

"Strangers and Pilgrims"

Hebrews 11:13-16

Subtitle: **Faithful to the End: The Pilgrim's Perspective**

"What does it really mean to live by faith?"

Hebrews 11 doesn't just define faith – it *illustrates* it through the lives of those who saw God's promises from afar and still believed. In verses 13 through 16, we pause in the middle of this great 'hall of faith' to reflect on how the patriarchs lived and died without ever receiving the full promises in this life – but they lived **looking forward, letting go of the world, and longing for something better.**

This short section is more than a historical note – it is a **spiritual blueprint** for every believer who wants to walk by faith in a world that doesn't feel like home. These verses show us what kind of faith pleases God – **a faith that is persuaded of His promises, presses on in pursuit, and receives His praise.**

I. THEIR PERSPECTIVE IN LIFE AND DEATH – VS. 13

A. Confidence in the promises

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises..."

They didn't receive the promises in full, but believed in them.

1. **"These all died"** – this is speaking specifically of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (vs. 8-12).
2. "In faith" (κατὰ πίστιν) – This phrase has the sense of **according to the standard of faith** or **in the sphere of faith**. It suggests that:

- a) Their **entire life and death** were characterized or governed **by faith**.
 - b) It was not merely one action (as in "by faith Abel offered..."), but a **life posture** - a continuous faith that remained **even unto death**, despite not receiving the full promises.
3. **"Not having received the promises"** - of the promised land, numerous descendants, and most importantly, **the promise that the Seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would bless the earth, speaking of the coming Messiah**.
- Abraham - Gen. 12:1-3
 - Isaac - Gen. 26:1-5
 - Jacob - Gen. 28:13-15; 35:9-12

B. Clarity of vision

"But having seen them afar off..."

They saw the promises *afar off*, with spiritual perception.

1. "Having seen them" - this aorist participle suggests that this "seeing" was a **decisive starting point** - a moment when they recognized and believed God's promises were real, even if distant.
2. **"Afar off"** - the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - saw the **fulfillment of God's promises** (a land, a people, and universal blessing) not as something realized in their lifetimes but as something **far off in the future**.
 - a) They **"saw them afar off"** - Not with physical eyes, but with **the eyes of faith** (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7).

2 Corinthians 5:7

7 (For we walk by faith, not by sight:)

- b) They **perceived** the promises as real and certain, even if they were not immediate.
- c) They **demonstrated** that true faith looks beyond the present, holding fast to what is future and eternal.

The phrase closely mirrors how **believers today view the return of Christ, the resurrection, and the heavenly city**. Like the patriarchs, we too:

- Walk by faith, not sight (Heb. 11:1; 2 Cor. 5:7).
- Long for promises still unfulfilled in this life (Heb. 11:39-40).
- Are strangers and pilgrims, awaiting a better country (Heb. 11:16).

The use of "afar off" reminds us that:

- **Faith doesn't demand immediate results.** It clings to God's word despite delay.
- We are to **embrace the promises as certain**, even if we don't yet possess them.
- Our vision must be shaped by eternity, not by the nearness or comfort of earthly things.

 Supporting Scripture:

- **John 8:56** - *"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and **he saw it**, and was glad."*
→ Abraham saw Christ's coming **afar off**, with the eyes of faith.

- **Romans 4:20-21** – Abraham was “fully persuaded that what He [God] had promised, He was able also to perform.”
- **Hebrews 11:1** – “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

C. Conviction in their faith

They “**were persuaded of them**” – fully convinced of the reliability and certainty of God's promises.

D. Celebration in hope

They “**embraced them**” – a word that speaks of welcoming or greeting, expressing a joyful acceptance of future realities.

E. Confession of pilgrimage

“...and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

The patriarchs openly acknowledged (“confessed”) that this world was **not their true home**.

- “**Strangers**” (ξένοι) – foreigners, those without rights of citizenship in a land.
- “**Pilgrims**” (παρεπίδημοι) – temporary residents, sojourners, exiles.

These terms highlight that the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) recognized their **transient** status on earth. Though they physically lived in the land of promise (Canaan), they never truly possessed it in their lifetime. More importantly, their hearts were set on **a heavenly country** (v.16), showing they viewed themselves as **citizens of another kingdom**.

This same language is echoed in **1 Peter 2:11 (9-12)**, where believers are called “strangers and pilgrims” and urged to live holy lives. Just as Abraham and his descendants **lived by faith in the future city God had prepared**, believers today are to live as **heavenly citizens**, resisting the world’s pull and reflecting the identity described in 1 Peter 2:9: “a chosen generation... a peculiar people.”

