

February 20, 2011 by Steve Brandon



Seeking A Better Country

Hebrews 11:13-16

1. Dying in faith (verse 13a)
2. Living in hope (verses 13b-16a)
3. Secure in God (verse 16b)

I invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Hebrews. Turn over to chapter 11.

As most of you know, the theme of Hebrews can be said this way: Jesus is Better, So Press On! Over and over the book argues the ways that Jesus is better. He is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. He is better than angels. He is better than Moses or Joshua. He is better than Aaron or any of the high priests. He offers a better covenant, based upon a better sacrifice. And because of that, we should press on in our faith.

Hebrews 11 is filled with those who have pressed on in their faith. Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at some of those who walked by faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah. This morning finds us in a parenthetical portion of Hebrews 11, where the writer pauses a bit to reflect upon the nature of their faith. Let's look at it now.

Hebrews 11:13-16

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. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country 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. 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.

When you go on a journey, it's the destination that you have in mind. However comfortable the plane ride, however nice the hotel room, however beautiful the view, however delicious are the meals along the way, you may enjoy them but for a moment. But, soon afterwards, you continue on your way. See, the traveler doesn't ever stay long along the route, because it's the end of the journey that is in mind.

The travelling metaphor works well with the Christian life. Believers in Christ know that "this earthly scene is transitory." Believers in Christ know that we are headed for our "heavenly home" ^[1]. Thus, anything here on earth is to be enjoyed, but only for a moment. Our true destination is in heaven with Christ! The saints of the Old Covenant also had the same mindset. They were seeking a better country.

Here's my first point, ...

1. Dying in faith (verse 13a)

That's what we see here in verse 13, "All these died in faith." Certainly, the emphasis here in Hebrews 11 is how those in the Old Testament lived by faith. Abel offered up a better sacrifice. Enoch walked with God and never died. Noah built an ark in reverence. Abraham went out to the promised land. Sarah was able to conceive a child in her old age.

But, here, we see the author focusing not upon their life, but upon their death. When it came to their death, they were still trusting in the Lord. "All these died in faith." Now, particularly, here, we are talking here about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob, who were mentioned in the previous section. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are often called, "The Patriarchs." They were the fathers of the Jewish people.

Indeed, they were the ones who received the mighty promises of God. They were the ones who left a land and could have returned (according to verse 15). They were the ones who died (unlike Enoch). As they died, they died in faith. That is, they died while believing in the promises of God, even though they never received them. Indeed, that's the point of verse 13, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises."

Last week, we talked about this when we came to verse 9: "By faith [Abraham] 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." They never received the land that God had promised to Abraham. When he arrived in the promised land, the Lord said to Abraham, "All the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever" (Genesis 13:15). And not only was the land promised to Abraham, it was also promised to Isaac and Jacob. To Isaac, God said, "Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands" (Gen. 26:3). To Jacob, God said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants" (Gen. 28:13).

And yet, according to verse 9 (of Hebrews 11), they dwelt there as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents. And they died, believing the promise, but never receiving the promise. They died in faith (verse 13), looking for God's city (verse 10).

Now, this is filled with application for us. Will you be like this? The premise of Hebrews 11 is that we are called to be like those who came before us. Not only in the way that they lived, but also in the way that they died. And Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob all died in faith, believing God, even though they never received fully what was promised to them.

When it comes to the day of your death, will you die in faith? Even if you don't receive everything that is promised to you by God, will you die believing? Can you say with Job, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job. 13:15)? Can you say with Jesus, "Let this cup pass from me, ... nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will" (Matthew 26:39)? Can you say with Paul, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 12:9)? When standing up for what is right, can you say with Esther, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16)?

In other words, are you following the Lord, only because of the blessings that you will receive in this life? Or, are you following the Lord, regardless of your lot in life? Because, difficulties will come; and it's during those times that you can let your difficulties be the means by which you show your faith in God. Anyone can praise the Lord when things go well for you. Will you praise the Lord even if your life turns sour? (1 Pet 3:15).

