
The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Characters of Faith Part 4 (Abraham – Part 3) Hebrews 11:13-16

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

Hebrews 11:13-16 is like a mid-term report card. How many of you remember those? It is a summary of what has been accomplished and taught thus far in the examples of faith put forth by Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham. These verses are here to cause us to reflect upon and further assimilate the facets of faith offered in the examples of these men. The summary of truths taught here in our text are sobering; particularly in light of the way that faith is often portrayed in our modern Christian culture. There are many people who water down what saving faith is by making it nothing more than a personal decision to let Jesus save them without understanding that faith in Christ involves being made new, with a change of what one desires and what one seeks after.

And in this we find the key truth of this particular text – saving faith means having new desires and seeking new satisfactions. To expand on this a bit, saving faith, a faith by which one lives and even dies, means having new desires, godly desires and the seeking of new satisfactions, godly satisfactions, implanted in the heart by God. The things that God desires, by faith we desire. The things that satisfy God, by faith, now satisfy you. This is the picture of faith we are to see and emulate. As we look at our text this morning then, I wish to ask you three questions about your faith, questions that are answered for us in our text, and of which we must ask ourselves, “does this describe my faith?” Faith that pleases God and faith that assures a person of salvation is faith that can answer the following three questions:

- I. Does your faith contain godly conviction? (11:13a)
- II. Does your faith make godly confession (11:13b-15)
- III. Does your faith anticipate a crown? (11:16)

I. Does your faith contain godly conviction? (11:13a)

13 All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance...

As I stated before, these verses serve as a summary, a rest stop whereby we might pull over as it were and think about where we been before continuing on to where we are going. So, what is it that we have learned from the verses preceding our text? We have learned that faith is indeed “conviction” – a godly conviction, an inward confidence “of things not seen” and

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yet promised by God. We must stop to ask ourselves, “does my faith contain this godly conviction”? From the first part of verse 13 I see two aspects of this conviction for us to ponder.

First, there is a common conviction, a conviction that is to be the possession of all who profess faith regardless of when they lived, how long they lived, or even the circumstances under which they lived. Our text begins with the words, “**All these**” referring back to the lives of those whom we have already considered as well as those whose lives we are yet to read about in the verses to come. “**All these**” have something in common – faith – sure, pure, confident, convinced, positive faith – an unwavering trust in the person, promise and provision of God through Jesus Christ that results in behavior consistent with the Word of God.

Our text says that “**all these died**” – again reflecting the general and common lot of men, namely that is appointed for men to die once and after this judgment (Hebrews 9:27). But there is more said as all these died – “**in faith**”. Notice here that they did not die “by faith” – that it was not that they died because of their faith, but rather that these who died, died “in faith” that is, while exemplifying or living out their faith in God. What a way to go!

I remember a man of whom I have told some of you, who upon having some ailment in his old age, was rendered unable to communicate. When I would visit him in the hospital, he could not greet me or carry on a conversation. But one thing he did, he was able to quote Bible verses and so when I visited him, he began to recite verse after verse. This man had filled his heart with the word of God and I believe he died “in faith” – he died while living out what he believed. Does our faith have this conviction, that we would die while living out the very truths we profess?

Another commonality is that all these died in faith, “**without receiving the promises**” which means they did not live to see the fulfillment of the promises. Beloved, do we not live by the same faith. For if the Lord tarrys and we die before His return, the promise of being clothed with an immortal, incorruptible body will not be fully and finally realized – we will die “in faith” – in anticipation of the resurrection. Is this your conviction? Does this describe your faith?

But in addition to this common conviction, faith is also described in our text as a **certain conviction**. For we go on to read, “**but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance...**” We are reminded once again of the certainty that faith has, that while the fulfillment of the promises of God may well tarry and we die, so certain, so persuaded, so convinced of their realization, we see and welcome those promises, even if we are temporarily separated from them by death. Beloved, here is the gospel, that we so believe that Jesus died for our sins, to make us right with God, that we anticipate living with Jesus even if that means we die before we live. Is this not the promise of Jesus in John 11:25-26?

