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DESIRING A BETTER COUNTRY

Hebrews 11:13-16

By

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Hebrews Lesson 37

Desiring a Better Country
Hebrews 11:13-16

A pastor encountered three young boys and asked them, "Do you want to go to heaven?"

"Not me," one said. The pastor was shocked. "You don't want to go to heaven when you die?"

"Oh, when I *die*? Yeah, sure!" the boy replied. "I thought you were getting up a group to go *right now!*"

Most of us probably share that boy's feelings about heaven. Someday, it would be nice to go there, but at the moment, we're not interested. It's just too nice here on earth. Besides, if we were honest, we'd probably admit that heaven seems a bit boring. Gary Larson pictured this in a *Far Side* cartoon. A guy with wings, white robe, and a halo is sitting alone on a cloud, thinking, "... wish I'd brought a magazine."

But the author of Hebrews counters these disinterested views of heaven by showing that rather than settling in and feeling comfortable on earth, believers feel out of place here. They confess that they are "strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:13). And rather than viewing heaven as a nice extra thrown in after we enjoy the good life here below, he shows that believers *long* for heaven. "They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (11:16). Our text teaches us that...

We who live and die according to faith are exiles on earth,
desiring a better country in heaven.

The hymn writer, Henry Francis Lyte put it like this (in F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 306):

It is not for me to be seeking my bliss
And building my hopes in a region like this;
I look for a city which hands have not piled,
I pant for a country by sin undefiled.

In our day, our emphasis is far too much on the good life here and now, and not enough on the promised joys of heaven. Thus

many that profess Christ as Savior live with their minds on the things on earth, rather than setting their minds on the things above (Col. 3:1-4). They are motivated more by collecting treasures on earth than by storing up treasures in heaven. Our focus is on what Christ can do for us here and now. Heaven is a nice extra, but it does not govern how we live day to day. But, it should!

As we've seen, the first readers of this epistle were tempted, under the threat of persecution, to go back to their Jewish religion. The implication of our text in its context is that to go back to Judaism would be like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob going back to settle permanently in Mesopotamia. God had promised them a new country, the land of Canaan. But, being men of faith, they looked beyond that piece of real estate to the *heavenly* country that God had prepared for them.

They all died *according to* faith (the literal rendering of 11:13). Faith was the dominant characteristic of their lives, right up to the point of death. None of them realized the promise of the land of Canaan, or the promise of innumerable descendants. They viewed themselves as strangers and exiles on earth. If they had doubted God's promise, they could have gone back to their homeland. "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (11:16). And so they died well, "according to faith" in the yet unfulfilled, unseen promises of God. As such, they are examples of how to live and die according to faith as exiles on earth, while we *pant after* a better country in heaven. Our text makes two main points:

1. We who live and die according to faith are strangers and exiles on this earth (11:13-15).

These men of faith "confessed that they were strangers and exiles on earth." This refers to Abraham's telling the sons of Heth, when he sought to buy a burial plot for Sarah, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you" (Gen. 23:4). When Jacob, near the end of his life, met Pharaoh, he twice referred to his life as a *sojourn* (Gen. 47:9). Our text brings out three aspects of this pilgrim life:

- A. Strangers and exiles on earth have seen and welcomed God's promises from a distance.

There are four implications in that sentence:

- (1) We must *see* God's promises.

Before we can *believe* in God's promises, we must *see* them. Before we can see them, God must open our spiritually blind eyes (Matt. 13:11-15). As Paul explains, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." In order for us to see spiritual truth, the God who said, "Light shall shine out of darkness," has to shine in our hearts "to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

Faith, which is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9), enables us to prove the things not seen (Heb. 11:1) by bringing them into our present experience. In this way, Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus' day. "He saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). A personal relationship with God begins when He opens your eyes to *see* His promise in Jesus Christ, that whoever believes in Him has eternal life (John 3:16). If you have never seen this, read the Gospel of John with the prayer, "Lord, open my eyes to see the glory of Jesus Christ."

(2) We must *welcome* God's promises.

Having seen God's promises, the patriarchs *welcomed* them. (The KJV and New KJV add that they were *persuaded* or *assured* of the promises, but there is virtually no manuscript evidence for this reading.) They greeted God's promises with open arms. They brought God's promises into their lives as gladly as they welcomed guests into their tents.

Have you done that? Have you *welcomed* Jesus Christ into your life as Savior and Lord? Have you embraced Him as you would a long lost friend? If God has opened your eyes to your true condition as a guilty sinner before Him and to the glory of the Savior who bore the penalty you deserved, then you rush to *welcome* Him warmly into your life!

(3) We can only see and welcome the promises *from a distance*.

What does this mean? It amplifies the opening phrase of the verse, that these men "died in faith, without receiving the promises." But, Hebrews 6:15 states, "having patiently waited, [Abraham] obtained the promise." Hebrews 11:17 says that Abraham

“had received the promises.” So, in what sense did he not receive the promises, or, receive them at a distance?

The author means that the patriarchs did not receive the total fulfillment of God’s promises in this life. They only received a taste of them. Abraham and Sarah finally received the promise of a son in Isaac. But Abraham died with only two heirs according to the promise, Isaac and Jacob, hardly an innumerable nation! Isaac owned a few wells, plus some grazing land for his flocks. But he still lived in a tent and was not in any significant way the heir of the land. Jacob died with about 70 descendants, including his sons, who became patriarchs of the 12 tribes. But they were forced to move out of the land into Egypt, because of the famine. So the patriarchs had a taste of the fulfillment of the promises, but they only welcomed them from a distance.

The same is true of all believers. God has promised us *eternal* life, and yet, like the patriarchs, *we all die* (unless we’re alive when the Lord returns). The world scoffs at an epitaph like Hebrews 11:13: “All these died in faith!” What a joke! That’s “pie in the sky when you die!” The world says (with Reverend Ike), “I want cash in the stash *here and now*, not pie in the sky when I die!” But, as C. S. Lewis observed (*The Problem of Pain* [Macmillan], pp. 132-133):

Scripture ... habitually put the joys of heaven into the scale against the sufferings of earth, and no solution of the problem of pain which does not do so can be called a Christian one. We are very shy nowadays of even mentioning heaven. We are afraid of the jeer about “pie in the sky,” ... But either there is “pie in the sky” or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine is woven into its whole fabric.

So, we must see and welcome God’s promises, although we can only do so in this life from a distance.

(4) Seeing and welcoming God’s promises alienates us from this world.

The reason that Abraham left his homeland and migrated to Canaan was that he had seen and welcomed God’s promises. If he had ignored God’s promises, he would have continued to live in his native land, where he blended in with everyone else. But because he believed God and obeyed His call, he went out from his

family and friends and “lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise” (11:9).

Seeing and welcoming God’s promises *disrupted* the rest of Abraham’s life on this earth. Instead of blending in, he was different now. People stood and stared at them when they journeyed past the villages of Canaan, or when they pitched their tents outside of town. “Who are they? Where did they come from? Why do they look different? Why are they here? What do they want from us? Be careful around them! They might be dangerous!”

Have you ever felt like an outsider? Marla and I have felt it when we’ve traveled in Eastern Europe. You can try to blend in, but you still stand out as different. You don’t speak their language. You can’t read the signs or the newspapers. They use different money. You stand out by your appearance. You don’t share or understand many of their customs. While the native believers are very friendly and hospitable, and do everything they can to make you feel welcome, you’re still a stranger.

As Christians, we’re *supposed to* feel that way about living in this evil world. We *shouldn’t* fit in! The world pursues different goals and pleasures than we do. The world laughs at jokes and scenes in movies that we find repugnant. The world lives for this life only, but we live in light of eternity. The world lives as if there is no God, but we live to please the God who knows our every thought and motive. The world should not be able to understand us, because we think, act, and live so differently than they do.

A week ago, on our way to California to visit my family, Marla and I spent a night in Nevada at a hotel that was part of a casino (the room was *really* cheap!). It was Wednesday and the huge parking lot was jammed with cars and RV’s. Inside, hundreds of mostly senior citizens sat mesmerized in front of the clanging gambling machines. Marla wouldn’t even come in with me to get the room, so I was in there all alone, feeling completely alienated from these people. Why? Because, by God’s grace, I have received and welcomed His promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ.

- B. Strangers and exiles on this earth have the opportunity to tell others about our homeland.

The patriarchs "*confessed* that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things *make it clear* that they are seeking a country of their own" (11:13b-14). *Confess* refers to speech; *make it clear* comes from a word meaning *to exhibit*, and may have the nuance of lifestyle or behavior. *Country* means *fatherland* or *homeland*. As Paul explained (Phil. 3:19-20), we are not like those "whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things." Rather, "our citizenship is in heaven"! Since we come from a different country, we talk and act differently than the natives of this world do. When they observe that we are different, we should be ready to tell them why (1 Pet. 3:15). Tell them about God's promise of heaven for all that believe in Christ, so that they can join us as pilgrims journeying toward our new country in heaven.

C. Strangers and aliens on this earth cannot move back to their former country.

The author is writing to people who were encountering hardships in their new life as Christians. They were tempted to go back to their old religion. So he points out that the patriarchs could have returned to Mesopotamia if they had been looking for an earthly inheritance. The living conditions in their former homeland were probably far more developed than in the land of Canaan. If they had returned, their family and friends would have welcomed them with open arms, whereas in Canaan, they were kept at a distance. But they endured the hardships and didn't go back because they were seeking a better country, namely, a heavenly one.