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived difficult lives. They were foreigners in a strange land, surrounded by strange people. They were never able to settle the land. They never had rest. All they had was a hope that God would bless the world through them. But, they had little in this life. And yet, they had faith. They trusted in God.

In many ways, this is the great reality of everyone in Hebrews 11. Moses (verses 23-29) was never able to enter the promised land. Even the generation of Joshua never fully knew the rest they were seeking (Hebrews 4:8). And everyone else in the list - Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel and the Prophets - never received what was promised either.

This is the point come the end of the chapter. Look at verse 39: "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised." All of the Old Testament saints stood like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. None of them ultimately received the fulfillment of the promises. Jesus is the One who brought in the New Covenant and all of the abundant blessings that have come to us in it!

When we were in Hebrews, chapter 8, we looked at the riches of everything that we have received. In the New Covenant, no longer does God deal with us based upon the external regulations of the law. Instead, God has put His laws into our minds and upon our hearts, giving us a willingness to follow God's will (Heb. 8:10). No longer are we far off and estranged from God. Instead, God has claimed us as His people (Heb. 8:10). No longer does God hold our sins against us. Instead, He says, "I will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12).

The Old Covenant saints could only look forward until the day when these things would come. In fact, those are the very words the writer uses to describe their perspective of the fulfillment of the promises. Verse 13 tells us, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance." This is all that they could do. All they could do is see them, as one views a distant country from a high vantage point. The patriarchs were like Moses, able to get up on Mount Nebo to see the land, but never being allowed to enter.

Oh, how much different we stand. We, who live in the days of the New Covenant, have seen the fulfillment of what they only looked for. We have seen it in Jesus.

Jesus, Himself, said, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). To His disciples, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it" (Matt. 13:17). But, we have seen Jesus come in all His fullness. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." Do you rejoice in these things? Do you gladly receive what they prophets only longed for?

1 Peter 1:10-12

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven--things into which angels long to look.

We are the envy of all the saints in the Old Testament. We are the study of the angels, who long to see and understand God's saving grace (Eph. 3:10). Do you realize the position that you are in? Think of an orphan in a third-world land. They would give anything to have the sort of opportunities that any of you children have here in the United States - education, wealth, opportunities. And so also, the patriarchs. I believe that they would give anything to have lived after the cross, to enjoy the blessings of Christ. They died, only looking for what we have. Will you treasure what we have?

But, there is more than that, because there is plenty that we have to look forward to as well. To be sure, Christ has come as a fulfillment of the promises. But, there's more to come. There's plenty for us to look forward to. There's plenty for us to anticipate.

We live in-between His comings. His first coming inaugurated His kingdom. His second coming will completely bring in His kingdom. Of that day, we will sing with heaven, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah, ... For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns" (Rev. 19:6). No more tears, no more death, no more crying or pain (Rev. 20:6). "There will no longer be any curse; ... His bond-servants will serve Him" (Rev. 22:3). It will be a great day. It will be a great eternity. And it may well be that you die before that day comes.

Will you die in faith, like Abraham and all the patriarchs did? Will you die looking for and longing for this day? Will you die "seeing and

welcoming" that day from a distance? A life of faith will. That's the lesson to learn from our text.

Let's turn to my second point. Not only were the patriarchs dying in faith (verse 13a), they were also ...

2. Living in hope (verses 13b-16a)

I want to show you this point by walking through the writer's logic over these verses. Let's begin again in verse 13, ...

Hebrews 11:13

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.

The main thing that we need to see here is that in verse 13 that the Patriarchs confessed that they were "strangers and exiles on the earth." That language pulls from the tongue of Abraham, who said to the sons of Heth, who were living in the land and who owned property there, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you" (Gen. 23:3). In other words, he confessed to them, "I'm a foreigner in these parts. I'm just a passing through."

