

Desiring a Better Country

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Date: 19 January 2020

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[0 : 00] Let me pray for us. Lord, as we come to your word, open our hearts and our minds that we may hear what your spirit has for us.

That we would not only be hearers, but that we would obey it too in Jesus' name. Amen. What do you want in a country?

I'm certain that each of you had a very different reaction to my question. If you came here from somewhere else, you will likely think about that process by which you chose to come to Australia. Maybe seeking a better life for your family. Or if you're politically inclined, either side of the ideological fence, you already have strong views on the social and economic and legal changes that this country needs.

Maybe some of you are casting your minds back in nostalgia, perhaps, to simpler and happier times and wondering, what happened to that country?

[1 : 19] Not one answer in this room will be the same. But there is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that one thing is true of all of us.

We all want a better country. And our text today talks a lot about seeking a better country. It's part of that great passage in the Bible about faith.

And we'll focus on verses 13 to 16, which I must declare is one of my two favorite passages in the whole Bible.

And that's given that I was given a free choice of what I could preach on today. I chose that. But I pray that with the Lord's help, I will do it justice. There are many of you in this congregation who are migrants to this land.

And if, like me, you are recent arrivals in the last 15 years or so, you have had to undergo a citizenship test if you wanted to become an Aussie.

[2 : 27] You know, to get that passport and the right to vote. But to be honest, it's not a very hard test. Although I have very nearly failed it. Because I joked to the examiner that I'd found all the answers on the Al-Qaeda website.

Fortunately, I had a guy with a sense of humor. Although he told me that some of his colleagues would have had a very, very much dimmer view. But citizenship is clearly no laughing matter. The Australian Department of Immigration test, contrary to popular opinion, is not simply, you know, you don't just give Don Bradman as the answer to every question or far left. It's also there to confirm that you understand the social implications, the civic responsibilities that are incumbent on Australian citizenship.

And in a similar way, Hebrews chapter 11 provides us with a template by which we can establish those characteristics, those qualities we should expect to find in the person of faith.

Now we hear that word faith thrown around a lot. But we're not talking about any religious faith here. We're talking about faith in the God who made the universe and in his son, our savior, Jesus Christ.

[3 : 53] And unlike the Australian citizenship test, however, this one is not trivial. Because it has eternal implications. We'll see it's a test in three parts.

How we start. How we proceed along the way. And how we finish. In verses 8 to 12, we are given a case study of Abraham.

A case study from which we must draw several very important conclusions. Abraham is arguably the greatest example of faith in both the Old and the New Testaments.

14 chapters of Genesis alone are devoted to his life. Paul uses his example and his arguments in Romans and Galatians to prove certain truths about the faithful life.

And James calls him the friend of God. So I think we can safely say that we have a model citizen to use as our test case.

[5 : 05] The one against whom we measure. And as we heard in our first reading in Genesis 12, the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

In the story, he has to leave his extended family in Haran to go to a place he did not know.

Verse 8 of our Hebrews passage says the same thing. That when he was called to go, he obeyed and went. Even though he did not know where he was going.

This is a strange thing. How does someone do that? Well, Stephen, when he's giving his great defense before the Sanhedrin in the Acts of the Apostles, describes that Abraham was moved by the glory of God.

He was stirred by something. It wasn't conceivable or tangible. But nevertheless, he perceived that it was already there. And why?

[6 : 15] Because God said it was so. And we have to remember at this point, we're not dealing with one of the great saints of the Bible. Not at all. This Abraham is an idol worshiper from pagan Ur.

Ur was a city known for its astrology, known for its multiple gods, known even for human sacrifice as part of its religion. And there's no reason for us not to believe that Abraham did not partake or participate.

Yet this man, given no map, given no guarantees of safe passage, yet Abraham, we read, obeyed and went.

He heard God's call and he obeyed without delay. And his obedience was very costly. He left behind everything.

Fatherland, family, a very secure life to go somewhere not very clear at all. He did not know where he was going.

[7 : 24] I'm sure you're asking yourself, how is it possible for him to do this, to leave all these things he loved? And there's only one answer.

Because he loved God's promises more. He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Earlier in Hebrews, the writer tells us that Jesus is the mediator of a superior covenant. Remember, you had the Mosaic covenant given to Moses when he takes the people out of Egypt.

But the covenant that Jesus brings is superior because it is established on better promises. And it is these promises, the city with foundations, that motivate Abraham as to where his true citizenship lies.

And this is always the starting point of our faith. That we respond to God's revelation of himself to us. Every one of us has probably had a different story of how we first encountered God.

[8 : 36] But in obedience, we take him at his word. We believe and we embrace his promises. This is the very essence of our faith.