25 I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?

Do you believe this? Is this your faith? Is this the deep and assured conviction of your heart? For now you live “by faith” by means and because of the faith God has implanted to your heart. And if you died before the Lord’s return, before the Lord fulfills His promises, you die “in faith” – under the regime of faith singing out with desire those familiar words –

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And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll...
Spafford

One day faith will cease and all will be sight, but before a person can see, he must first come to Christ by faith and then live “in faith” – a faith of godly conviction, believing in the promises of God and then living accordingly.

II. Does your faith make confession? (11:13b-15)

and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. 15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

Having seen the conviction of faith, we consider the next question harvested from the end of verse 13 on through to verse 15 – does your faith make godly profession? The faithful had a confession, a word that means “to freely tell people” or “unhesitatingly speaking to people.” Before we consider this godly confession of the faithful from the text, let me speak to you about what often is the confession of people.

Many of us have fond memories of times and events in our lives that most precious. It is not unusual for us to sometimes long for such times, to “go back” if it were possible to live them over again. Some are even taken in the pursuit of constantly trying to recreate such times. Now don’t get me wrong, we ought to be grateful to the God who so graciously bestows upon believer and unbeliever alike such a common grace as to allow such times in a sin-filled world. But it is not unusual for people to also pervert the past, to long after it rather than moving ahead – some even seeking after experiences and feelings that may not have been godly to begin with. Perhaps Proverbs 26:11 reveals to us a bit of the problem here -

Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.

The world tends to long for the “good ol’ days” – days gone by when things were seemingly better. The world longs for a pre 911 atmosphere, particularly when at the airport. The world longs for the earlier, simpler days. This world forgets to learn the lessons of history and as the saying goes, “those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” Many of the ills we face today are simply bigger, more exaggerated problems that humanity has already faced. Some of our own struggles and difficulties are nothing more than taking the sins of our parents or families to the next level. We look back only to learn how we might not repeat mistakes in the future. Beloved, the life of the believer is not a life that is overly spent on looking back, but rather is one that looks ahead, looking ahead to promises and places that we have only read about in the Word of God and can only vaguely imagine the beauty of.

In contrast to all this, the lives of the faithful are to be distinctive from the world, not looking back with longing to the good ol’ days, but looking forward, longing for the blessed days to come. In the words of Philipians 3:12-14 -

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12 Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Herein lies the faith of these described in our text in Hebrews 11:13b-15, a faith that truly forgets what is behind and reaches forward to what lies ahead. The faith of the faithful expresses itself in a distinctive hope – a new desire for what God promised and finding satisfaction in the pursuit. How is this aspect of faith manifested? Notice first the confession there at the end of verse 13 – **“they were *strangers [literally resident aliens] and exiles [sojourners – passer throughers] on the earth.*”** This confession made them distinct from those around them. Our text goes on to say in verses 14-15,

“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.”

Beloved, this world was not the end-all to Abel, Enoch, Noah and Abraham and the rest of those of faith here in Hebrews 11. By faith, they stood out from the rest of the world because their hope, their expectation, their seeking, their desires were focused on the promises of God rather than the fleeting prospects of this world. Some of you may or may not be familiar with the term “hedonist.” The dictionary definition of a hedonist is “a person whose life is devoted to the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification.” A hedonist is one who lives for the moment, who is consumed by pleasure and is bound by the indulgences of the world. I would have you note the contrast, the distinctive set up for us in verses 14-15. The faithful, by their confession of being **“*strangers and exiles*”** – made **“*it clear that they [were] seeking a country of their own.*”** These faithful longed for a country, a place where faith was not an anomaly, where faith was not uncommon, where faith was not mocked or ridiculed; in fact, a place where their faith might be fully realized.

If they had not lived by faith, then they would have longed to return to the country from which they came from – they would have sought to return according to verse 15 as they had plenty of opportunities to return if they were not living by faith. It is interesting to note that while Abraham and later his grandson Jacob did go down to Egypt and Isaac never left the land of Canaan, none of the patriarchs ever returned to Mesopotamia. In fact, Israel never set off in that direction until some 1500 years after Abraham when, as a punishment for her sin, Israel was sent back to Mesopotamia, captives of Babylon for seventy years.

In other words, God called and delivered Abraham out of the idolatry and spiritual sickness of Mesopotamia, but as Israel flirted and followed after the sins of the nations around her, longing to indulge in the pleasures, perversion and self-gratification hedonism of the world, failing to be distinctively God’s people by faith, God thrust Israel right back into the heart of such depravity. God gave them over to their lusts and degrading passions.

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And a lesson to be learned from all this is as follows – God calls us out of hedonism, out of living for self and worldly pleasure so that we might live for him and for godly pleasure. We ought to, by faith, be seeking to live out our faith and not long to live as we once did in sin and self-pursuits. To live for God one must live by faith, to know and confess that there is something more than this life and this world and this hope makes the believer a “peculiar people” – distinctive in hope and focus. Does this describe your faith? Are you willing and find satisfaction in telling others that this world is not your home, that you are looking for and expecting something better, something promised by God in His Word, something which affects the very way you live now? This is the life of faith.

III. Does your faith anticipate a crown? (11:16)

16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed [what pleases God – this kind of faith] to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

We have seen that true saving faith is based upon godly conviction, that it desires to make a godly confession, and now, in verse 16, we see that faith also anticipates a crown. [Read text].

Because they have no desire to return to their former country and their former customs – because they are living by faith, **“they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one.”** This should not be construed to mean that the faithful are looking for a place on earth that is merely like heaven, but rather that the faithful are those who are desirous, who are “seeking” the country in heaven.

The word “country” is first given to us in verse 14 and then is understood in verses 15 and 16, not being in the text itself. The faithful are “seeking” (v. 14) and “desire” a “patria” – the Greek word from which comes patriotism or patriotic. If you know your Greek or Latin, then you know that “patri” is mean father. The word country means “fatherland” or native land. The faithful are not seeking, or looking for any place on this earth, but are in pursuit and expectation of the “Fatherland” – the heavenly dwelling place of their heavenly Father. For the faithful, the crown of life, the crown of joy and the crown of righteousness is being in the eternal presence and bliss of God Almighty. This is the desire of the faithful. This is the only thing that will satisfy the faithful – the constant presence of God. Was this not the prayer of David 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 and to meditate in His temple.

That is the prayer and desire of the person who lives by faith and is willing to even die in faith. The Apostle Paul was persuaded of something similar in 2 Timothy 4:7-8 -

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

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Does your faith, like that of Paul, anticipate and long for such a crown, such a reward, to receive the fullness of the reward of the righteous of Christ, that reward being in His presence?

But our text includes more than simply the crown or reward of His presence. Or perhaps it would be better to say that there is now an additional description of what it means to be a part of this heavenly country. We read on in verse 16, *“Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God; for HE has prepared a city for them.”*

When I think about my life, both before Christ and even since coming to Him some 20 plus years ago, I must confess that I am ashamed of what I am in myself. I am sickened that I continue to wrestle with sin, saddened by my lack of trust and dependency upon the Lord, troubled by the deficiency of my prayer life; all these things that I am in myself. But then I praise the Lord that He has not called me to live in or by myself, but to live in and by faith in Christ. That when I sin, by faith I believe my sin has been graciously paid for by the blood of Christ, that when I trust in myself, I can repent and turn to God for help; and then when I do not pray as I ought, I, by faith, know that the Holy Spirit of God takes my groanings and pleas before the throne of grace.

I praise the Lord that, according to 1 Corinthians 1:30, it is ***“by His doing that [I] am in Christ Jesus, who became to [me] wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption...”*** A believer is “in Christ” “by faith” and God is not ashamed to be called the God of the faithful. In fact, God takes great pleasure in being referred to as “the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6) – or, in other words, “the God of the Faithful” – the God of those who were seeking and desiring a better country, a heavenly dwelling place, who find satisfaction in obeying Him, serving Him, and loving Him.

God is not ashamed to be called their God and He proves that He is not ashamed by having prepared a city of His own design and construction for those who are of faith, for those who long for the crown or reward of faith – eternal communion with God. Does this describe your faith? This is the faith of the faithful. This is the faith to which everyone in this room is being called to. This is what saving faith looks like. This is how genuine faith manifests itself. It is a faith of conviction – firm and unwavering trust in the promises of God even if death comes before their fruition. It is a faith of confession; a faith that speaks plainly and without hesitation concerning who God is, what He has promised, that those who possess such faith are not of this world, but longing for the country of God. And finally it is a faith that anticipates a crown, a reward, not because those of faith deserve such a trophy, but rather that God has promised such a prize for those who live and die “in faith”. May this be our faith – may this be your faith.

Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

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