

April 10, 2011 by Steve Brandon



A Better Privilege

Hebrews 11:39-40

1. The Promise to Them (verse 39)

2. The Provision for Us (verse 40)

When I was a little boy, my father used to sit me (and my siblings) down and tell us stories of his childhood. He used to start each of them with a little phrase, "A long time ago when Daddy was a little boy...". We loved these stories. Well, a few years ago, he wrote a book entitled, "A Long, Long Time Ago When Grandpa Was A Little Boy." As you can tell by the title, that he was aiming for another generation with his book: his grandchildren. In his book, he wrote down many of the stories that he used to tell us, his children.

One of his aims in writing this book was to help his grandchildren appreciate the world in which they lived. My father grew up as a poor farmer in the depression. As a young boy, he worked in the fields and lived in a farm house with no plumbing and no electricity. And yet, through hard work, he has arrived at where he is today. My father wants his grandchildren to realize the advantages and privileges that they have today -- what he never had - so that they might live differently.

One of my favorite stories is told on page 26 and is entitled, "The Christmas Present--1939." He writes, ...

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, when Grandpa was a little boy, I lived with my parents, Vic and Helen Brandon, and my brother, Earl Thomas (who was 20 months older) in a red brick house in Decatur, Illinois. There was a rented apartment upstairs. I do not remember the house well except that the kitchen was to the back, and there was a front room where we gathered. There was a front porch which was open facing Wood Street (the house was numbered 1936 East Wood Street) which had a bench type swing. Of course the swing was made to be sat in and go back and forth, but Tommy and I would use it to go to end to end and pretend we were going to New York.

I remember a special Christmas a long time ago. We had a Christmas tree decked out with a set of lights and other ornaments. There were presents under the tree, but not so many at that. It was our custom not to open presents until Christmas morning. I know it was hard to wait, but we always did.

...

I remember getting up on that Christmas morning on what I would guess was 1939, going to the front room, and there under the tree was a train set with tracks circling the Christmas tree. It looked everything like a modern train with a diesel engine and four cars to pull. It was a wind up model. Fortunately we did not get many other presents, so there was lots of time to play with that train set. The tracks were those that really looked like train tracks, and there were enough sections to make a turn at each end and just a few straight pieces. I am sure it was not many, but not only was I greatly surprised, but I was very happy to have the train.

I can remember having the train and tracks to play with many years later as we moved to the farm and even as we moved to Clinton. It was good that it was a wind up model too, as we did not have electricity when we moved to the farm. Whatever happened to it I do not know, but it is a Christmas present I remember.

And then comes the punch line, ...

Do you have a favorite toy? Or do you have too many to have a favorite?

Do you have a favorite toy? Or do you have too many to have a favorite? My guess is that this is the situation of many of you children. You all have many toys to play with. If you are a boy, you have trucks and balls. If you are a girl, you have dolls and dresses. You have big toys like trampolines and play sets. You have small toys like mp3 players and play stations. You have outdoor toys, like bikes and roller blades. You have indoor toys and games like Monopoly and Life. You have Legos and Polly Pockets and Matchbox cars and Beanie Babies. But, with all your toys, you don't have a favorite toy, because you have too many toys.

My father has written this story so that my children might see the privileges of their lives; that they might not take them for granted. When he was a little boy, he had one toy, and he cherished it.

This story has some parallels to our text this morning. We, who live in the days of the New Covenant have great privilege, which those in the Old Testament never knew. The Old Testament saints had a faulty covenant (Heb. 8:7) with weak priests (Heb. 5:2) offering up imperfect sacrifices (Heb. 10:4, 11). But we have a better covenant (Heb. 8:6) with a perfect priest (Heb. 4:15-16) who has offered up the ultimate sacrifice (Heb. 10:12). They only looked forward in hope. But, we have seen the promises fulfilled in Jesus. We experience all the treasures of Christ.

Yet, sadly, there are many times that we take for granted everything that is true for us in Jesus. We lose sight of the wonders of the privileges that are ours by faith in Christ. Proverbs 27:7 says, "One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry everything bitter is sweet" (ESV). If you are full and satisfied, even the sweet things aren't attractive to you. But, if you are empty and hungry, then anything is sweet. Sadly, this can happen in our spiritual lives. The incredible spiritual blessings that we have in Christ can be seen as being so normal that we forget how privileged we are to live in these days.

