

Desiring a Better Country

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[0 : 00] What do you want in a country? I'm certain that each of you had a very different response to my question. Lots of you came here from somewhere else.

And you'll likely think about that process by which you chose Australia, maybe seeking a better life for your family. I don't see Dean here, but I know there's a few other political animals in this place. And on either side of the ideological fence, you probably approach this question with strong views about the social or economic or legal framework or changes that this nation needs.

Others might be thinking back with nostalgia, wondering what happened to that country, a country that they have in their minds.

And there are many other responses, whether it's about identity or place or often just people as well.

[1 : 12] But no one answer will be the same, I'm certain. There is, however, no doubt that in one aspect we are all the same.

One thing true of all of us. We all want a better country, right? And our text today talks a lot about seeking a better country.

It's part of that great faith passage in the Bible. Some have labeled it faith's hall of fame. And today we'll focus on verses 13 to 16, which I must be honest is why I chose it.

It's one of my two favorite passages in the Bible. And I was given free go, so I chose my favorite. But I pray that with the Lord's help, I will do it justice. As I said, there are many of you in the congregation who are migrants to this land.

And if like me, you're relatively recent, last 15 years or so, you had to undergo a citizenship test. And I see smiles already.

[2 : 22] If you wanted to become an Aussie, you know, with a passport and the right to vote. To be honest, and I think those who have done it will say, it is not a very hard test. Although I 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 probably would have rejected me.

Citizenship, as you can see, is clearly no laughing matter. And the Australian test, contrary to popular opinion, is not simply, you know, answer Dodd Braddon, Farlap, and Ned Kelly, and you've got it all.

It's also a test seeking to confirm that you actually understand the social implications and the civic responsibilities incumbent on Australian citizenship.

Basically, what's expected of you as an Australian. 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 a person of faith.

[3 : 38] And not simply any faith. We live in a society that loves faith, just not Christian faith. But faith in the God who made the universe.

And faith in his son, our savior Jesus Christ. And unlike the Australian citizenship test, this one is not trivial. Because it has eternal implications.

I'll show you it's a test in three parts. How we start. How we proceed. And how we finish. How we finish. In verses 8 to 12 of our passage, we're given a case study of Abraham.

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

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

[4 : 47] James called him the friend of God. So I think we safely can say that we have got a model citizen to use as our test case. Our Genesis reading, we saw that 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, it's an extended story, but he is required to leave his family and go to a place he doesn't know.

Verse 8 of our Hebrews passage says, by faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

This is an amazing thing to think about. He didn't know where he was going. And how is that? Well, Stephen gives us a clue in his sermon in Acts where he's facing the Sanhedrin and he describes the whole history of Israel.

He says that Abraham was moved by the glory of God. Abraham was stirred by something that wasn't conceivable or even tangible yet. But nevertheless, he perceived that it was real because God said it was so.

[6 : 21] Now, remember, too, at this point, we're not dealing with one of the great saints of the Bible or history. Not at all. This Abraham is an idol worshiper from pagan Ur.

And Ur was a city known for its astrology, for its multiple gods and even human sacrifice as part of its religion. So this was a pretty wicked place.

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

He heard God's call and he obeyed without delay. And his obedience was costly. He had to leave everything behind.

He left everything he knew behind. Now, I'm sure many of you who have come from other countries have an inkling of what that is, leaving family and fatherland. But you knew where you were going, I hope, most of you.

[7 : 23] Abraham went. He left all of it to go to someplace he had no clue about. And how was it possible for him with so little clarity to leave behind these things he loved?

Well, it's because he loved something else more. He loved God's promises. Verse 10 says he was looking forward to a city with foundations whose architect and builder was God.

Earlier in Hebrews, the writer tells us that Jesus is the mediator of a superior covenant to the old Mosaic covenant. And the reason he gives is because it is established on better promises.

The promises that were given to Israel are not as good as the promises that Jesus gives. And it's these better promises to the city with foundations that motivates Abraham and the other patriarchs as to where their citizenship lies.

And this is always the starting point of our faith. That we respond to God's revelation of himself in obedience. Not all of us will have an experience like Paul or like Abraham.

[8 : 39] For most of us, that experience of God's self-revelation will be in his word, hearing a sermon or something along those lines. But for all of us, it's the same.

We believe and we take God at his promises. We embrace his word. Now, we have a lot more to go on than Abraham ever did in terms of God's fulfilled promises.

For Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. But Jesus makes this point in John 8.

When he says of Abraham, he says, Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day. He saw it and was glad. So we understand that Abraham's faith was in Christ.

Just as ours. His faith was in a coming redeemer. We're better off. Ours is in a savior who has already come. But nevertheless, we are alike with Abraham in that we enter our citizenship by faith.

