

# Hebrews

## Desiring a Better Country

### Hebrews 11:13-16

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#### INTRODUCTION:

#### ILLUSTRATION:

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!*”

A lot of people on this earth probably share that boy’s feelings about heaven. Someday, it would be nice to go there, but at the moment, we are not interested. It is just too nice here on earth. If they were honest, they would 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 should feel out of place here.

#### All Stand and Read Scripture

#### **Hebrews 11:13-16 (NASB95)**

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> 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.

#### Prayer

Believers confess that they are “**strangers and exiles on the earth**” And rather than viewing heaven as a nice a nice retirement after we enjoy the good life here below, he shows that true believers **long for** heaven. “**They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one**” Our text teaches us that...

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

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. Many believers who profess Christ as Savior live with their minds on the things on earth, rather than setting their minds on the things above.

### **Colossians 3:1-4 (NASB95)**

3 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

The world is motivated more by collecting treasures on earth than by storing up treasures in heaven. Their focus is on what Christ can do for us in the here and now. They do not allow the thought of Heaven to govern how they live day to day. **But, it should!**

As we have 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 in faith**". 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**" And so they "**died in 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 yearn for a better country in heaven.

Our text makes two main points:

### **BODY:**

#### **I. We are Exiles on this Earth.**

### **Hebrews 11:13-15 (NASB95)**

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. <sup>15</sup> And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

These men of faith "**confessed that they were strangers and exiles on earth**". An **allusion** to this phrase is found in Genesis.

### **Genesis 23:2-4 (NASB95)**

<sup>2</sup> Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. <sup>3</sup> Then Abraham rose from before his dead, and spoke to the sons of Heth, saying, <sup>4</sup> "**I am a stranger and a sojourner among you; give me a burial site among you that I may bury my dead out of my sight.**"

Our text brings out three aspects of this sojourner life:

## A. We See and Welcome God's Promises from a Distance.

There are three implications in that sentence:

### 1. We must hear and see God's promises.

Before we can **believe** in God's promises, we must **hear** and **see** them. Before we can see them, God must open our spiritually blind eyes. Jesus shared this concept with his disciples when they questioned why he always taught in parables.

#### Matthew 13:10-13 (NASB95)

<sup>10</sup> And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?"  
<sup>11</sup> Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. <sup>12</sup> For whoever has, to him *more* shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. <sup>13</sup> Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

Faith, which is the gift of God, enables us to prove the things not seen by fully trusting that God's promises will come true in His time. In this way, Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus' day. This is how Jesus demonstrated this to the Jews who were claiming that they were Abraham's descendants and God was their only father.

#### John 8:39-44, 56 (NAB95)

<sup>39</sup> They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus \*said to them, "If you are Abraham's children, do the deeds of Abraham. <sup>40</sup> But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; **this Abraham did not do.** <sup>41</sup> You are doing the deeds of your father." They said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God." <sup>42</sup> Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. <sup>43</sup> Why do you not understand what I am saying? **It is because you cannot hear My word.** <sup>44</sup> **You are of your father the devil**, and you want to do the desires of **your** father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. ...

<sup>56</sup> Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he **saw it** and was glad."

A personal relationship with God begins when He opens your eyes to **hear** and **see** His promise in Jesus Christ, that whoever believes in Him has eternal life.

#### John 3:16 (NASB95)

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

### 2. We Must Welcome God's Promises.

Having seen God's promises, the patriarchs **welcomed** them. John tells us that Abraham "**rejoiced**" to see God's day. 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. But they welcomed God's promise "**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 also told us that Abraham **did** obtain the promise.

### **Hebrews 6:13-15 (NASB95)**

**<sup>13</sup> For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, "I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you."**

**<sup>15</sup> And so, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise.**

So, the question is "How did Abraham die without receiving the promise, yet by being patient, he did obtain the promise?" And secondly, "How was it received from a distance?"

The author means that the patriarchs did not receive the total fulfillment of God's promises during their lifetime on this earth. 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. **That was 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 are alive when the Lord returns). The world scoffs at an epitaph like "All these died in faith"! What a joke! That's "pie in the sky when you die" talk!

We tend to be afraid of being ridiculed 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 hear, see, and welcome God's promises, although we can only do so in this life from a distance.

### **3. Welcoming God's Promises Will Alienate 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.

### **Hebrews 11:9 (NASB95)**

**<sup>9</sup> 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;**

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. They were thinking to themselves, "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!”

When you travel to a foreign country you can **try** to blend in, but you still stand out as different. You do not speak their language. You cannot read the signs or the newspapers. They use different money. Your appearance is different. You do not 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 are still a stranger.

As Christians, we are **supposed** to feel that way about living in this evil world. **We should not fit in!** The world pursues different goals and pleasures than we do. The world laughs at jokes and scenes in movies that we find disgusting. 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.

Notice in verses 13 and 14 of our text, 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**".

"Confess" refers to speech; "make it clear" comes from a word meaning *to exhibit*,. Since we come from a different country, we talk and act differently than the natives of this world.

### **Philippians 3:18-20 (NASB95)**

*<sup>18</sup> For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, <sup>19</sup> whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ;*

When they observe that we are different, we should be ready to tell them why.

### **B. We Cannot Move Back to Our 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. If they had returned, their family and friends would have welcomed them with open arms. But they endured the hardships and did not go back because they were seeking a better country, namely, a heavenly one.

## **II. We Yearn for a Better Country in Heaven.**

### **Hebrews 11:16 (NASB95)**

*<sup>16</sup> 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.*

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

### **A. Desiring a Better Country.**

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. 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, and no need for anti-virus for your computer!

Heaven will be beautiful beyond our imagination. And the best part of heaven will be that God Himself will dwell among us as His people!

## **B. Anticipating the Prepared City.**

The better country and the prepared city are the same thing, viewed from different perspectives. 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**, it will be perfectly suited to all of our needs.

## **C. Rejoicing that God has Accepted Us.**

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”** Even though these men were far from perfect, God was pleased to be identified with them.

### **1 John 3:1-2 (NASB95)**

**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. **2** 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.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The application is that as believers, we live **in** the world, but we cannot be **of** the world. 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!

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 you can say...

### **Psalms 73:25-26 (NASB95)**

**25** Whom have I in heaven *but You?* And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. **26** My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

## **What a Day That Will Be!**