence for God. That means we don't have a casual attitude toward worship or the Bible. Every fiber of our being should be in awe of God. That's an internal response. It's an unchangeable attitude.

Verse 8 says Abraham "went out, not knowing where he was going." John Piper says that part of our inner response is ignorance. We generally think of ignorance as a bad thing. But our inner response to God's calling must include a willingness to embrace "not knowing." If you generally like to be in control of your life you're going to struggle with this. This week you may need to work on stepping out in faith, not knowing how things are going to turn out. It's a sign of your "assurance of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen," which is the third part of an inner response, a confidence in God's promise of complete forgiveness and an assurance of your salvation in Christ.

That leads to the fourth thing, trust. Faith is more than just believing. It's more than just knowledge. Faith is belief plus trust. If Abraham didn't trust God he wouldn't have left his nice, secure home in a nice city to head out not even knowing where he was going. If Noah didn't trust God's promise he certainly wouldn't have starting building a ship in the desert, much less spend the next 120 years working on it.

It's clear from this passage that faith hears the call of God and responds with an inner transformation, but it's still not enough to simply believe and trust. Faith requires action. That's the third element of true faith. There's the Word of God, his call on our lives. That leads to an inner response of reverence and ignorance and trust and then it's expressed in real, tangible actions. Noah believed and trusted God so he built an ark – a 4-story high, 450-foot-long ship. Imagine if God had told Noah,

"I'm going to send a flood. Build an ark to save yourself and your family and all the animals," and Noah said, "I believe you," but then didn't do anything. When the rain came he would have perished. Faith is always expressed in actions. John Calvin said, "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." In other words, true faith is always expressed in obedience, which he said, "always flows from faith like water from a fountain." Noah trusts God and builds an ark. Abraham trusts God and leaves his homeland. He trusts God further by living in tents instead of building a new city.

Sarah trusts God and conceives when she's old. This one may be a little more confusing at first glance. It's pretty obvious, I think, how building an ark or leaving your homeland required trust in God. But what about Sarah? Verse 11 says, "By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age." At this point in their lives Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 90. What we often forget is that she conceived in the same way everyone else does. I imagine that took a lot of faith!

Finally, the fourth element of faith is the hope in a future reward. Verse 13 tells us, "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." Faith allows us to taste the blessings in this life but the full reward comes later. Sometimes we may struggle to taste them now. But faith involves trusting God to fulfill his promise to bring us to the "city whose designer and builder is God." That's heaven.

So here's the thing. Noah and Abraham and Sarah were asked to trust God and believe something that had never happened. There had never before been a worldwide flood. Abraham had never been to Canaan and he didn't even know that's where he was going. But God asks *us* to believe something that's already happened – the death and resurrection of Jesus. Not only has it already happened but there's lots of evidence for it, both in the Bible and in ancient documents. God promised Noah and Abraham

and Sarah things that were hard to imagine. But he promises *us* something he has done countless times already – forgiveness and salvation.

We have the Word of God. We can hear him call us in worship and in Bible study and in prayer. We have access to the Holy Spirit who brings about that inner transformation. We need to respond with our actions. We respond by leaving our comfort zone and ministering to the needs of others. That may mean going across town to visit someone who is sick or in a nursing home. It may mean going into the inner city to help alleviate poverty or help school

children learn to read. It may mean going to the pregnancy center to help a young woman in an unplanned pregnancy or simply to help organize donations. It may mean travelling to other states or other countries to be the hands and feet of Jesus. It may mean giving up an hour or so a week to pray with others. The key to all of these elements of faith is to keep focused on the better country, the heavenly city, trusting the promises of Jesus. And everything else will make sense.

Amen