

Still Living by Faith: Longing for a Better Country
Hebrews 11:13-22
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13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. 20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

When I was seventeen years old I hitchhiked across North America, spending six weeks on the road. Two years later I took off from Canada to Europe. And for almost six months I travelled throughout the UK, continental Europe and North Africa.

As exciting as those adventures were, I didn't take a single photograph!

I've never been terribly nostalgic. I've always tried to live for the future. So why take pictures? That's the past. I'm wired for the things to come, not days gone by.

As I've aged I've starting taking pictures--especially of Noa, the cutest little granddaughter on the planet. But besides being just plain photogenic, she's the future. And investing in the generations to come is becoming a priority and joy.

So with my natural bent forward I was delighted to be given the subject: *Still living by Faith: Longing for a Better Country*.

During these days we're looking at Hebrews 11 and the heroes of the faith.

And as you remember, the very first verse of Hebrews 11 declares: "Now *faith* is the substance of things *hoped* for..."

We know what faith is. But what is hope? Here's a good definition: "Hope *is faith* in a preferred *future*."

Faith is inseparably tied up with a *future hope*.

If any of us is stuck in the past, or too glued to the present, my hope is that as we study Hebrews 11:13-22, we'll all be more free to soar into the future.

There are a number of nuggets of truth we can mine out of these verses. I've dug out six.

1. Be confident that the promises of God WILL come to pass--if not here and now, surely THEN AND THERE

The first nugget of truth we find in verse 13 is this: To have the faith of these heroes, means being confident that the promises of God WILL come to pass--if not here and now, surely THEN AND THERE.

Verse 13 says: "These all DIED in FAITH, NOT having received the PROMISES, but having seen them AFAR off were ASSURED of them...."

What are these "promises?"

John Calvin says they include the promise of a myriad of descendants to bless the world; the Land of Canaan; the coming of the Messiah; the resurrection of the dead; and the promise of heaven.

These heroes of the faith died before ever seeing the FULLfillment of any of these promises.

Yet, they kept on believing God and His Word.

While we still await the fulfillment of many of the same promises, you and I have experienced the impact of the greatest of all promises--the coming of Messiah, Yeshua.

We have the advantage of *hindsight*. But the heroes of faith surpass us in *foresight*. Hindsight may be 20/20 vision, but these heroes had *telescopic* vision. Though not yet fully realized, God's promises were already in their sights--"having seen them AFAR off," verse 13 declares.

Imagine for a moment what it must have been like for any one of these heroes of faith when nearing the point of death. He's lived his life in faith trusting that God's promises are "yes" and "amen." Yet on his deathbed, he has still not seen a single one of those promises coming to pass. Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick..." But none of these heroes died from this sickness. Instead, it says, that they all "DIED in FAITH, NOT having received the PROMISES, BUT having seen them AFAR off were ASSURED of them...."

If you've ever had doubts that God keeps his promises, may you get a faith lift from Numbers 23:19: "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

Join the heroes of the faith. being confident that the promises of God WILL come to pass--if not here and now, surely THEN AND THERE.

2. Embrace the future as a *friend*, not a *foe*

The text naturally leads us to a second nugget of truth.

The next phrase in Hebrews 11:13 reveals that to be like those heroes of faith, we will embrace the future as a *friend*, not a *foe*.

Verse 13 says: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, *embraced* them."

The New Testament Greek for "embraced" can also be translated, "to salute, greet, bid welcome."

I picture a young lady waiting for the arrival of her fiance at Ben Gurion airport. She's electric with excitement and anticipation; she's rehearsing in her mind how she will *embrace* her beloved.

Is that the way you approach the future? Are you someone who *EMbraces* the future or *braces* for the future. Is the future your friend--or foe?

Believe the words of Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."

Our greatest hero of faith is Yeshua. How did he approach his future? Here he was, about to face the reality of inexplicable suffering and death by crucifixion. He could easily have fled in fear. But instead, we read in Hebrews 12:2,3, "looking unto Yeshua, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls."

Yeshua "endured" the cross. But He also "embraced" the cross-- "for the joy that was set before Him."

When I was a child we used to sing this old song written by Ira Stanphill: "There are many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand, but I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand."

When we realize that Yeshua is on our side, and at our side, we can *embrace* the future as a friend, and not a foe.

3. Reinforce your confidence in the future by our *confession*

Turning now to the last part of verse 13, we discover a third nugget of truth: If we have the faith of these heroes we will reinforce our confidence in the future by our *confession*.

Concerning their attitude regarding the promises of God, we read: "but having seen them afar

off were assured of them, embraced them and CONFESSED that they were *strangers and pilgrims* on the earth."

Confessing our faith reinforces our faith.

David hadn't lost his mind when on several occasions he *talked to himself*, saying, "Bless the Lord O MY soul..." David understood the power of confessing his faith with the words of his mouth.

God Himself brought the world into existence with the spoken word. "And God SAID, "let there be light." And God SAID, "Let Us make man in Our image..."

And in verse 13 of our text these heroes of the faith "CONFESSED that they were *strangers and pilgrims* on the earth."

The pull of the earth is so magnetic that we easily *forget* that this is not our permanent home. But one of the best ways to remember something, is to say it out loud. I've found that out when it comes to learning Hebrew. In the synagogue many prayers are spoken and confessions of faith are declared for all to hear. Somehow confessing the word of God with our mouth awakens our senses and enables us to remember God's truth.

So not wanting to ever *forget* that their ultimate destination is not of this world, the heroes of faith "CONFESSED that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

King David make this same confession in 1 Chronicles 29:15: "For we are *aliens and pilgrims* before You, as were all our fathers..."

Those heroes of faith confessed many things, but one of the most important things they confessed was their faith in a preferred future--a future when the things of earth will have grown strangely dim and the light of their eternal destiny has become bright and beautiful.

Many of you have heard the story of an American tourist who visited the renowned rabbi, Hofetz Chaim. The tourist was surprised to see that the rabbi's home was only a simple room--a table and a bed and books. The tourist asked, "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" Hofetz Chaim replied, "Where is yours?"

The confused tourist asked, "Mine? But I'm only a visitor here. I'm just passing through." The rabbi replied, "So am I."

It would be a good habit to make this same *confession*: "I'm just passing through." And with the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:13, *confess* that we are "*strangers and pilgrims* on the earth."

4. Don't even call to mind your old way of life

Now the text leads us to a fourth point: If we have true faith we will not even think of going back to our old way of life.

We read in Verses 14 and 15 of Hebrews 11: "For those who say such things declare plainly

that they seek a homeland. And truly IF they had CALLED TO MIND that COUNTRY from which they had COME OUT, they would have had OPPORTUNITY TO RETURN.”

I like the way “The Message” version translates this last verse: "If they were homesick for the old country, they could have gone back any time they wanted."

A little bit of nostalgia isn't bad. But when we get obsessed with recapturing the "good ole' days" we will never press on and reach our God-given destiny. (By the way, the good ole' days, are usually not as *good* as we remember them. We have selective memory).

We think of the Internet as a tool of progress. But it can also be very regressive. Social media sites enable us search to reach back in time as we find long lost friends from high school or University. Unfortunately it's former girlfriends or boyfriends that too often appear on our screens. It's intriguing to see what they're doing with their lives after all these years. But I've heard tragic story after tragic story how believers have been pulled back into the clutches of an "old flame." Instead of going forward, many are sliding back to their old way of life--enticed by the former things instead of the future "things which God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

But the heroes of the faith never even "CALLED TO MIND that country from which they had come out."

Proverbs 23:7 says, "For as a person THINKS in his heart, so is he." When you've had idle time to think, what have you “called to mind?” Do you fantasize? And if you do, how much of your thinking harks back to the old country and the old man?

Don't even call to mind “that country from which [you have] come out." Reckon the old man dead and gone. Reckon the old habits dead and gone. Reckon the old haunts dead and gone.

In the words of Paul in Romans 6:11: “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

There are commentators who see evidence that the Hebrews were undergoing persecution when this letter was written. Under this pressure, they were being enticed to go back to their old way of life--Judaism without Jesus.

So the writer to the Hebrews recounts the perseverance of these heroes of faith, who continued to press onward and upward toward a higher calling.

In the midst of his own challenges, Abraham may have been tempted to go back to a prosperous and more predicable life in Ur of the Chaldees. But he never even "CALLED TO MIND that country from which had come out."

Have you been entertaining thoughts of the old life? Reckon your old man and your old way of life as dead and gone.

Instead of looking back, let's have Paul perspective: "but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me." (Philippians 3:12)

5. Develop a desire for heaven

Now a fifth nugget we unearth in Hebrews 11: Not only should we resist even the thought of going back to the old 'country,' but we should develop a desire for our new 'country'--in heaven.

Speaking of all these heroes of the faith, we read in verse 16: "But now they DESIRE a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."

It's one thing to know you're on your way to heaven, but it's another thing to "desire" it. In the midst of suffering heaven can look pretty good. But when things are going well down here, things of this earth look pretty appealing.

But if we're going to be like those heroes of the faith, we will have a growing "DESIRE a better, that is, a heavenly country."

Paul echoes this in Philippians 3:20: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also EAGERLY WAIT for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ..."

What was there about heaven that produced such a longing in those heroes of the faith?