His words indicate that he didn't consider himself to be a permanent resident in the promised land, although the promised land is where he lived for more than 60 years. Abraham left Ur when he was 75 years old. He said that he was a "stranger and a sojourner" when Sarah died, at age 127. This put Abraham at 137 years old. If you do the math, you will see that this puts Abraham in the land for more than 60 years. He still considered himself a "stranger and a sojourner."

And the writer makes the proper implications in verses 14 and 15.

Hebrews 11:14

For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own.

Even though God had promised to give to Abraham the land of Canaan, (where he was when he said these things), Abraham never really settled down in the land. Nor did he ever lay claim to the land. Instead, he considered himself to be an "alien" and a "stranger" in the promised land itself. This means that he thought that he was travelling some place. Which means that he has a destination in mind. But where might that be?

Verse 15 eliminates one possibility. The writer continues, ...

Hebrews 11:15

And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

In other words, if Abraham considered his home-country his destination, then surely he would have had many opportunities to return. But, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all remained in the land. Isaac was born in the land, and remained there. Jacob was born in the land, and remained there as well. They could have returned. The travel wasn't prohibitive. When seeking a bride for Isaac, Abraham sent one of his servants to Haran, where many of his relatives lived (Gen. 24). His servant brought Rebecca back to Canaan. So travel was a possibility.

Regarding Jacob, the same thing happened. He, himself, travelled to Haran to obtain a wife. He spent a few years in Haran (getting more than he bargained for). But, as soon as he had opportunity, he returned to the land of Canaan.

Why didn't they return to their original home-country? Because God had promised them the land of Canaan. It was a demonstration of their faith to stay. Yet, while they stayed, they still considered themselves to be "aliens" and "strangers" in the land.

So, what do we make of all this? Verse 16 tells us, "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one." And this is my point. The Patriarchs were living in hope (verses 13b-16a). They were living in hope for "a better country." It is from this phrase that I derive the title of my message this morning: "Seeking a Better Country."

Where is the country? We are told there in verse 16, it is "a heavenly one." Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were living in hope of a country. Only, as verses 13-15 show, they weren't looking for an earthly country. They were seeking a heavenly country. They were living in hope for another world.

And the application comes straight to us this morning. This is how we are to imitate their faith. We also ought to live in hope for a heavenly country. Peter calls us "aliens and strangers" in this world (1 Peter 2:11). Jesus calls us to "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). Paul tells us to "Set our minds on things above, ... where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1-2). John tells us, "Do not love the world nor the things in the world" (1 John 2:15).

As believers in Christ, our affections should be elsewhere. So, where is your hope? Where is your affection? What are you seeking?

Jonathan Edwards used to tell his church often, "This life ought so to be spent by us as to be only a journey towards heaven".^[2] And you do that only if that's where your hope lies. If your hope is on earth, you will make decisions that are consistent with your hope. If your hope is in heaven, you will make decisions that are consistent with your hope.

Listen to the testimony of the early Christians (this was written in the 2nd century).

"Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric lifestyle....

While they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one's lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship.

They live in their own countries, but only as aliens; they participate in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners.

Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign.

...

They are "in the flesh", but do not live "according to the flesh". They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven" [\[3\]](#)

When your heart is in another place, it will change the way that you live.

I read this week of the Perez family. Orestes Lorenzo Perez was a pilot in the Cuban air-force. In 1991, he flew his MiG-23 to Florida and defected to the United States. It meant leaving his family -- his wife and his two children (ages 10 and 6) --behind in Cuba. Now, before he left, he told his wife, "If in a year you are not allowed to leave Cuba, I will be back for you. I don't know how -- in a boat, a plane, or swimming -- but I will be back for you and the children."

Over the next year, Lorenzo attempted to get his family into the United States. He travelled to Geneva and asked for the world's help before a United Nations Human Rights Commission. He met with a host of dignitaries, including President George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev. But, the Cuban government refused to let his family go to the United States. They were still in Cuba. Certainly, there was a hope that they would be together, but how?

