

Hebrews 11:13-22 "Looking for a Better Country"^{**}

Main Idea: Is it really worth it to live by faith? Hebrews 11:13-22 says yes and gives us two significant incentives.

I. People living by faith die well (13-16).

A. The promises of God affect the way they view themselves (13).

1. They embrace the fact that they are foreigners on earth.
2. They talk about the fact that they are sojourners.

B. The promises of God affect the way they view this world (14-15).

1. Life is full of opportunities to settle for temporary pleasures.
2. We must not live for what we can see if we want to enjoy what we can't see.

C. The promises of God affect the way they view the future (16).

1. They live to please God.
2. They know that what's coming is far better than what they're missing.

II. People living by faith know that death is not the end (17-22).

A. It's why Abraham did what he did (17-19).

1. He offered his son as a sacrifice.
2. He loved God more than he loved his son.
3. He believed that God had the power to do what He promised.

B. It's why Isaac did what he did (20).

1. He took action to help his sons think about the future.
2. He knew the best thing he could give his sons wasn't available yet.

C. It's why Jacob did what he did (21).

1. He finished his life looking ahead.
2. He finished his life looking up.

D. It's why Joseph did what he did (22).

1. He believed that what God promised would take place.
2. He finished his life bringing attention to the promises of God.

Take Inventory: Ask yourself the following...

1. Am I heading for a better country?
2. Am I living like it?

It is said that on his retreat from Greece after his great military expedition there, King Xerxes boarded a Phoenician ship along with a number of his Persian troops. But a fearful storm came up, and the captain told Xerxes there was no hope unless the ship's load was substantially lightened. The king turned to his fellow Persians on deck and said, "It is on you that my safety depends. Now let some of you show your regard for your king." A number of the men bowed to Xerxes and threw themselves overboard! Lightened of its load, the ship made it safely to harbor. Xerxes immediately ordered that a golden crown be given to the pilot for preserving the king's life -- then ordered the man beheaded for causing the loss of so many Persian lives![\[1\]](#)

I think about those men who were willing to die for their king. What motivated their self-sacrifice? Was it duty? Honor? A commitment to place the good of one's country above one's personal interests? All noble things, for sure.

We have a king. Would you die for Him if He asked?

The fact of the matter is, He did ask, for He said (in Luke 9:23), "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." But there's a huge difference between dying for Xerxes and dying for Jesus. For starters, it's a privilege to give our all for the One who gave His all for us. Our king died for us. He took our sin upon Himself and on the cross endured the wrath of God we had coming to us, died on that cross, and three days later rose again, securing our forever salvation. But there's another huge difference. We have a powerful incentive to lay down our lives for our King, and that's because we know that death is not the end. In the words of Hebrews 11, we're looking *for a better country*.

For the past three weeks, we've been learning about living by faith, and not just learning about it, but hearing a call to embrace it. The original readers of this epistle were Jewish Christians, and they were experiencing incredible pressure to abandon their devotion to Messiah Jesus and return to the established tenets of Judaism. But Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God intended for Judaism. He is the promised Messiah who is superior to Moses, Aaron, and Levi, whose sacrificial death on the cross is the final sacrifice for sins, a sacrifice that can cleanse any sinner from acts that lead to death so he can serve the living God. That's the message of Hebrews 1-10.

The appropriate response? It's faith. That's the message of Hebrews 11. Persevering faith. The writer ended chapter ten with this charge in verse 39, "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of *those who believe* and are saved."

We're people who believe God, says the writer. That's our calling. We're called to trust in the person of God and act on the promise of God, regardless how we feel. That's what faith is. We're sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. And because that's true, it'll show up in our lives.

It did for Abel, and Enoch, and Noah, and Abraham, as we've seen already in verses 1-12. Perhaps you're still wondering, "Is it really worth it to live by faith? I mean, it seems like folks who live by faith pay a price for it." They do, but it's worth it! Hebrews 11:13-22 gives us two significant incentives, and here's the first...

I. People living by faith die well (13-16).

Just watch how they die. Watch how they finish their race. When people are living by faith it shows up in the way they exit this world.

The writer of Hebrews shows this in general terms in verses 13-16, and then with specific examples in verses 17-22.

