

Living by Faith, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Faith That Waits on the Promise: Sarah and the Patriarchs

Hebrews 11:11–16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson carries some of the heaviest and most pastorally important doctrine in the whole study, because it confronts the hardest question of the life of faith: what do we do when the promise is delayed, and what happens to believers who die before they receive it? Hebrews 11:11–16 answers without flinching. Sarah received power to conceive because ‘she considered him faithful who had promised,’ locating faith not in human capacity but in the unchanging character of God. Then the writer makes the stunning admission that ‘these all died in faith, not having received the things promised.’ The doctrinal stakes are high. This text teaches that the object of saving faith is God’s faithfulness across generations, that the believer’s true home is a heavenly country and a city God has prepared, and that those who die in faith are not failures but pilgrims whose hope is fixed on the resurrection and an eternal inheritance. Hebrews 11:39–40 will later confirm that God reserved something better so that they, together with us in Christ, would be made perfect. This is not a postponed earthly kingdom but the heavenly inheritance secured in Christ, whose kingdom and church were established at Pentecost and over which He reigns now.

Be ready to handle two pastoral pressures. First, the modern instinct treats delay as evidence that God has failed or that our faith was misplaced. The patriarchs teach the opposite: faith proven over decades, faith that dies still waiting and is still commended, is the very faith God honors. Second, many in the class carry grief over loved ones who died before promises were realized, and over their own long, unanswered prayers. This text speaks directly to them. To die in faith is to die a winner, because the promise is sure even when it is not yet seen, and the resurrection hope means the story is not over at the grave.

The spiritual-formation aim is to cultivate patience and a pilgrim’s heart. We want students to leave trusting God’s timing rather than demanding their own, holding the things of this world with a loose and grateful grip, and living as sojourners whose deepest longing is the heavenly city. Help each student see that waiting is not wasted time but the very soil in which God grows the kind of faith He commends, and that Jesus Himself is forming in them the patient, hope-filled trust that marked Sarah and the patriarchs.

Question 1

Student Question: *Verse 11 says that Sarah ‘received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.’ What does it mean to ‘consider him faithful,’ and why does the writer locate the source of her faith in God’s character rather than in her own ability?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with the verb the writer chooses: Sarah 'considered' Him faithful. The word points to a settled judgment, a reckoning. She weighed the situation and concluded that the One who promised could be counted on. Faith here is not a feeling that swept over her but a deliberate decision to treat God as trustworthy, made in spite of everything her circumstances were telling her.

Notice carefully where the writer puts the power. The strength to conceive did not arise from Sarah's body, which was long past the age, but from God's faithfulness. This is the consistent pattern of Scripture: faith does not generate the outcome by its own intensity; it rests on the character of God who alone can act. The question to keep before the class is never 'How strong is my faith?' but 'How faithful is the One I am trusting?'

It helps to be honest about Sarah's journey. Genesis tells us she first laughed in disbelief at the promise (Genesis 18:12), and yet Hebrews celebrates her faith. This is a great comfort. Faith is rarely a straight line. God met a woman whose trust had wavered and brought it to maturity, and He honored the faith she finally rested in Him. Many in your class will need to hear that a faith with a stumbling start can still finish strong.

Bring it home to the doctrine of God. To 'consider Him faithful' is to know the kind of God we serve: one who keeps His word across decades, who does not forget, who cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18). The bedrock of the Christian life is not our reliability but His. When we anchor our trust in God's character, we have something that will hold when our own resources are exhausted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith as a deliberate reckoning that God can be trusted, not merely a feeling
- The source of faith's power located in God's faithfulness, not human ability
- Sarah's journey from doubt (Genesis 18:12) to commended faith as encouragement
- The character of God as the unshakable ground of trust
- The right question being not how strong my faith is but how faithful God is
- God who cannot lie and keeps His word across the years (Hebrews 6:18)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between trying to muster strong faith and considering God faithful?
- How does it encourage you that Sarah first laughed in doubt and was still commended for faith?
- Where do you most need to relocate your confidence from your own ability to God's character?

Question 2

Student Question: *Sarah waited decades for a promise that her own body seemed to contradict. Where in your life are you waiting on something God has promised, and how is that waiting testing your confidence in Him?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, and it touches a tender place in nearly everyone. Most believers are waiting on something: healing, a wayward child's return, a marriage, relief from loneliness, an unanswered prayer that has gone on for years. Create a safe space where people can name their waiting without feeling they have failed for finding it hard.

Help the class see that waiting is not a sign of God's absence or displeasure. Sarah's decades of waiting were not punishment; they were the long road on which God grew a faith worth honoring. The very delay that tempts us to doubt is often the place where God is doing His deepest work in us. Waiting is not wasted time in God's economy.

Gently surface the testing that waiting brings. Long delays tempt us toward bitterness, toward taking matters into our own hands (as Abraham and Sarah did with Hagar), and toward concluding that God has forgotten. Naming these temptations honestly is the first step toward resisting them. Encourage students to bring the waiting itself to God in prayer rather than carrying it alone.

End with hope. The God who was faithful to Sarah after decades is the same God who holds our delayed promises. Even if a particular promise is one that will only be fully realized in eternity, it is no less certain. Encourage the class to keep considering Him faithful in the waiting.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universality of waiting in the life of faith
- Delay as the soil in which God grows mature faith, not as punishment
- The temptations of waiting: bitterness, self-reliance, concluding God has forgotten
- Abraham and Sarah's resort to Hagar as a warning against taking matters into our own hands
- Bringing the waiting itself to God in prayer
- The certainty of God's promises even when realized only in eternity

Discussion Prompts

- What are you waiting on God for right now, and how long has the waiting been?
- What temptation does the waiting stir in you, and how do you fight it?
- How might God be growing something in you through the delay itself?

Question 3

Student Question: Verse 12 says that from Abraham, ‘as good as dead,’ came descendants ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’ What does it teach us about God that He brings such abundant life out of human weakness and impossibility (compare Romans 4:18–21)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger on the phrase ‘as good as dead.’ The writer is not being delicate; he is underlining that there was nothing left in Abraham and Sarah to make the promise possible. Humanly speaking, the situation was finished. This is precisely the kind of soil in which God loves to work, so that the glory of the outcome belongs unmistakably to Him and not to human strength.

Bring in Romans 4:18–21, where Paul reflects on this same story. Abraham ‘in hope believed against hope,’ and ‘he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead.’ He was ‘fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.’ This is the anatomy of mature faith: clear-eyed about the impossibility, yet fully convinced of God’s power. Faith does not pretend the obstacle is small; it knows the God who is greater.

Draw out the pattern across Scripture, because it is everywhere. God brings life out of barren wombs, water out of rock, victory out of weakness, and supremely, resurrection life out of a sealed tomb. The God of Hebrews 11 is the God who calls into existence things that do not exist (Romans 4:17). This is the same power that raised Jesus and that works in His people.

Apply it with care. When students face situations that feel ‘as good as dead,’ a dead marriage, a dead church, a dead hope, this text invites them not to despair but to remember the character of God. He specializes in impossibilities. The countless descendants that came from one dying couple are a standing testimony that no situation is beyond His reach.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God bringing abundant life out of human weakness and impossibility
- Faith that is clear-eyed about the obstacle yet fully convinced of God’s power (Romans 4:18–21)
- The biblical pattern of God working from barrenness to abundance, culminating in resurrection
- God as the One who calls into existence things that do not exist (Romans 4:17)
- The glory belonging to God when the outcome is humanly impossible
- Hope for situations that feel as good as dead

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God so often work through human weakness and impossibility?
- What does Abraham’s example in Romans 4 teach about facing obstacles honestly while trusting God?
- What situation in your life feels as good as dead, and how does this text speak to it?

Question 4

Student Question: *Can you recall a time when God worked in a situation that felt hopeless or 'as good as dead' to you? What did that experience teach you about His power and His timing?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites testimony, and testimony strengthens the whole class. When believers recount how God acted in a situation that seemed finished, it builds faith in everyone listening. Be ready to share an example of your own to prime the conversation and to model the kind of remembering that fuels faith.

Help students reflect not only on what God did but on what they learned about Him. Often the deepest lesson is not the outcome itself but the discovery that God could be trusted in the dark, that His timing differed from ours and yet proved right, that He was present even when He seemed absent. The point is to mine past faithfulness for present trust.

Acknowledge that not every story has the ending we wanted. Some in the class are still waiting, or watched a situation not turn out as they hoped. Handle this honestly and tenderly. Even there, God's faithfulness is not in question; sometimes the deliverance He gives is not the one we asked for, and sometimes the full answer waits for eternity. The aim is to build confidence in God's character, not to promise that every prayer is answered as we wish.

Close by connecting remembrance to hope. The God who proved faithful before is the God we face the future with. Scripture constantly calls believers to remember, because memory of past faithfulness is fuel for present and future faith.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faith-building power of remembering God's past faithfulness
- Learning to trust God's character in the dark, not only His outcomes
- God's timing differing from ours yet proving right
- Honest handling of situations that did not turn out as hoped
- Some answers reserved for eternity
- Memory of past faithfulness as fuel for present and future trust

Discussion Prompts

- When has God worked in a situation that felt hopeless to you?
- What did that experience teach you about His power and His timing?
- How can remembering past faithfulness strengthen you in a present waiting?

Question 5

Student Question: *Verse 13 says, 'These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.' What does it mean to die in faith*

without yet receiving the promise, and how does this reframe what a successful life of faith actually looks like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This verse is one of the most important in the chapter, and it overturns a common assumption. We tend to measure a successful life of faith by what we receive: answered prayers, fulfilled promises, visible results. But the writer holds up as heroes people who died without receiving the things promised. Their success was not in the receiving but in the trusting. They died still believing, and that is what God commends.

Unpack the beautiful sequence: they 'saw' the promises, 'greeted' them, and confessed they were strangers. The image is of travelers who catch sight of their destination from a great distance and wave to it joyfully, even though they have miles yet to walk. They held the promise so firmly by faith that it shaped their whole journey, even though they never set foot in it during their earthly lives.

This reframes faith powerfully for the class. The faithful life is not measured by how much of heaven we get here, but by whether we trust God all the way to the end. To 'die in faith' is to finish the race still believing, still looking ahead, still confident in the God who promised. By that measure, a life of much waiting and little earthly fulfillment can be a tremendous success in God's eyes.

Guard against a wrong inference. This does not mean God's promises are unreliable or merely symbolic. The patriarchs really will receive everything God promised, in the resurrection and the heavenly city, as the rest of the chapter makes clear (Hebrews 11:39-40). The promise is not cancelled; it is kept on a timeline that stretches into eternity. Faith trusts that timeline.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Dying in faith without yet receiving the promise as the mark of a successful life
- Faith measured by trusting to the end, not by visible results received
- Seeing and greeting the promises from afar as a posture of joyful, forward-looking hope
- The promise kept on God's timeline, reaching into eternity, not cancelled
- Comfort for those whose lives hold much waiting and little earthly fulfillment
- The fulfillment secured in the resurrection and heavenly city (Hebrews 11:39-40)

Discussion Prompts

- How does this verse challenge the way we usually measure a successful life of faith?
- What does it mean to see and greet God's promises from afar?
- How would it change your outlook to aim, above all, at dying in faith?

Question 6

Student Question: *The patriarchs 'greeted from afar' promises they would not see fulfilled in their lifetimes. What would it mean for you to greet God's promises with joy even now, before you see them fulfilled?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks the class to take up the patriarchs' posture. Greeting a promise from afar is an act of joyful anticipation, like a family waving as a loved one's plane finally appears on the horizon. The promise is not yet in hand, but it is so certain that it produces joy now. Ask students whether their faith carries that kind of forward-looking gladness.

Help them see that greeting promises with joy is a discipline, not just a mood. It grows as we keep God's promises before our eyes, rehearse them, thank God for them in advance, and let them shape our daily choices. A believer who regularly remembers the promise of resurrection and the heavenly city carries a different spirit through ordinary days.

Contrast this with two common postures: grim endurance that merely white-knuckles through life, and anxious waiting that frets over whether the promise will come. The patriarchs show a better way, a settled joy rooted in confidence that the promise is sure. This joy is available even in hardship, because it rests on God rather than on present circumstances.

Make it concrete. Encourage each student to name one promise of God they could begin to greet with joy this week, perhaps by thanking God for it daily before it arrives, the way a person sets the table before the guest has come.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Greeting promises from afar as joyful anticipation grounded in certainty
- Anticipatory joy as a discipline cultivated by keeping promises before our eyes
- The contrast with grim endurance and anxious fretting
- Joy that rests on God's character rather than present circumstances
- Thanking God for promises in advance as an act of faith
- Letting future hope shape present daily life

Discussion Prompts

- What would it look like to greet one of God's promises with joy this week?
- How is anticipatory joy different from grim endurance or anxious waiting?
- Which promise of God could you begin thanking Him for before you see it fulfilled?

Question 7

Student Question: *In verse 13 these believers 'acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.' What does it mean for a Christian to live as a stranger and exile, and how should*

this identity shape the way we hold the things of this world (compare 1 Peter 2:11; Philippians 3:20)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Define the terms first. A stranger is a temporary resident, someone living in a land that is not finally home. An exile is someone whose true homeland lies elsewhere. The patriarchs literally lived this way, dwelling in tents in a land God had promised but not yet given. The writer uses their literal pilgrimage as a picture of the spiritual reality of every believer.