Application: Their **confession** was not just with their lips but with their lives – **they lived as people who belonged somewhere else**. So should we.

II. THEIR PURSUIT OF A GREATER COUNTRY - VS. 14-15

“For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country...”

A. Seeking a better homeland - vs. 14

Explanation: The patriarchs' own confessions (v.13) made it clear – they were **actively seeking** something greater than earthly security.

1. The Greek word for “seek” (ἐπιζητοῦσιν) suggests **earnest desire** or **diligent pursuit**.
2. The “country” here (πατρίδα) isn't merely a location but a **homeland** – a place of true belonging, which verse 16 reveals to be heavenly.


B. Separation from the past - vs. 15a

“And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out...”

Explanation: The patriarchs had left their homeland (Ur of the Chaldees), and **they didn't**

dwell on it, cherish it, or desire to return.

1. Spiritually, this mirrors the believer's break from the **old life of sin and worldly values**. As new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), we are called to **set our affection on things above** (Col. 3:2) and not look back.
2. Just as Lot's wife looked back and was judged, the patriarchs looked ahead and walked by faith, refusing to return to what God had called them out of.

 **Spiritual Application:** Faith not only embraces the future – it **lets go of the past**. True pilgrimage demands separation from what once defined us.

C. Steadfast in their journey - vs. 15b

"...they might have had opportunity to have returned."

Explanation: The opportunity to return was available – but they **deliberately stayed the course**. Their commitment reflects the same mindset Jesus commended: *"No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God"* (Luke 9:62).

1. For the believer, this speaks of **enduring in discipleship**, resisting the temptation to turn back to the comforts or compromises of the world (cf. Heb. 10:39).
2. They had forsaken the past, not because they were forced to, but because their **faith had given them something better to live for**.

 **Spiritual Application:** The faith that saves is also the faith that endures. Pilgrims **don't retreat** -

they press forward, eyes fixed on the promise.


III. THEIR PRAISE FROM GOD - VS. 16

A. God's affirmation of their testimony

"But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly..."

Explanation: The entire verse shows that the **lives of these patriarchs testified** of their desire for God over the world. God's approval and provision are His **affirmation** of that testimony.

1. They sought a better country → God praises them and prepares one.
2. Their legacy becomes **a model for faith** (cf. Heb. 12:1), and their lives bring **honor to God's name**.

 **Spiritual Insight:** A life of faith doesn't just receive a reward - it leaves a **testimony** that God honors before others.

B. God's approval of their faith

"...wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God..."

Explanation: The word *"wherefore"* (Greek: διό) shows that **God's commendation** is a direct response to their faith-filled pursuit of a better country.

1. God's statement "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Ex. 3:6; Matt. 22:32) is **not just covenantal, but commendatory**. He associates His name with them because their lives honored Him.


| Exodus 3:6 [the call of Moses at the burning bush]

⁶ Moreover he said, I *am* the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God.

Matthew 22:32 [Jesus answering the Sadducees]

³² I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

2. The phrase “not ashamed” implies **God is pleased**, even **honored**, to be publicly identified with them.

 **Spiritual Insight:** When we live by faith, we bring **glory to God**, and He is not ashamed to **claim us as His own** (cf. Heb. 2:11).

Hebrews 2:11

¹¹ For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified *are* all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren,

C. God's preparation for their future

“...for he hath prepared for them a city.”


Explanation: This “city” is the **heavenly homeland** they longed for (cf. Heb. 11:10; 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21:2).

1. “Prepared” (ἡτοίμασεν) shows **intentional provision** - God Himself made it ready in response to their faith.
2. This reflects not only a reward but a **relational fulfillment** - they sought God, and He prepared a place for them (cf. John 14:2-3).

John 14:1-3

¹ Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. ² In my Father's house are many

mansions: if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, *there* ye may be also.

 **Spiritual Insight:** Faith is not in vain – **God responds to our faith with eternal provision.** What they longed for, God lovingly prepared.

Conclusion: The lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob teach us something essential: real faith isn't just about believing *in* God, it's about **believing God enough to live like strangers and pilgrims here—people on the move toward a heavenly country.**

They saw the promises “afar off,” but they were persuaded, they embraced them, and they confessed that this world was not their home. And what was God's response? He was **not ashamed to be called their God**, and He **prepared for them a city.**

So the question we must ask ourselves is this: **Are we living like people who belong somewhere else?** Because that's what faith does. It loosens our grip on this world and fixes our eyes on the one to come—where Christ is, and where the promises of God are fully and forever fulfilled.