Verse 13 begins, "All these people [what people? the 'ancients' mentioned in verse 2 and identified in verses 3-12] were still living by faith when they died." As the KJV puts it, "These all died in faith." Literally, "they all died according to faith."

What does that mean, to die according to faith? The writer elaborates with four participles in verse 13. They all died in faith: 1) not having received the promises, 2) seeing the promises from a distance, 3) welcoming the promises from a distance, and 4) admitting that they were aliens and strangers on the earth.

What enabled the ancients to die well? Did you catch the motivating factor? The writer attributes it to *the promises of God*. They were still living by faith when they died because they lived by God's promises. Sounds like knowing God's promises is pretty significant! It is.

Let's probe that thought further. When people are living by the promises of God, it affects them in three very practical ways that are identified in verses 13-16.

A. The promises of God affect the way they view themselves (13). "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth."

Take Abraham, for instance. According to verse 8, God gave him a command and a promise. Leave Ur and go to a place I'll show you—that's the command, and I will give you an inheritance—that's the promise, at least one of them. And by faith Abraham obeyed and went. Verse 9 says he made his home in the *promised* land.

Yet though he lived in it he never owned it. He lived in tents, like a stranger in a foreign country, just like his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob later did.

How do people living by faith view themselves? According to verse 13...

1. *They embrace the fact that they are foreigners on earth.* The patriarchs, says the writer, admitted that they were aliens [Greek *xenoi*, foreigners] and strangers [the word speaks of people living in a place that is not their final destination; sojourners]. Note that word "admitted" (Greek *homologeō*, "to profess, to declare"), for it indicates verbal activity. In other words, people living by faith don't just *think* about their identity as aliens and foreigners. They *talk about it*, too. Yes...

2. *They talk about the fact that they are sojourners.* Abraham did. He described himself to the Hittites in Genesis 23:4, "I am an alien and a stranger among you." Jacob gave a similar testimony to Pharaoh in Genesis 47:9 when he referred to the years of his "pilgrimage."

Do you see yourself as an alien and stranger in this world, as someone who doesn't really have ties to this world and who in reality isn't going to be here very long? Do you talk about it openly? Teens, you'll have opportunity to talk about it when your classmates ask you to come to the big party at Joe's house on Friday and you know there's going to be alcohol. So will you, men and women, when your boss urges you to cut ethical corners at work in order to increase production with the justification, "Everybody does it!" Brothers and sisters, it's not the aim of a sojourner to fit in and do what everybody else is doing.

By the way, one of the reasons we struggle with change is because we don't see ourselves as sojourners. If we're not thinking like a sojourner, we'll want things to stay the same. Same house. Same job. Same seat in church. Same ministry. Same friends. And sameness is fine, unless God calls for a change. And when that happens, a person who sees himself as a sojourner says, "I'll go where You want me to go, dear Lord."

So the promises of God affect the way people living by faith view themselves. God's promises affect them in a second way, according to verses 14-15.

B. The promises of God affect the way they view this world (14-15). “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.”

The phrase “country of their own” is one word in the Greek, *patrida*, lit. a “fatherland,” a “homeland.” It’s used in John 4:44, there referring to a prophet being without honor “in his *own country*.” That’s something this world is *not* to sojourners. It’s not their fatherland, their homeland, their *own country*. That country is yet to come.

That’s why the patriarchs didn’t look back. When Abraham sought a wife for his son, he sent his servant back to the land of his origin, but he himself did not go. So too, after Jacob did return to Ur to find a wife and lived there twenty years, he still referred to Canaan as “my own homeland” (Gen. 30:25).^[2] Joseph, likewise, had a similar perspective, as we’ll see momentarily in verse 22. Because these men knew God had promised them a country of their own, it affected the way they viewed this world.

Let’s make it personal, for the fact of the matter is...

1. *Life is full of opportunities to settle for temporary pleasures.* For what the author in verse 25 calls “the pleasures of sin for a season” (KJV). The patriarchs refused to do that, says verse 15. They refused to return. If they’d been thinking about the country they had left, they would have, but they didn’t.

Beloved, every day you and I are faced with opportunities to short-change ourselves, that is, to go back, to go back to our old places, to our old ways and practices in the world. Mrs. Lot looked back to Sodom and perished for it. Sure, the world offers pleasure, but it’s temporary pleasure, and we must refuse to settle for it. To put it another way...