[9 : 48] Just as he did. We hear, we believe, we obey. There is no other model. We hear, we believe, we obey. Faith always obeys. Part one, then, is that we start well when we hear God and obey.

Because faith always obeys because obedience pleases God. And this idea of a pleased God is going to be key to whether we pass or fail our citizenship test in the end.

And then that begs the question, what is it that we have to obey? Well, for Abraham, and this is part two, obeying meant living in tents his whole life.

And likewise, Isaac and Jacob. You do know that he never took possession of a single square meter of Canaan in his life.

The only thing he did was buy a burial plot for his wife, Sarah. Which is what verse 8 tells us. He made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.

[11 : 01] He lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. And living in tents must be true of us too.

Figuratively, if not literally. It may be literally for some of you, because if you hold too tightly to the house you have, God may take it away and live in a tent.

But for the most part, I suspect none of us will actually have to live in tents. But it is this idea of impermanence is key to our walk in faith. So if faith always obeys, then faith also always makes us a stranger and a pilgrim.

Two different but parallel aspects of the Christian's walk of faith. The passage goes on to say that they embraced their strangeness. They weren't afraid of it.

They didn't hide it. Rather, it says they confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims. And therefore, they never fit in again with those around them, ever.

[12 : 12] And like the patriarchs, we also need to cultivate a conscious dissonance. Great. I won't explain it.

It's probably better to understand it as we deliberately work hard at being in the world and not of it. It's a conscious thing.

Have you truly stepped out then? Is that a characteristic of your life? Or are you still trying to straddle two worlds, keeping a foot in this one while you may?

You see, having responded to Christ, we must, we have no choice, we must openly declare that we have stepped out of this world.

And therefore, like the patriarchs, we never feel truly comfortable in it again. Now, before anyone jumps to the wrong conclusion, I must emphasize that stepping out doesn't mean that we forego our responsibilities to this world and its inhabitants.

[13 : 19] Abraham was fully involved in his world. He fought in its wars. He did all kinds of things, even though he was an outsider.

And for us, that means that we are still required to preach the gospel to the lost as part of the Great Commission.

People should know that we are people of faith. As Christ said, they shall know you are my disciples by your love. So we are not to flee this world.

We are not going out to some monastery or become like the Amish. But we do flee two things. Two of the world's favorite inducements.

We flee idolatry. And we flee immorality. The apostle Peter, he wrote in his letter, he addresses it to the pilgrims of the dispersion and says later in the same letter, I beg you, as strangers or sojourners, abstain.

[14 : 23] And that's what characterized Peter's readers. They were alienated from their culture because they refused. They abstained from worshiping their gods. And they abstained from participating in their wicked practices too.

Similarly, Abraham was happy to confess that he belonged to Yahweh, the one creator God, and him alone.

He and his sons and grandson, they refused to be assimilated by anyone. Not Pharaoh in Egypt, not by the kings of Sodom, and nor would they endorse the way of living that they found in Canaan around them.

And as a result, they remained estranged in the land, despite it being the place promised to them. And it's the same for us.

We have to acknowledge that there is a stigma which comes as part of the strangeness that comes of belonging to Christ. Not belonging, this idea of not belonging, is also a characteristic of the pilgrim.

[15 : 37] You see, pilgrims are going from one place to another. They are not citizens. They don't belong here. This is not their home. Only passing through.

In verse 14, it tells us that people who say such things, that there are pilgrims and strangers, show that they are looking for a country of their own.

And because this is their perspective, this is what they're looking for, their affections, the things they care about, lie elsewhere too. So if we're God's pilgrims, if we're passing test too, then we too must set our minds on things above.

Our minds and our affections cannot be captive to the cares and enticements, the priorities of this wilderness.

It was a wilderness for Abraham and it's still a wilderness for us today. Jesus said, my kingdom is not of this world. But our alienation from the culture around us is not because we're weird.

[16:48] Not true of most of us, hope. Or because we do eccentric things to draw attention to ourselves. But rather it is grounded in a spiritual difference.

We are marked as different by God's grace. Nothing we did. But because of his grace, we will always end up as being confronting to the world.

Because the world hates God. And it hates his people. It hates his standards. It hates his agenda. Because his agenda is always at odds with theirs.

That was the part of the fall. We decided to do our own thing. And that is where this world is. And if we're pilgrims and our progress is to another country, that marks us as unpatriotic to this one, doesn't it?

We're clearly understood. They're correct when they understand that we're saying we're going to a better place. And it is a better place. I hope you're assured of that. So don't be surprised then that people behave towards Christians the way they do.

[18:00] If this world is all that they have to hold on to, then our attitude is actually dismissive towards the one thing that they hold dear.

