



Here is the NIV version; *“By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was able to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.”*

These translation variations are arrived at through disagreements in the Greek sentence structure and the tenses of the Greek words. There is an argument that Abraham’s ability to produce ‘seed’ is the expression in this verse, i.e., “the power of procreation”, which generally fits the male role in the production of children, even as an old man. The phrase “from one man” in v. 12 also seems to fit with this reading. Also, Sarah did not have faith by giving Hagar to Abraham in Gen. 16: 1-6, and also laughed in disbelief when “the Angel of the Lord” told her she’d have a son<sup>3</sup> ( cf. Gen. 18:9-12 ).

However, Thomas Schreiner is convinced that the ESV and other versions besides the two above, are correct in having Sarah as the subject of v. 11, by many technical arguments regarding the Greek structures, and also comments that Abraham also disbelieved in his going in to Hagar as well; and the role of “one man” in v. 12 doesn’t eliminate Sarah’s participation in having a child; God opens her womb ( and she understood Him as having closed it in Gen. 16 ); the language of “laying down seed” is not used in a biblical sense here. Instead the author is speaking generally of the ability to bear children. It takes two! Both Sarah and Abraham were faithful in trusting God here.

Furthermore, it seems that Sarah’s singular event of motherhood at 90 years old, was not repeated. However, Abraham, even older in Genesis 25:1, took a second wife, Keturah, and she bore him 6 children! By this time, according to Gen. 23:1, Sarah died at 127 ( making Abraham 137 ), and she was buried. In Gen. 24:67, Isaac “was comforted after his mother’s death”, and had just taken Rebekah as his wife – he too was a grown man. So, my argument is this – if the verse ( 11 ) is translated as about Abraham because of his age in fathering Isaac, he still had that power at ( at least ) 137 or more. He died at 175 ( Gen. 25:7 ). There is no mention of his faith in fathering these 6 later children, and he had also fathered Ismael by Hagar. I believe the faith being highlighted in verse 11 is Sarah’s.

## “From One Man”

## v. 12

“Therefore”, because of the promise of God, with enough time having elapsed between promise and fulfillment to convince anyone that it was “of God”, many offspring were born through Abraham and Isaac, via Isaac. This really is astonishing and shows that God is not confined to our human ideals of when the time is right. He has His own perfect plan ( [Galatians 4:4](#), and note [Isaiah 51:2](#) ), even when by all appearances, in our estimation, His promise cannot be realised!

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 352

The author, in v. 12, clearly alludes to Gen. 22:17 and God's specific promise ( stars and sand ). Notice Gen. 17:15-27. At age 99, Abraham was still waiting on God to provide himself and Sarah with that one son ( out of the unity of both of them ) who would be named Isaac ( v. 19 ). Notice that in v. 25, Ishmael was already 13 years old, and yet no Isaac.

Although we know the Genesis accounts of all this, Hebrews 11 says nothing about the laughter or the stuttering faith of Abraham or Sarah, because their sins were washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. Richard Phillips points out; : "*Believing God, they came together as husband and wife, and by the power of His grace, God brought life from a dead womb, bringing a salvation that is all of grace.*"<sup>4</sup>

This 'miraculous' and important birth is a precursor to that of another descendant of Abraham, many centuries later; that special seed God had in mind all along ( Gen. 3:15; cf. Gal. 3:16-29; Isa. 7:14; 9:6-7; 11:1-5, and so on ), who was born of a virgin – a work produced by God alone – human workings set aside...Matt. 1:21 – "*She [ Mary ] will have a son and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*"

Richard Phillips comments further, focusing this on Christ:

"The virgin birth tells us that the means by which the gospel produces its ends are not natural or man-controlled; they are not things we can manipulate for our own success, or that rely upon us. The blessing that God promised Abraham could come about only if a barren and elderly woman could conceive and give birth. When it comes to Christ, we find that there will be salvation from our sins only if a virgin girl can do the same. That Sarah conceived and gave birth, and that Mary did the same, tells us that the salvation we trust is of God from first to last, and to the glory of his name alone. Therefore, let us trust ourselves to this God who gives life to the dead and produces blessing from the barren womb, even salvation through the virgin womb that bore our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup>

## Faith Seeking a Home

vv. 13-15

"*These all died in faith...*". This phrase may refer to all the examples given in chapter 11 from v. 1 until this point, or just to Abraham and his immediate family. The context suggests the latter ( and Enoch famously did not die ), but this should be able to be said for every believer – those in the Bible, and us. They trusted in promises not fulfilled during their present circumstances, or even during their lives, but rather "*having seen them and greeted them from afar.*"

In Abraham's case, for example, he did live to see the birth and some of the life of his promised son, Isaac, but all that God promised as related to multiple offspring and

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 455

<sup>5</sup> IBID, p. 456

nations to arise from him, *“like the stars of the sky”* and his possession of the land – never occurred while he was alive. He died trusting God to take care of the rest.

In fact, a point is made that stresses this very fact ( regarding the land promise ) in Genesis 23. Sarah dies at 127 years old, and Abraham in vv. 3-4 decides to purchase a place to bury her, so he paid for a cave and a field ( where he would also later be buried ( cf. Gen. 27:7-12 ) for 400 shekels of silver. The land that God promised Abraham is specified in Genesis 15:18-20, and notice how the promise is specified, “To your offspring I give this land...”. So Abraham’s sojourn through life, almost 100 years from when, at 75, God called him out of Ur ( Gen. 12:4 ) seems to have ended without his ever receiving all that God promised. But he had a faith that looked back at God’s call and his salvation, counted on it daily and it fueled the perseverance to keep pressing on.

But aren’t our Christian lives somewhat the same? Don’t we, as Hebrews 11:16 says, *“desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one”*? It’s one we don’t expect to see before we die, the Rapture perhaps intervening, but, even with relatively minimal biblical information about this heaven we long for, we long to be there because that’s where our Lord and Saviour is. When our believing family or friends die, despite our sadness and mourning, we rejoice that they have finally arrived there, that they now await our arrival to be with them, and with Christ!

We are given tremendously gracious blessings as we sojourn here on earth – the indwelling Holy Spirit, imputed righteousness, peace, joy, abundant blessings, great hope, etc., but those things are tempered by our war with the flesh, with suffering and grief until that moment described by Revelation 21:4 arrives.

It is therefore a tragedy that so many modern day charlatans – specifically those involved in the Health, Wealth and Prosperity “gospel”, must attempt to get people to believe that they can have all that awaits us in heaven in the here and now, without the nuisance of death. And as Paul says in I Cor. 15:17,32b, pointing to the resurrection, if that is not a real promise, if we are not faithfully, if impatiently, waiting for that, then we might as well follow these heretics whose main purpose is the love of money!

At the end of our life, we will be freed from sin – an unimaginable blessing. Puritan writer, Thomas Watson comments on this:

“A believer at death is freed from sin; he is not taken away in, but from his sins: he shall never have a proud, vain thought more; he shall never grieve the Spirit of God any more...Death smites a believer as the angel did Peter, and made his chains fall off ( Acts 12:7 ). Believers at death are made perfect in holiness....Oh! What a blessed privilege is this; to be without spot or wrinkle; to be purer than the sunbeams; to be as free from sin as the angels! ( Eph. 5:27 ). This makes a believer desirous to have his passport and to be gone; he would fain live in that pure air where no black vapours of sin arise.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Watson, cited by Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 461

Verse 13 tells us “These all died in faith...” What a difference that makes as one faces the inevitable death that comes upon us all ( cf. Heb. 9:27 ) – we will all face it. And verse 13 goes on to describe the feeling of those who died in faith, trying to reach this place where promises are fulfilled. Faith, in the context of this passage, is a pilgrimage, a journey through a foreign land to a greater, perfect home that awaits us beyond death. ( cf. John 14:1-6 )

This verse also says, “*they were strangers and exiles on the earth...*”. This is a quote from Abraham in Gen. 23:4 when he went to purchase a burial plot for Sarah from the Hittites. In other words, “aliens and sojourners” – those passing through – their earthly homes having been left behind them.

Abraham had left Ur behind him. In vv. 14-15, and speaking like Abraham did, he knew that was in the past. He had not yet arrived at the destination God had promised him – “*to the land I will show you...*”( Gen. 12:1 ), but then v. 15 points out, if he had been thinking about Ur, he could have gone back there. But his faith alone kept him from returning to where his journey had begun. “The fact that he made no attempt to go back shows the strength and reality of that faith.”<sup>7</sup> Remember that Ur was not just his original home, it was the place he had worshipped idols, and had been called out of by God.

Interestingly, Jesus Himself points this concept out in Matt. 10:37-39. This is a quite challenging & striking test of our faith. Follow Him to the end or be found unworthy of Him! Another passage that challenges those who contemplate following Christ is found in Luke 14:25-33.

## God Has Prepared a City

v. 16

### *I.) “They desire a better country”*

To willingly leave worldly comforts behind, then, to exhibit a desire, a faith that longs for what God has promised to His faithful people. This is the corollary to being a stranger and alien – because the motivation to accept that status is what awaits us at the end of life’s long journey. We are headed somewhere that our hearts long to be; that place our faith longs for and can only be realised in a world other than this vale of tears we now inhabit. If we are believers, our view of death will necessarily change our view of life. Death is terrible, but for those who trust God’s promises and the Cross of Christ, it’s the gateway into real, eternal life. ( cf. Phil. 1:21 )

### *II.) “God is not ashamed to be called their God.”*

True believers can empathise with Abraham’s mindset. He was dwelling in tents, had not yet received all that God had promised, yet by the eyes of faith, he could see where he was going, afar off. Perhaps Christ provides us with a clue of this in John 8:56.

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<sup>7</sup> Phillips, p. 463

Perhaps Abraham was strengthened by God through some sense or vision of the life of Christ – the thing, that for him, settled the inner issue whether he received the promises before death or not, because he was fully convinced of an afterlife of promises fulfilled for him, and that his progeny, his family who would inherit the land and make of him a great nation!

What could be of more importance, of more encouragement to know than what v. 16 tells us here? The God of Sovereign Grace, of all the universe, is not ashamed of those who trust Him? John 4:23 expresses that these are the very sorts of people that God seeks to worship Him. Christ expresses His desire to share heaven with His own people – John 17:24 – and Revelation 21:1-4 ( especially v. 3 ) presents the grandeur and inestimable comfort for God's loved ones in the future. Again, the NT presents a challenge to us in Mark 8:34-38.

We must live with these promises firmly established in our hearts and minds. Peter reminds us, in I Peter 1:3-4 that our inheritance is “kept in heaven for us”; and Paul, in 2 Tim. 4:7-8 expresses the same hope for us all. Let's strive to reach that land of promise!