



Lesson 5 – Abraham: A Life that Lives for Eternity

I Want To Go Home!

Have you ever been out of the country? If you have, no doubt you had an exciting time. It was probably fun to see customs and foods and sights that were different from your own. But by the time the trip was over, I'm sure that you were ready to go home. To see American foods and sights and to go to your house and sleep in your bed. There's something special and comforting about coming home. Abraham never went home, not really. He left Ur of the Chaldees and wandered around in the promised land, as in a foreign country (11:9). He and his sons lived in tents, never fully receiving everything he had been promised by God. So how were they able to do continue living for God even when it was incredibly hard?

Because Abraham realized that Ur wasn't his home. And the promised land wasn't his home. New Jerusalem and an eternity spent with God, that was home. This was the mindset of Abraham and his whole family, and it allowed them to continue living in difficult times.

Do you American Christians tend to think about heaven a lot? Why or why not?

Where we've been (v. 1-12)

The author of Hebrews has been pleading with Jewish Christians not to go back to Judaism. He has argued that they must be strong in faith, believing who God is, what God says, and what God does even and especially when life doesn't make sense. He has shown them that faith makes the unseen and hoped for things real for us in the present, so that we can grab onto and claim the promises of God. We've seen so far that faith is necessary to live a life that...

- Pleases God (Abel and Enoch vv. 4-6)
- Stands against the corrupt culture (Noah v. 7).
- Doesn't live by sight (Abraham vv. 8-12).

What opportunities have you had to stand against a corrupt culture, or to believe God's promises even when it was hard?

The Problem of Faith (v. 13)

Does God fulfill His promises?

The author of Hebrews is emphatic that God does do what He has promised to do. In fact, he has already taken half a chapter to argue for this in 6:12-20. Before he begins, he challenges us to imitate the faith of those in the Old Testament who through faith and endurance received God's promises. Twice this passage says that Abraham and others inherited the promises God gave to them (6:12, 15). Later on in 11:17 the author again states that Abraham had obtained the promise. It would seem that Hebrews is pretty clear – God fulfilled his promises to Abraham.

But there is a problem, and that is 11:13. Here we read that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob did **not** receive the promise. So which is it? Did Abraham receive the promise or didn't he?

Pose this question to the group and give them some time to think it over

So how did Abraham not receive the promise?

The answer to this question is to go back to Genesis and realize that God promised Abraham 3 things (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:4-6):

- The land of Palestine
- A nation from his son with Sarah¹
- A blessing for all peoples

As we think through those promises, we realize that some of them Abraham received in his lifetime, and other ones he didn't. When Abraham died, he had his son whom God had promised, through whom the nation would come and eventually the worldwide blessing through Christ. This is the promise that 11:17 is pointing to – that God had given the son he had promised, and then threatened to take him away.

But he didn't see the whole nation that came from his son, or the worldwide blessing (Christ). Most importantly for the author of Hebrews, he never possessed the land that was promised him. He was a stranger and foreigner in the land he had been promised. So Abraham received the promise of his son, but not the promise of the land.

What can Christians learn from the example of Abraham in this regard? How is Abraham like us?

So if Abraham, died without receiving all the things promised to him, how did he do it? How could he remain faithful even when he didn't get what he was promised? We often feel this same tension. We see some of God's promises fulfilled, but not all of them, at least not just yet. How then do we live a life of faith as Abraham was able to?

¹ God did not initially make clear that the son would be through Sarah. He did, however, specify that it would be through her that Abraham would receive this special son in Genesis 17:15-21.

The Perspective of Faith (vv. 13b-16a)

Faith treats the future promises as present realities

The author uses three words to describe how these heroes of the Old Testament interacted with God's promises.

1. They saw the promises from afar – this indicates a spiritual sight that allowed them to see what others missed (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:12-16).
2. They greeted them – they acted as if they were present realities, and they lived that way. One dictionary gave this definition for the Greek word behind greet: “to express happiness about the arrival of something.”²
3. They confessed – they expressed with their mouths and their lifestyles that the world was not their home.

All three of these words convey the idea that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob were able to die without having received the promises because they believed strongly that they would one day have them.

Faith realizes that this world is not our home

What did they confess? They confessed that this world wasn't their home. They weren't citizens of any country. While it's true that this was literally the case for them, the author intends for this to be a picture of all of us. They were seeking another homeland; they were citizens of another country (cf. Phil 3:20).

One church father wrote this when describing the Christians during the times of Rome, and sums up well the life of a Christian:

² William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 144.

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. . . But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. - Epistle to Diognetes

This was an intentional act on their part. Abraham could have gone back at any time. But he chose not to think about where he had come from. He never got sick because he didn't allow himself to go there. We have much to learn from this account. Our home is in heaven, and we should feel out of place in this world. But if we want to, we could return as well. This is why we, like Abraham, must choose not to think about what we have left behind, but rather what we are searching for.

Being a citizen of heaven obviously doesn't mean that we can't be a citizen of a country here on earth, for Paul was a Roman citizen (and used that to his advantage). So how can we balance being an active citizen and the teaching of this passage?

Faith desires something better

These men and women did not live as they did because they didn't enjoy or want rewards or pleasure. Actually, they lived this way because they wanted more than what the world had to offer (cf. 11:24-26). C.S. Lewis perhaps put it best when he said:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. – C.S. Lewis

God doesn't ask us to give up on pleasure and reward. He asks us to seek the greatest pleasure and reward and to be willing to wait for it. Christians ought to live the lives they do because they are holding out for something far better.

Can you think of other examples in Scripture where this principle of waiting for a greater pleasure shows up?

How could this idea be dangerous if not taught carefully? What is the danger if it is not taught?

The Prize for Faith

There are two rewards promised at the end of this passage for the choice that these people made to live for God, and those rewards are still available to us today.

God claims those who live for Him

In the beginning of our series we talked about God's commendation. God commended Abel, Enoch, and other ancient ones. Now he says the same thing but in a different way: God is not ashamed to be called the God of those who renounce their earthly citizenship and confess themselves to be strangers. In Eastern cultures, the idea of shame and honor were much more highly prized than in our highly individualistic cultures, so it's hard for us to feel the full force of this promise.

We must never take God's commendation for granted. Believe it or not, Scripture teaches that God is at times embarrassed to claim people for His own (Luke 9:26). Yet those who live for eternity have the privilege of God being proud to be called "their God." This was the case with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and can be true of us as well.

How does the statement "God is sometimes embarrassed by his people" strike you? How does this fit with the Bible's teaching on God's grace and love?

God is preparing a city for those who live for Him

As reward for the lives of faithfulness that these people lived, God is preparing a city for them. This is an actual, literal city (Revelation 21-22), one that Abraham apparently was aware of and sought after (11:10). God eternally rewards those who will in faith continue believing him until their death even if in their life they don't see how God has fulfilled all His promises.

Too often believers live their lives only looking for rewards and blessings in this life. While God does often bless us in the here and now, Paul and Asaph both recognized that if this life was all that there is, living for God would be a pretty miserable thing (Psalm 73; 1 Corinthians 15:19). A big component of God's justice and goodness, both in punishing wrong and rewarding right, comes as we look at the life to come.

What types of thing tend to eat away at our vision for eternity? How can believers keep before them the perspective of eternity?

The hymn writer once said, "This world is not my home; I'm just a passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. The angels beckon me from heaven's open door and I can't feel at home in this world anymore." Is that true for us today? Do we think much about eternity or are we content with what we have been given? Do we long to live with God as the patriarchs, or like Demas do

we love this present world? We too must set our hearts and our hope on eternity and realize that is our ultimate goal, not an easy, fun, successful life here on earth.