

Faith that Seeks a Better Country

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[0:00] A reading this evening is taken from Hebrews chapter 11. It's a short reading. We're reading! We're reading from verse 13 through 16, and Ryan will be opening up these verses to us in a moment or two.

Let's hear and read together in God's Word. Hebrews 11 from verse 13. These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone 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 for them a city.

This is God's Word, and to His name be the praise and the glory. We've been looking at Hebrews 11 for about a couple of months now on how we live by faith.

Hebrews 11, obviously, is a very famous chapter in the Bible. Some people call it the Hall of Faiths, as we look back at the patriarchs and people from the Old Testament and how they lived by faith.

[1:47] And we know that, and understand that, Christianity begins by faith. We have verses like Ephesians 2, 8 and 9 that says, for it's by grace you've been saved through faith. It begins with faith. And then we have lots of verses that tell us that the Christianity, the Christian walk with the Lord is by faith. So Romans 1, 17 talks about the righteous to live by faith. Paul talked about in Corinthians how we walk by faith and not by sight. He says personally in Galatians 2 that he lives by faith, this life that he lives in the flesh. So the question then is, how do we live by faith? And that's one of the things that Hebrews 11 is addressing. We also see in Hebrews 11 that this is the life that is commended by God, is one that is lived by faith. And in fact, verse 6 of chapter 11 says that without faith, it is impossible to please God. So tonight we're going to look a little bit about the nature of faith. But to understand that, we actually need to go back to verse 1 to understand what this passage is talking about. And Hebrews 11 says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. So faith involves assurance. It involves something that is a foundation that is firm, that we can count on. It involves a conviction. Another word for that would be evidence or maybe even proof. It's reasonable faith. It's faith that makes so much sense that I would consider it a firm foundation and even live my life built around these things that I believe. In fact, the word believe is the verb form for the word faith is the noun form. Faith and belief go together. But this also tells us that faith is tied to hope. Faith is tied and linked to this idea of what we put our hope in. Hope is when you realize that things aren't completely as they should be, and you long for something better. And your hope depends on the object of your faith. For instance, I was getting a haircut. Yes, my hair is almost gone, but I still get haircuts. And went to the barber. And the guy that was in the chair when I got there, the barber tends to ask a question like, okay, sir, what's your philosophy of the day? Like he's asking for just some, what have you been thinking about lately? And the guy in the chair says, I hope that Scotland wins the FIFA World Cup. And everybody just starts laughing and everything. And I was like, okay, maybe this is something that's not that possible. It's more of a joke or whatever. But if you are putting your faith in Scotland winning the World Cup, you might be disappointed, right? That might be misplaced hope, no offense, but that experience would tell us that. However, if you said something like, I hope to make a good grade on the exam, you're kind of putting your faith in your ability to perform well after you've studied. If you did not study for that exam, maybe misplaced hope, right? So faith is actually, your hope is tied to your faith in the object. How good is this object that I'm putting my faith in?

But faith is believing in something that gives me assurance of a better future. It's tied to hope. And that's what we're talking about tonight. So when we come to our passage, the writer has just been talking about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. They had believed what God had said, and it changed the way that they lived their lives and the decisions that they made. So we get to verse 13, and when it says, these all died in faith, it's probably talking about those four, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. And the NIV translates this as, all of these people were still living by faith when they died. So the sentence structure, the way that it's worded would demonstrate that their lives were characterized by faith, but when it came to death, they were still facing death by faith.

What does that mean? Well, it says, these all died in faith, not having received the things promised. They hadn't received the things yet that had been promised to them. Faith, they're believing that what God had said is going to come to pass, but they're coming to their death, and they still haven't received those promises. If you think about it and remember, Abraham was promised this massive area of land from Genesis 15 tells us from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates, the great river.

And he was also promised descendants that were as countless as the stars and the sands on the seashore. And he left this great urban cultural city to dwell in tents. The last paragraph tells us that he was dwelling in tents. And what we know now about Ur of the Chaldees, where he came from, you can actually, it was pretty cool. We were in the British Museum this summer and went to an exhibit where this piece of what they think might be the leg of a table or a stool or something, it was so ornate and just so valuable that they were like, this is what Abraham left when he left Ur. It was a cultural center.

We know that this was a developed place. This was an established city. And he left all of that to go live in tents. He was dwelling in a temporary place so that even when his wife died, he had to go buy a place for her to be buried. Did God not fulfill his promise? Abraham believed God knowing that even though it wasn't completely fulfilled, it was being fulfilled. And he knew that God would fulfill his promise. But can you imagine waiting your whole life for a promise to be fulfilled by God only to get to your deathbed and see that these promises have yet to be fulfilled?

