

A Better City
Christ is Enough Series
Hebrews 11:13-22
Pastor Bryan Clark

We reminded ourselves last week that everybody lives by faith. It's not just the Christians; everybody lives by faith. The question is: faith in what? "What is the object of our faith?" Everybody deep within their souls has a longing—a longing for something that will satisfy, a longing for something that gives us significance. We have these deep real longings in our souls as people made in the image of God, and there are millions of people who believe somehow, some way, those deepest longings can be satisfied in this world. They believe somehow this world will ultimately make them happy...will make them significant...will meet the deepest needs in their soul. In essence, they do believe you *can* create heaven on earth. Most of us in the room would say, "We simply don't have that much faith." We look at the world, such as it is, and it just seems like a reckless leap of faith. Rather we choose to believe there's got to be something different and something better. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have your Bible, turn with us to Hebrews, Chapter 11.

It's our second week in Hebrews 11, and it would be good to go back to verse 1 and just remind ourselves again of the Hebrews' definition of faith. So: "*Faith is the assurance, (the confidence) of things hoped for.*" Again, *hope* in the New Testament is something that is certain but it is also something that is yet future. This word *assurance* is a word that can also be translated as *the substance*. In other words, it's something I believe so strongly that it actually becomes the substance or the foundation of my life. I believe it to such a degree that I live in such a way that I actually give people a glimpse today of the world to come. It is: "...*the conviction of things not seen,*" which reminds us this is a faith that is thoughtful; it's reasoned; it's not just a reckless leap of faith, but rather we have examined the evidence and concluded, "This is what we believe is true." The writer then goes on to illustrate this kind of faith through people like Abel, through Enoch, through Noah, through Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob, which is where we pick up the story in verse 13:

All of 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 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.

(*NASB, Hebrews 11:13-15)

This is very important to understand. What the writer says is **all of these died in faith, without receiving the promises**. We don't like that. We want what we want, and we want it now. "I want the promises kept and I want them kept now!" Many Christians struggle with this desire to see the promises fulfilled and fulfilled now. We want to believe that somehow the deepest longings of our soul *can* be satisfied in this world. We want to somehow create heaven on earth.

It's a little bit like building your dream house in a war zone. And let's imagine the builder tells you again and again not to do it, "It's not going to work," but you won't listen; you insist! So he builds you your dream house in a war zone. Then you don't like it. "It's too noisy; it's too dangerous!" But here's the irony: Then you turn around and you blame the builder. That's what we do. We take

these promises and we want them fulfilled now; we want our best life now! And so that is what we try to accomplish—heaven on earth.

But this world just breaks our heart again and again and again, and when it doesn't work out like we want it to, then we blame God. And God says, "Wait a minute, that's not what I promised. I didn't promise your best life now." You can sell a lot of books with that theme; you can fill a big auditorium with that theme, but it simply isn't what God promises. What God promises is: this is going to be tough; this is a war zone; this is a cosmic war between the forces of darkness and the God of the universe. This is going to be hard. The hope of the gospel is the reminder that one day Jesus is coming back and we *will be* ushered to the place that our souls long for.

We live by faith; we will die in faith, having not seen most of the promises fulfilled. It can be a very long, painful journey coming to grips with this. We try and we try and we try to somehow satisfy the longings in our soul with the things of this world. How much pain, how much suffering, how much disappointment, how many good-byes to people you deeply love are necessary before you finally realize, "Hey, this isn't working. This world isn't cutting it. This can't be where it's at!" And you begin to realize the hope of the gospel is that I believe *by faith* that there is a world to come.

Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob—they all believed the promise that God would give them a land, but they all lived in tents. They all died having never seen the promise fulfilled. The text said they were *aliens and strangers*. They were saying, "This world is not my home—at least not as it is now." The writer says they wanted to find a place to call home, and if they were referring to the cities from which they left, they could have just gone back home. Moving to some other place, trying some other thing is not going to cut it. But rather with eyes of faith, they knew they were headed for somewhere else. Verse 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.

