

THE STUDY OF HEBREWS—YEAR 2
LESSON 11—NOTES
HEBREWS 11:13-16
I AM AN EXILE LOOKING FOR A BETTER COUNTRY

Faith is the assurance of unseen realities and the backbone of hope, as seen in Hebrews 11 verse 1. Faith is the belief that God exists and rewards those who seek him, as in verse 6, and faith is also the badge that marks people out as members already of God's true people.

Hebrews 11:13-16 highlights the faith that trusts in God for the future. Abraham left Ur even when he didn't know where God was calling him to live. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob died without seeing the promises realized in their fullness, but they didn't mock the promises of God or dismiss them as fantasies. They trusted that God had a heavenly homeland for them, a heavenly city.

Our passage today describes the life of faith as a pilgrimage in a foreign land, a journey through life to a home that awaits beyond the grave. These verses make an important point about such a pilgrimage...namely that it requires that we first leave our prior home.

God is the highest good of the reasonable creature; and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied.-- To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean.-- Therefore it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven, as it becomes us to make the seeking of our highest end and proper good, the whole work of our lives; to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on, anything else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?
-Jonathan Edwards

VERSE 13—All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

"All these" (those mentioned in the five preceding verses, Abraham (with Sarah), Isaac, and Jacob)—*"died in faith"* as they had lived in faith. Their lives were regulated by the firm

conviction that God would fulfill the promises he had given them, and in death they continued to look forward to the fulfillment of those promises.

The statement, *“all these died in faith without receiving the promises”* declares that these men died in perfect hope and assurance of fulfillment. For the person of faith, God’s promise is as good as the reality. His promise of the glory ahead was as encouraging and certain to the patriarchs as actually possessing it could have been.

None of them gained full possession of the land God had promised to Abraham. It was actually close to 500 years after Jacob died that Israel first began to possess Canaan. The immediate promises such as the birth of Isaac were fulfilled. But all that God had promised Abraham; offspring like stars in the sky and with them possession of the land, did not occur in his earthly life. He died still hoping for all that he had longed for and sojourned toward in this life. Abraham and the people were always nomads, *“strangers and exiles.”* They were not landowners and had to be forever moving on. To the end of their days they never lived a settled life in a settled land.

In the ancient world *“strangers”* were often regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt. They had few rights, even by the standards of that day. The patriarchs were also *“exiles”* (pilgrims and sojourners) making them refugees in their own Promised Land.

Richard Phillips explains the Greek meaning of these words saying;

In the Greek, the writer of Hebrews renders this with two words, the first of which is xenoi, meaning “aliens.” This was a pejorative term indicating outsiders. It is not the sort of word one wanted to have applied to himself. It describes not merely a person from another place but rather someone who doesn’t fit in, who doesn’t belong. In our society, aliens can assimilate, but the writer of Hebrews says that in this world Christians never do.

The other term is parepidemoi, or “sojourners.” These are ones who are passing through to a destination somewhere else. In Greek writings the term was applied to someone lodging temporarily in an inn, without a home in the place where he found himself even if he would be there a while. That is what our text says about Abraham and those who follow him in faith. By admitting they are aliens and strangers they show that they are looking for a country of their own (v.14).

In spite of their circumstances these Old Testament believers never lost hope. God had not told them when or how the promises would be fulfilled. He only gave the promises, and that was

enough. They believed in an unchanging God no matter how long it took before His promises became realities. While their descendants finally saw fulfillment of the promise, the Old Testament believers were positive that God's promise was sure because it was God's promise.

These believers welcomed the promises from a distance. How could they welcome them? They had to first "see" them with eyes of faith in order to welcome or embrace them. Donald Guthrie says they were "*men who saw the objective on the horizon, but never actually reached it in this life.*" They "*welcomed*" these promises *from a distance*, in the sense that they knew they would eventually come to pass. The author wants his readers to see the parallels. They may feel in their current distress that God isn't fulfilling his promises, but a long-view reveals that God is always faithful to his word.

C.H. Spurgeon beautifully summarizes,

Though the promises could only be seen from a distance, FAITH has such long arms that it embraced them, clung to them as loving relatives cling to one another, and would not let them go. So may we see the promises, and be persuaded that they belong to us, and embrace them as we clasp to our bosom those who are nearest and dearest to us!

The implication of Hebrews 11 is a long-range faith where mature faith does not look only to the immediate. These patriarchs had a sampling of the Promised Land. They lived on it, pastured their flocks and raised their children on it, but they were not impatient to possess it. It was enough to possess it *from a distance*, because their primary concern was for a *better country, a heavenly one*.

Philip E. Hughes carries this thought further in saying,

This is why our author speaks of them here as having seen the promised reality and greeted it from afar. They perceived that the fulfillment was not yet, and indeed the crisis of death confirmed them in this conviction, assured as they were that the word of God was true and could not fail. And so, once again, we see the principle illustrated that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (v. 1); for the seeing from afar of which we read here is the inward seeing of faith, not the outward faculty of physical sight. Christ himself spoke to precisely the same effect when he said: "Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (John. 8:56). So real were God's promises to him that their fulfillment, though not yet, was as certain to him as something already and inalienably possessed. Thus the existential power of faith made the distant hope a present reality, and these believers of the ancient world "saw" and "greeted" the promised consummation even, and indeed especially, in the hour of death as though already face to face with it.

