

Excursus: Looking for a Better Country

The writer's parenthesis (vv. 13-16) focuses on the forward-looking nature of faith, especially as it recognizes, embraces, and lives in view of the inheritance God appointed for His people. Because an inheritance is a *future* commodity, it is necessarily embraced as a matter of *hope* (Romans 8:24-25). This is true of any sort of inheritance, even one established by legally binding agreements; until the terms are met by which an heir obtains his inheritance, he must own it "at a distance," holding it with hopeful expectancy. This is not to suggest that an heir patiently waiting for his natural inheritance is an instance of *faith* in the biblical sense. This is clearly not the case, since faith has *God* as its object, not any particular thing one expects or hopes to obtain. Faith presupposes and expresses a true and vital relational knowledge of the living God, and so doesn't apply to those who don't know Him in this way. Such people might manifest certain qualities associated with faith (hopefulness, expectation, etc.), but they do not possess *faith*.

A natural heir doesn't necessarily possess faith, but he does live with a sense of confident expectancy regarding the inheritance that has been pledged to him. And to the extent that he actually believes he will one day obtain it, that inheritance affects the way the heir views and orders his present life. *He lives his life in the present with an eye toward the future that he believes awaits him.* This dynamic is fundamental to the writer's parenthesis, which focuses on the way God's faithful people relate to the inheritance He has promised them.

Again, this parenthesis occurs in the middle of the writer's treatment of Abraham and his faith, and there is no doubt that he was including the three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) in his opening statement, "*All these died in faith, without receiving the promises...*" As well, in context, the primary "promise" the writer was drawing on was God's covenant pledge of a land inheritance – the land of Canaan. For this reason, and pointing out that their descendents *did* inherit this land, many have sought to limit the writer's referent ("*all these*") to the patriarchs. But, as noted, the immediate context suggests that the author had in mind, not just Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but *all* of their faithful descendents. This is indicated by verse 12, but more importantly by the very argument the writer was making, which is that Canaan *wasn't* the inheritance God actually promised to Abraham and his covenant descendents.

- The patriarchs themselves understood this, evident in their contentment to live as foreigners and transients in the "promised land" (11:9).
- And so it was with their Israelite descendents, who came to possess the land, kingdom and dominion promised to Abraham, and yet never enjoyed the rest and intimacy with God that those things represented (ref. 11:39-40; cf. also 4:6-8 with Joshua 21:43-45).

Canaan didn't provide Israel with the rest and peace the covenant promised, *precisely because it didn't resolve the exile that left mankind expelled from God's garden-sanctuary.* Every covenant child of Abraham remained in essential exile from God, regardless of whether he lived in Canaan or not, and regardless of the presence of Jerusalem and its temple. Canaan was the "promised land" to the extent that it was Yahweh's habitation where He dwelt with His people, but the relationship represented by this mutual habitation was never realized. Even when His *shekinah* was present in the Holy of Holies, God remained distant and estranged from His covenant "son."

The patriarchs were content to live as foreign sojourners in Canaan because they knew that this “promised land” was only a symbol for the true habitation in which God would fulfill His pledge to be God to Abraham’s offspring such that they would be His people in truth. This is the sense in which they were looking for a “better country” – a dwelling place “designed and constructed by God.” They understood that God was promising a habitation where He and His image-children would dwell together in perfect intimacy. And given the extent and scope of man’s fall, only God’s will and hand could see such a habitation actually realized (ref. Deuteronomy 30:1-6; Jeremiah 24:1-7, 31:31-34; Ezekiel 34:1-31; 36:22-38; Zechariah 8:1-8; etc.). Abraham’s descendents eventually possessed the land he only traversed as a sojourner, but they too, looked beyond its goodness and glory – even the glory of David’s kingdom in its fullness – to the heavenly habitation they understood by faith to be their true inheritance (11:16, 39).

This much is clear from this context, but what exactly is the “better country” – the “heavenly city” – that the writer was referring to, and that is the inheritance of the faithful? Multitudes of Christians instinctively associate this imagery with the conventional notion of heaven, and so take from this passage affirmation that God’s people have always recognized eternity in heaven as their inheritance. Not just believers in Jesus in the Christian era, but the faithful in every age have set their vision on the “heavenly city” whose gates they enter when they die. This is perhaps the predominant view among Christians since at least the Middle Ages, and yet the Scripture recognizes no such hope or inheritance. The notion that God’s faithful are promised “eternal life” in an other-worldly realm called “heaven” would have been utterly foreign and preposterous to the people of Israel, for no such teaching exists in their scriptures. Indeed, Christians who examine the New Testament carefully also find no such inheritance pledged to the saints.

