**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (35): The Book Of Better Things**

**“Heaven On Earth, The Homeland of the Faithful”**

**Hebrews 11:13-16**

**February 16, 2025**

Back in the day, long before there was contemporary music, or praise bands or worship teams, our church sang hymns. We sang lots of hymns. We sang them on Sunday mornings and evenings, and on Wednesday nights, and at our special “hymn sings” throughout the year. I remember that old hymnal well. It was the only hymn book we ever had, and we made good use of it.

I remember singing many hymns about heaven. One of our favorites was “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder, I’ll Be There.” “Up yonder,” of course, refers to our future homeland, far beyond the earth. Verse one reads as follows: “On that bright and cloudless morning, when the dead in Christ shall rise, And the glory of His resurrection share; When His chosen ones shall gather to *their home beyond the skies,* and the roll is called up yonder, I’ll be there.” (James M. Black, 1893)

Another favorite was “The Old Rugged Cross.” The third verse ends on the same theme: “To the old rugged cross, I’ll ever be true; Its shame and reproach gladly bear; Then he’ll call me some day, to my home far away, *where His glory forever I’ll share*.” (George Bennard, 1912) No wonder I grew up believing that heaven is the final destination of every born-again Christian. That’s what I was learning as I was singing these hymns.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that’s not true. It is true, of course, that when we die physically, we enter immediately into the presence of Christ in heaven. That’s what Paul meant when he said, “*To live is Christ and to die is gain*.” That’s what he meant when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:8; “*To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord*.”

That’s what happens when we die. Our physical body is buried in the ground where it will eventually decay; or it’s cremated. But our soul/spirit enters immediately into the presence of Christ. Although we are in a “disembodied state,” we are mentally and emotionally conscious, filled with joy and delight as we worship the Lamb around the throne – in heaven.

Then what happens? As Christ returns to this earth, our bodies are raised from the dead. That’s when we receive our glorified bodies, which are reunited with our souls. Then what happens? Contrary to popular thinking, we won’t “wing our flight to worlds unknown,” as another hymn tells us (“He Keeps Me Singing”). Rather, we will spend eternity in our glorified, resurrected bodies, reigning with Christ on this glorified, physical earth. This is the New Earth of Revelation 21-22.

For that reason, theologians refer to heaven as “the intermediate state.” It comes in between our present life on this earth and our future life on the New Earth. As we shall see, the *Bible’s* emphasis is much different than the one found in our hymnals. *It is not so much that we go to heaven as it is that heaven comes to earth, when Christ returns.* It’s not so much, “I shall reign with Him on high” as it is, I shall reign with Him on earth. Here are just a few Scriptures that teach this:

“*Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth, the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind*” (Isaiah 65:17).

“*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*” (Matt. 5:5).

“*Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth*” (Rev. 5:9-10).

“*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*” (Rev. 21:1-3).

We have also seen that the author of Hebrews has referred to this city in one of the texts we looked at last week; “*By faith* (Abraham) *made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God*” (11:9-10).

What is this city? It is the city which God had prepared for them (11:16), mentioned again in Hebrews 12:22 as “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” It’s “the city that is to come” (13:14). It’s the same city that John saw in Revelation, “*the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God*, *prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband*” (Rev. 21:2, 9-10).

With that in mind, we are now prepared to turn our attention to day’s text (11:13-16). Our author’s point is that none of the patriarchs saw the physical land of Canaan as their everlasting possession. They realized that God had promised them an inheritance that far exceeded the promised land. Their hope was on “*a better country – a heavenly one*” (v. 16) with its central feature, “*the heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:22). It was this hope which enabled them to patiently endure the disappointments and reversals during their pilgrimage in the land of Canaan. Our author’s flow of thought is as follows:

**A. The Patriarchs Recognized They Were Pilgrims (vv. 13-14):** “*All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting they were foreigners and strangers on earth*. *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own*.”