[8 : 25] Would you die in living by having lived by faith? Would you die in faith, as this passage talks about? I mean, we have a hard time being patient with things not happening instantly, right?

So how would we face this kind of situation by faith? How do you keep from thinking that God has broken his promise and let you down? How can you have the confidence that these things will come to pass? That's what this passage tonight helps us understand. So when it says, these all died in faith, verse 13, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. It says that they saw these things and greeted them from afar. This word seen here is actually an experiential seeing, meaning they'd seen some things that by experience, it kind of helped them understand these things would come to pass. And it says they welcomed them from afar. The word here is to salute, to welcome, to greet. We might think of it as a wave today, a friendly wave. Or you might think of it as, I get into gifts sometimes when I'm sending messages and there's one of Jack Black saluting, you know what I'm talking about from School of Rock. It's like that, where it's like this passionate, yes, I salute you kind of thing. It's this welcoming thing that we'll talk about in just a minute.

It's more than just a academic or intellectual exercise. But it says that he acknowledged, or this word says confessed, is another translation of this word, having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. So how do you live by fates like this? Well, one, you have to understand the reality of your situation. And that is what we see here, that we are aliens and strangers, strangers and exiles on the earth.

We've been talking a little bit about this on Sunday mornings with Daniel and how he was in Babylon. This was not his home, but it was a temporary dwelling place. And how do we live as a foreigner in a strange land? Well, if that's ever been you, if you've ever been a foreigner living in a strange land, especially if someone speaks a different language, you're longing for something that feels like home.

There's a longing there. It's not a dispassionate thing. In fact, we love to connect with things that feel like home. And he acknowledged, these by faith acknowledged, that they were residing in a place that is not their home. Maybe when you look at this word, one of the best translations might be a resident alien, meaning I live here, but I'm not a citizen here. The reality of our situation in Christ is that we live here, but our citizenship is in heaven, in another place.

[11 : 40] There are ways that while we're living here on earth, we might try to live like residents. And when we do that, we're tempted to look just like the world. There are other times where we're tempted to live like aliens. In other words, we're so trying to disconnect from the world that we're living separately from it and disconnected from it, even in an unhealthy way. But the reality is, because we are resident aliens, this is not our home. There are just some ways that we're not going to completely fit in. There are just some ways that we're going to feel like a foreigner.

So growing up in the 80s and 90s, even in the Bible Belt in America, the picture of Christianity became like Ned Flanders from The Simpsons. And I spent so much of my time trying to demonstrate that I'm not like that. Trying to demonstrate that I was in fact cool and I shouldn't be ostracized because I'm not a certain way or don't do certain things. And I might even try to be in one of those situations where I'm feeling that tension and even try to soften that tension. Something like, well, I don't party because I'm so focused on being an athlete. Even being afraid to admit that it was because of my Christian convictions that I might not do the things that my friends were doing. I was trying to say, let me prove to you that I'm not that different. And that's a temptation in our lives. But we are called, as God's people, living by faith to understand that we are resident aliens. So in some ways, we're just going to be different and maybe even would say weird in the eyes of the world. It's weird to the world for us to pursue holiness and purity and not give in to our fleshly appetites. People don't understand that.

It seems weird. It seems weird to eat and drink in moderation. It seems weird that we would guard our eyes and our ears from what we see and what we hear. It's weird that we're willing to inconvenience ourselves in order for others to have what they need. It's weird that we would give a considerable percentage of our income to the church and the mission of God out of joy and not out of trying to earn God's favor or trying to ease our consciences or anything. We're just going to stand out sometimes and we have to be okay with that. Now, many of us can try not to stand out from those around us or we might do the opposite and create our own little subcultures so that we're separate from the world, but we need to let the gospel and the obedience to Christ make us unusual and maybe even a little weird, not like a lack of self-awareness or a desire to stay comfortable in a certain subculture, but just walking by faith, understanding who God is and what he's called us to do. So we live and love our city. We seek the peace and prosperity of the city as the Bible teaches us to, but we still acknowledge that we are foreigners and resident aliens. And that's the reality we're in if we're going to live by faith. But this passage also teaches us a little bit about the nature of faith.

In verse 14, for people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country that is a heavenly one. In these three verses, we see that the nature of faith is something like this, seeking, thinking, and desiring. The word here for seeking is like a word that would mean something like overly seeking, like meaning we do it with passion, we do it with focus, we do it with an intensity. It's a focused pursuit, a deliberate pursuit, something with passion.

Thinking about this, Kelly and I, we first moved here. King Charles was being presented the honors of Scotland, and we came up to the Royal Mile so that we could hopefully get a glance, just to get a peek of the new king. And we're actually like getting there early. We made plans around it to do that.

