



Ministry of the Word

Sunday 16th June 2019

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Scripture: Hebrews 11:13-16

Subject: Part 34 - The Heavenly Hope

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.

As we look back at this chapter, which has been given many titles such as the hall of faith, we see from verses 1 to 3 the explanation of faith, which we are reminded of, time and again throughout the chapter. Then from the explanation of faith, it goes on to giving us examples of faith from verses 4. The examples we have delved into so far, are of 5 patriarchs, three prior to the flood and 2 following on. Each person gives us an aspect of what is really, the pattern of faith.

Abel offered an excellent sacrifice to God and in this we saw the importance of the right kind of “worship of faith”. Abel went before the Lord as the Lord directed, not on his own terms but on the Lord’s terms, in obedience to God. He offered a Lamb sacrifice, which prefigured Calvary.

Enoch had an amazing life in fellowship with God and he gave us the example of the “walk of faith”. Only in time, when we get to heaven, will we truly know what was revealed to him and what Enoch taught. With Enoch, we saw that when we walk closely with the Lord, one day we will be caught up with him. Enoch was caught up prior to the flood, prior to the wrath of God.

Noah witnessed and warned the people while he worked, just as instructed by God. He survived the flood which was when God’s wrath was poured out upon the earth on account of the evil found there. With Noah, we seen that faith produces “works and witness”.

Next, we came to Abraham, whose life was a life of faith. His life has a lot to teach us, be it warnings or encouragement, both of which we need. We saw with Abraham, the pilgrimage and the promise and with his wife Sarah, we saw the patience of faith as she awaited the promise of God to bear a child even though from a human point of view that was impossible, for she was past childbearing age. But as we know, a promise is only as good as the person who makes it and can keep it. And as the Lord say to Sarah ‘Is there anything too hard for me?’ One trait that all of these people exhibited was obedience and this is an incredibly important trait.

Besides this brief overview of these people who lived lives of great faith, there are three important things that these examples show us. Firstly – What they did given the Scriptural light that they had, which I must point out, was far less than what we have now. They humbly “took God at His word” which wasn’t so simple as we have seen, in a fallen world heading towards destruction, particularly in the first three people we met. They accomplished quite a lot by purely taking God at His word. Which brings me to the next point which is, “How they endured”. How does anyone do that apart from the grace of God and the help of God. Yet despite the highs and lows, they endured the trials, temptations, and tests, they held on in there. While they were people of faith, and didn’t always show perfect faith, however, they ultimately endured in the faith. Lastly, we see “how they acted”. It was not simply a declaration of belief, either keeping it to themselves or telling everyone that they had the truth. But they acted out their faith, be it, offering up the right type of sacrifice, walking with the Lord, warning others, being physically involved in a project, leaving their family and homeland, beginning a pilgrimage, waiting on the promises. Yes, they all had active faith.

When we think about our own faith, can we honestly say Yes, I take God at his word? Do we really take Him? How does this show? How enduring is our faith? When we slip, do we get back on the track and keep going? How do we act out our faith? Do we hide it under a bushel, glide along in life, or do we step out and be obedient to the Lord? Yes, there is a lot to think about here, isn't there?

We have seen how they lived, but now in verses 13 and 14 we see the impact of their faith in their outlook on life as well as how they died.

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.

They lived their lives as pilgrims along the narrow way. It always was and is a narrow way, with only a few on it. These days, the few seem to be fewer. They lived their lives with their hearts and minds on the Lord. Regardless of their ups and downs, their focus was always on the Lord. They had a vision given to them by the Lord, a vision that only faith can perceive. These people knew that the here and now is not all there is but there is an amazing hereafter. Knowing this, they also believe in resurrection which would explain why Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac, which we will look at next week. They not only received the assurance from God and God's approval when they were alive, but they were counted righteous by God.

