

**LIVING BY FAITH WHEN PROMISES ARE NOT (FULLY) FULFILLED, PT. 2**  
**OR, LESSONS OF FAITH**  
**HEBREWS 11:13-16**

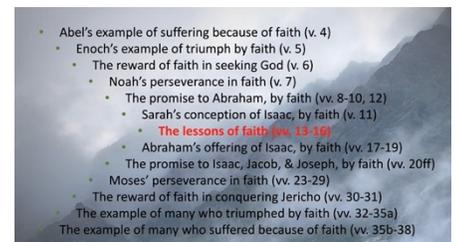
I came across a synthesis of some important **life lessons** this week:

- ✓ “I’ve learned that you can’t hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk.”
- ✓ “I’ve learned that just when I get my room the way I like it, Mom makes me clean it up.”
- ✓ “I’ve learned that silent company is often more healing than words of advice.”
- ✓ “I’ve learned that wherever I go, the world’s worst drivers have followed me there.”
- ✓ “I’ve learned that children and grandparents are natural allies.”
- ✓ “I’ve learned that making a living is not the same thing as making a life.”
- ✓ “I’ve learned that I still have a lot to learn.” (Age 92)



Some of those lessons were learned with difficulty (and perhaps suffering). Wouldn't it be nice to learn some of life's harder or more important lessons from the lives of other? That's actually what the writer to the Hebrews does for us in this morning's passage.

In Hebrews 11:13-16, we come to the center point in the chapter (not in the number of verses, but in the theme and flow of the chapter). It is the middle point of a **chiastic structure** in the chapter. And at the center, the writer takes a moment to consider the lessons we have already learned about faith and looks forward to how those lessons will be exemplified in the lives of the faithful people in the remainder of this chapter.



**LIVING BY FAITH MEANS ACTING ON GOD'S PROMISES WHEN THEY AREN'T YET RECEIVED.**

Last time (vv. 8-12) we looked at how we can live that way; in this passage we see the lessons of faith — what Abraham and others exemplified about living by faith.

In these verses, the writer reveals **six characteristics of living by faith**:

1. Live by Faith by Being **CONFIDENT** in God (v. 13a)
2. Live by Faith by Being a **STRANGER** in This World (v. 13b)
3. Live by Faith by Being **AMBITIOUS** for Home (v. 14)
4. Live by Faith by **DISCERNING** Two Realities (v. 15)
5. Live by Faith by **CULTIVATING** a Better Desire (vv. 14, 16a)
6. Live by Faith by Being **SECURE** in God's Plan (v. 16b)

## 1. Live by Faith by Being CONFIDENT in God (v. 13a)

- There are disappointments in life — it's a cliché, but “life is filled with disappointments.” Marriages, friendships, parenting/children, jobs, finances, houses/locations, cell phones, meals, postal deliveries, and many more parts of our lives don't live up to our expectations. The writer tells us in v. 13 that this is not unusual — it is the norm for the “greatest” people on earth and even God's “greatest” people.
  - ✓ The phrase ***all these died...*** tells us that everyone mentioned so far experienced “disappointment” — they died ***without receiving the promises***.
  - ✓ There is a question of who “all these” refers to — everyone mentioned so far, or just the ones who were part of the Abrahamic ***promise***. I think it is most likely everyone in the chapter:
    - Abel offered a sacrifice expecting the blessing of God and was killed by his brother instead.
    - Enoch didn't die, but he also endured hardship on this earth before he died and didn't realize all the things he might have expected on this earth.
    - Noah likewise experienced mocking and saw the futility and rebellion of the world.
    - Abraham was promised land, seed, and blessing and never came close to getting the full fulfillment of that promise (nor did Sarah, nor Isaac and Jacob). [Aside: **6:15** says he *did* receive the promise made to him; how do we reconcile these two verses? He received a son, but he did not receive anything approximating the full provision of the covenant — and Israel is still waiting for those blessings, Rom. 11:25-32.]
    - All of these left this world anticipating something from God that they did not receive here.
    - And this would be true of everyone else in this chapter also (**v. 39**).
- But notice that the writer doesn't just say that they died, but that they ***died in faith...***
  - ✓ Literally, he says, “they died *according to faith*” — that is, their deaths exemplified and were in accord with a life that is lived faithfully to God.
  - ✓ They did not receive all they wanted, but they did continue living faithfully to God.
- How did they die in faith towards God? What did they do that demonstrated they had faith?
  - ✓ All of these (from Abel through Jacob) ***saw*** and ***welcomed them*** [promises] ***from a distance***.
  - ✓ While they did not receive the complete fulfillment of the promises, they saw enough of the promises that they were able to “welcome” those promises. They were ready for fulfillment, but also understood that God could still be faithful and fulfill the promises after their lives were over.
  - ✓ All of these lived out the principle of faith explained in **v. 1** — they were sure of God so that even when they did not see or possess the full promise, they still believed.
  - ✓ What all these did was exemplified in Moses' life — he prayed that God would let him enter the land (**Dt. 3:23-25**), but God only allowed him to see the land (**Dt. 3:26-28; 34:1-4**).

- ✓ They had the promises of God and that was enough for them to keep going. They were confident in God. When they didn't receive the immediate provision, they weren't discouraged or dissuaded.
- ✓ Along with being confident in God, they were also patient with God (2 Pt. 3:3, 9). His "slowness" does not equal His "inability." He will fulfill all His promises in His right time.
- ✓ They were confident that "God's promise is as good as the reality." [MacArthur]

## 2. Live by Faith by Being a STRANGER in This World (v. 13b)

- They could see and welcome (embrace and delight in) what they didn't fully receive because they recognized that they were *strangers and exiles on the earth*.
  - ✓ This was Abraham's own statement (Gen. 23:4); cf. also Jacob (Gen. 47:4, 9) and Ps. 119:19.
  - ✓ God's faithful people have always recognized that this world is a temporary residence and not our home — we are foreigners living in a strange land (1 Pt 1:1; 2:11; Phil. 3:20).
  - ✓ They could live faithfully to God on this earth because they were only *very* loosely attached to this earth — they recognized it's "foreignness."
- In fact, not only did they recognize that they were foreigners, but the writer says, *they confessed...*
  - ✓ That is, they "agreed" with that statement. They affirmed the truthfulness of that statement.
  - ✓ The implication is that they were content with the reality of their position. They were not discontent. They were "happy exiles."
  - ✓ How content were they?
    - Jacob would spend 20 years in Mesopotamia (near Haran) working for Laban to gain his wives Rachel and Leah and building Laban's flocks — and at the end of those years, he asked Laban if he might "go to my own place and to *my own country*" (Gen. 30:25).
    - Similarly, when Abraham and his family left Ur, he fully left it. He never owned land in Canaan, but when Sarah died, there was no thought of taking her body back to Ur, but he bought a plot in Canaan; and Joseph also asked for his body to be taken back to Israel (Heb. 11:22).
  - ✓ Wherever they were on this earth, it was "foreign land;" they were looking for their ultimate home.
  - ✓ "At no time did Abraham (or Isaac and Jacob) put down such roots as to cause them to feel that they really belonged to any certain spot on earth." [Kent]
- One thing that will keep us from being faithful to the Lord is when we become more attached to this world and the things of this world than we do to the promises of God and eternity.
  - ✓ There is a temptation to fix our eyes on the world at the expense of Christ (Col. 3:2-3) — we forget our ultimate end and we forget our ultimate joy. Cf. also Ps. 27:4, 8.
  - ✓ Scripture never warns of being too heavenly-minded or not worldly-minded enough. There are no dangers associated with looking to the future of our heavenly home. There are always dangers in being attached to the things of this world.

- ✓ Samuel James wrote on Friday: “The insatiable need for novelty and replacement withers if our hearts are tethered to the person whom moths and rust cannot touch and neither thieves nor death can take away....Just imagine how this might transform every area of life and culture. The unexpected pregnancy goes from crushing and optional to something that’s difficult but glorious. Marriages that feel hopeless and life-draining become places of deep sacrifice for the sake of a preserved covenant.” Looking past this world to the promises of the next keeps us faithful.