To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the land of Canaan remained a “promised” land to the end of their lives. But to them that promise was sure, since it was *God’s* promise, and they staked *everything* on its certainty. Thus, they lived in faith and they died in faith. Their entire lives were governed by the “*conviction*” and the “*assurance*” that God would do what He had promised He would do, even though they didn’t know when He would fulfill those promises.

At the very end of his life, Abraham spoke to the Hittites and said, “*I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site so I can bury my dead*” (Gen. 23:4). Jacob, also at the end of his life, speaks of his long sojourn in Canaan as “*the years of my pilgrimage*” (Gen. 47:9). Yet by faith they “saw from a distance” the reality to which the promise pointed. They were sure that what they hoped for would ultimately be theirs. The point is that God always fulfills His promises to His people, either immediately or ultimately.

**B. Their Hope Was Focused on a Better Country (vv. 15-16a):** “*If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one*.”

Even though they saw themselves as pilgrims in a foreign land, there was no looking back. They never thought of the land they had left as being their true home. If that were the case, they would have returned. For example, when Abraham sought a wife for Isaac, he didn’t take the opportunity to return to his native land. Instead, he sent his servant. When his servant suggested that he take Isaac back with him to find a suitable bride, Abraham said, “*Make sure you do not take my son back there*” (Gen. 24:6).

In the next generation, even after Jacob had spent twenty years in Haran, he never regarded that country as his homeland. Instead, he said to Laban, “*Send me on my way, so I can go back to my own homeland*” (Gen. 30:25).

But “the truth is,” writes F. F. Bruce, “their true homeland was not on earth at all. The better country on which they had set their hearts was the heavenly country. The earthly Canaan and the earthly Jerusalem were but temporary object-lessons pointing to the saints’ everlasting rest, the well-founded city of God. Those who put their trust in God receive a full reward, and that reward must belong not to this transient world-order to the *enduring* order which participates in the life of God. The example of the patriarchs is intended to guide the readers of the epistle (including you and me) to a true sense of values . . . They (and we) are to live in this world as ‘aliens and exiles’ . . .” (The Epistle to the Hebrews).

**C. Their Faith Made God Unashamed of Them (11:16b):** “*Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them*.” This is one of the most astounding statements in all of Scripture. That God should say that to any of us – “I am not ashamed to be your God” – is truly remarkable. But that’s what a life of steadfast faith does – it makes God unashamed of us, or *proud of us*.

In 1 Samuel 2:30, the Lord says, “*Those who honor me, I will honor . . .*” The patriarchs honored God by putting their faith in Him; He honored them by calling Himself, “*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*” (Ex. 3:6). These three men were not faultless, but they took God at His word. For these men – *and for all who walk in the same path of faith*, God has prepared “a city.” This city is the “*heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:22), “*the city that is to come*” (13:14), “*the new Jerusalem*” (Rev. 21:2), which John saw “*coming down out of heaven from God*” (Rev. 21:9-10).

The New Jerusalem is “*the wife of the Lamb*” (Rev. 21:9-10). Those who dwell in this “city” are those whose names are written in “*the Lamb’s book of life*” (Rev. 21:27). They “*will reign on the earth*” (Rev. 5:10), “*forever and ever*” (Rev. 22:5). The Homeland of the Faithful *is* Heaven on Earth! For all eternity!

So, what are some of the promises that God wants us to believe and trust, as *we* live like “aliens and exiles” in this “foreign land”? Here’s just a sampling of the promises that God has made to us – all which call for a response of faith:

“*You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you*” (Isaiah 26:3).

“*Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*” (Isaiah 41:10).

“*Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall, but those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*” (Isaiah 40:30-31).

“*Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (Matthew 11:28-29).

“*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*” (Phil.4:6-7).

“*And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 4:19).

“*He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?*” (Rom. 8:32)

No matter what our difficulties or hardships may be today, we can rest assured that God has our lives safely in His hands, and we can trust Him to do with us what is best for us and for His glory. He will *always* be faithful to His word. What He said He will do, He will do!