True, Abraham sent his servant back to the old country to get a bride for Isaac. But he sternly warned him not to take Isaac back there (Gen. 24:6, 8). Jacob fled to the old country for 20 years to escape from Esau's murderous intentions. But it was never his true homeland. He told Laban, "Send me away, that I may go to my own place and to my own country" (Gen. 30:25).

The application is that as believers, we must make a break from our old life and from the world. We live *in* the world, but we cannot be *of* the world (John 17:14-18). Often, like Ur of the Chaldees, the world is sophisticated and modern. The church seems old fashioned and out of touch with the latest trends. Especially when we face hardships because of our faith, we may be tempted to go

back to the world. But to do so would be to turn away from God's promises in Christ. We *cannot* go back! Why not?

2. We who live and die according to faith seek and desire a better country in heaven, prepared by God for us (11:16).

There are four aspects of verse 16 that I can only touch on briefly: the better country; the prepared city; the desire that seeks; and, our God who is not ashamed.

A. The better country is heaven.

We cannot answer many of our questions about heaven, but we can know for certain that it will be *far better* than the best existence that we can imagine on this earth. Every problem that we face on this earth is the result of the fall of the human race into sin. In heaven, there will be no curse, no death, no sorrow, and no pain (Rev. 21:4). Think of all of the businesses and jobs that will not be needed in heaven! No doctors or nurses, no police or armed forces, no locksmiths or keys, no need for anti-virus for your computer!

Heaven will be beautiful beyond our imagination. Golden streets, walls and gates made out of precious stones, and the clear river of the water of life flowing through it are mere earthly pictures to give us a dim idea of how magnificent it will be. But the best part of heaven is that God Himself will dwell among us as His people (Rev. 21:3)! There will be no need of sun or moon, because the glory of God will illumine it all the time.

B. The prepared city is for us.

The better country and the prepared city are the same thing, viewed from different perspectives. This is the heavenly city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (11:10; 12:22), "made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). Many Christians envision heaven as a beautiful country estate, secluded in privacy from all neighbors. But the Bible pictures heaven as *a city*! We think of cities as dirty, polluted, crowded, run-down places, with graffiti defacing everything. But the heavenly city will be pristine and indescribably beautiful. Earthly cities are dangerous, because of the high crime rate. But the heavenly city will be without sin. In earthly cities, you have to put up with difficult neighbors and rude strangers. But the heavenly city will be a place of close, sweet fellowship with those filled with the love of Christ. Since it

will be an *eternal* city, we will never be pressed for time! Since God prepared it *for us* (the same word, *prepared*, is in John 14:2-3), it will be perfectly suited to all of our needs.

C. The desire that seeks heaven stems from faith.

Verse 14 says that these pilgrims “are *seeking* a country of their own.” Verse 16 says, “they *desire* a better country.” When you fall in love, you *seek* to be with your beloved because you *desire* her company. These are strong motivational words. I have seen young men in college, carrying a heavy academic load and working many hours to pay their bills. They don’t have a minute of spare time. Then, they fall in love. It’s simply amazing how suddenly they have hours every day to spend with this gorgeous creature! They seek her because of desire.

We are to *seek* heaven because we *desire* to be with Jesus, the lover of our souls. If you are not rearranging your busy schedule so that you can seek the things above, where Christ is (Col. 3:1), you need to examine your heart. You may have left your first love for the Savior, who gave Himself to secure you as His bride.

D. The God who is not ashamed of us is *our God*.

Because these patriarchs desired the heavenly country, “Therefore, God is not ashamed of them [lit.], to be called their God.” The idea of God being ashamed is startling! It is a figure of speech, using the negative to mean the positive, that God is pleased to be called their God. But even this is startling! When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:6; see Matt. 22:32). Even though these men were far from perfect, God was pleased to be identified with them. In fact, God is most often called the God of Jacob, who was the least exemplary of the three (Bruce, p. 307).

John writes (1 John 3:1-3), “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He

is." Then he applies these glorious truths: "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

Conclusion

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon titled, "The Christian Pilgrim" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:243-246). I put this quote under the glass on my desk, so that I can think on it often (p. 244):

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, any thing else, but that which is our proper end, and true happiness?

Ask God to open your eyes to the beauty of the better country, which is heaven. Ask Him to fill your vision with the beauty of Jesus, so that with the psalmist (Ps. 73:25-26), you can testify, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Discussion Questions

1. What is worldliness? How can we avoid it?
2. Where is the balance between being distinct from the world, and yet relating to the world enough to be a witness?
3. How can we develop a deeper desire for heaven?
4. What does it mean (practically) to "seek the things above" (Col. 3:1-4)?

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