Each person walked by faith in spite of ***not having received the promises*** in their lifetime, but because they could trust the promise Giver, there was therefore, the absence of complaint against God. There was also the absence of compromise, and even of comparison with the world, with others around them. This attitude led them to seek the eternal not the temporal. They were assured of having seen the promises afar off. Not only were they assured, but they embraced these promises. Why? Because it goes back to faith, they believed God, and He showed them and assured them. They accepted what God promised them willingly and enthusiastically. The acceptance of these promises which they embraced informed how they would live their lives. We see this in the end part of verse 13 in that they - ***confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*** The message of this chapter, amongst others,

goes back to verse 1 of this chapter when it explains that *'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.'*

The message is that we are simply passing through this life on earth, as believers, but that this place is not our home. So, are we also looking for the eternal not the temporal? Really, is that true? Does the world have all of what you really desire and everything that you will need to make life heaven on earth? If so, then you won't want to listen any further. This place for the true believer is not home, but have you made it home? This is not our true home, not for true believers anyway.

The world is a very alluring place. It has a devilish power attached to it. It's amazing how it is possible to get excited about heaven in a moment and for that moment, but then as you go back into the current of life, the place of heaven becomes less important. We don't have our hearts as fixed as we would like to believe. It does not take much to distract us, a book, a movie, the television. The cares of the world have a way of smothering the truth and of smothering our vision so we can't see. When this place becomes more important and heaven less, then we know that we have been ensnared. Let's face it, when we don't walk closely with the Lord, the snare becomes bigger and we become easy prey.

You see, faith, is the assent of the mind to the truth about God and His Gospel. Faith is when we are fully persuaded that God's Word is true and utterly reliable. Faith does not stop there but it actually effects the will, in other words we respond, we believe, we are persuaded, we have confidence, in the promises that leads us to right actions, right choices and singular direction.

We have seen it in these accounts. God's promises were believed, despite the ups and downs. As we go through the Old Testament, we see God fulfilling promise after promise. He didn't have to, but He did. Yet, the greatest one was of course the coming of the Saviour. Although it was not realised fully to many of the patriarchs, however it did not mitigate the fact that in faith they saw the Christ, the Cross, the Resurrection and the Crown. Isaiah spoke about the person of Christ, his death, resurrection and ascension. David in Psalm 22 for example wrote about the cross, Job spoke about the resurrection in Chapter 19 verse 25 to 27 –

For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; ²⁶ And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, ²⁷ Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

Faith bore them along to belief that this world was not it and never will be. Its destruction has been well documented in both the Old Testament and the New. We stand in a very privileged position spiritually. Christ has come, we have seen the fulfilment of those promises and you know that the message, that this world is not your home, has not changed. You notice from Abraham to Jacob and beyond for a time at least, the pilgrim had two things which he could and did call his own. A tent and an altar, have you noticed that? What is their significance? John Philips said it well -

“With the tent they confess their attitude towards the world: they would not let its attractions blind them to spiritual realities. With the altar they confessed their relationship to the world to come, they were believers! So they adopted the attitude that as far as this world was concerned they were strangers (away from home) and pilgrims (going home).”

Strangers are always those who are in foreign territory but pilgrims are those on the journey to a better place and for us the better place is home. God had weened their hearts away from the earthly to the heavenly. This of course was the very thing that the Spirit of God was seeking to accomplish in the lives of the Hebrews to whom this letter is addressed to and even to whoever reads these words.

The challenge is, where are we most comfortable? Where do we really feel at home? Here or in Heaven! Are we holding on and building up, or, are we letting go and packing up? The world is an enemy, it's a powerful force, it's a deceiver and its out to destroy. It does not have to be feared because as 1 John 4:4 tells us –

“Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.”

By faith in Christ, we can overcome the world. If we are going to travel the pilgrims' pathway than it probably means that new decisions with new priorities will need to be made as we embrace God's hand and allow Him to lead us. This is not just something that we need to remind ourselves of, but we need to be daily active in doing. We need to embrace the vision that God has in store for us, just like those in this chapter. Let me explain that word vision.