The human destiny set out in Israel’s scriptures, beginning with the creation account and through all the Law, Prophets and Writings, is the consummating of human identity and vocation in relation to God and His creation. This human destiny is connected with the creation’s renewal, but it’s also fundamental and essential to that renewal. Thus Paul asserted that the creation, which also languishes under the curse, awaits the full manifestation of the “sons of God,” knowing that that manifestation will herald its own deliverance and renewal (Romans 8:12-23). This was Paul’s eschatological vision, but he derived it from Israel’s scriptures, not from some new or extra-biblical insight. Paul was an Israelite who believed precisely what God had always promised in Israel’s sacred writings; it’s just that now, he’d come to understand those promises and their fulfillment in terms of Jesus the Messiah and His death and resurrection.

Like his devout countrymen, Paul had been looking for the *Olam Ha Ba* – the “coming age” of Yahweh’s consummate kingdom marked by His return, triumphal judgment and reign over all the earth through His messianic Servant and Davidic King. This was the inheritance God promised through His prophets, and every covenant child of Abraham longed to be part of the faithful (“righteous”) throng that would inherit this kingdom and its glory. Most importantly, this inheritance was perceived to be an *earthly* one. Yes, it was to be “heavenly,” but because it would see the heavenly and earthly realms conjoined, not because it would exclude or be separate from the earth and the natural creation. The faith and hope of Israel’s faithful were directed toward the God whom they believed would prove faithful by fulfilling His promise to renew all things and flood the *earth* with His presence and glory and a true and living knowledge of Him, just as the waters cover the sea (cf. Isaiah 11:1-9; Habakkuk 2:14; Zechariah 14:8-11).

The inheritance God has promised to His children is very much an earthly one, and this truth rebukes the widespread notion that “heaven” is the Christian’s destiny. But it does more than provide a doctrinal corrective; *this understanding of the human inheritance has profound practical significance*. So much so, that, without it, it is impossible for a person to live a faithful life. How can one be faithful when his faith and hope are directed toward something that God neither intends nor promised? Faithfulness involves owning what God *Himself* owns; it is binding one’s perspective, priorities and practice to the God who has spoken, acted and promised. Faithfulness involves owning the God who is “yes and amen” in Jesus the Messiah.

Faithfulness, then, involves co-laboring with God according to His purposes and the work He is doing. Anything else, however pious, conscientious, or commendable, is actually unbelief set at cross-purposes to God; it is working with a vision and goal other than His own. *This means that Christian faithfulness necessarily involves a certain kind of earthly-mindedness*. Drawing on the Hebrews writer’s imagery, having one’s gaze fixed on the inheritance of a “better country” involves living an engaged and purposeful life in this world, not looking beyond it to “heaven.”

Thus faithfulness is a profoundly ironic enterprise: It is radically and entirely theocentric (specifically, Christ-centered), and yet very much concerned with this world and our lives in it. The reason, again, is that faithfulness is conformity to God’s will and purpose, and His will is to renew His good creation and bind it to Himself in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:9-10). *Christian faithfulness, then, is faithfulness to the Christian vocation, which is to co-labor with God, in the power and leading of the Spirit, in His project of creational renewal. This involves proclaiming and living out the reality of new creation in Jesus, with one’s labors directed toward its fullness.*

This understanding exposes the error – indeed, the *unfaithfulness* – of retreating from the world until we can “go to heaven,” or of devoting one’s energies toward “soul-winning.” Christians already inhabit the heavenly realm by sharing in Jesus’ resurrection. He is the beginning and essential substance of the merging of heaven and earth, and those who share in Him embody that reality, which is the very marrow of God’s “good news.” Christians proclaim the gospel when they testify to the creation’s renewal in Jesus and His transformative lordship over it, not when they explain to people how they can go to heaven when they die. So also they err when they treat this world as *ichabod* and appointed for destruction. The “fire” God has laid in store for the earth will achieve its complete cleansing, not its annihilation. (So 2 Peter 3:10: *The day of the Lord will come as a thief, in which the present heavens will come to their end (i.e., attain their destiny), and the elemental things (the elemental principles and patterns of the present world) will be consumed in the fire of God’s final judgment, and the earth and its works will be fully disclosed and dealt with.* Thus the hope of “new heavens and new earth” – 2 Peter 3:11-13.)

If we would be faithful, we must devote ourselves to testifying – in all things and at all times – to the reality of new creation in Jesus and God’s intent to renew all things in Him. This testimony goes beyond religion, morality and ethics, since these are part of human life in the “old creation.” It is the testimony of a new kind of human existence within a new human community – an existence that confounds and challenges the prevailing order because it involves a new perspective and orientation in engaging the world. This is what it means to “take up one’s cross” (i.e., own for oneself Jesus’ condemnation and execution of Adamic humanness) and “put on the new man.” This is what it means to be faithful (Matthew 16:24-25; Ephesians 4-5; Colossians 3).