

Sermon 61, Faith's Homeland, Hebrews 11:13-16

Proposition: To die in faith and to live by faith requires you to wean your desires from earth and train them toward heaven, for God has prepared heaven as your true homeland.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the question of citizenship assumes larger and larger dimensions as Nov 5 approaches. Election day is almost here, and even if you have been living under a rock you are more than aware that the politicians want your vote. You may regret it, but at times like these you feel extremely American. While there is an undeniable element of showbusiness in the whole election phenomenon, and a thick layer of political idolatry, there is also something important about citizenship. Our task this morning is to hear Scripture's testimony to our status as impermanent citizens. We have here no continuing city, but we seek the city that is to come. Our faith loosens our grip on the earthly city, and lowers our confidence in politics and politicians. These things may have some profit, but they cannot save us. Our author addresses in our text this morning the historical reality of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's status as strangers and sojourners living in a foreign land. He connects this status to their faith, and in ch. 13 explicitly to ours as well. He tells us that, just like the patriarchs, we need to die in faith and to live by faith. That will require us to train our desires toward heaven and distance ourselves from our earthly homeland. Our motivation and encouragement is that God has prepared heaven for us as our true homeland. We need to live and die by faith, holding our earthly homeland loosely, because God has given us citizenship in His city and that is our true homeland.

I. What You Need to Die in Faith, v. 13

Bearing and nurturing children is the longest test of faith. It will occupy the rest of your life. But the hour of your death is probably the biggest test of faith. Death is the last enemy. If anything can kill your faith, it would be death. But faith conquers death. Faith in the God who will vanquish death gives you the ability to say "Death, you lose. Death, you shall die!" Can you die

in faith? Are you prepared for death? Do you pray for God's guidance? "Be with us now and at the hour of our death" is not a bad prayer.

How can you be ready for the moment of death?

A. To See God's Promises

The writer tells us about the relationship that Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his four wives had to the promises of God. They did not see the promises fulfilled. They did not own Canaan from one end to the other; indeed, no land at all was theirs except a burial plot. Nor did they enjoy heaven during their lifetimes; indeed, one of the realities of heaven is that it cannot be enjoyed by those on earth.

You can be ready for the moment of death like they were: by seeing the promises. They saw the promises from a distance. Faith is opposed to sight, or at least to sight up close. They saw the fulfillment coming, but it was still distant enough that it required faith to believe in it. We have a pretty good indication that a country called The USA will still exist at the end of next week. We can't see the end of next week for sure, but none of the things in motion in the present seems to be the kind of thing that could destroy our country within a week. But run that out to seven hundred years and we simply can't be sure. Seven hundred years ago, England still owned cities on the mainland of France. To see the promise is to just see the smallest outlines of how it might actually be coming to pass in the real world. Abraham didn't see 2 million people leaving Egypt, but he did get to see Isaac and Isaac's two sons. Jacob didn't get to see Israel settled in the land under Solomon, but he did get to see his seventy descendants multiplying in Egypt.

In the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments you see God's promises. You get to know what He has said about you being His child.

B. To Embrace God's Promises

The other thing they did was to greet the promises with joy. They welcomed them. If seeing the promises is about catching little developments, small bits of evidence here and there that show which way God's power is moving, welcoming them is enthusiastically assenting to that power. It is saying "God is at work and I love it. God is going to send a mighty, numberless seed, and I can't wait."

God has promised that the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. We see that distantly, but we do see it. Do you greet that development with joy? Do you hail it from afar, enthusiastically assenting to it and welcoming how things are building?

C. To Admit Your Status as a Stranger

Yet at the same time, by waving and shouting for something that is just beyond the horizon, you are saying "I'm more excited about that thing than I am about what's right in front of me. My fulfillment is to be sought in the promises of God rather than the earthy blessings that are available within reach of my arms." By spending your life welcoming future promises and privileging them over present possessions, you are making a definite statement. You are saying "I don't have a place to invest everything here. I'm investing treasure in heaven. I'm putting my stuff in my true homeland, not here where I will only be temporary." If you say "I'm all about

God's promises" and people say "Aren't you all about your 401k?" you have to say "No, heaven is actually my retirement plan." I'm exaggerating a little bit. Jesus said not to be anxious about tomorrow, but it is okay to buy something today to eat tomorrow, or to save something today to spend tomorrow.