For one thing, *heaven is the dwelling place of God.*

J.I. Packer writes: "We know very little about heaven, but I once heard a theologian describe it as "an unknown region with a well-known inhabitant," and there is not a better way to think of it than that."

Richard Baxter expresses the thought in these lines:

My knowledge of that life is small,
The eye of faith is dim,
But it's enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with him."

The longing and desire of the heroes of faith for "a better...heavenly country" comes from the fact that *heaven is where God dwells*. David expressed his longing for God's presence when he says in Psalm 27:4: "One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: *that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life*, to behold the beauty of the Lord."

Augustine sums up his own longing for God's presence in heaven when he said, "Thou has made us unto thyself, and our heart finds no rest until it rests in THEE."

What else do we know about heaven that should cause us to long for it? Paul teaches that *heaven is the eternal home of believers*.

Genesis 25:8 says: "Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old

man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people."

I long to be with my Savior, but I also long to see my mother. She died at age 59. I miss her. Not only should we eagerly desire heaven because God is there; But also because my believing friends and loved ones will be there. I will be gathered to my people.

An unknown author once said, "As a boy, I thought of heaven as a city with domes, spires, and beautiful streets, inhabited by angels. By and by my little brother died, and I thought of heaven much as before, but with one inhabitant that I knew. Then another died, and then some of my acquaintances, so in time I began to think of heaven as containing several people that I knew. But it was not until one of my own little children died that I began to think I had treasure in heaven myself. Afterward another went, and yet another. By that time I had so many acquaintances and children in heaven that I no more thought of it as a city merely with streets of gold but as a place full of inhabitants. Now there are so many loved ones there I sometimes think I know more people in heaven than I do on earth."

And then there's something else wonderful about heaven that we often forget: Heaven is going to be *a place of exciting and fulfilling ministry.*

Some of us are so in love with our ministry on earth, that heaven looks boring in comparison. But listen to what Alexander MacLaren says about heaven: "The caricature of heaven as an eternity of idleness has no basis in Scripture. Instead,...in the last chapter of Revelation...we read of "those who serve Him, and see His face."But remember that if there is to be service there, the exercising ground is here. I do not know what we are in this world for unless it is to apprentice us for heaven. Life on earth is a bewilderment unless we are being trained here for a NOBLER WORK which lies beyond the grave."

I could say more about heaven. If I had more time I'd talk about the beautiful home that Yeshua is preparing for us there (John 14:12).

If I had more time, I'd talk about the heavenly banquet. Yeshua alluded to heaven as a joyful feast.

And if I had more time I'd talk about rewards in heaven for God's faithful servants.

No wonder believers are told to rejoice because their names are written in HEAVEN ! (Luke 10:20).

6. Prepare the next generations for their God-given destiny

I'm going to conclude by digging up just one last nugget--revealed in verses 17-22 of our text:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when

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 departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

Here we see that these forerunners of faith--Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, were fixated not only on their own future; they also knew the importance of blessing the generations that would follow them, and preparing them for their God-given destiny.

Abraham could have easily written off Isaac's future when God commanded Abraham to slay him on the altar. In the natural, God's command defied all logic and contradicted God's promise of multiplied descendants who will bless the world. But with the eyes of faith, Abraham still believed in a bright future for Isaac, "concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead..." (verse 19).

Maybe you have a child who's been swept into the whirlpool of worldliness and is spiraling out of control. If you're on the verge of giving up, don't. Keep on believing just like Abraham believed, "concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead..."

And then we read in verse 20: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff."

Isaac, in his old age and frailty could have become fixated on his own plight, but Isaac would not leave this world until he had blessed his sons, Jacob and Esau.

And then we see Jacob, taking up his father's baton. And he too, before his days were over, made sure he prepared the next generation. And not just one generation--but even the subsequent generation of his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

Never think you're too old to be an influence on younger people--even to those 40, 50, 60 years younger than yourself.

And then, finally we read in our text, "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones."

Like his forefathers, Joseph also set his sights on succeeding generations, looking ahead to the day when his children's children's children will finally enter the Promised Land. As it is written in Genesis 50:23-25:

"Joseph saw Ephraim's children *to the third generation*. The children of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were also brought up on Joseph's knees.

And Joseph said to his brethren, "I am dying; but God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land to the land of which He swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Then Joseph took an oath from the children of Israel, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here."

I'm grateful that the generation gap so huge when I was growing up is now shrinking smaller and smaller. Today there is a younger generation screaming for true fathers and mothers.

As we peer into the future, let's not neglect our children, and our children's children. Let's inspire the generations following in our footsteps become the new heroes--who *live by faith and long for a better country.*

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