The hope of our faith is not what we can see or hold or measure, but the promise that one day we will forever be with the Lord. Christians whose faith does not extend to heaven will have their eyes on the things of this world and will wonder why they are not happier in the Lord. Christianity is not a religion focused on the earth and this present life. The Scriptures make this point over and over. Paul says in Colossians 3:2; *“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”* Jesus taught, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal”* (Matt. 6:19-20). Christians are presently filled with joy because of the certainty of what lies ahead; by faith we greet and enjoy the things promised for the life to come.

Richard Phillips reminds us, saying;

How easily we forget that to be a Christian means to be persecuted in this world. Our blessings are spiritual rather than material (see Eph. 1:3). It means living as an alien and a pilgrim, it means not being able to fit in with others who are slaves to sin, it means denying yourself and picking up your cross, it means a life of struggle and of fellowship in the sufferings of Christ. It means peace with God but war with the flesh, the world and the devil. The primary blessings Christianity offers do not lie in this life but in the life to come, in the resurrection from the dead. Indeed, even our present blessings, abundant and wonderful as they are, are located there and are accessed by the exercise of faith.

VERSES 14-15—For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country (homeland ESV) of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

Abraham was living in the land of his father when God called him to leave and go to the land of promise, where he would live as an alien and a stranger. *“If they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.”* Nothing stood between Abraham and his former home, nothing except his faith. The fact that he made no attempt to go back shows the strength and reality of that faith.

As with Abraham, those who acknowledge that they are *exiles and strangers* on earth make clear that they are seeking a different homeland, *a better country*. If their hope was on earth they wouldn't long for a home that was heavenly. Again, this is written for the readers as well. Their inheritance is heavenly and eschatological. Currently they are resident aliens, and they are awaiting the inheritance to come.

Thomas Schreiner adds,

The patriarchs demonstrated that they didn't long for any earthly land, for when they were exiles and sojourners in Canaan, they could have returned to the land of their origin. Abraham could have gone back to Ur or Haran, and he also stubbornly insisted that his servant never take Isaac back to such a place (Gen. 24:6). Jacob could have stayed with Laban instead of returning to Canaan. Their actions indicated their devotion and commitment to the Lord. The readers, on the other hand, are tilting in the other direction. They are tempted to go back to Judaism to enjoy the comfort and security of this world. Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman empire, and they may have been inclined to move in this direction to avoid persecution. Or perhaps they wanted tangible assurance that their sins were forgiven through the concrete and repeated activity of the Levitical cult. They may have justified such a move by saying they were returning to the faith of their fathers. But actually, according to the author, their ancestors didn't look backward but forward. They didn't put their trust in an earthly city but a heavenly one, and the readers should follow the example of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

VERSE 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; for He has prepared a city for them.

As we have seen multiple times throughout the book of Hebrews, the word “*better*” is vital to the argument of the author, and in verse 16 he uses this word again. The patriarchs looked for a *better country*, a better city.

The better country on which they had set their hearts was the heavenly country. The earthly Canaan and the earthly Jerusalem were temporary object lessons pointing to the saints' everlasting rest, the city of God. Those who put their trust in God receive a full reward and that reward does not belong to this transient world order but to the enduring order which participates in the life of God.

Thomas Schreiner writes,

Since the ancestors longed for a heavenly homeland and city, and heaven is the residence of God, it is evident they longed for God more than they desired any of the things of this world. Since they longed for God in such a way, he is not ashamed to be called their God. Dwelling in God's presence is their greatest desire and thus God is not ashamed to be identified as their God. Indeed, he has prepared for them a heavenly city so they may reside with him forever. The author commends the same for his readers. Their desires should not be for earthly comforts but God's heavenly presence, and they should recognize that if they endure in faith and hope until the end that God has prepared a city for them.

When a believer desires God's *better country*, *"God is not ashamed to be called their God."* God also says in 1 Samuel 2:20, *"Those who honor me I will honor."* The patriarchs honored God by putting their faith in him; God honored them by calling himself *"the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"* (Ex. 3:6). What higher honor than this could be paid to any human? That God, the holy God, the God of grace, the sovereign God of all the world, is not ashamed of them that trust in him, that sojourn in this world longing for the home he has prepared.

David declared, *"One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD"* (Ps. 27:4). Job, after unbelievable trials, destitution, and illness, could say, *"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God"* (Job 19:25-26). This is the hope and the security of the believer—the positiveness of faith. It is people of such faith that God blesses. He is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Richard Phillips encourages us when he writes,

Christians are to increasingly think of themselves not in terms of the old categories, the old homeland, but in terms of where we are headed, in terms of him who calls us and those with whom we will spend eternity in heaven. What liberty it gives us for Godliness when our hearts have left our earthly homes. What an ally in repudiating worldliness and sin and in putting on a heavenly character! If we will not leave behind our former home, we cannot advance to the heavenly place God has called us; if we will not leave, we show that we are not longing for a better country, a heavenly one. This is a sober test of our faith, as Jesus put it: "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 10:37-39).

References:

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