### 3. Live by Faith by Being **AMBITIOUS** for Home (v. 14)

- The writer connects vv. 14-16 with v. 13 with the word **for** — he is providing reasons for their attitudes in v. 13, and particularly for their confession at the end of v. 13 (**those who say such things**).
  - ✓ They are looking for something — they are **seeking** — they have a strong desire for something (cf. **Mt. 6:32; Rom. 11:7**). It’s a yearning or craving. They are ambitious and aggressive in the pursuit.
  - ✓ And notice what they are seeking — **a country of their own**, lit., “Fatherland,” or “hometown” (which is how it is generally translated in the NT).
  - ✓ It is **clear** by the way these lived that they did not consider this world to be home.
  - ✓ “They had no fatherland on earth.” [Westcott]
- Even the world is attracted to the idea of going home: ET wanted to go home; songs are sung about going home; TV shows (several networks!) are designed around building the perfect home, and we dream of getting home for Christmas.
  - ✓ Home is sentimentalized in the culture; it speaks to an unfulfilled longing.
  - ✓ The believer understands that this world is the “workshop” in which we labor until we go home. But this workshop isn’t home. It’s a temporary location and assignment until we get home.
  - ✓ We don’t flee from this world (**Jn. 17:11, 14**).
  - ✓ But we also don’t have this world as our ambition. There is no good end for those who desire this world and live for this world only (**1 Jn. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:10a**).
  - ✓ The believer is always looking forward to his final, genuine home (**2 Cor. 5:1-2, 4, 6, 8-9**).

“Christians will always feel frustrated by the godlessness of our national governments and media because earthly nations are not run in accordance with the word of God as heaven is. Heaven is our homeland now.”  
[Coekin, *Faith for Life*, 64.]

#### 4. Live by Faith by **DISCERNING Two Realities (v. 15)**

- How can someone keep looking towards our ultimate goal of Heaven? We can look back to places we have been that were pleasurable to us (vacations, previous residences, etc.), but since none of us has been to Heaven, it is hard to imagine and anticipate what lies ahead for us.
- The writer tells us the thought process of these people of faith:
  - ✓ ***If they had been thinking of that country from which they went out*** implies not just a thought, but a remembrance — a meditation. The idea is not merely that a thought might have crossed their mind, but the writer is speaking of the kind of thought that is a longing and desire — perhaps even a regret for what has been lost in what he gave up for the pursuit of God’s promise.
  - ✓ The implication is that if they had been remembering their previous “country” with longings and desires, they certainly would have had opportunity to go back to that country.
  - ✓ But they did not think of their former lands (or even their lack of fulfilled promises) in that way.
    - So they weren’t tempted to go back to their old way of life. (In fact, Abraham warned his servant not to take Isaac back to Mesopotamia for a bride, **Gen. 24:6**).
    - They were encouraged to continue pursuing their promised heavenly home.
  - ✓ What the writer is implying is that these faithful followers of God were discerning the good from the bad, the better from the good, and the best from the better — and they were always only looking for and pursuing the best — their heavenly home.
  - ✓ It was essential in that day to discern between that which was appealing but temporal and what was lasting (cf. **v. 25**). And it is just as essential today.

“Discernment is an act of the heart and the mind in which we uncover hidden motives in ourselves and in the world around us, and in so doing, begin to see the ways in which we need to change our behavior. Discernment happens when we reflect on those things that are most true, and then think critically and Christianly about one thing or another and, in view of these truths, live differently.” [Tennant, *Unfriend Yourself*]

“When discernment is attacked and destroyed, a flood of opportunistic false teaching is waiting to attack through the weakened defenses....[And] a lack of discernment leaves people to wither under the attack of false doctrine. A lack of discernment leaves Christians unable to protect themselves and others, and allows sin to flood in.” [Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*]

- What the writer wants us to see is that these faithful people did not turn back. Having placed their faith in Christ, they did not return to their past and the ways of the world. They understood the cost of living in the world according to the world’s belief system. And the writer would have his readers, who were tempted to give up on Christ, continue looking forward to all of Christ’s promises.
  - ✓ I am more than a little concerned that we are more desirous of a better world now than later.
  - ✓ I am more than a little concerned that our worldview is more shaped by Twitter than Scripture.
  - ✓ To stay with Christ we need the discernment that only comes from Christ’s Word.