2. *We must not live for what we can see if we want to enjoy what we can’t see.* It’s called *delayed gratification*, and it requires that we say no to the fleeting pleasures of sin in the present in order to experience the far better and enduring pleasures God has for His people in the future.

Granted, we need a biblical balance here. In one sense, yes, this world is our home, so we ought to live life to the fullest, for the glory of our Creator. But since this world is not our final home, we ought not get too comfortable in it.

So God’s promises affect the way people of faith view themselves, this world, and thirdly...

C. The promises of God affect the way they view the future (16). It sure did the patriarchs, according to verse 16, “Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

We’re told two things here about people who live in light of God’s promises.

1. *They live to please God.* The text says that “God is not ashamed,” the negative implying positively that He is willing and glad to “be called their God.”^[3] That’s what He does, for instance in Exodus 3:6 when He identifies Himself by the names of the men that please Him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” People who live by God’s promises do so because their greatest fear is to bring shame to God and their greatest ambition is to bring pleasure to Him.

2. *They know that what’s coming is far better than what they’re missing.* They’re longing for a *better country*. Notice that for the patriarchs, the better country wasn’t merely a future hope, but one in the present. Our text says they *were longing* for it as they lived. So, too, note the present tense in God’s assessment of them. He *is not ashamed*, even now in the present, to be called their God.^[4]

So don’t feel sorry for God’s people, no matter how much they’re called to suffer for their King in this world. As Paul assessed it in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Corrie Ten Boom said, “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”^[5] She could say

that because she knew that what's coming is far better than what she had to miss while locked in a Nazi concentration camp. She was looking for a better country.

Jesus talked about this future hope, didn't He? "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:1-3)."

Let's take a moment to think about heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven, according to Philippians 3:20. Randy Alcorn, who has written a well known book entitled *Heaven*, had this to say in a sermon he preached, "Often we think of Heaven as our going up into an angelic realm to live with God in his place. But in fact, the Bible says the ultimate Heaven, will be God coming down from His place to live with us in our place—the New Earth. That's the place He's making for us."^[6]

Perhaps that's why God's Word uses so many "earthly" images to depict what's coming. I mean, what exactly are we looking forward to, a house with many rooms, a city, or a country? And the answer is, all of the above! Jesus said He's building a house. In Hebrews 11:9, we're told Abraham was looking forward to *the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*. In Hebrews 11:16, we're told that the patriarchs were longing for *a better country—a heavenly one*, and that God is preparing *a city* for them. As F. F. Bruce explains, "There is, of course, no difference between the heavenly country and the city of God."^[7]

We're not going to be floating around on clouds strumming harps. We're longing for a country, a *heavenly* country. What will it be like? The following perspective come from J. I. Packer's book, *Your Father Loves You*:

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

Richard Baxter expresses the thought in these lines:

My knowledge of that life is small,

The eye of faith is dim,

But it's enough that Christ knows all,

And I shall be with him.

To those who have learned to love and trust Jesus, the prospect of meeting him face to face and being with him forever is the hope that keeps us going, no matter what life may throw at us."^[8]

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let there be no question about it. I don't know all the details, but be assured that what's coming is far better than whatever we may be missing!

Last week I told the story about missionaries Robert and Mary Moffatt who served a decade in the country of Botswana without a convert. I should point out that the Lord used Robert Moffatt to inspire David Livingstone to go to Africa and serve Christ. Livingstone married the Moffatt's daughter, Mary, and eventually become one of the Western World's most famous missionaries.

Here's what David Livingstone said about sacrifice, "People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply acknowledging a great debt we owe to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny? It is emphatically no sacrifice. Rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, danger, foregoing the common conveniences of this life--these may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing compared with the glory which shall later be revealed in and through us. I never made a sacrifice. Of this we ought not to talk, when we remember

the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us."^[9]

Is it really worth it to live by faith? We're looking at two incentives this morning. The first, people living by faith die well. Do you want to die well? Then make sure you know Christ, and make sure you're living by faith. Here's a second incentive, and it's certainly related to the first.

II. People living by faith know that death is not the end (17-22).

In verses 17-22, the writer returns to the patriarchs and cites them as "exhibit A." In each case he highlights something the patriarch did that revealed his conviction that death is not the end.