II. What You Need to Live by Faith, vv. 14-15

A. A Quest for a Country of Your Own

Every human being needs a place to belong. You need a country, and if you don't have one, believe me, you will be seeking one.

B. A Distancing from Your Earthly Homeland

But here's the thing: don't think you already have the perfect homeland. Do not give your heart to your earthly homeland. If you are all about America, you are not living by faith. It's good to love your country, but it's better to love heaven. Give what you need to give to this world — render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and all that. But give yourself in your totality to God. Abraham's story dramatizes this by showing Abraham and his descendants never even thinking about returning to Ur. Never is there a moment where Abraham is pulling down the tent and saying "That's it. I'm tired of pretending you're my sister. Let's go home!" and Sarah has to say "No, we're going to stick it out in the Promised Land. You know God is faithful."

Ur was not even a thought for Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. This world was not their home and thus Ur was not their home. All of you are privileged to live in the land of your birth as adults. Natural affection for your country is a good thing, and giving back to the nation that gave to you is a good thing. But don't you understand? The vast, vast majority of your life will not be spent here, but in eternity.

C. A Desire for Heaven, v. 16a

You can't live for America. You must live for heaven. Part of that, of course, means that you enjoy reading the Bible more than reading the news, that you are more concerned with the kingdom of God than the Biden Administration, that you are more eager to bless our Father in Heaven than to curse our Father in Washington. We are seeking a country of our own, a country called Heaven. You are a temporary citizen of America, even if you are a citizen of this country from your birth to your death. But you are a permanent citizen of heaven, a place from which you will never emigrate. Who would leave the right hand of God?

To live seeking heaven means, going back to the beginning of this sermon, having children — because they can go to heaven with you, but nothing else from earth can. Your house, your car, your degrees and your books and your guns and your memberships — none of those will accompany you beyond the great divide. Not everyone with a lot of children is seeking heaven, but by faith Sarah received the strength to carry Isaac and that is how you can show your faith too.

Cultivate your desire for heaven by piling your treasure there. To live seeking heaven means investing there, laying up treasure there, by doing good works. It means thinking and talking about heavenly things more than earthly ones.

I'm not very good at this. Some of you are better at it than I am. But for all of us, focusing on the promises of God rather than on the promises of politicians is one of the first steps toward seeking heaven.

III. Why You Need to Live by Faith, v. 16

Well, all human faith is built on this rock: God is faithful. You can trust Him because He is trustworthy. His word is pure and it will stand.

A. Because God Is Proud to Be Yours

And that word tells us that He is proud to be ours. Knowing yourself, you might not want to be affiliated with yourself. God has no such modesty or shame. He is not ashamed of you and of being your God, the God of the Christians at Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church in Gillette, Wyoming. He is proud to be your God. That is a big part of why you can and must trust Him, why you should be looking to heaven as your true homeland. Since He is proud to be yours, He is not going to let you down. He has put His name on you and that is something He's excited about.

B. Because God Has Your Homeland Ready

He has also put His name on your homeland. He is not ashamed to be your God because He has everything ready. Jesus has gone and prepared that place for you. The many mansions are spruced up and move-in ready. Faith's mother, Sarah, believed that, and she gave birth to Isaac because she was ready for him to find a home in God's house forever. Faith leads us to a better homeland than the one we have. I have no problem saying that we get to live in the greatest country in the world and that I am proud to be an American, as I trust all of you are too. But you will also agree with me that our forever home is not America but the New Jerusalem, the city that God has prepared for those who love Him. That is how faithful He is — and that is why we ought to be faithful to Him too. That means have children, and train them to be citizens of heaven, children of promise like Isaac was. You are seeking a better country than the USA, a country so good it actually can't exist on this corrupt earth. Within a few short years, you and I will go there. Until then, keep on believing in the God who made Wyoming and who also made Heaven. Faith enables you to bear children in hope, to transcend death and exile to find a homeland called Heaven. Faith is how we live and how we give life, because faith is how we receive God's life. Amen.