## 5. Live by Faith by CULTIVATING a Better Desire (vv. 14, 16a)

- We saw this principle first in v. 14 — these faithful ones were *seeking a country of their own*.
- The writer reiterates that idea in v. 16 — in contrast to the opportunity to go back to the ways of the world and the world system they know, *they desire a better country*.
  - ✓ The word **desire** here is different than in v. 14 — it has the idea of reaching or stretching out for something. They aspire for something and they work for their desire.
  - ✓ What they want is the thing that is **better**. That is an important word in Hebrews. The writer reminds the readers (and us) that there are many things from God that are better:
    - He gives a better hope (7:19)
    - He gives a better covenant (7:22)
    - He gives a better promise (8:6)
    - God provides a better resurrection (10:35)
    - The sacrifice of Christ is better (9:23) and He has a better blood (than Abel, 12:24)
    - And of course, Christ is better (1:4)
  - ✓ In this verse, he reminds us that there is a **better** country that is ahead for the believer. And he is explicit that he is talking about **Heaven**.
- Note that this is not the only time he reminds the readers about the superiority of our heavenly home and country — he also says it in 10:34 and 11:40.
  - ✓ Heaven is better because it is lasting (10:34).
  - ✓ Heaven is better because there all things will be made perfect (11:40)
  - ✓ Once in Heaven, no one will look back longingly for earth. (I often wonder how disappointed Lazarus was to show back up on earth after he was resuscitated.)
  - ✓ As in v. 14, the writer wants us to be purposeful and intentional in cultivating heart longings for Heaven and to diminish our satisfaction and desire for earth and worldly pursuits.
  - ✓ He's not saying, "don't work on this earth" (all these faithful people were highly productive in work, evangelism, and relationships). But he is saying, "don't find satisfaction with something secondary."

## 6. Live by Faith by Being SECURE in God's Plan (v. 16b)

- **Therefore** is the writer's conclusion about the faithfulness of these believers. What's the payoff?
  - ✓ **God is not ashamed to be called their God** — this is the "negative" way of saying that God rewards those who have faith in Him (v. 6). God was delighted to call them "Mine."
  - ✓ What is notable is that most of these people not only had faith, but they had significant failings. Their faith was "weak" (at times). But they had faith and God rewarded them and kept them.
  - ✓ It is remarkable, but God rewards and honors His people (Jn. 12:26) and delights in them (Ps. 37:23).

- As part of His delight in them, ***He has prepared a city for them.***
  - ✓ Note that God isn't scrambling to get it ready. It's finished. Nothing remains to complete the construction of this city. They desired a heavenly city (that was promised for them, v. 10) and God had prepared it for them (it is already fulfilled in Heaven).
  - ✓ This city is the ***heavenly Jerusalem*** (12:22-24) and it is ***the city to come*** (13:14).
  - ✓ This is the ultimate destiny of every believer (Rev. 21:10ff); give attention to Rev. 22:2-4.
  - ✓ Abraham left Ur, a highly developed city in Babylon, because he was looking for this eternal city.
- The point that the writer is making (to encourage the readers to stay with Christ) is that this city is secure and their destiny is sure. They can give up the enticements of this world and worries about suffering in this world, because there is a certainty to what is ahead for us (the city is finished)!
  - ✓ The best "enticements" of this world will be infinitely worse than the "worst" gifts of Heaven.
  - ✓ The world is competing with God and Heaven for our attention. Don't let the temporary "joys" distract you from the eternal and infinite pleasures of Heaven.

**CONCLUSION:** So what have we learned from these verses and the people in these opening verses of Hebrews 11? How will we summarize what it means to live by faith?

"The simple lesson for us today is that living by **faith requires us to be patient**—to feel like strangers and foreigners in this world because we are longing for heaven, waiting and groaning for the marvellous heavenly city God has prepared for us. We can stop complaining about the hardships we face and stop expecting things to be perfect now, in our friendships, our careers, our social life, our marriages and our churches. **The eternal joys of life in heaven** will make the temporary costs of being a Christian on earth seem trifling." [Coekin, 66.]

**BENEDICTION:** **Hebrews 13:20-21**