Eventually, Perez came up with a plan. With the help of some friends, he purchased a twin-engine Cessna 310F and learned to fly it. He figured that he could fly out of an airport in the Florida Keys, fly across the Gulf of Mexico a few feet above the surface of the water, so as to be undetected by Cuban radar, land on a remote highway in Cuba, pick up his family that was waiting for him, and return to the United States.

This was the plan. He calculated that he needed to take off at 5:07 in the evening, so that he could land at 5:45 in Cuba, with just enough light to pick up his family and take off again. Then, the cover of darkness would help him escape the Cuban military who might attempt to capture him.

And so, on a day in December 1992, Perez communicated with his wife (through a code) and told her that he was coming. They were to get on a bus and travel to the rendezvous point, wearing bright colors, so that he could easily spot them when he landed.

One man described the details of the landing with these words, ...

He was approaching to land on the two-lane highway when he saw his wife on his left. As he had instructed, she and the children were wearing brightly colored clothes so he could spot them quickly. It had been 21 months since he had last seen them, and now there they were on the side of a road, wearing fluorescent orange T-shirts and caps. Below him, a small car was moving in the same direction as the airplane. Several hundred yards ahead of it a truck was approaching. Behind that a bus was trying to pass. Lorenzo planned to fly over the car and land in the highway between the car and the oncoming truck when he noticed a large rock in the middle of the road.

He didn't have room for a proper landing, but he knew there wasn't time for a second approach. He overflew the car and raised the left wing to pass the rock, then touched down. When the Cessna came to a stop, Lorenzo found himself staring directly at the truck's driver, who sat clutching his steering wheel, his eyes wide and mouth open.

Victoria didn't see her husband until the airplane was almost on the ground. She and the children had their backs turned to the Cessna as it approached and couldn't hear it because of the traffic on the highway. Now they ran toward the airplane, Victoria gripping her sons' hands.

While his family was running to him, Lorenzo turned the Cessna around and then made another 90-degree turn to the left to keep the propellers away from his family. He opened the door on the starboard side and they scrambled up into the cockpit: Reyniel, Alejandro, and finally his wife. Alejandro was barefoot because he had lost both his shoes while running. "Papi! Papi!" the children cried as they tried to hug their father. But Lorenzo had to concentrate, and he sternly ordered them to be quiet and sit in the seats behind him.

His family now aboard, Lorenzo hurried to close the door. Twice he tried, and each time he failed. "Calmate, calmate," his wife said. "Calm down, calm down." On the third try he got the door closed.

With the airplane's flaps set for a short field takeoff, Lorenzo began to accelerate down the highway. As the airspeed indicator showed 60 mph--not fast enough to take off--Lorenzo could see the highway's curve approaching. He pulled the yoke back slowly and the airplane continued accelerating, gaining speed.

Finally the Cessna cleared the ground. We did it!, Lorenzo thought, and he retracted the landing gear. In the back seat,

Victoria wrapped her arms around the boys. They recited the Lord's Prayer.^[4]

Why go through such extremes? Why risk so much? Because their heart was in a foreign land. They were living in hope, that things would be better in America.

The wife and children gladly left all behind -- house, possessions, friends --all because their true love was in America. He had come to rescue them. They were hoping for a better life there.

As believers in Christ, we are in the same circumstances. Our hope ought not to be here in America. Our hope ought to be elsewhere. Our hope ought to be in heaven. We ought to willingly leave all behind. The promises of the life to come are far greater than what we have on earth.

Jesus said, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, ... will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29).

The patriarchs were Dying in faith (verse 13a) and Living in hope (verses 13b-16a). Finally, we come to my third point. The patriarchs were, ...
3. Secure in God (verse 16b)

Look there at verse 16, ...

Hebrews 11:16

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

There are many things in life that are unsecure. Investments fail. Houses burn. Goods are stolen. Friends and relatives die. Kingdoms fall. Relationships are broken.