He begins with Abraham in verses 17-19, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

People living by faith know that death is not the end. That's not simply academic knowledge either. That knowledge affects in practical ways the choices they make.

A. It's why Abraham did what he did (17-19). What did he do? Three things are mentioned here.

1. *He offered his son as a sacrifice.* Verse 17 begins, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him." And oh, how he was tested! You'll find the details in Genesis 22. Take your son, Abraham, the one you love, and go to the place I will show you, and offer him as a sacrifice. It took Abraham three days to reach the destination on Mount Moriah, many feel the very place that God Himself would later sacrifice His own Son. What a trip that must have been! To walk side by side with the son he'd waited all his life to see, knowing that once they reached their destination he would have to put a knife into his son's body. Had Abraham not possessed faith that God was up to something good in this, he surely would have either gone mad or gone running from God in disobedience.

But he didn't run. He did exactly what God told him to do. He trusted in the person of God and acted on the promises of God regardless of how he felt, and by faith he offered his son as a sacrifice.

What does that tell us about Abraham? It's quite revealing. His actions prove that...

2. *He loved God more than he loved his son.* Abraham was not a perfect man, but by grace he was a man who loved God more than anything in this world, including his own son. Jesus had this to say about Abraham in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad." That's what made Abraham tick. He looked ahead. He rejoiced at the thought of seeing the day of Messiah Jesus, and in fact he saw it and was glad. He trusted in a person he could not see. That's what faith is. For us, it's looking back. For Abraham, it was looking ahead. He rejoiced at the thought of seeing Jesus' day, actually saw it by faith, and was glad.

Beloved, God loves to do things that make us think about His Son. That's what this test did for Abraham. Abraham was asked to offer his precious only son, and figuratively speaking Abraham received his son back from death. By faith, he looked ahead and saw another son, a descendant of his own, and rejoiced. For two thousand years after Abraham, God Himself offered His precious only Son who did die, and three days later received Him back from death.

Do you love Jesus that much? Do I? Are you willing to give up your best, whatever that may be, should the Lord ask? The only way we'll ever lay our children and everything else we hold dear on the altar is if we love Him more than them.

But there's something in particular that Abraham did wrestle with. Verse 19 says that he "reasoned" (Greek *logizo*, meaning "to reckon, to calculate, to have an opinion"). It indicates Abraham invested some

mental energy into a dilemma. He knew that Isaac was the chosen son, the one through whom God promised to fulfill His redemptive plan to bring salvation to the world. And he knew that Isaac didn't yet have an heir—he wasn't even married yet. So how could a dead son produce a living offspring? He couldn't. "So if I kill him and burn him on that altar," Abraham *reasoned*, "God will bring those ashes back to life again." To put it simply...

3. *He believed that God had the power to do what He promised.* According to Genesis 22:5 Abraham actually gave his servants the following instructions, just before he took Isaac up that mountain: "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

We are coming back. I don't know for sure what's going to happen on the mountain, but I do know that we are going to worship the Lord there, and we are coming back.

Here's Paul's commentary on the life of Abraham. Romans 4:20-21 says, "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

Philip Hughes puts it this way, "What appeared to him to be an insoluble problem was for God no problem at all...It is precisely the powerlessness of man which provides the opportunity for the triumphant manifestation of the omnipotence of God."^[10]

Are you facing an insoluble problem these days? Learn from Abraham. For God it's no problem at all. Abraham reasoned that death, should it come for Isaac, wouldn't be the end. It's why he was willing to do what he did.

What's more, it's why the next three examples in Hebrews 11 did what they did, for each at the end of their lives took action to do something that prompted others to think about God after their death. In other words, people who live by faith not only see beyond death, but they want others to see it too.

B. It's why Isaac did what he did (20). "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future." What did Isaac do? In short...

1. *He took action to help his sons think about the future.* He blessed them in regard to their future. He didn't just give his boys the "good life in the here and now," but reminded them that God had a purpose for His chosen family, a purpose that began with their grandfather Abraham, had continued in his own life, and was now embracing them, and particularly Jacob, the younger chosen son. He blessed them regarding their future. Isaac's actions indicate something else, namely...

2. *He knew the best thing he could give his sons wasn't available yet.* It had to do with their future. You can read the actual blessing in Genesis 27. Ironically, Isaac was tricked into giving his primary blessing to Jacob and secondary blessing to Esau, but nonetheless, he concluded his life pointing his sons' attention to the future, and specifically to the future work God would accomplish through them.

C. It's why Jacob did what he did (21). "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff." Jacob ended his days the same way his father Isaac had. By faith...

1. *He finished his life looking ahead.* And...

2. *He finished his life looking up.* He blessed Joseph's sons (you can read the blessing in Genesis 48), and he worshipped as he leaned on his staff. Faith lives with its eyes on the future. But faith also lives with its eyes in the present fixed on God.

That final statement says a lot to us about worship. Sure, you can worship God in a church building, but you can also worship Him on your bed as you're taking your final breath. Worship is simply an activity intended to bring honor to God, and that includes giving a blessing to your grandkids.

D. It's why Joseph did what he did (22). "By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones."

It's interesting that of all the things that Joseph did in his life to put his faith on display—and he did many—the writer of Hebrews chose to highlight this event. He says that when Joseph was about to die, he talked about the exodus and gave instructions about what to do with his bones, and he did them both *by faith*. Joseph's first activity indicates that...

1. *He believed that what God promised would take place.* Here's what happened according to Genesis 50:24, "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.'" Joseph went to his grave believing that what God promised God would do. But not only did he believe those promises...

2. *He finished his life bringing attention to the promises of God.* And he did it in an attention grabbing sort of way. "Take my bones with you," he told his relatives. And Genesis 50:25 says he made them swear on oath that they would.

That's interesting. Joseph had spent all but the first seventeen years of his 110 year life in Egypt, yet he doesn't want his bones left in Egypt. Why not?

I don't think Joseph was being sentimental. In one sense, dirt is dirt. Whether his body lay in Egypt or Canaan didn't really matter. But it did matter. For by requesting his bones be transferred to the promised land he was making a statement designed to point future generations to the promises of God, namely to the promise of His coming redemption. "God is going to rescue our people," affirmed Joseph. "He's going to deliver us from bondage in this country and take us to the land of promise. And though I'll be dead and gone when it happens, I want my bones to be there, as a final testimony to the fact that this man believed God!"

And that's what happened. When the exodus occurred a couple hundred years later, Moses took Joseph's bones from Egypt (Exod. 13:19), carried them through the wilderness for forty years, until finally Joshua buried them in Canaan at Shechem (Josh. 24:32).

Let this sink in. We've just pondered four generations of faith, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. These men did not have a Bible, like we have, but they did have a few verbal promises from God. And by faith, they chose to trust in the person of God and act on those promises of God regardless how they felt.

All these men had a faith that looked beyond death, and they did so because they knew that death is not the end.

In a moment we're going to sing a hymn that Isaac Watts wrote in 1707, a hymn that reminds us that if we know Christ, we're heading for a better country, indeed "We're Marching to Zion."

*Come, we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord,
Join in a song with sweet accord
And thus surround the throne,
And thus surround the throne.*

*We're marching to Zion,
Beautiful, beautiful Zion;
We're marching upward to Zion,
The beautiful city of God.*

Take Inventory: Ask yourself the following two questions...

1. *Am I heading for a better country?* You say, "How can I know for sure?" Let there be no misunderstanding. It's *by faith*, and specifically by faith in the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. If you have repented and put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are heading for Zion. That's your hope. Now, the second question...

2. *Am I living like it?* Am I living like I'm heading for a better country? Is it apparent to those who are watching my life that I believe the best is yet to come?

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] *Today in the Word*, July 11, 1993.

[2] Helpful observation by Leon Morris, p. 121.

[3] Explanation by Philip Hughes, who points out this figure of speech called a litotes; p. 480.

[4] Observation by Philip Hughes, p. 480.

[5] Source unknown, taken from sermonillustrations.com

[6] Randy Alcorn, http://epm.org/media-files/pdf/Heaven_Sermon01.pdf

[7] Quote taken from Philip Hughes' footnote, p. 480.

[8] James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

[9] Source of quote unknown, taken from sermonillustrations.com

[10] Philip Hughes, p. 483.