Vision, in a worldly sense, is what man wants to do or the plans he would like to see happen. Biblical vision, is the opposite to that. It is when we, by faith, lay hold on God and God lays hold on us. Biblical vision is not about seeing the circumstances but seeing God in the circumstances. Let me show you from the Bible an account that highlights this very well. Isaiah had many visions from God concerning Israel. During a very difficult time in Israel's history, the Lord called him to go out and be His prophet. It was a difficult time because King Uzziah had died. Things looked very grim indeed for the country, as the next king was being considered. Would he be better than the last one? While those thoughts or such like, occupied the minds and hearts of the people not so Isaiah, we read in verse 1 of chapter 6 - *"In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple."*

The prophet Isaiah was caught up with God. The people saw the here and now, but God's prophet saw the future.

Thomas Carlyle wrote, *"He who has no vision of eternity has no hold of time"*.

How true that is. If Heaven is not in your sight, then you will be caught up with events and forgetting that time is in the hand of God, not in the hand of man. The men and women of this world have places they can call home, but where do we call home? What are we looking for! Many people that I minister to often tell me, they feel empty, they are on a journey to discovery but I think U2's song says it all - "Cause I still don't know what I'm looking for" the question is do we? And if not, what are we looking for? God has set eternity in the heart of men so that we may seek Him.

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah and many more of the patriarchs, believed that they were going to go to their real homeland, heaven. They had a better and clearer vision than just setting their eyes on this earth. Their vision reached into another dimension we call the eternal. These verses are saying don't look inward, don't look around you but look up.

I heard a statement once about Vision which sums it up -

"Vision that looks inward becomes duty. Vision that looks outward becomes aspirational, but vision that looks upward becomes faith".

It is so very easy for our hearts and minds to embrace the world. The world is always more than ready to embrace anyone and everyone, especially the believer. The world is not our home as the writer of Hebrews is underlining time and again, this world is not our base, it is our launching pad to somewhere better.

Many people talk about their homeland, that they live in, they love and would die for. The first Hebrew people to whom this letter was originally addressed too, did not realise that within a couple of years of this book being written that their world, their home, their homeland was going to dramatically, desperately and disastrously change. They did not realise, that not only the city of Jerusalem but them as a nation would be displaced, and that they themselves would become the strangers in lands such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Germany, Poland, Asia and even further afield as time marched on and it would remain that way until May 14, 1948. The invasion of three legions of highly trained Roman soldiers would pour into their land and stamp across it and in their wake, they would murder over 1 million people who would die in an unspeakable manner. In 1 Peter 1, Peter refers to them as the diaspora or the dispersed. The vast majority remained away until the day God would call them back in accordance with Scripture. In that time many yearned, long for, their homeland from where they came. We as believers don't have a home land here on this earth. This is why it doesn't really matter too much where God would have us geographically. We can only be truly happy where Jesus is. This is what can keep us going, this is what can fuel our lives. Our faith tells us to look up not around us. Joseph Fort Newton put it like this, "***Belief is a truth held in the mind. Faith is a fire in the heart.***"

But in saying all this, we do have a choice - either to follow God or not. The choice is often informed by where our focus is – this is what verse 15 tells us

15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.

There was a real danger of the Hebrew Christians going back to where they had come from. This should not surprise us one little bit. In Numbers 11 we read how the people complained because they did not have what they had in Egypt. They had forgotten the misery of Egypt; they had forgotten the miracles that God had performed there and throughout their journey. They wanted to go back, so they could do, what? what for? Satisfy their appetites! In verse 4

of Number 11, it said that *“the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense cravings”*. They desired to go back; life was hard on the journey to the promised land. Joshua reminded the leadership of the new nation in chapter 24:2-3 that God had brought Abraham from where? out of idolatry, paganism, and the other side of the river. Abraham had not gone back and God had not brought them out of Egypt to bring them back or to go around in circles. He brought them out to bring them on to a better place. Why would they want to go back? What was there, apart from the food that they craved? It does not make a bit of sense at all but I believe that Jesus in John 3:18-21 gives us the answer:

¹⁸“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

Man loves his passions whatever they are. He loves his prison because he feels comfortable there, and he drinks his poison without realising that it is killing him, that is darkness. The journey gets hard doesn't it, often there are times when we think if only, we weren't a Christian, it would be easier. It may be easier if you want to be more lost, more confused, and to some degree more insane. While the Christian pilgrimage can have hard moments, we have greater promises, a greater hope, we have a greater purpose in this life and we know the direction in which we go. We don't have to sing along with U2 – cause I don't know what I'm looking for because we have been found by Jesus. And it is Jesus who is our guide along the narrow way.

This part of Hebrews 11 points out the very real danger of compromising. Compromise is the first step towards disobedience and disobedience leads to indifference of the truth, and before we know it, we are drifting away, becoming less effective Christians and more accommodating to the world, losing out on the blessings God has in store for us and even inviting destruction into our lives unawares. A good example of this is at the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Pilate knew that Jesus was innocent, he was sitting on the seat of Judgment, strangely enough. He had the power, as he thought, over life and death, but he condemned an innocent man to die because on the face of it, he wanted the people's approval. He

comprised a person's life in order to please others. He demonstrated that he did not care about justice, right or wrong, innocent or guilty, sure he asked Jesus What is Truth, but didn't stick around for the answer. He really compromised for an easy life and save face, nothing really about others. That was Pilate, an unsaved man, a pagan. But what about Peter in Galatians 2:14-16.

¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? ¹⁵ We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, ¹⁶ knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified

Paul had to confront the apostle Peter. Thankfully Paul used the occasion to reaffirm the Gospel of Faith that it's not going back to the old wine skins with the new wine but new wine skins for the new wine. No compromise! We've looked at a pagan, then at an apostle but wait a minute, how about your own heart? What are you willing to compromise, how far are you willing to go? We must not be willing to compromise, or when we do, we must be ready to get right before God as well as others if necessary, remember the believers soap: 1 John 1 verse 9 –

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The writer to the Hebrews makes the point, had Abraham or any of the others wanted to go back they could have. For a moment, just imagine that happened. There would be no homeland for the Jews, in fact, there would be no Jews. There would be no man of faith that they or anyone else could look up too. Abraham and his son did not entertain the possibility of a return, it was not even an option nor should it be for us. Of course, they faced their troubles, their temptations, and their tests, but in all, they triumph in faith. Paul wrote an encouraging word on this, in Romans 5:1-5.

¹Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴and

perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

The pilgrimage is not a bed of roses, it is tough and rough, a hard slog, and many lose their lives on the course of the journey, and not pleasantly I might add. Someone once said:-

“What we obtain too easy we value too lightly. It is the cost that gives value”

What does following Christ cost you? Embarrassment? Feeling like a fool? Being jeered or mocked? Forsaken by friends or possibly family? Loss of pre-eminence amongst your work colleagues? There is a cost involved and Jesus never hid this fact from us. Jesus said in John 16 verse 33 –

“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (cross reference Acts 14:22 and 1 Thessalonians 3:4)

The writer of this book was not speaking to people who did not know what he was speaking about. They knew only too well what they were facing and they were counting the cost. Enduring faith looks beyond the here and now, the past and present, it looks upward. When Jesus spoke to His disciples in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 9 verse 23 to 27, about denying self and taking up his cross daily, He was not simply pointing to them but to all who follows Him. No doubt its hard, but we have a great hope which we see in verse 16 of Hebrews 11 -

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.