But, in verse 16, we see a security, which is unmatched in all creation. It's the security of God's affirmation that we see here in verse 16, "God is not ashamed to be called their God." Now, again, I believe that this has primary reference to the Patriarchs. God is not ashamed to be identified with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

When God initially appeared to Moses, He came with these names. At the burning bush, God said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex. 3:6). Please, don't let that pass you by. Think about what God is saying. "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Your Fathers? I am their God! They believed and trusted in Me. I will freely take on their name to identify Myself. I am not ashamed to be called their God."

The God of the universe taking on the names of the Patriarchs? One commentator rightly asked rhetorically, "What higher honor can any man have than that?"^[5] So answer the question: none.

Now, the great reality is this. Not only has God delighted to take on the names of the Patriarchs. But, He has also delighted to take on the names of all who believe. This applies to us! We are called sons of God. That's the reality of the New Covenant. Hebrews 8:10, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." And if God is not ashamed to take on our name, what does this mean of our hope for eternity? It means that our eternity is secure.

Listen: if God is not ashamed of you, what do you have to fear? There's nothing to fear! There is nothing that people can do to affect your eternity! Jesus said, "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32).

Picture the scene. You are standing before the throne of God on judgment day. You are guilty in your sins. But, while on earth, you professed Jesus to other men. You had faith in Christ to wipe away your sins. And Jesus says, "I know Steve. He wasn't ashamed of Me. I'm not ashamed of Him. Father, forgive Him. Let him come into the city that we have prepared."

Such is the thought of verse 16: "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." The book of Revelation speaks about this city. It's the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:10). The Bible describes it as a perfect cube -- 1,500 miles in width, 1,500 miles in length, 1,500 miles in height (Rev. 21:16). It has streets of gold and gates of pearl (Rev. 21:21). All kinds of costly jewels adorn the city (Rev. 21:19-20). It's a place of security, always having it's gates open (Rev. 21:25). It's a place of purity, "nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21:27). It's a place where God dwells (Rev. 21:3).

It's the place that God has prepared for all who believe. "He has prepared a city for them" (verse 16). "He has prepared a city for us." Why has God so prepared a city? We will desire it. What God wants of us is to desire something more. The reality is: there is something more. This gives us reason to believe.

I read this week about Winston Churchill's funeral. Now, I don't know anything about his faith, but what he planned for his funeral was wonderful, and gives us a great picture of where our heart should be. His funeral took place in Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. At his direction, a bugler, positioned high in the dome of Saint Paul's, played, after the benediction, the sound of "Taps," the universal signal that says the day is over. But then came the most dramatic turn. As Churchill instructed, as soon as "Taps" was finished, another bugler, placed

on the other side of the great dome, played the notes of "Reveille"— "It's time to get up. It's time to get up. It's time to get up in the morning."

That's a great picture for those who have a heavenly hope. When we come to die, "Taps" isn't the last note that will sound in our lives. It's not the end of the day for us. Rather, it is only the beginning. As we begin to truly live in our heavenly city, that God has prepared for us.

We will now have the musicians come up, and we will sing one last song. It is called "It Is Not Death To Die". Pay special attention to the lyrics.

It is not Death to die, to leave this weary road,
and join the saints who dwell on high,
who've found their home with God.
It is not death to close the eyes long dimmed by tears,
and wake in joy before your throne,
delivered from our fears.

O Jesus, conquering the grave,
your precious blood has power to save.
Those who trust in you will in your mercy find
that it is not death to die.

It is not death to fling aside this earthly dust,
and rise with strong and noble wing
to live among the just.
It is not death to hear the key unlock the door
that sets us free from mortal years
to praise forever more.

O Jesus, conquering the grave,
your precious blood has power to save.
Those who trust in you will in your mercy find
that it is not death to die. [6]

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 20, 2011 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Kistemaker, p. 325

[2] John Gerstner, Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell, p. 11

[3] The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus

[4] <http://www2.fiu.edu/~fcf/orestes.102297.html>

[5] Tom Hale, The Applies New Testament Commentary

[6] "It Is Not Death To Die". Original words by Henri Malan (1787–1864). Translated by George Bethune (1847). Music, chorus, and alternate words by Bob Kauflin.