

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## Looking for a Better City

*By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (Hebrews 11:9–10, KJV 1900)*

Sadly, in our day, far too much preaching on the resurrection delves into fantasy not at all supported by Scripture or into all about what it shall be over there with no association to how we live life now. Most often Scripture links our hope in and for the Lord's return and our resurrection to how we are to live now. The old Puritan preacher Matthew Poole wrote about this lesson.

The reason of this contented pilgrimage was the excellent end of it, the place and state to which it brought him; he did really discern by the Spirit's work in him, and promise to him, his title to it, and vehemently did desire and long for, and yet patiently waited for, a better place and state than this earthly; and was daily making his approaches to it.<sup>1</sup>

All too often believers in our day either unplug from this world (Or at least try to do so) because they despise everything about it, so focused on glory that they abandon their post in this life. The cliché goes "So heavenly minded that you are no earthly good." Clichés are cute expressions, but they are often cuter than true. That is the case with this cliché. If we are truly "Heavenly minded," we shall be at our best in terms of serving and helping other pilgrims who walk with us, making us of more earthly good—and for good—than we ever imagined. Our "Contented pilgrimage" attitude just might rub off on others and give them more contentment than they would otherwise have. We cannot truly abandon this world as long as we live in it. (1 Corinthians 5:10b; "...for then must ye needs go out of the world") I love Poole's terminology, "this contented pilgrimage." Abraham is more often mentioned as a godly example of true faith in the New Testament than any other Old Testament personality. While the Lord obviously changed the form of worship during the Old Testament era, and dramatically so in the New Testament, Abraham's example, the walk of faith, has remained the same from the beginning. That is a central point of Hebrews 11. If we read Abraham's life in Genesis, we observe this point.

He was driven by faith in God and he grew in that faith, in God and in God's revelation to him, so that he continually sought that "city." Even though he was sojourning within the land that would eventually belong to his heirs, he never stopped looking and longing for that city. He was "Home" in Canaan, though he didn't know it, but he ever looked for his final and permanent "Home" in glory. Canaan eventually belonged to Abraham's heirs, conditioned on their submission and obedience to the Lord. At brief times they enjoyed the milk and honey of that land. At other times they faced constant warfare to hold onto it or to regain what they lost to their adversaries because of their unbelief and rebellion against the Lord. Their occupation of that land was not at all analogous to the permanence and reliability of a city with foundations, made and built by God.

Abraham indeed supplies us a noble model of the "contented pilgrimage" mindset. He never disengaged from his God-given charge to seek that country and become a worthy "Father" of faith for his heirs who would witness God's fulfillment of the promises that God gave to him. If we embrace Abraham's "contented pilgrimage" life, we will follow his walk of faith in working for all of our life and in everything we do for the welfare of those who come after us in the path of faith, never in seeking our personal gain or will. This way of life trusts God wholly to supply our needs from His riches in glory, leaving us gloriously free from the need to fight and scratch for our own will or way. (Philippians 4:19) Like Abraham, our faith-example, we shall devote all of our life to make the godly way for those who shall follow us in this way easier and clearer than it was for us. If one thing we do can make their walk in the faith easier and more peaceful, we will work tirelessly and faithfully to smooth their way. This, my friends, is the Biblical reality of Abraham's faith and of this thing that Poole calls "this contented pilgrimage." Like that One to whom he looked and saw by faith, Abraham worked for others, not for himself. If we walk in Abraham's faith, we shall likewise work for the benefit of others, not ourselves.

*By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country.* Even though Abraham actually reached the Promised Land, he lived in it as a "Sojourner," not as a permanent citizen. It

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 862.

would belong to his heirs many generations later, but today Abraham remained in that land as a sojourner, not as a permanent resident.

...dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. Jacob was born many years after Abraham's death. For much of his "Sojourn," Isaac was yet only a future promise, not yet born. As you ponder the lesson of these words, anchor your thoughts in the first two words of the verse, "By faith..." Abraham lived daily with the reality of God's promise fresh and alive in his mind, even though the fulfillment of that promise was yet future. We honor and fulfill Abraham's "contented pilgrimage" only as we fill our today's with the rich reality of the Lord's promises for our future. Forget or even allow the thought of those promises to fade in your mind, and your contented pilgrimage will immediately collapse into a discontented pilgrimage. You will lose your faith's anchor and your roadmap for your pilgrimage. Allow your life's focus to shift off that "contented pilgrimage" onto what you want to gain for yourself, and Scripture's description of glorious and godly contentment shall vanish from your mind, replaced by a growing cancer of discontentment, anger, and destructive bitterness. (Hebrews 12:14-15) You will lose your joyful contentment and with it any semblance of a "contented pilgrimage."

Notice that Isaac and Jacob, though not yet born, were in Abraham's mind "...heirs with him of the same promise." No, this promise was not for Abraham's personal or exclusive benefit. He received it from the Lord, but he received it on behalf of all who would follow him in the faith walk that stay the course on our "contented pilgrimage." Folks, if we live for ourselves, we have a poor motive to live. If we live for God and His promises, we joyfully lose ourselves in Him and are then free to live for the service and benefit of others, the true "Abraham" example of faith.

*For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.* We often tend to ignore those commonplace words in Scripture and thereby also ignore the richest of Scripture's treasures. "For" firmly links this verse with the prior verse. Abraham was empowered to forget himself and look and long for that future blessing that would fall on his sons and their heirs by his looking for God's better "City."

The idea of a city prompts thoughts of both a place that has dimensions and reality, buildings and all the necessary accommodations for living there. It also stirs us to think about the culture of the city. Is it a friendly and safe place, or is it a dangerous place? What are the citizens of that city like? More important to our long-term view, who rules in that city, and how does he rule? Finally, it also nudges us to think of what our own life will be like in that city? Abraham didn't look merely for a "Place." He was looking for a "City."

Further, this city that Abraham sought was not just any city. It was a stable city, a city with a solid

foundation. It was not a "Flash in the pan" kind of city, constantly changing, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Abraham could whole-heartedly engage his present pilgrimage life with a measure of contentment because he was longing and looking for a city of permanence, not yet another temporary stop on the pilgrim path.

Even a stable—if there is such a thing in this world—city here would not satisfy this pilgrim of faith. The city that he sought must have a very precise and specific history. Its founder, its "builder and maker" must be God Himself. No human founder could possibly build the kind of city that Abraham's faith required and longed to inhabit.

Many years ago I was visiting with a man who was near and dear to me. He had lost his health and often his mind was clouded with age, disease, and with medications intended to relieve some of his symptoms. On some days, he didn't know where he was, and he didn't know the dearest people in his life. On other days, he seemed quite alert. Often in those alert times, he would tell his caretakers about visiting different churches and preaching the gospel to them. While he was in the fog to our observation, the Lord was filling his mind with rich thoughts of serving others in his ministry. Oh for such grace if my "Pilgrimage" takes me down that path. On the day that I visited him he was pretty much out of it. Though he had known me from infancy, he would look at me with the obvious question mark in his face, trying to recall who I was. A lifelong friend of his was also present. Sincerely trying to break through the fog in this dear saint's mind, he asked a question, "When did you last see XXX?" The man referred to by "XXX" was a man who had been cruel and ungodly toward this noble saint. It was as if for a brief moment the Lord lifted that dear saint's fog and gave him a clear mind, His eyes turned from blank to sharp and thoughtful. Instead of staring blankly ahead, he turned to his friend and spoke with as much clarity as he had ever had, "The last time I saw XXX I was on my way to a better country." This dear saint fully understood Abraham's longing and looking for that better city with foundations, whose "...builder and maker is God." Everyone in the room responded alike. We all melted in joyful tears. We had witnessed the Lord's sweet hand that gave his longing and tired saint a brief reminder that the "XXX" people of this life could no longer invade his joy or hinder his longing heart. He was on his way to "Home." Soon, very soon, he would no longer be a tired pilgrim looking for home. He would be home, not on his pilgrim journey.

What the Lord gave His servant Abraham ages ago He gives to every one of His faithful saints who have set their hearts firmly on that city that lies ahead. They will serve gladly now as "contented pilgrims," but they never stop longing for "Home. Home at last!"

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor