

# Dying in Faith

Hebrews 11:13-16

*Halifax: 10 September 2023*

## **Introduction:**

Today we are continuing our sermon series in the book of Hebrews.

- We have been looking at the chapter that gives us examples of people of faith from the Old Testament.
- The purpose is to show us all the benefits that come when we believe God and His promises.
  - With Abel, we saw that faith gives us righteousness. Though we are sinners, if we trust in God to make us righteous, He does.
  - With Enoch, we saw that faith gives us immortality in glory. By faith, Enoch walked with God and was taken to glory, testifying to the ancient world that there is life after death for those who believe.
  - With Noah, we saw how faith enabled him to act wisely when the LORD warned him about the great flood He was sending to judge the world. Because Noah believed, he built an ark according to God's instruction and saved his household.
  - With Abraham, we saw how faith enabled him to obey God's calling, to turn from this world and its idolatry and seek the blessing of a city with sure foundations (one that will last) whose builder and maker is God.
  - With Sarah, we saw how, by faith, she was given the ability to bring forth the child of promise when she was not only barren, but also too old to have a child. By trusting God, she was enabled to bring forth the Son God promised.
- Faith enables us to bring God and His blessings into our lives.
  - We are able to bring God and His promises of salvation into our view as true and real so that we respond by asking Him to save us and to be our God, to give us eternal life through Christ, as He has promised to do for all who come to Him.
    - By believing, by looking to Him for all that He has promised, we receive all that He has promised even before we actually obtain it.
    - Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen—it makes these things real to us and makes them ours before we possess them—that is, before we have the full blessing of God in heaven.
  - Without faith, we avoid the true God—we distort Him and we have no use for what He promises, nor do we look for Him to fulfil His promises for us.
    - Instead, we either despair and become hopeless and miserable;
    - Or we delude ourselves for a time into thinking we can find all that we want in this world—ignoring not only how short our time in this world is, but even worse, ignoring the eternal sentence of God to hell that we must suffer for our sin if we never come to Christ whom He has provided for our forgiveness.
    - God did not send His Son to die on the cross for no reason. It is only by Him that we can be forgiven and reconciled to God and live with Him forever in heaven—in righteousness and wholeness.

The passage we come to today, Hebrews 11:13-16, describes how all those who believe die in faith without yet receiving what God has promised.

- Let's take a look at... Hebrews 11:13-16. Remember that it is the holy word of God.

**Hebrews 11:13-16: These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. <sup>15</sup>**

**And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. <sup>16</sup> But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.**

Thanks be to God for His precious Word.

**I. To understand this passage and how it applies to us, we need to clarify three things:**

A. What does it mean when it says: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises"?

1. It means that when they died, they still believed that God would give them what He promised, even though they still did not have the things that He had promised.

- In other words, they continued to believe what He had promised throughout their whole lives even though they never received them in this life.
- They died, still believing that they would receive them... that God would do all that He had said.
- That is what it means when it says that they died in faith.

2. There are three levels at which a promise can be said to have been received.

- For example, if your uncle promises to give you his house,
  - On the first level, you have received the promise when he makes it, whether you believe it or not.
  - On the second level, you have received the promise when you believe it, even if you don't have his house yet. You have it in the sense that you believe he will keep his promise and give it to you.
  - On the third level, you have received the promise when you actually get the house and move in.
- This passage teaches you that believers are at the second level until they die.
  - The promise had been spoken by God and they believe it, but they are still waiting for it to be fulfilled.

➤ Now, the second question.

B. Who does it refer to when it says: "These all"?

- This is a little tricky to answer. There are different opinions.
- 1. Some say that it only refers to Abraham's immediate family who have already been mentioned (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob). They are certainly a graphic example because they are specifically described as having a land promised to them that they actually walked in but never obtained possession of.

- Those who hold this view note that the land was not promised to Abel, Enoch, and Noah, and that Enoch did not actually die—so it must refer to Abraham and his family as the ones who died in faith, not receiving the promise.
  - Those who say this fall into two main camps.
    - One camp is clearly wrong because they deny that Abraham and the Old Testament people in general had any thought of heaven—they think that they were only focused on this life. This is clearly wrong. This very passage makes it clear that they were looking for God’s eternal city.
    - The other camp sees them as a shining example of faith because they died believing, despite the fact that they received so little of what God had promised even in this life—the land, the Son who would save them, etc.
      - Those in this camp powerfully apply the example of Abraham’s family to us who today have received so much more, having seen how God raised up Israel, gave them the land, and brought forth Christ.
      - If they believed before seeing all of that fulfilled, how much more should we believe who have seen all that and wait only for the return of Christ to establish His heavenly kingdom!
- I don’t think this view is what the passage refers to when it says “these all.” It is a powerful and true point, but it does not seem to be what is referred to.
2. A second view is that “These all” speaks of all those who are mentioned so far in Hebrews 11:4-11, including Abel, Enoch, and Noah, along with Abraham and his family up until Jacob.
- Those who hold this view argue that even though they were not promised the land of Canaan, they were promised God’s ultimate blessing which they did not receive.
3. It seems better to say that “These all” refers to *all* the Old Testament saints who died in faith without receiving the promises.
- This seems to be the better interpretation for several reasons.
    - a. First, because the words “these all” seem to properly refer to more than just Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, and the three others named.
      - If these were all that are meant, it would seem better to simply say “They” instead of “These all.”
      - “These all” would seem to speak of a greater number of persons.
    - b. Second, because “these all” seems to be referring to the innumerable persons spoken of in the preceding verses.
      - Last week we looked at the two verses preceding:
        - Heb 11:11-12: **By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.**
      - This great multitude that is brought forth by God’s supernatural power is made up of all the people who have been and will be saved by Jesus Christ.

- They could not be brought forth without divine power. Divine power was required to bring the Son of Promise, Jesus Christ, who would save them all.
  - By faith, Sarah received strength to bring forth the son from whom Israel would spring and through whom Christ the Son of God would come through whom all the elect from every nation would be saved.
    - However, as it speaks of them in the past tense, it seems to be limited to those in the Old Testament who died before Christ came.
- c. A third reason for taking “These all” to refer to all the Old Testament believers is found in the conclusion to Hebrews 11 which uses the same designation to refer to them all in exclusion from us in the NT.
- **Heb 11:39-40: And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us [we who live after Christ has come].**
  - They trusted God until they died, even though they saw neither the coming of Christ and His saving work, which we have now seen, nor the establishment of God’s kingdom of glory, for which we also wait.
- Clearly, Hebrews 11:39-40 speaks of the promise of Christ’s coming to do His saving work which we have seen and they of the Old Testament did not see.
- But what does our passage today, Hebrews 11:13-16 emphasise?
  - That is actually the third question I want to answer:
- C. What is the ultimate promise that ‘these all’ sought but did not receive? I will add that it is the promise that we who believe still seek and have not received.
- ANSWER> It is the promise of our eternal blessed home with God our Father.
1. This is set forth plainly in verse 14 in the word *homeland*.
    - **Heb 11:14: For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.**
    - The word *homeland* is more literally *fatherland*.
      - It is *patris* in the original which comes from *pater* which means *father*.
    - We have already been told in Heb 11:10 that Abraham was waiting for the city which has foundations (a permanent city) whose builder and maker is God.
      - In verse 16 it is called a heavenly country and a city that God has prepared.
  2. When we hear God’s call to salvation, it is a call to enter God’s house.
    - a. This call is expressed in a variety of ways:
      - It is a call to be restored to God as our God through Jesus who saves us.
      - It is a call to enter His kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ.

- It is a call to everlasting life—that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life—to be an heir with Christ in His Father’s house.
  - God told Abraham that He would be His God, and that Abraham and all His spiritual seed would be His people—they would have God as their God.
- b. Like Abraham and all the Old Testament saints, we also die in faith believing this promise, seeking this home with God, this fatherland.
- c. What is this home?
- 1) It is a home that is a kingdom of those who by Christ have been restored to God as their God—
    - Where we live with Him as our God and where He blesses us as His people with a blessing that none but God can bestow!
    - A blessing worthy of His own children!
  - 2) It is a home the way a home ought to be.
    - A home where we have peace, wholeness, safety, protection, rich provision, happiness, and sweet pleasures.
    - A home where we know God, where we clearly see His beauty, His majesty, His glory, His wisdom—which is infinitely more than all the beauty, majesty, goodness, glory and wisdom that is in this world—a glory that is without corruption.
    - A home where He is our Father.
  - 3) It is also home where we are all that we were created to be.
    - A home where we are God-lovers who perfectly love Him, who serve Him, who obey Him, who pour out ourselves for Him completely.
    - It is a home where we love one another, serving one another, delighting in one another, each of us made perfect and sinless.
    - It is a home of perfect harmony, where we are in harmony with God, with each other, and even with nature...
      - There is no more curse, no more death, no more sickness or injury.
      - Eternal joys and lasting pleasures.
  - 4) All of this is contained in God’s promise to be our God and to make us His people—in His promise that “I will bless you.”
    - If He blesses us, we will be blessed.

TRANS> So brothers and sisters, like Abraham and all the Old Testament saints, we are seeking this glorious city, once we believe, until the day we die.

- Even though we have not yet received it, we believe it right up until the day we die.
- Like all of the Old Testament saints, we die in faith not receiving the promises.

**II. Our passage teaches us how God’s promise of this homeland (this house with God as our Father) takes hold of us until we die—of how it captivates us.**

- What is true of the Old Testament saints is true of us.
    - Three things to consider here:
      - that we see the promises afar off;
      - that we embrace them;
      - and that we confess that we are not at home in this world—not at home till we reach our Father’s house. Let’s look at them.
- A. Though we have not received our homeland, we see it from afar by faith.
1. Verse 13 says that we have seen the promises afar off.
    - Even though Christ’s kingdom of glory may still be far in the future, faith has eyes that see into the future...
    - We believe what God has promised and so we have it by faith.
    - It becomes ours, as it were, by faith.
  2. We know we will definitely have it because God has promised it.
    - Of course we would rather experience the blessing than to just have it promised; nevertheless, what God has promised is just as sure as if it had already happened.
    - Our faith can be weak, but the promise is solid and sure, and our faith, such as it is, enables us to live the expectation and reality of it.
      - It gives comfort and hope in our trials and afflictions because we know that the outcome of everything is God’s house in glory.
  3. Perhaps I should mention that the next words—that we are assured of the promises—do not appear to be part of the original as they are not in the majority of the manuscripts.
    - Likely, it was a marginal note that simply got inserted in a few copies as part of the original text. Certainly, it is true—that when you see what God has promised, you are assured of it.
- B. Next we are told that believers *embrace* the promises.
1. The Greek word translated *embrace* means *to greet* or *to welcome*.
    - So the idea conveyed is that we do not simply believe the promises about inheriting God’s house, but that we welcome them—we delight in them.
    - We see them as wonderful promises.
      - John Brown says: “They were not only persuaded of the truth and certainty of the promises, but also of the goodness of the things promised. The blessings promised were the objects of their desire, esteem, and affection.”
  2. Truly, when you believe, you cannot live without God’s promise of heaven.
    - The very thought of being cut off from it is repulsive to you...
    - You want to be with Him in glory, you want to be delivered from sin, you want to be free of misery and the curse, of death.
  3. Like Abraham, what happens to you in the present world makes little difference as long as it brings you at last to your Father’s house.

- Even more, now that Jesus has come and we have beheld His glory and had the promise of heaven more fully confirmed to us, we are filled with joy.
  - John Calvin says: “Though God gave to the fathers only a taste of that grace which is largely poured on us, though he shewed to them at a distance only an obscure representation of Christ, who is now set forth to us clearly before our eyes, yet they were satisfied and never fell away from their faith: how much greater reason then have we at this day to persevere? If we grow faint, we are doubly inexcusable.”
  - We are on our way to glory. We can’t wait to get there. Like Jacob serving Laban for Rachael, the years of our service seem few because of the great love we have for the glory that God has promised.
- 4. But let’s be honest here—often our love is not as strong as it ought to be.
  - But if we are true believers, if we have saving faith, we have received not only the truth, but also the love for what God has promised...
    - And this love keeps us going onward to the celestial city.
- C. The third thing we are told regarding the promise of our fatherland is that because of this promise, we confess that we are strangers and pilgrims in this world.
  1. When we say that we are strangers, we are saying that this world is not our home.
    - Our home is with our Father in heaven.
    - When we say that we are pilgrims, we are declaring that we are just passing through. We are ever moving onward to our heavenly home.
      - We need to confess this and remember this when life is hard here. This is not our home.
      - We need to confess this when we are discontent and start to covet things—this is not our home, we are but pilgrims and strangers.
  2. We have examples of this confession in every age.
    - a. Certainly, it is the confession of Abraham and his sons who wandered about in the promised land without ever possessing it...
      - But even if they had come to possess it, they would still have confessed (and known) that they were but pilgrims and strangers in this world.
      - How do I know that?
        - Because David, who *did* possess the land of Canaan that God gave His people to be their habitation in this world confessed that this was so.
          - In Psalm 39:12, he said: “**Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; do not be silent at my tears; for I *am* a stranger with You, a sojourner, as all my fathers *were*.**”
          - In Psalm 119:19, he said: “**I *am* a stranger in the earth; do not hide Your commandments from me.**”
          - And in 1 Chron 29:15, he said: “**For we *are* aliens and pilgrims before You, as *were* all our fathers; our days on earth *are* as a shadow, and without hope.**”

- b. This is also our testimony of New Testament believers.
- In 1 Cor 15:19, Paul, speaking of the resurrection, confesses: **If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.**
  - In Romans 8, he speaks of our the whole creation is groaning until it is renewed, and then he says: <sup>23</sup> **Not only *that*, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.** <sup>24</sup> **For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?** <sup>25</sup> **But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for *it* with perseverance.**
    - There is what we might call a holy discontentment with this world which is a holy discontent when it is rooted in joyful contentment because of the better things that God has promised.
  - Peter also testifies to being a stranger and pilgrim here when he says (1 Pet 2:11): **Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul...**

TRANS> The world does not understand us because we are living for things that we cannot see. We see them with the eye of faith. We welcome them, and we confess that this present world is not our home.

- We are looking for our heavenly inheritance in God's house.
- We have an eternal perspective.

### III. So let me ask you, has the promise of an eternal home with God taken hold of you? Are you a believer? Are you living for that promise of glory?

A. Every day, you have opportunities to show where your treasure is—what you live for.

1. Verse 15 explains that the Old Testament believers, if they had wanted to go back to the world, had plenty of opportunities to do so.
  - **Heb 11:15-16: And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.** <sup>16</sup> **But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*.**
    - When it speaks of calling to mind the country from which they had come out, it speaks of calling it to mind in a dreamy way—of wanting to go back.
  - After Abraham left Ur where he had lived like a prince, he could easily have gone back if he had wanted to.
    - Once he realised that he had been reduced to a nomadic life, living in tents and struggling to find a place where he could feed his servants and his flocks, he could have said, “It is enough—I was better off in Ur—God has given me nothing—I am going home.”
  - Yes, if he had concluded that he was better off, nothing would have prevented him from going back.
2. It is the same with you.



- Every day you are given choices—are you going to do what pleases God, or are you going to pursue the things of this world?
    - Will you live for the LORD or for the world?
    - Will you serve others, or will you serve yourself?
    - Will you look at porn or at God’s Word?
    - Will you tithe or will you purchase whatever you have been dreaming about?
    - Will you keep the Sabbath, or will you find something else to do?
    - Will you get drunk or high, or will you be filled with the Spirit and give praise and thanks to God?
    - Will you correct your child, or will you ignore them because you want to do something else?
    - Will you testify to that neighbour of your hope in Christ, or will you protect yourself from the ridicule that might come?
    - Will you spend the day worrying about what people think of you, or will you focus on their needs and how you may serve them?
    - Will you lash out in anger, or will you seek to restore your relationship with the one who wronged you?
    - Will you indulge your bitterness about your past, or will you give thanks to God for His many blessings and for forgiving you?
  - You are constantly showing where your heart is—what you treasure.
    - Is it God’s kingdom or this world with its temptations to sin?
    - There are plenty of opportunities to return to the world.
3. But let me tell you, there is nothing worthwhile in the world for you. You have an eternal soul.
- As it says in verse 16 of believers, **“Now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.”**
  - The world is a vain and empty show. It is full of promises that will not be fulfilled. It offers you immediate pleasure, but afterward, it disappoints.
    - God will not disappoint. Those He blesses are truly blessed!
- B. But let me warn you. The passage is clear. God’s reward does not come until after you die.
1. God does not give us our full inheritance now. It would not be good for us. He tells us to expect suffering now:
- Jesus told us that if we follow Him, we can expect much tribulation.
  - Paul once said (Phil 1:29) that it has been given to you not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for His sake.
    - We heard his words in 1 Cor 15. If our hope is only in this life then we are of all people most pitiable.

- Peter tells you not to think something has gone wrong or that something strange has happened to you when fiery trials come (1 Pet 4:12).
    - That is the way God deals with us when we come to Him for as long as we are in this world—we die in faith, not receiving His promises.
2. We are told in verse 16 of our text that He is not ashamed to call us His people even though we live our whole life, often afflicted, without receiving what He has promised.
- **v. 16: God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.**
  - The world will look at us and say, “What do you have for all your service to God?” Perhaps they have more money, more leisure, better health...
    - They measure what we have on their terms, not realising that this world and all its glory will pass away; not realising that the glory of this world is nothing compared to the glory of God and of life in His house.
    - Without faith, they can’t see what you see. It is right there, but they suppress it—the sinfully suppress it.
  - When you tell them that you are seeking the glory that is to come to those who are reconciled to God through Christ, they will mock and laugh.
    - They will say, “What good is that to me now?”
    - But you see, you see afar off what God had promised. To you it is real, and you embrace it, and you confess that your treasure is not in this world—that you are a stranger and pilgrim here.
3. God is not ashamed for His people to be in that condition. And why not?
- Because He knows what He has prepared for us.
    - He knows that glorious city that He is going to give us, and that He is preparing us for in this present world.
    - The world can mock and ridicule all it wants, but our Lord knows what He is going to give to us.
  - If what He gives us in this world as His people was all that He has for us, He would indeed be embarrassed to say, “These are my people.”
    - They would be right to say, “Is that all?”
    - But He is like a father waiting to bestow a wonderful gift on His child at the proper time when it can be fully appreciated.
      - You can be absolutely sure that there will be no embarrassment at all about what He gives us in the end.
      - He knows that. Your faith knows that too.