Connect to the New Testament's clear teaching. Peter calls Christians 'sojourners and exiles' and urges them, on that basis, to abstain from the passions of the flesh (1 Peter 2:11). Paul says 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Philippians 3:20). The believer holds dual awareness: we live and work and love in this world, but our deepest belonging is elsewhere, with Christ.

Draw out how this identity shapes our grip on things. A traveler packs light. A person who knows they are passing through does not sink their whole heart into the temporary. This is not a call to despise God's good gifts or to neglect our responsibilities here; it is a call to hold them with an open hand, to invest in what lasts, and to refuse to let the comforts of this world become our final hope.

Apply it pastorally. Living as exiles explains the strange ache so many believers feel, the sense that we do not quite fit, that something is missing even when life is good. That ache is not a defect; it is homesickness for a country we have not yet seen. Far from being discouraged by it, we can let it point us toward the home God has prepared.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer as a temporary resident whose true home is elsewhere
- The New Testament call to live as sojourners and exiles (1 Peter 2:11)
- Heavenly citizenship shaping earthly priorities (Philippians 3:20)
- Holding the things of this world with a loose, open hand
- Not a call to despise God's gifts or neglect duties, but to invest in what lasts
- Spiritual homesickness as a pointer toward our true home rather than a defect

Discussion Prompts

- What does it look like, practically, to live as a stranger and exile on the earth?
- How should heavenly citizenship change the way you hold money, comfort, and status?
- Have you felt the ache of not quite fitting in this world, and how does this text reframe it?

Question 8

Student Question: *Where do you feel most at home in this world, and where do you sense the pull to put down deeper roots here than a sojourner should? What is one way you could loosen your grip on the temporary and reach for the eternal?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the pilgrim identity into specifics. Everyone has places, comforts, relationships, or ambitions where they are tempted to settle in as if this world were home. Help students name where they feel most at home, then gently ask whether any of those have become anchors that hold their hearts down rather than gifts they hold loosely.

Be careful to keep the tone free of false guilt. The issue is not enjoying God's good gifts; the patriarchs had families, flocks, and homes. The issue is misplaced ultimate hope. The diagnostic question is: what would devastate me to lose, in a way that reveals I have made it my final treasure rather than God? That is where the roots have grown too deep.

Lead toward concrete reorientation. Loosening our grip might look like increased generosity, a willingness to hold plans loosely, refusing to let career or comfort dictate every decision, or investing more deliberately in eternal things such as people's souls, the work of the church, and our walk with God. The aim is to reach for the eternal, not merely to renounce the temporary.

Close with the positive vision. We loosen our grip on lesser things not because they are bad but because something far better is coming. The hand that lets go of the temporary is free to take hold of the eternal. Encourage each student toward one concrete step in that direction this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest examination of where we are tempted to settle in as if this world were home
- The difference between enjoying God's gifts and making them our final treasure
- The diagnostic of what we could not bear to lose
- Loosening our grip through generosity and holding plans loosely
- Reaching for the eternal: souls, the church, our walk with God
- Letting go of lesser things because something far better is coming

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to put down roots deeper than a sojourner should?
- What would it reveal about your heart if you lost the thing you most fear losing?
- What is one concrete way to loosen your grip on the temporary this week?

Question 9

Student Question: *Verses 14 to 16 say that these believers were seeking a homeland, 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one,' and therefore 'God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he*

has prepared for them a city.' What does this passage teach about the believer's true home, about God's unfailing faithfulness to keep His promises across generations, and about the eternal inheritance and resurrection hope that await those who die in faith? How does this heavenly hope sustain us when promises are delayed and loved ones die before the great day comes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, so give it ample room and let its weight settle on the class. The writer reveals what the patriarchs were truly seeking all along. They were not merely homesick for a patch of land in Canaan; had that been their goal, they could have returned to the country they left. They were seeking 'a better country, that is, a heavenly one.' Their whole pilgrimage was driven by a hope set beyond this world entirely. This tells us that the deepest promise God makes to His people is not earthly prosperity but a heavenly home.