[16:22] People would be like getting in front of us and jostling, and we're trying to keep our position, you know, and Hannah Ryan at that time was a little bit smaller than she is right now, and so she's up on my shoulders. We're like stretching out, looking, seeing, doing anything that we can do to see the king.

What an experience to be able to do that. And then, of course, the police changed the barricade, and a whole crowd got in front of us, and we got to see nothing. However, the pursuit is what it was about, right?

We're trying to organize our day, our life, to try to see this thing. That's the idea here of seeking. We have to seek the Lord. We have to seek a homeland, it says. So that's one thing about faith, is it is about intensely seeking, intensely seeking God. The second thing, though, it says, if they had been thinking of that land from which they came. Thinking, this word here, is actually a word that means to remember or to recall. So it's looking at things in the past. It's looking back, not forward. And it says if they had been doing that, that would have been bad. That would have been wrong. Fate is actually forward-looking. It's setting our minds on things above, not on things of this earth. In this example that the author gives, it's clear that they shouldn't be looking back. And their minds, he's writing to people with a Jewish identity in this letter, and their minds may have gone a couple of things. It may have gone to the people of Israel when they were in the wilderness, and they were longing to go back to Egypt. If they would have been, they were looking back and thinking about how good they had it back then, not remembering that they were slaves, but they were thinking at least we had food and weren't going to starve like we are in this desert. They might have thought about that, thinking back to when we were in Egypt. But in the immediate context, it's talking about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. What would have happened had they looked back to maybe going back to Ur, maybe going back to an organized city instead of living in tents? Dwelling in the past. That's not the thing that's needed in living by faith, but faith is forward-looking. We all know what that's like to dwell in the past, like remember how much freedom we had before kids. Have you ever said anything like that? Or my son recently was talking about, oh, I remember when I lived at home and you paid for everything, right? It's that looking back and longing. I'm sitting there thinking like, son, it's not good for you as a 24-year-old to have your parents pay for everything, right? That is not a good thing to look back in that way. But many of us can focus on those losses that we're grieving instead of focusing on what lies ahead. Faith focuses forward towards the promises of God, the hope of Christ's return, that place that he's prepared for us.

And that's why we have words like Paul telling us in Colossians 3 to set your mind on things above. Keep seeking the things above where Christ is, he says. Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1 to set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Even Jesus, when talking with Peter, or when talking with the disciples, he rebukes Peter because he says, you're setting your mind on the things of man instead of on the things of God. So faith is about thinking forward towards the promises of God and that future that he has promised to us. The nature of faith takes every thought captive and sets those thoughts on the things of God and the promises that he's made to us. So the nature of faith, as we see it here, is about seeking. It's about thinking. And then the next verse talks about desiring. But as it is, they desire a better country that is a heavenly one. This word desire literally means to stretch oneself out in order to touch something. It's a word picture of trying to reach up and grab something.

And as I do that, as I get older, I start getting cramps in my shoulders and stuff. But it's that really, like really stretching myself to the limits in order to get that thing that I'm craving. And in fact, sometimes that word can be translated as aspiring or craving. It is a desire that has strong passion. Especially these two words, seeking and desiring here, they have an intensity to them. Passion is involved. If we're to walk by faith, our minds have to be set on these promises that God has made to us. But so do our hearts. And when the Bible talks about setting your minds, it's not just an intellectual thing. It's setting our hearts, our wills on that thing that God has promised. Banking on the promises of God. And so we have to ask ourselves a question, what is it that we seek? What is it that we think about? What is it that we desire? I often think about the song, Everybody's Working for the Weekend.

[22:02] That can be me sometimes. Why? Because I'm putting my hope in the ability for comfort and leisure to bring me that thing that I'm looking for. Maybe turning off, watching Netflix, something like that's going to make me feel really refreshed and fulfilled. And if you've been there, you know that is an absolute lie. It does not leave us fulfilled. What are those things that we seek? Is it financial security or wealth? Is it a relationship with someone? What are you putting your hope in? What do you seek?

What do you think about and set your mind on? What do you desire? So that gives us a little bit about the nature of faith. But then also it shows us this passage, a pursuit of faith. And that is this word, we're pursuing a homeland. It's the same word in the Gospels. It's translated as hometown, town, a place where I feel grounded and centered. If you're in a foreign country, in a foreign place, they'll tell you that even if you don't necessarily feel it, there is a low-level anxiety that is on you.

Maybe it is a different language and you're trying to figure that out. Maybe it's just like this unfamiliar puts this low-level stress and we start longing for those familiar things, longing to feel centered and grounded and feel at ease. And that's what this word homeland would represent.