But the Christian faith is confessional. We declare it openly.

And that means that we have no choice. We can't hide it. We can't hide it from the culture around.

We have no choice but to make clear where our allegiance lies.

It's not to this world. It is to Christ. And also, if we're pilgrims, then we have to travel lightly through this world.

Think about it. People in tents can't carry too much. We can't be burdened down with the things of this world. It also means, as a pilgrim, passing through, that we must bear joyfully the suffering and the slander that may come because of him.

[19:09] As we live in a world that increasingly dismisses Christ and his word, the price of our pilgrimage may be very high. But it's a conscious position that we have to take.

Because we are Christ's possession. And our security is in him. Not in the material things that we hold. I said earlier that verses 13 to 16 was one of my two favorite passages.

And, well, the other one comes from Joshua chapter 24. And I think it illustrates exactly the consciousness that I'm talking about. Joshua talking to the people of Israel as they enter the land, the promised land, says, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.

Whether the gods of your fathers beyond the Euphrates in Ur, or the gods of the Amorites, the Canaanites in the land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Conscious statement of his allegiance. Conscious statement of his allegiance. Conscious statement of his allegiance. So, as citizens of his country, in part one, we started our journey well when we obeyed.

[20:27] We heard and obeyed. And part two of the test then we pass is we proceed well when we consciously acknowledge that we are pilgrims and strangers.

And that comes to the third part then. Despite always being an alien in the land that they were promised, it says of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they died in faith, not having received the things promised.

The patriarchs, you see, were happy with their state of impermanence. Because the promises that they held on to were better by far than any obstacle or threat or aggravation that came from being a stranger and a pilgrim.

And it's these promises that allow us to finish well too. Verse 15 says, If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had an opportunity to return.

You see, the patriarchs refused to look back. And thus they persevered to the end. And neither can we look back. The life we have given up has no merit at all when we compare it to what citizenship in God's country means.

[21:46] Attitude should be like Paul's. He says, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. The somber truth is that we will take nothing out of this life anyway.

So we're not foolish. And what could be better than to die in faith? But not only to die, to then 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 yours and mine too, if we finish well. Take a moment, just think about it.

It's an utterly mind-blowing statement. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God. For he prepared a city for them. That the God who made all things and who has nothing of which to be ashamed ever should say such a thing.

Of this weak, turncoat, betraying, whatever else you can describe Abraham. As I say, have a look at his life.

[22 : 59] It's certainly not all wine and roses. And neither is ours. But this is the key. He will say that of us. Because if we carry through this pilgrimage of ours to the end.

You see, the hope is, as we proceed along, that God is pleased. We have this knowledge that God is pleased to identify with his people.

And not only in the future. It's not that he'll tell us one day. He is our God now. And as such, we have the full resources of the Godhead to undergird our progress.

We're not left alone. So, this is not, if you're worried that you're doing this by yourself. We have God's word. We have the spirit. We know that the loving arms of the Savior are round about us. So, if you've been listening and thinking that estrangement from this world and the pilgrimage demanded of a Christian are way too hard or too costly. Then remember, God's grace will carry us on.

[24 : 10] Think again about the promises of God and hold on to them for dear life. Grace calls us and grace carries us home.

I love C.S. Lewis' The Great Divorce. Especially the one where he describes that one day, when our journey ends, we will come to see that we had always been in the heavenly country.

When we look back in this life, we will not see the struggles and strife. We will see the God who is with us then was always with us. And that's a glorious thought.

This road will never be too tough to travel. This world's scorn will never be too hard to bear. If we remind ourselves of that. The life Jesus offers you when you respond in obedience to his call is a radical one.

That demanded you hate this life. And forsake all its treasure. But in return, you are guaranteed a better country.

[25 : 21] And that's what we said at the beginning. We're all looking for. 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 that city with foundations. Whose architect and builder is God. Are you looking for the coming of the day of the Lord?

That's the day when our final home will become truly apparent. And it is the same city that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were waiting for. In Revelation, John says, I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people.

And he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

[26 : 31] There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. For the old order of things has passed away. This wilderness has passed away.

These then are the promises that we hold on to. These are the promises that make our pilgrimage bearable. And for which our citizenship test has been preparing us. So part three, we know we have finished well.

When we find ourselves at that 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 and representatives in this wicked generation.

For this is not our country. And we don't belong here anymore. If our feet are set on the path of obedience.

And our eyes are cast in the correct direction. Then we will have passed our heavenly citizenship test. As with Abraham.

[27 : 45] May it be said of us. Instead. They were longing for a better country. A heavenly one.
Amen. E fragile. Amen.
Amen. Amen. defin didn't