And we are fortunate. We have much more to go on than Abraham in terms of the fulfilled promises of God. Abraham and the patriarchs, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.

But Jesus, we read in John 8, 56, says of Abraham, Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day.

He saw it and was glad. So Abraham's faith was in Jesus Christ, just like ours. His faith was in the coming Redeemer.

Ours is in a Savior who has already come. Nevertheless, we enter the citizenship. We start our faith just as he did.

[9 : 38] We hear, we believe, we obey. So part one, therefore, we start well when we hear God and obey.

Faith obeys God because obedience pleases God. And this idea of a pleased God is a key part of whether we pass or fail our citizenship.

But that begs the question, what do we have to obey? For Abraham, obeying meant living in tents his whole life.

And likewise, Isaac and Jacob, he never actually took possession of a single square meter of Canaan. Except for a burial plot for his wife, Sarah.

He made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country. He lived in tents. And living in tents must be true of us too.

[10 : 41] Figuratively, if not literally. And then we come to verse 13, this amazing verse. These all died in faith.

Not having received the things promised, but having seen them from a distance, they were assured of them and embraced them, confessing that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

So if faith always obeys, then part two. Faith always makes us a stranger and a pilgrim.

Two different but parallel aspects of the Christian's walk of faith. You know, sometimes it's been translated stranger and foreigner, which I think is almost the same.

I think this use of stranger and pilgrim in the New King James I like the most because there are slightly subtle differences. And the passage goes on to say that the patriarchs embraced their strangeness.

[11 : 47] They weren't ashamed of it. Rather, they confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims. And as a result, they never fit in again with those around.

And like them, we need to cultivate that attitude. What one commentator called conscious dissonance. I like phrases like that. But what does it mean?

It means that we deliberately work hard at being in the world, but not of it. Have you truly stepped out like Abraham?

Or are you still trying to straddle two worlds, keeping a foot in this one? If you've responded to Christ, as I hope all of us will declare, we must openly confess that we have stepped out of this world.

And therefore, we can never feel truly comfortable in it again. And before anyone jumps to the wrong conclusion, I must emphasize that stepping out does not mean that we forego our responsibilities to this world and its inhabitants.

[13 : 03] You look at the life of Abraham, he was always involved in the activities of his world, even though he was an outsider. So for us, what does this mean?

We are still required to be obedient to the Great Commission, to declare the gospel to the lost. We are still to be hallmarked by Christ's statement about his disciples.

They shall know we are his disciples by our love. So what does that mean? We are not to flee the world to some monastery or separate ourselves out like the Amish.

But we are to flee some things. We are to flee the world's favorite inducements, idolatry and immorality.

The apostle Peter, in his first letter, which he writes to the pilgrims of the dispersion, says, I beg you as sojourners or strangers or foreigners, abstain.

[14 : 05] And his readers were alienated from their culture because they abstained from worshipping their idols or their gods, and they abstained from participating in their wicked practices.

And likewise, Abraham and his descendants, they were happy to confess that they belong to Jehovah, to Yahweh, the one creator God. And that meant they refused to be assimilated.

They refused not Pharaoh in Egypt or nor the king of Sodom and his inducements, nor would they endorse their way of living. And as a result, they were estranged in the land, in spite of it being the land promised to them.

And that's the same for us. And it means we have to acknowledge that there is a stigma which comes as part of the strangeness of being one of Christ's.

But brothers and sisters, we cannot avoid this fact. We do not belong here anymore. And not belonging is a characteristic.

[15 : 21] If it's characteristic of the stranger, it's a characteristic of the pilgrim too. Pilgrims are also not citizens. This is not their home. It's because they are on a route to somewhere else.

Pilgrims were only passing through. Verse 14 tells us that people who say such things, that they're strangers and pilgrims, show they are looking for a country of their own.

And because that's where their perspective is set, it means that's where their affections are too.

And if we are God's pilgrims, if we're trying to pass test too, then we have to set our minds on things above.

Our minds and our affections cannot be captive to the cares, the enticements, the priorities of this wilderness. Because that's what it is.

It's a wilderness. It was a wilderness for Abraham, and it's still a wilderness for us. Jesus made it clear to his disciples that his kingdom is not of this world.

[16 : 31] So our alienation, though, from our culture, is not because we are weird or crazy. It's not because we do eccentric things to draw attention to ourselves.

I know some Christians do, but I don't think that's a biblical thing. But rather it is because it is grounded in a spiritual difference.

We have been made different. We are marked by grace. And this will always be confronting, because one day in the judgment, there will be sheep and there will be goats.