When we say home is where the heart is, we're talking about these kind of things where there is just a deep desire and passion. If you've had many conversations with me, I might reveal to you how I love. I'm kind of a fantasy nerd. I love like this high fantasy or what's called epic fantasy.

And that is a very regular theme, which Tolkien tells us that's one of the reasons why you should read fantasy is because it helps you have that longing for something better. But speaking of Tolkien, it's like the elves longing for Valinor, the undying lands beyond the sea. It's a deep longing for that which is truly my home. And it becomes a pursuit. Now, when we think about this, this absolutely doesn't mean that life here is meaningless. It doesn't mean or downplay the reality of God's kingdom coming to bear on the here and the now. But there is an already and a not yet and longing for that not yet. There is a sense in which we pursue things that are unseen, things that are eternal, that Paul tells us about in his writings. We need to understand that this is not our home. And there are some of those great gifts here that God has given us that are a shadow, but they aren't the substance. And we can't make those things the substance. I mentioned how we will long to turn off sometimes and just to do nothing. Or maybe that's just me. When we're like that, rest is a good thing.

[25:12] But that's the shadow. The substance is the rest that only Christ can give us. Rest is talked about in the book of Hebrews here. Maybe it's a good thing like we're longing to cuddle up with your significant other, your husband or wife. Or maybe it's that pursuit of Mr. or Mrs. Wright as we would talk about it. These are good godly longings. However, the deeper longing is a relationship with our heavenly groom who we will one day be with. Maybe we long to get that promotion or long to get a raise or long for those hours that fit perfectly into the lifestyles that we desire. The substance in that though, those are some good longings. It's okay to long to see the fruit of your labor and to see success from putting in hard work. But the substance is wanting to hear the master say, well done, good and faithful servant. We can't focus on the shadow. We must focus on the substance.

Let it lead us to Christ. So the question that this passage leaves us is where are we putting our hope? If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had the 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 for them a city. Where do we put our hope? What thoughts go through your head throughout the week that get you through the week? What is that thing that you long for that kind of gives you that extra boost throughout the week? What do you set your mind on? What are the things that you passionately seek or passionately long for? This passage tells us that we've got to set our minds on the things above. We've got to desire the better heavenly country. Do we long for our true home with God? And again, we're talking about passion. We're talking about longing for that time where we're with God and we will be like him for we will see him as he is, where he will wipe away every tear. Death will be no more. There'll be no mourning, no crying, no pain. We will get to dwell with God himself. Do we long for that day? Do we long for that day when all will be made right? Maybe we might call it a holy discontentment with the way things are here? Do our prayers reflect that, that there is a holy discontentment, that we long to be with our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Or are you just fine with how things are? Are you just, okay, things are great. I'm not worried about things. And if I can keep that worry down, that's all that I need to be thinking about. The writer of Hebrews actually ends his letter pointing us to Jesus and this city that he's prepared for us. We see it in chapter 13 verses 12 through 14. It says, so Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Jesus was cast outside of the city so that we could gain the city that abides.

Jesus endured reproach so that we could have the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. So we've got to fix our eyes on Jesus. We've got to be willing to go outside the camp, meaning we've got to be willing to bear the reproach, as it says here. People may find us weird in the way that we live our lives. People may think we're crazy to hope in what we hope in. I was listening to a podcast the other day and that was one of the things that they were just talking about. A guy that would call himself a former Christian who is now an atheist and just talking about almost like it's silly to have your hope in something like this. Yeah, there might be some physical or mental benefits from believing in something like that, but really is it necessary to believe in something silly like that? And the world is just not going to understand. But what are we seeking? Where is our hope? Are we seeking the city that is to come? Let's pray.

[30:13] Father, I often think when I'm thinking about passages like this that how Jesus said the spirit is willing and the flesh is weak. There's something in me that really does resonate with this longing of I can't wait for all things to be made right and every sad thing made untrue. But yet my flesh is weak. I still put my hope in things of this earth so many times, Father.

Please help us to walk with you and fix our eyes on you in such a way that we see the promises that God has made to us through you, Jesus Christ. Father, thank you for giving us assurance.

All these things that you've told us in your word will come to pass. And even when we are faithless, you are faithful. And we praise you for that. But we do pray that by your spirit, you would empower us, help us to fix our eyes on things above, help us to long for the city whose builder and architect, the foundations are secured, but you are the builder. You are the designer. Help us to long for that city and that time where we can be with you. And show us this week. Show us where we are putting our hope in things of this earth. Show us how we put our faith in things that can't handle our faith. Help us to repent of those things and fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Please help us to do that tonight, tomorrow, day by day. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.