While many people, even the Jews, who read this letter were all passionate about their homeland, the writer is emphasising that Abraham and his son did not share the same passion. Their eyes and hearts were fixed on something that they were meant to see, and by inference so are we. This heavenly country, Heaven, was and is only attainable through the promises of God in Christ. If we desire to get a glimpse of Heaven we can go to the Book of Revelation. Chapter 21 informs us a little about Heaven’s architecture from verses 10-20. It describes a great and high mountain that overlooks the great city which God’s Glory is enough to light the place up. This light is like the most precious stones, clear as crystal. There is a great and high wall with twelve gates which are twelve pearls, and it has twelve foundations. The city is laid out as a square, the construction of its walls is of Jasper and the city is pure

gold, like clear glass, foundations adorned with all kinds of precious stones. 1 Corinthians 2 verse 9 which is a quotation from Isaiah 64 verse 4 and Isaiah 65 verse 17 tells us-

“No Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man, The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”

This is an amazing place no doubt, we can't even imagine it really. God built it. It might surprise you that even in Revelation very little is spoken about the actual streets of gold because Heaven is not just about that, but its mostly about the people there, about what they do and who they worship. In Heaven there is no sin, no sorrow, no sickness, no sadness, no sense of fear or inferiority, nothing that would stress or strain you. There are no tents for that is our home and there is no altar or as verse 22 says there is no temple, for we are with the triune God. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. This is what the Bible teaches as we read in the last verse of chapter 21 in Revelation, ***“but only those who are written in the Lambs Book of Life”***.

Taking this into consideration then, it makes sense when you read the second part of verse 16 in our text. ***“Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God”***. The creator of the whole earth, the whole universe and a the ages, God who is most Holy and Almighty, is not ashamed to be called their God. This is extraordinary, isn't it? Who are these people? These people are those who have identified themselves with God not just in word but in action. They made the choice to follow the Lord, no matter what happened here on this earth. It's the only time you have a choice, it's too late when you die. God will not only recognise them, but He rewarded them with His approval. These people are His children, part of His family and as such, He is not ashamed to be called their God.

There is a very interesting word that we could easily over look here, and it's the word “desire” which means to stretch out for, to reach further, to touch or grasp. All the physical and material blessings were only a picture, a type, of something greater. This is not our home, Heaven is. John Bunyan wrote the following and it very telling. It is meant to encourage us to provoke us to run well the race that is set before us.

“They who will have Heaven must run for it because the devil, the law, sin, and death and hell are following them. There is never a poor soul that goes to Heaven were the devil, the law, sin, death, hell do not chase after it, “Your adversary the devil walks about like a

roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1Peter 5:8); And I assure you the devil is nimble, he can run very quickly, he is light on his feet and has overtaken many, he has knocked them down, and given them an everlasting fall. Also there is the law, which can shoot at great distance.

Be careful to stay out of reach of the law’s great guns- the ten commandments. Hell also has a wide mouth, it can stretch itself further than you are aware of. As the angel said to Lot, “Escape for your life! Do not look behind you nor stay anywhere in the plain. Escape to the mountains lest you be destroyed (Gen 19:17).

So I say to you take heed. Do not delay any longer, lest the devil, hell, death, or the fearful curses of the law overtake you and throw you in the midst of your sins, so you will never rise and recover again. If this were well considered, then you, as well as I, would say they would have Heaven must run for it.”

What makes the journey bearable is that we are going home, we are destined to a better place. One day, we are getting out of the mess, the muck and the contamination of this world. We are casting off death for life. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 in verses 35 to 58 tells us that we will be taking off morality and putting on immortality

“Oh Death where is thy sting, oh Hades where is your victory?”

The most beautiful place on earth, where ever that may be, is nothing compared to heaven. This earth is fallen, its fading and one day it will finish with fire. Our home in glory is flourishing, it’s finished, it’s final, it’s fantastic!

This city that God has prepared will not be over crowded like any city we have here on this earth, because God has prepared a place for every one of its citizens. In this city of Glory, this city of Gold, in this city of God, every child of God, from every tribe, tongue and nation, all brothers and sister will be rejoicing with our Lord. Not a dull moment, not a dreary day but joy, peace and love, in the place where the Lord is.

The acceptance of the promises of which we have embraced should inform us how we would live our lives. We need to keep our focus on the most important person, God.

Amen.