They understood that even the land of promise is but a shadow of the eventual city their souls long for—which is not an earthly city—it is a **heavenly city** that will be everything that they longed for. But they believed by faith. They lived by faith; they died by faith...believing it's true. It's very interesting what the last part of verse 16 says: **Therefore...** As a result of that—remembering that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, these were not perfect people—go back and read their stories. There were times of struggle, times of death; there were times when they seriously messed up. Jacob was a liar; he was a schemer; you don't even like the guy after you read his story. The message has never been on the basis of their performance but on the basis of their belief. They *believed* that God would keep His promise. **Therefore God is not ashamed.**

We think of that concept of *ashamed* as kind of an emotional thing. But we're talking about a first century shame-honor culture where shame and honor were never private; they were always public. It was either honor or shame before the community. So essentially what the text is saying is: these people that lived and died by faith, as a result of that, *God would not be ashamed*. He would be honored to stand before the community and say, "I am honored to say I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." As a matter of fact, in the book of Exodus when God introduces Himself, how does He introduce Himself? "I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." Think about that moment as people who live and die by faith. We live our lives that way—that God would stand before the community and He would say, "I just want you to know, I am honored to say I am the

God of *Michael*....I am the God of *David*....I am the God of *Margaret*.” What an amazing moment that would be!

Last week I shared just a little bit of my dad’s story. My dad suffered for over twenty years in excruciating pain, but he was very positive. He was a man of remarkable faith! I never heard him complain; I never heard him ask why. As a matter of fact, the pattern of his life was to ask again and again, “How might my story glorify God?”... all the way to the finish line. Amazing, remarkable faith! My dad died in the summer of 1982. He died at home, and within just a few minutes after his death, three significant men showed up at our house—men who had been a significant part of my dad’s story. While my dad was still in the bed—no one else had come—there were just these three men and our family. One was Curt Lehman, the founder of this church. One was Theodore Epp, the founder of Back to the Bible, and one was Bob Peterson, also of Back to the Bible. And for about an hour we talked and prayed, circled around my Dad’s bed that still held his lifeless body. I remember vividly Bob Peterson opened up and read from Acts 7. It’s the story of the martyrdom of Stephen, believed to be the first Christian martyr. Stephen was a remarkable man of faith. He believed the message so strongly he was willing to die for it, and he did die for it. He was stoned outside the gate of Jerusalem. If you go back and read that text, there’s a detail there that would be easy to miss. When you read the text as Stephen was dying, the text says **he looked up into heaven and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father**. Extraordinarily rare! For almost always Jesus is identified as *seated* at the right hand of the Father, but in that glorious moment as He was welcoming home this warrior, the text says that Stephen looked and he saw Jesus *standing*, as a way of saying, “I am honored to be the God of Stephen. Welcome home!” In that moment Bob Peterson read that text and he expressed his thoughts that he believed, in that moment Jesus was *standing* at the right hand of the Father and He was welcoming home his courageous, faithful, obedient servant, saying to the community, “I am honored to be called the God of Eugene Clark!” It was just one of those sacred moments! But there are a lot of people that would say this life after death stuff is just wishful thinking. It’s kind of a way where we psychologically cope with the fear of death. That’s what makes the verses that follow so important. Verse 17:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac... (Vs. 17a)

So this story is found in Genesis chapter 22; you can go back and read it for yourself. The verb tense here would indicate that in Abraham’s mind he had already offered Isaac. In other words, he wasn’t still wrestling with the idea. He had settled it; he would offer his son, Isaac.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; (Vs. 17b)

It’s the same language as John 3:16—*For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son*. The language means specifically *unique* or *special*. We’re called the sons and daughters of God, but we’re not God’s only begotten Son in that special way that Jesus was. In the same way, Abraham had other sons, but they were not the son of promise—Isaac was! And so Abraham is wrestling with this idea that God promised that the seed would travel through Isaac, but He’s asking me to sacrifice Isaac on the altar. At this point Isaac would have been 12 or 13 years old. Verse 18:

...it was he to whom it was said, “IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.” (So, in his mind, Abraham had settled it.) **He considered...** (That word is very strong. He had a deep, deep conviction...) **that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.** (Vs. 18-19)

Essentially what the text is saying is that Abraham, in his mind had as good as sacrificed Isaac—he had settled it. But he believed so strongly in the promise and that God tells the truth that he had believed that he would have to sacrifice Isaac, but somehow God would raise him from the dead in order to fulfill His promise. As a matter of fact, if you go back to Genesis 22 and you read the story, Abraham says to his servants, “Wait at the bottom of the hill and *we* will return to you.” He believed with all of his heart that he *and* Isaac would return, and his way of making sense of that is, “God’s going to raise him from the dead.” What the text essentially says is in a way God did, because God stopped Abraham before he plunged the knife into Isaac. And Abraham and Isaac *did* walk back down the hill together. But the other part of that story is in that moment when God stopped Abraham, He provided a ram, and the ram would die rather than Isaac. The ram would be the substitute for Isaac that would die that day. We don’t have to guess at this; the text actually tells us: that was a **type**—a shadow, a picture. We’ve had a lot of that in Hebrews. It was the reminder that one day on this same mountain, on Mount Moriah, there would be a Father who would actually sacrifice His only begotten Son for the sins of the world. He would be the substitute. He would be the Lamb of God who would die the death for Isaac, would die the death for Abraham, would die the death for all of us as sinners. We’ve learned this in Hebrews: He died our death. His blood is sufficient payment for sin. There’s nothing more that needs to be done.

But what the story also includes is the resurrection—that Jesus not only died and was buried, but He conquered sin and death once and for all when He rose from the dead—literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead! That’s Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15—the basis by which we believe that we will experience resurrection after death, and it is not just religious talk, not just wishful thinking. It’s based on the fact that Jesus Himself literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead and conquered sin and death once and for all that we, too, might be resurrected and live even though we die. Verse 20:

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. (Vs. 20-22)

The text is reminding us that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph believed the promise, but they would die having never seen it fulfilled. They would never inherit the land in their lifetime. What did Abraham have to pass on to Isaac? The promise! What did Isaac have to pass on to his sons Jacob and Esau? The promise! “Boys, I know we’ve been living in a tent our whole lives, but God tells the truth. We have to trust Him.” What did Jacob pass on to his son Joseph and his grandsons? The promise! “Boys I know we’re in Egypt and it looks like we may never make it back, but God promised. You have to believe that; you have to trust Him.” Joseph so believed the promise that he said, “Don’t bury me here.” Egypt was his home. “Take the bones to Canaan, because that will be our land.” It would be over four hundred years before God would raise up Moses to deliver them out of the land of Egypt into the land of promise. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, his sons—they’d all be buried in Canaan. But at the time of the burial, the land would belong to someone else. They just believed by faith, one day God will keep His promise. But it was more than that. They understood the land of promise was yet but a picture of something more. They were aliens and strangers; they were passing through; they wanted a country of their own which ultimately would be a heavenly city that would be everything their souls longed for. It is interesting that in verse 16, God had prepared a place. It was past tense—God already had the city ready. When they died, He welcomed them home.

It is our tendency to want to create heaven on earth—to believe that the things of *this world* will ultimately satisfy the deepest longings within us. And as I said, that can be a long, painful process of understanding that’s not true. How much pain, how much suffering, how many disappointments, how many heartbreaks, how many good-byes to people we deeply love will be necessary before we finally come to grips with the fact this world is not cutting it? This world just teases me. This world just breaks my heart again, and again, and again, but there’s something deep within our souls that says, “Please tell me that there’s something more.” We’re aliens and strangers headed for a place we will call home—a heavenly city. But it’s critically important to understand we’re not merely talking about life after death. We’re not talking about our spirits just somehow living and floating on a cloud somewhere playing a harp. That’s not what we’re talking about. We’re talking about redemption; we’re talking about restoration! We’re talking about God making things right, taking what was broken and corrupted—the things that broke our heart—and somehow restoring and redeeming them and making them right. It’s not just life after death floating on a cloud. It’s a restoration; it’s a redemption; it’s God’s declaration, “I win—completely, fully, totally!”

The root of this is found in the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead, He did not rise from the dead with a new body. He rose from the dead with a resurrected body. He showed the imprints of the nails in His hands; He showed the scar in His side. It was the body that was crucified and buried that rose again. This is Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15. That is the basis by which we believe this body, such as it is, is the body that will be raised from the dead. This mortal will put on immortality. I don’t just float out on a cloud somewhere. This body will be restored to me and it will be changed and it will be made the way God intended it to be. It’s the picture of redemption, of restoration, of making right what was taken and broken. This is critically important to understand because it is the message filled with such hope! The things that broke our heart, the things that disappointed us, the things in this world that simply were not the way we had hoped they would be, somehow they’re made right and restored and given back.

One of the most painful moments of my life was April, 2016. I have an image burned in my head and it will not go away. It is a picture of my beautiful daughter lying in a hospital bed, holding an absolutely beautiful, full-term, lifeless baby. I grieve for little Lettie but I grieve for my daughter, knowing there never would be another moment in this life where she wouldn’t carry that pain. Those pains don’t go away, and I knew in that moment everything had changed. Lettie was so beautiful...she was so beautiful...but by this moment, Lettie was in the presence of Jesus, and all we were holding was her lifeless body. But that’s not insignificant because it’s that little lifeless body that will be raised from the dead, that will be changed, that will reunite with her spirit. It will be restoration; it will be redemption; it will be the giving back of what was taken. We never got to see little Lettie smile, never got to see her laugh, never got to see her cry, never saw any life in her body, never got to see her crawl—all the things that a parent wants to see from their child. We didn’t get that. But here’s the critical piece of that: This story is not over...it is not over! Don’t ask me to settle for this world; I will not! This story is not over; it’s just on pause—it’s delayed. The message is not, “Lettie is floating on a cloud somewhere. It’s that she will be resurrected... restored!” We will get back the things that this world took from us that so broke our hearts. Heaven will be different for everyone. It will be part of your story; it will be the giving back of what was taken and broken and destroyed. It’s just on *pause*. But the rest of the story is yet to come.

One of the things that will define heaven for me is: I just want to throw a ball to my dad. I just want to go for a walk with my dad. I just want to see one day without pain with my dad. I want my dad to meet my girls. He never got to meet my girls; I can’t wait for that day—and that day is coming!

Don't ask me to settle for this world. I will not! I am a stranger and an alien; I'm just passing through. I'm looking for a place I can call home. I'm looking for a place with no more tears, no more sorrow, no more pain. I'm looking for a place with no more good-byes.

The more you understand this, the more you believe this—the more it changes the way you live everyday. The more it changes your priorities, the more it changes your perspective, the more it changes your values—the more you realize what matters and what doesn't matter. I'm not trying to create heaven on earth. I'm an alien and a stranger and I'm headed to a better place. God made a promise, and I believe that God tells the truth and I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. And I live by faith and I will die in faith, having never seen the promise fulfilled, but believing with all my heart it is true! And there will come a day...finally...where I will finally be home!

Our Father, it's hard to even process the depth of the hope of the gospel. God, we know this world teases us; this world breaks our hearts again and again. And it just reminds us this world is not our home—that we are aliens and strangers—and by faith we are headed to a better city—a place that will finally be home! God, until that day, find us faithful. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. What do you think of when you long for a better place? What does that mean to you?
2. Where do many people turn to try to fill the emptiness they feel in their souls? What are they putting their faith in?

Bible Study

1. Review the Hebrews definition of faith from Hebrews 11:1. What is faith in your own words?
2. Read Hebrews 11:13-16. Throughout history many if not most Christians have lived difficult lives of persecution and suffering. That's still true for many Christians today. Here in America we can be Christians and still live a very comfortable, safe life. How might the persecuted Christians read these verses compared to how we as Americans might read them?
3. What happens when we try to create heaven on earth now? How do we interpret God's promises and how do we react when things don't go the way we think they should?
4. What is meant by a "better country" or a "better city?" What makes it better?
5. Read Hebrews 11:17-22. Also read Genesis 22 for the background on the Abraham and Isaac story. What did Abraham believe by faith and how did his actions reveal his belief?
6. How is the Abraham and Isaac story a shadow or type of Christ?
7. What do you know about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph? Were they perfect in their faith? Did they struggle? What happened when they walked by sight? So why does the writer of Hebrews present them as heroes of faith? What do you learn from these examples about what God is wanting from you?

Application

1. If you believe by faith in a better city, how does your life differ from your neighbors who don't believe that? Is the difference obvious to others?
2. If your heart's desire is set on a better city, a heavenly one, how should that effect your daily perspective?
3. What does a life of faith look like for you today?