My aim this morning is to stir your hearts afresh in the wonders of what we have in Jesus. In fact, this is the message of our text this morning: Our privileges are greater than that of the Old Testament saints. They lived in the difficult days, like the days of the depression when all they could do was live each day in the promise of something better tomorrow. The promises were a long way off.

But, we live in the days of plenty (despite the current recession). We live today with all of the modern conveniences that generations could only have hoped for. We have plumbing and electricity and electronic communication. Spiritually, we live in days of plenty. We live today when the promises have all been fulfilled in Jesus. We don't need to look high and long for God's provision for our lives. Rather, we need merely to look to Jesus, the One who fulfilled all of the Old Testament promises.

We ought to live in light of the privilege. That's why my father wrote his book -- that his grandchildren would understand the great privileges of living in this day and age. It's the burden of my message.

Well, if you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Hebrews and turn to chapter 11. This morning, we come to the end of the chapter which ends with a punch, similar to the punch in my father's story. For the full effect, I want for us to read the entire chapter, ...

Hebrews 11:1-38

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he 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; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

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.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their

release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

And now, here comes the punch line.

Hebrews 11:39-20

And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

What astonishing words! After a long build-up of example after example after example of those who lived by faith; after a long list of those who are heroes of the faith (like Abraham and Moses and David); after an overflowing list of great deeds that they had done (like shutting the mouths of lions, escaping the edge of the sword, martyrdom and affliction), he then says, "[But they] ... did not receive what was promised" (verse 39). Now, it's not that God wasn't pleased with them. On the contrary, we see in verse 39 that God was very pleased with these people, "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, ... did not receive what was promised." When God looked down upon them, He was pleased with them. They gained God's approval. But, they didn't receive what was promised???

Why? Well, verse 40 answers the "why" question. We see the word "because" which is a word of explanation. "... Because God had provided something better for us." It's right here that we see the hinge to bring the chapter to us. They "did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us." After an entire chapter describing the faith of the Old Testament saints, who lived lives of faith, he turns and tells us that God has something better for us.

And, once again, we see this word, "better." It's used 13 times in this epistle, which is all about how Jesus is better. He is better than the angels, better than Moses and Joshua and Aaron and any of the high priests. We have a better covenant, based upon a better sacrifice. And in verse 40, what do we have that's better? We have a better privilege; we live after the coming of Christ. It's right here that I have derived the title of my message this morning. My message this morning is entitled, "A Better Privilege." That is, the position that we sit in (as New Covenant believers) is of greater privilege than that of those who lived under the Old Covenant.

And such a better privilege calls us to live a better life. Well, that's the quick run through of these verses. Let's spend some time looking at these verses in detail.

Let's look first at ...

1. The Promise to Them (verse 39)

By "them," I mean the Old Testament saints as opposed to the "us" of verse 40, the New Covenant saints. And, when talking about "the promise," I'm talking about that which the Old Testament saints never received. In fact, this is the point of verse 39, "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ..."

Now, if you know your Bibles, you know that the Old Testament saints received plenty of promises. God promised to give Israel the land. They received the land under Joshua's leadership (Josh. 21:43-45). Various military leaders won the promised victories (i.e. Gideon and Barak and David and many others). Hezekiah received an extra 15 years of life according to God's promise to him (Is. 38:5). These are but a few of the promises received by the Old Testament saints. God has always been in the business of granting promises and fulfilling them. It even says in verse 33 that many of them "obtained promises."

So, how can the author here say that they "did not receive what was promised." If you have a New American Standard, you can see in the footnote that this might be literally translated, "they did not receive ... the promise." The King James had it translated like this: "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise."

I believe that this verse is particularly talking about the singular promise of the coming of the Messiah. This is the one promise that was given to all of the Old Testament saints, of which they all knew about, for which they eagerly waited, and which they never obtained.

Since the day that Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, they all looked for one to arise from the seed of the woman, who would be bruised on the heel, but who would bruise the serpent on the head (Gen. 3:15). Since the days of Moses, they always looked for the prophet to arise like Moses who would be another deliverer (Deut. 18:15-29). Since the days of David, they always looked for the one to arise from his line to sit in David's throne forever (2 Sam. 7:13). Since the days of Isaiah, they have always looked for the one born of a virgin who would be called Immanuel (Is. 7:14), Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6). They were looking for the one to sit upon the seat of David, and reign forever and ever (Is. 9:7). This was the great promise that all of the Old Testament saints were looking for. And yet, according to verse 39, they "did not receive what was promised."

Now, again, this wasn't because of a deficiency in them. On the contrary, they all "gained approval through their faith." This is the overall testimony of this chapter. We see the phrase, "By faith" nineteen times here in Hebrews 11. The overall testimony is that by faith, the saints of the Old Testament sought for and found God's approval. Particularly, here in chapter 11, they all received God's approval. There isn't a name mentioned that didn't receive God's approval. Abel received God's approval. Enoch received God's approval. Noah received God's approval. And so did Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and Rahab and Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel. They all gained approval through their faith.

We see this spelled out in the first 2 verses of this chapter, ...

Hebrews 11:1-2

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.

That is, God approved of the way that they lived. God saw their faith and was pleased with them (verse 6). He gave testimony that they were His children.

As a side note, this ought to come as great encouragement to us this morning. God remembers those who have faith in Him. When things in life are rough and difficult, you have not left the mind of God.

Regarding the saints in the Old Testament, God gave testimony to all who lived by faith in God. But, this doesn't mean that they gained everything that God had promised. No, look at verse 13, ...

Hebrews 11:13

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, ...

They died, "in faith." That is, they died having pleased God (Heb. 11:6), having gained His approval. But, they died not receiving the promises, just like verse 39 of our text, this morning.

Right here in verse 13, we see the nature of how it is that they didn't receive the promise: "having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance." That is, they were awaiting the future fulfillment of the promises, which never came in their lifetimes. They went to their graves without ever seeing the fulfillment of the promises come to pass. They were like the child, who eagerly anticipated the coming of Christmas. But for them, like Narnia of old, Christmas never came. Oh, they hoped and dreamed, but they never saw the fulfillment.

Now, I want for you to notice that this was by design. This was no accident. They didn't receive the promise, "because God had provided something better for us" (verse 40), who live after the cross. Acts 17:26 says that God determines the times and boundaries of when and where we live.

This leads nicely to my second point, ...

2. The Provision for Us (verse 40)

The Promise to Them (verse 39) was unfulfilled. But, The Provision for Us (verse 40) is way better. You say, "What has God provided for us?" Christmas has come for us. Jesus has come and brought in the better covenant, based upon better promises (Heb. 8:6). What the Old Testament saints could only dream about, we have seen fulfilled.

I love the way that Michael Card captured this well in his song, entitled, "The Promise"

The Lord God said when time was full
He would shine His light in the darkness
He said a virgin would conceive
And give birth to the Promise
For a thousand years the dreamers dreamt
And hoped to see His love
The Promise showed their wildest dreams
had simply not been wild enough
But the Promise showed their wildest dreams
Had simply not been wild enough

We no longer have to live in hope of something coming. Rather, we are able to live in assurance that someone came and paid for our sins and established peace for us. Someone came and reconciled us to God. God has given something better to us than they ever hoped for. And notice the purpose of why God has done things this way. "So that apart from us they would not be made perfect" (verse 40).

This isn't exactly what you might expect the author to say. Rather, you might expect him to say, "So that apart from Christ they would not be made perfect." In other words, "They didn't receive what was promised, because God had provided something better; he provided Jesus, through whom they would be perfected." Romans 3:25 says, "... in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed."

Now, that's perfectly true. And that is the thrust of what he's saying here. Yes, the Old Testament saints had to await the coming of the Messiah before their full perfection. They needed Jesus to be their Savior. They needed Jesus to forgive them of their sins, because the animal sacrifices were deficient. But, that's not exactly what we read here in verse 40. Listen again closely, ...

Hebrews 11:40

... because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

Do you notice the little pronoun, "us"? It appears twice in verse 40, intentionally to direct our hearts to the privilege that we have over and against what they had. Yes, Abraham was favored of God. Yes, Moses was favored of God. Yes, David was favored of God. But, God has placed His favor upon us in a greater way than he ever did upon any of them. We have something better. Apart from us, they wouldn't be made perfect.

Do you remember what Jesus said of John the Baptist, the last of the great Old Testament saints? He said, "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matt. 11:11). Jesus was speaking of the privilege of entering the kingdom, like we do, believing in the One whom John the Baptist announced.

And so likewise, God has so bestowed His favor upon us that Abraham and Moses and David and John the Baptist would never know perfection apart from us. Don't ever consider yourself a second-rate citizen. The original hearers needed to hear us. They were being told "Come back!" to Judaism, that they were second-rate as Christians. But they said, "No! We have it better!"

And this makes all the difference in the way that we ought to live. This isn't just mere theology. It's all heading toward application. It's all heading toward the way that we live.

It's a bit like this. Imagine that you are called you to be a gardener of a large estate. You are in charge of all of the plants outside. You need to mow the grass. You need to prune the trees. You need to trim the bushes. You need to rake the lawn. You need to plant the flower beds. You need to cultivate and weed the garden.

But, here's the deal. The owner of the estate is a bit eccentric. You can only do your work at night, under the few lights of the estate. The owner of the estate doesn't want to see anyone working on the premises. You need to mow at night. You need to prune the trees at night. You need to trim and rake and plant and cultivate and weed in dim light. Furthermore, you are prohibited from using any water or fertilizer (the owner of the estate is a naturalist) And, you cannot read any books on gardening that have been written in the last 100 years (the older ones are fine to read).

So, how well do you think you will do? I think that you are going to struggle to make everything look very nice. When you mow, you are going to miss some long streaks. It's going to be hard to visualize the trees that you prune. It will be difficult to keep the bushes even. You won't be able to see everything in the lawn you rake. It will be difficult to distinguish the weeds from the plants.

This is a bit of how the Old Testament saints had to live. Hebrews 10:1 said that the law was "only a shadow of the good things to come." That is, there was something to the guidance they had. But, they couldn't see clearly. They were living by the shadows, not in the light of the sun. And it's hard to live in the shadows. It's hard to see clearly.

On top of that, their covenant was faulty. Hebrews 8:7 said so. To be sure, there was activity. But, you had weak priests (Heb. 5:2) offering up sacrifices that could never take away sins (Heb. 10:4). And it all pointed to a Savior, who would come someday. But, they didn't know, nor did they fully understand.

Peter said it this way:

1 Peter 1:10-11

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.

They didn't know. They didn't understand. Even the prophets who wrote didn't understand. But, today, we understand. We understand "the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow." We understand how Jesus came to suffer upon the cross for our sins. We understand how God highly exalted Him as a result. We live in full knowledge of these things.

Those prophets who didn't understand, knew that there would be a day when others would understand.

1 Peter 1:12

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 have been recipients of the promises. We have seen Jesus, the Messiah, come. We are like the gardener, who can work during the day, seeing the lawn and the trees and the flowers clearly, and using all the water and fertilizer necessary while being able to read and study all about gardening. The more we know and the more we can apply, the prettier ought to be our garden.

So also with our lives of faith. We who live in the days of greater revelation, ought to have lives that surpass that of the Old Testament saints. We know how our sins are forgiven. We know of the atonement. We know of redemption. We know of propitiation. We know of reconciliation. We know of the resurrection. We know what it means to be born again. We know how salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We know how the Holy Spirit dwells in us. We have this privilege that none of the Old Testament saints had. They could only look at the shadows. But, we can look to Jesus.

In fact, that's where the author is leading us. Look at Hebrews 12:2: "fixing our eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith." We don't have to fix our eyes on some vague hope of something in the future. Rather, we fix our eyes upon our Lord, who came to earth, suffered upon the cross, was buried, rose from the dead, ascended to the heights of the heavens, and now, sits "at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

And with the better privilege, God calls us to live better. He calls us to have greater faith than Abraham. He calls us to have greater faith than Moses. He calls us to have greater faith than David because, the blessings are greater and the object of our faith is clearer. That's not to say that everything is all clear for us. We have some promises that we are awaiting -- namely the return of Christ. But, we have seen that Christ has come once, and we look forward to His return.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 10, 2011 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