And it's not something that we do for ourselves. It is a mark of grace given to us by God. And because of it, the world will hate us.

It's because his decrees, his standards, his agenda is always at odds with theirs. And it's our progress to another country which marks us as unpatriotic.

[17 : 34] Because we clearly understood to say, we've got a better place to be. And doesn't that raise a fence? When you say, well, you know, I think Melbourne's much better than Sydney or whatever, right?

People take a fence. So is it surprising that people behave towards Christians as they do? If this world is all they have, then our attitude is dismissive towards that one thing they hold dear.

But we can't avoid it. The Christian faith is confessional. You remember Abraham? They confessed they were strangers and pilgrims. And that means that we have no choice but to make clear that our allegiance is not to this world but to Christ.

And if that's where our allegiance is, then we must travel lightly through it. Remember, we are people in tents and people in tents can't carry too much.

So we consider the things of this world of minimal value. And we also bear joyfully the suffering and slander that may arise because of him.

[18 : 49] As this world in which we live increasingly dismisses Christ and his word, the price of our pilgrimage may be very high. But it's a conscious position we have to take.

Because if we're Christ's possession and our security is in him, not in the material things we hold, we have no choice. I know I said earlier that verses 13 to 16 were one of my two favorite passages. Well, the other favorite one comes from Joshua chapter 24 where you get that conscious declaration. He says to Israel, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.

You know, whether the gods beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites. But then that great statement, which is Joshua's but should be ours. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

As citizens of his country, part one, we start our journey well when we obey. And part two of the test, we proceed well when we consciously acknowledge that we are pilgrims and strangers.

[20 : 07] Despite always being an alien in the land that they were promised, the patriarchs were happy with their state of impermanence because the promises they held on to were better by far than any threat or obstacle that came because they were strangers and pilgrims.

And it is these promises that allow us to finish well to part three of the test. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.

The patriarchs would not look back and thus they finished well. They persevered to the end. And neither should we. The life we have given up has no merit at all when you compare it to citizenship in God's country.

That means our attitude must be like Paul's. He said, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

The somber truth is that we take nothing out of this life anyway. So what could be better than to die in faith? But it doesn't end there.

[21 : 23] And then to have God say of you, I am not ashamed to be called your God. This was the commendation that Abraham received and it will be ours also if we finish well.

Stop and think for a moment. What an utterly mind-blowing statement. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God for he has prepared a city for them.

That God who made all things and who has nothing of which to be ashamed should ever say of such a weak and lily-livered and often turncoat human being like Abraham or like me, to say such a thing.

And this is the key to the hope that we carry through this pilgrimage of ours. That God is pleased to identify with his people. He's not a God out there.

And it's not only a future reality. He is our God now. And as such, we have the full resources of the Godhead to undergird our progress. We are not left alone.

[22 : 32] This is not of you. We have the word. We have the spirit. We hear that God's, our Savior's loving arms are around us all. So if you've been listening and thinking that estrangement from this world and the pilgrimage demanded of a Christian is something just way too hard or too costly, then think again about the promises of God.

Remember that this is all, it's not about us. It's all of grace and all of God. He calls us and he carries us home.

So when you remember the promises, hold on to them for dear life. I've said often before that I love C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. And I think there's one thing in it that encourages me always about when I think about this journey and where we're going.

He describes how one day when our journey ends, we will come to see that we had always been in the heavenly country. That even though the struggles that we, we'll have forgotten them all.

When we look back, we will only have seen that God was with us. So the road will never be too tough to tread and the world's scorn will never be too hard to bear.

[23 : 55] The life Jesus offers you when you respond to his call is a radical one. It demands that you hate this life and forsake the treasure it offers.

But in return, you are guaranteed a better country. If we are to die, then better we die in faith.

But you can only do that when your perspective is changed. Looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

Are you looking for the coming day of the Lord? That's the day when our final home will become truly apparent. And it's the same city that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were waiting for.

that John describes in Revelation. The new heaven and the new earth coming down and that the loud voice from the throne says, look, God's dwelling is now among his people and he will dwell with them.

[25 : 02] They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. These are the promises that we hold on to that make our pilgrimage bearable and for which our citizenship test has been preparing us.

So part three, we finish well at the place where God dwells with his people. There is no greater honor than to be called the people of God.

There is no greater purpose before us than to be his servants, his representatives amongst this wicked generation. And this is not our country for we don't belong here anymore.

If our feet are set on that path of obedience and if we're walking this life with our eyes cast in the correct direction, then we will have passed our heavenly citizenship test when we desire to be only in one place.

So that as with Abraham, it may also be said of us, instead, they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. Amen.