

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Temporary Pilgrims on the way to their Prepared City

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:13–16, KJV 1900)

As we study the Old Testament people named in Hebrews 11, it almost becomes a roll call of notable godly saints from the early record of the Old Testament. Often people will impose artificial and unbiblical distinctions onto Old Testament children of grace that mark them as wholly different from New Testament saints. Hebrews 11 goes in the opposite direction. Every dynamic of faith except for one is the same in the Old as in the New Testament. The one difference is their perspective of Jesus coming and completing His work in the flesh. They looked forward to it prophetically in faith while we look back historically and see it by faith, both they and we believing in Him and His work. God also changed the form of worship from Old to New. In fact, He changed the form of worship within the Old Testament era. Believers in God who lived prior to Moses and the Law worshipped God differently than those who came after Moses and the Law. But Hebrews 11 reminds us that the "Faith factor" was precisely the same, so much so that those champions of faith in the Old Testament become our lively examples in the New Testament, the point of Hebrews 12:1.

...not having received the promises. God gave them the promise of Jesus' coming, but they did not live to see the promise completed or fulfilled, the point of their not receiving the promises, that is the promise fulfilled. It was a special season indeed when an aged saint was told by the Lord that he would not die till he actually saw Jesus, the Messiah, in the flesh. (Luke 2:25-32) He was blessed not only to see Jesus, but to hold the babe in his arms as he blessed God for promises faithfully fulfilled. Hebrews 11 makes a powerful point of promises faithfully fulfilled. If someone gives you a promise and you believe it, but he proves unfaithful, not fulfilling it, that promise is empty, a cruel deception. Your faith is honored only in believing promises faithfully fulfilled. We may never doubt any promise that God makes to us in Scripture. Every promise that He ever made to His children was grounded in His personal character. He cannot dishonor the promise and remain true to His essential holy character. If you believe that He is unchangeable, you may safely

believe that He will not—indeed, cannot—allow one promise to fail. (Titus 1:2; 2 Timothy 2:13) He cannot lie, and He cannot deny Himself. It is the faithfulness of God that empowers our faith. We believe Him who is ever faithful to every word He speaks to His children.

...but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. When the Lord revealed His promises to Old Testament saints regarding Jesus and His coming, they understood that fulfillment of that promise was in the distant future. (1 Peter 1:10-11) The very act of believing in Jesus before He came, and in God who promised His coming to them made these people "strangers and pilgrims on the earth." When a child of grace comes to believe this truth, he also becomes a stranger to this world and its fancies. The "Pilgrim" mindset is not a journey to nowhere. When the "Pilgrims" left England or other European countries for the new world, they had a specific goal in mind. They were looking for a new and better home in this country. Likewise, as we grow in our faith, more fully and strongly believing in Jesus and in that city which He has prepared for us, we increasingly focus on that "...better country" in heaven which the Lord has prepared for us. We are pilgrims now, but we are homeward bound. Our pilgrimage shall end with joyful glory.

In our study, on occasion I have mentioned the predominant mindset of modern Christianity that views the Second Coming as a dreadful, fearful event. Our present study passage highlights just how out of touch this mindset is with Scripture. The pilgrim looks forward to his arrival, to the time when his pilgrimage shall end. An interesting thought occurs to me. For the believer whose heart is enlightened by Scripture, a day **without** the Lord's judgment is far more a thing to be feared than the Day of His Judgment. Our joy and peace as we anticipate that day is not at all based on how obedient or faithful we assess ourselves to be, but how strongly we by faith see ourselves securely sheltered in Jesus and in His finished work. Folks who devalue Him and His work indeed look toward that day with dread. But folks who follow Scripture

and understand their present pilgrimage and their final chapter in this pilgrim journey, their arrival at "Home" with Him, think of that day with great joy. They reflect the mindset of the Old Testament saints described in our study passage.

For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. The stronger we grow in faith the more we look forward to our arrival in glory and the less we look back at where we've been. Faith empowers us to cut our ties with this world and with our own pride and self-glory seeking futility. We lose ourselves in our Lord and His glory. You see, the faith-way makes these two attitudes self-exclusive. You can't allow your mind to be full of self and getting what you want or getting credit to yourself for anything, and also devote your life to glorifying the Lord. His glory in the faith-way is all consuming. And, no surprise as we read this chapter, when we have immersed our minds and lives in seeking the Lord's glory, we lose the self-focused ambition to get glory for ourselves. Going back is not an option for the pilgrim in the faith-way.

Think of the likely motive for the Book of Hebrews, based on Hebrews 10:32-37. A first century Jew who left synagogue worship and became a Christian suffered great loss in terms of family and friends. They were typically treated by their Jewish family and friends as if they had died. And as these dear people who had already endured that personal loss came under even greater persecution from the world around them, they might well have pondered if the cost of discipleship was really worth the price. Perhaps it would be easier and simpler just to go back to the synagogue and try to make peace with that old way of life. Paul, I believe the human author of Hebrews, had walked that path already. He could write to the Hebrews from personal experience. There was nothing to go back to! Faith empowered them to cut the ties with their past life, however precious its heart-tug. Faith looks back only to see the godly and faithful saints who lived before us, the very people whom we meet in Hebrews 11. And these people with one voice shout out to us through faith to cut our ties with the "City," the way of life, that we formerly knew, and to build our hope on that city that lies just ahead, whose builder and maker is God. You can't go back and find the pleasure you once knew there!

But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. The first point to anchor solidly in our minds is simple. Whatever our past in this world, the country to which we travel in pilgrimage is "Better," infinitely so. Forget for the moment how you might assess that city. Think about how God assesses it. Even God is pleased with it! He is not ashamed to be called the God of tired pilgrims, for He knows the city to which they are going. The city that shall be

their eternal home didn't evolve over time or by the good intentions of earlier citizens who built it. God Himself built this city in every detail. He knows every part of it, and He doesn't hesitate for a moment to direct His pilgrim people to it.

When John saw into heaven and observed what those who have already arrived there were doing, he saw nothing to leave any tired pilgrim hesitant or subject to second thoughts about it. Quite the opposite, he saw them enveloped in joyful praise to the God and Savior who built that city for them.

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation. (Revelation 5:9)

Do you see any indication that these redeemed souls looked back to their life on earth with regret that there might have been something better? No. Their only memory of their life on earth is that their God and Savior, the Builder of this city, redeemed them from their sins. We see no subdivisions in John's observation of the redeemed in heaven. There are not two camps, one consisting of Old Testament saints who gained their access to that city by obeying Moses' Law, and another camp who were there by Jesus' work. The New Testament sufficiently and clearly reminds us that the Law was not capable of getting a single person to glory. (Hebrews 10:1, 4, 11) The poet nicely captures the sentiment of the Christian pilgrim.

Out on an ocean all boundless we ride,
We're homeward bound, homeward bound;
Tossed on the waves of a rough, restless tide,
We're homeward bound, homeward bound;
Far from the safe, quiet harbor we rode,
Seeking our Father's celestial abode;
Promise of which on us each He bestowed:
We're homeward bound, homeward bound.

Into the harbor of Heav'n now we glide;
We're home at last, home at last;
Softly we drift on its bright silver tide;
We're home at last, home at last;
Glory to God! all our dangers are o'er;
We stand secure on the glorified shore;
Glory to God! we will shout evermore:
We're home at last, home at last.

Words: W. F. Warren, before 1863; this song was sung on both sides during the American civil war.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor