

God and His Promises

Hebrews 11:13-31

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And as we together look again at God's Word in Hebrews 11:13-31. This series in Hebrews we have titled *The Radiance of Christ*. It is the promises of God in Christ that shapes the way we live. Or does it? So church, I encourage you this morning to know that if there is a pep rally ever in the Book of Hebrews, this is it. This is before the national championship, coach in the locker room, preparing his team that is predicted to lose by all those who can look at the numbers and data. And yet the coach believes and is trying to instill in them that victory is assured. That is what this portion of Hebrews is about. It is an encouragement. It is an encouragement to his audience, and it is to be an encouragement to us. But please note, it is not an encouragement that encourages or asks or pretends to ignore the difficulties and sufferings in the present. Rather, it is a call to hope in the midst of them. How are you doing with regard to hope? Hoping in the promises of God? Hear now God's Word, Hebrews 11:13-31.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Father, we now ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would help us to be full of the joy in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose promises are sure. Yet the ridicule will surely be swift and often acute, because we believe in One who is unseen, yet whose promises are written in a book derided and ridiculed as being old and not relevant, unworthy of our trust. And yet we are called week in and week out, day in and day out, to hold our faith sure upon the promises of God that are revealed in this Word. Help us as the church of Jesus Christ not to be beat down, not to look in the midst of our suffering down upon the ground as if we had no hope, but to be reminded of the promises of God given to us, the forerunners of faith, that we might be filled with joy, hope, and peace in God and his promises. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So you see as we look together in this outline, as we look at this passage together, things in common; future not the past; and audacity of hope. These are all predicated on the promises of God as we look together first at the list of names which are given to us—names which we're already familiar with, because they've already been mentioned, many of them, in this chapter. But as we look at this list of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Esau, Moses, Rahab—in these names are not just the stories which we've repeated in Sunday school, but there are things in common that each of them have, though separated over years, that we must look at to gain an understanding of why their trust was in the promises of God. So let's look together at the things in common.

First, they had in common, as we read through this text, that each of them was facing suffering, trial, and/or death. Each of them. Verses 13, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30, and 31 all have within them, either explicitly or clearly inferred, that each of these folks were facing imminent death, suffering, and trial. And yet it tells us that they sought to live by faith. In fact, it tells us in verses 13 and 14. It says, "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." What they had in common as they faced death or suffering or great trial is that they believed in the face of these things that there were promises that had been given. There were promises that they would never see fulfilled in their own lifetimes. But they could only see threads of the future. Yet the text tells us they greeted them from afar.

The idea of faith here, and the idea of hope, is not a matter that they had a small opinion. The words and the force of the tense of the verbs is such that they were settled convictions, much as we looked at last week. Faith is not the absence of reason. Or said another way—reason is not the enemy of faith; emotions are. It's not that they lacked reason. It's that they placed their reason, their foundation of their hope, on the certainty of God's promises because of his actions already taken place in their lives. In fact, it goes on to say that if they were thinking that the land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. They could have, and they were tempted to at times—to return to the land that they had left. And yet in the midst of facing this suffering and death, they said, "No, I will trust that the Lord will be faithful to his promise, though I cannot see him."

And that is the second part of the things that they have in common. Each one of them trusted in the unseen God because of their settled conviction that what God had promised would come true. Consider with me just one of them, because we don't have time to go through all of them. Verse 22, it says, "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones." Meaning though he would never enter the Promised Land, though he would not see exactly how it would all unfold, said that when he died, that he wanted his bones preserved, that they would take them with them as they journeyed, and when you reach the Promised Land you are to bury them there. Those instructions were based on a settled conviction that God had promised that he would lead his people to a Promised Land filled with milk and honey, and so he believed.

And so what would happen? The people of God took the bones of Joseph all through their journeying through the desert. Through all of their suffering, his bones remained in the box. And they were buried in Shekem, in the Promised Land. And if you recall, we've already been there the last several

months. Shekem was the place which was surrounded by enemies, and yet God's people took time once they reached there. Part of them went on the north side, and the other went on the south side, and they began declaring antiphonally, meaning back to one another, that God is worthy of praise because he is faithful to his promise. In the midst of battle, they did not fear their enemies. Joseph did not fear, because he believed that God would be faithful to his promise. These are the things they had in common. They faced death, they faced suffering, and yet they believed the promises of the unseen God. And we can go back, and we can read the testimony of God's faithfulness to his promises.

But in this, we see this one beautiful, golden strand going through the things that they had in common. And that is hope—a hope. Which takes us to this next portion: their belief, their lives in the present, were shaped by the future, not the past or even what they were facing in the present. By that I mean when it tells us here in verse 15 that, "If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city." So their hope, their experience in the present tense, was shaped by a future orientation—what theologians call an eschatological orientation, meaning the end of all things.

They saw, because of the promises of God, that he would have a settled place—but more than that, would make them his own, restore them, and give them a place that would see no end, a kingdom that would see no end, a throne that would see no end. They believed. And so therefore, their future is what shaped them. Not the poverty of their past. Not the fact that they were considered nobodies in the past. They believed that God would come true to his promise. And therefore in the midst of their suffering, what would they do? Look at what Moses did. It tells us. Verse 25—instead of being considered the son of Pharaoh's daughter and being guaranteed a life of pleasure and luxury, he chose to be recognized among his fellow Israelites as a Jew, and therefore mistreated.

And in that mistreatment, verse 26, does this mean, "He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward." It's not that he knew Christ, but he understood that God had presented himself to him in the burning bush. God's presence in the Old Testament was the pre-incarnated Christ, the Spirit of God showing himself, demonstrating himself to Moses that, indeed, he would give himself to this suffering. Because though he would not see exactly how it would all unfold, he considered reproach in the name of God for the sake of being faithful to God—he considered it of greater value. This is a person whose future shapes their present.

As we looked at last week, can you imagine the emotions that would have been screaming out at him? Of course. Can you imagine the imagination as he was suffering? What if he had said he was indeed Pharaoh's son? If he had said this, you imagine what he would have thought—like, what life would have been like? Of course he would have. Just as we imagine. Don't we? Hasn't there been a time when we imagined, "What would it be like to not have to worry about money at all?" Now, maybe you're unusual. I have. Haven't you? I'm getting ready to try to put a daughter through college. Yeah, I've thought about it. Especially when she showed me the list.

But the reality is, we have a choice to make. And here's the question: what future hope shapes you? The question is not whether a future hope shapes you. The question is, which one? Dr. Timothy Keller in his book on suffering writes these words as he reflects on the promises of God and the future orientation of Christian faith. He asks these questions:

Do you believe that when you die, you rot? That life in this world is all the happiness you will ever get? Do you believe that someday, the sun is going to die, and all human civilization is going to be gone, and nobody will remember anything anyone has ever done? That's one way to imagine your future, but there is another. Do you believe in the new heavens and the new

earth? Do you believe in a judgment day when every evil deed and injustice will be redressed? Do you believe you are headed for a future of endless joy?

Those two utterly different futures, and depending on which one you believe, are going to handle your dungeons, your suffering, in two utterly different ways. So it's not just how your future hopes shape your present enjoyments, but how you face your present suffering. If all this is all there is, then we cling to the things we can place our hands on. We cling to the fact that we believe all we have is our family, and if that doesn't work out, what will we think? If all this is all that we have, I will cling to my retirement, because that is the path that I want to take, because I want to experience greater joy, and this is all there is; you only live once.

The question is not how your future hopes spark your joys. The question is, as Keller asks, how does your future hopes shape your present suffering? He writes about one particular scholar whose name is Howard Thurman. Howard Thurman was an African-American theologian and scholar who, in 1947, was invited to lecture at Harvard University on the meaning of the spirituals that were sung among the slaves in the American South. Thurman responded to one of the criticisms of these songs. And that same criticism is given to the exact passage which we have read from this morning, at the idea that Moses would allow himself to face suffering because he believed in a coming Christ. It's otherworldly, they said to Thurman. And indeed, they are filled with references to heaven and to judgment day and to crowns, Thurman said. But he left them with this idea. He said:

The facts make clear that [this sung faith] did serve to deepen the capacity of endurance and the absorption of suffering...It taught a people how to ride high in life, to look squarely in the face those facts that argue most dramatically against all hope and to use those facts as raw material out of which they fashioned hope that the environment, with all its cruelty could not crush. This enabled them to reject annihilation and to affirm a terrible right to live.

They were otherworldly. They believed in otherworldly promises. Why? Because the world often screams around us that left to our own devices, we will destroy one another for our own ends. And indeed, we do. We will be laid bare by the idea that to each his own, and may the best man win, or woman. And so they looked at this, they looked at the Scriptures, and they realized that the God of Christianity promised in his goodness that a day will come when all injustice will not just be punished but will be undone. It will be reversed. And all evil will be judged, and the Lord will give to those who walk in faith with him an eternity of relationship in the new heavens and the new earth forever. And that might be to some scholars somewhere today and through the centuries a load of ridicule.

But the reality is, until we hear the voices of our forefathers in the faith, until we are able to get down and dirty in the narratives of Christians who have gone before us who were able to sing at the burning at a cross, because they translated the Scriptures into a vulgar tongue—then we begin to see that it shapes our suffering. It might be worthy of ridicule, but it is a people who are convinced. Convinced that it is the future, not the past, and not even the present, that shapes who we are. It is God and his promises. These folks are not outlining in a catalog for us of saying, "Go be like Abraham," because you can't. You can't go be like Moses, because we can't. We're not Moses, and we're not Abraham, and we never will be. Those were particular people with a particular, special relationship with the Lord. And yet what we are called to see is that they were a people who did as which we are called to do. Ask this question: what future hope do you have in the Lord Jesus Christ, and how is it shaping your present and your present suffering and what you cannot control, or what you might be afraid of?

And then we see, as this passage moves on, the audacity of hope. When it says that:

By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. By faith the walls of

Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies. [Verses 29-31]

The audacity of hope held a people who were not worthy of praise, the Israel, to leave Egypt far wealthier than they ever came into it. Though they were sitting by the Red Sea trembling and angry at Moses wondering, "Why did you bring us out here to die?" Yet the Lord in his faithfulness led them in victory. And then, aside from Sarah, the only woman in this catalog is Rahab. Oh, praise God for the story of Rahab, a prostitute that the Lord would use in the chain of unfolding his redemptive purposes with hoping in the faithfulness of God which shield and protect these spies so that the Lord might fulfill his promises. This is what the Lord through the writer of Hebrews decides to give to us. And in his craft, he's putting it out there. He's putting out the father of the faith, Abraham, all the way down to Rahab. And he's putting them all on the same plane. And he's saying, "Look at what they do. They have their hope in the promises of God."

So we also understand, then, why is he teaching them these things? It is because of this. In Hebrews 10, he said to this people:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. [Hebrews 10:23-25]

And then in verses 35 and 36, he says:

Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. [...] But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. [Hebrews 10:35-36, 39]

He was writing to an audience who were losing their minds, and they were losing their faith. They were beginning to drift. And so he sets out to say to them, "Look and remember." Look and remember. Are you facing suffering and trial and death? So were they. God was faithful to his promise, which is why you are here. God was faithful to his promise to them. He will be faithful to his promise to you, which is why he's able to say, "But we are not those who shrink back and are destroyed." And yet he says, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." [v. 38] He says, "The Lord is coming and will make all things right. What say you?"

The question is to you. What say you, the congregation of Columbia Presbyterian Church? This is a day when we are to remember when we hear these words, we are the church of Jesus Christ—not because of us, but because of Him whose death for our sin and victory over death is ours. And if that is the case, and he has promised that he will come again, who can stand against us? What do we have to we worried about defending that he has not already defended? If someone wants to steal from us—take it. It was never mine. It was a gift, and it will be given tenfold. If we are ridiculed or belittled—my name in faith is written in the Book of Life. Go right ahead.

But in the moment when you feel as though your life is in question, or the suffering feels particularly acute, let me remind you of something which is unusual in the writings of Dr. Keller. I rarely ever heard him give an illustration about himself. But in this book on suffering, he wrote these words:

There have not been many times in my life when I felt the peace that passes understanding. There was one time for which I am very grateful, and it

stemmed from this great Christian hope. It was just before my cancer surgery. My thyroid was about to be removed, and after that I faced a treatment with radioactive iodine to restore any residual cancerous thyroid tissue in my body. Of course, my whole family and I were shaken by it all and deeply anxious.

On the morning of my surgery, after I said my goodbyes to my wife and my sons, I was wheeled into a room to be prepped. And in the moments before they gave me the anesthetic, I prayed. To my surprise, I got a sudden and clear new perspective on everything. It seemed to me that the universe was an enormous realm of joy, mirth, and high beauty. Of course it was; didn't the triune God make it to be filled with his own boundless joy, wisdom, love, and delight? And within this great globe of glory was only one little speck of darkness: our world, where there was temporarily pain and suffering. But it was only one speck, and soon that speck would fade away and everything would be light. And I thought, *It doesn't really matter how this surgery goes. Everything will be all right for me, my wife, my children, my church. It will be all right.* And I went to sleep with a bright peace on my heart.

A few weeks ago, one of our brothers, Bill Devin, went to be with the Lord. Perhaps you were here when I shared this story. But the day before he passed, I was able to visit with him and Vera—Vera who is here today, and I'm grateful for her testimony and trust in the Lord. But she and I were there with her children and grandchildren. It was a day where he was getting on, and he could tell that the time was getting close. Medications were not effective any longer. And it was in those moments as a pastor, and you know you come in, and you're the one who's supposed to pray. And then another chaplain came in. And he had visited earlier in the day, and he was coming back for one last visit. And with two pastors in the room, surely we were going to pray.

But Bill awoke, and he said to the chaplain and to me and to Vera and to his daughters, he said, "I want to pray. I want to pray." And we all held hands around his hospital bed, and he prayed. And he said, "Thank you, Lord, because you know what you are doing. Thank you for your providence. I love you, Lord. Thank you for your grace." I'm grateful to have known Bill, and I'm grateful to know Vera. But I'm grateful not because of what they bring in themselves, but because of the hope that they have in the midst of suffering: there is light. In the midst of suffering, there is the promise of God. It doesn't mean that everything will work out according to what we want. But his promises are worthy of our trust. What say you? Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for this, your Word. We ask now that you would enable us to celebrate around this table the glory of the Lord in the giving of his life for our salvation, that his work on the cross and his victory over the grave is our hope. That our future hope would shape our present—help us, O Lord. Help us as those who doubt, help us as those who are suffering, help us as those who mourn—that the end of the story is the fulfillment of promise and life everlasting. Help us, O Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.