Press the truth about the believer's true home. Scripture does not point us to a renovated earthly kingdom or a future thousand-year reign on this earth; it points us to the heavenly city, the eternal inheritance, the dwelling place God Himself has prepared (compare John 14:2-3). The kingdom of Christ is not awaiting some future earthly establishment; it was established when the church began at Pentecost (Acts 2), and Christ reigns now at the right hand of God. What still awaits us is the consummation of that kingdom in glory, the heavenly country toward which the patriarchs and we together are traveling. Our citizenship is already in heaven (Philippians 3:20), and our hope is the resurrection of the body and the eternal inheritance kept for us there (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Marvel at the phrase 'God is not ashamed to be called their God.' The eternal God ties His own name to these wandering, waiting believers, and He does so precisely because their hope was fixed on Him and the city He prepared. There is profound dignity here. The God of the universe is honored to be known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and by extension the God of every pilgrim who trusts Him. This is staggering grace. He is not embarrassed by our weakness or our long waiting; He is honored by our trust.

Now bring the resurrection hope to bear on the hardest reality, that these believers died before receiving the promise. This is the answer to the grief that sits in many hearts in the room. Death does not cancel the promise. Jesus said God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and 'he is not God of the dead, but of the living' (Matthew 22:32), which means these patriarchs live still and will yet receive everything God pledged. Because Christ has been raised, those who die in faith will be raised with Him (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). The grave is not the end of the story. Hebrews 11:39-40 makes it explicit: these faithful ones did not receive the promise in their lifetimes because God had provided 'something better,' that they together with us, in Christ, would be made perfect. The whole company of the faithful, across every generation, receives the promise together in the end.

Carry this home to the soul that is weary with waiting and heavy with grief. When promises are delayed, God's faithfulness is not in doubt; He keeps His word on a timeline that runs all the way into eternity. When a loved one dies in faith before the great day, they have not lost the promise; they have gone ahead to wait for its fullness, and they live in the keeping of the God who is not ashamed to be their God. This is what sustains us: not that we get everything now, but that the One who promised is faithful, the city is prepared, the resurrection is sure, and the inheritance is kept. Let the class feel both the seriousness and the comfort of this truth, and let it lift their eyes to the home that is coming.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The believer's true home as a heavenly country and city God has prepared, not an earthly kingdom
- The kingdom and church established at Pentecost (Acts 2), with Christ reigning now, not a future earthly reign
- Heavenly citizenship and the eternal inheritance kept for us (Philippians 3:20; 1 Peter 1:3-4)
- God's unfailing faithfulness to keep His promises across generations
- God not ashamed to be called the God of waiting, trusting pilgrims
- The resurrection hope: those who die in faith will be raised in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20-23; Matthew 22:32)
- The whole company of the faithful made perfect together in Christ (Hebrews 11:39-40)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell us about God that He is not ashamed to be called the God of waiting pilgrims?
- How does the resurrection hope change the way we grieve those who die in faith?
- How does a heart fixed on the heavenly city sustain us when promises are long delayed?

Question 10

Student Question: *Looking back over Hebrews 11:11-16 as a whole, where is Jesus calling you to wait on Him with greater trust and to live more fully with your heart set on the heavenly city? What is one concrete way He is forming patient, hopeful faith in you this week?*

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the whole lesson and turns it toward transformation. The passage has shown us faith that considers God faithful, faith that waits through decades, faith that dies still believing, and faith that fixes its hope on the heavenly city. Now invite each student to bring it down to their own life and name where Jesus is calling them to greater trust.

Encourage real specificity over vague resolve. Waiting on God with greater trust might mean surrendering a particular delayed promise to Him in prayer instead of forcing it, refusing bitterness in a long season of disappointment, loosening a grip on something temporary, or

deliberately setting the mind on the heavenly inheritance through Scripture and prayer. The goal is one concrete step, not merely a warmer feeling.

Lift their eyes to Jesus, who is the great theme toward which this whole study moves. He is the author and perfecter of faith (Hebrews 12:2), and He Himself waited, trusted the Father, endured the cross for the joy set before Him, and is now seated in the heavenly city, preparing a place for us. The patient, hope-filled faith we long for is His own life being formed in us.

Close in prayer over the specific steps named, asking the Lord to grow in each student the kind of waiting, trusting, pilgrim faith that He is honored to commend.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal application of waiting faith and heavenly hope to one's own life
- Concrete steps: surrendering delayed promises, refusing bitterness, loosening the grip on the temporary
- Setting the mind on the heavenly inheritance through Scripture and prayer
- Jesus as the author and perfecter of faith who Himself waited and trusted (Hebrews 12:2)
- Patient, hopeful faith as the life of Christ being formed in the believer
- Prayer over the specific step each student names

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Jesus calling you to wait on Him with greater trust this week?
- What is one concrete way to set your heart more fully on the heavenly city?
- How can this class pray for and encourage you in that step?