

# **THE CITY OF GOD**

*SERIES: LEARNING TO LIVE BY FAITH*  
By Steve Zeisler

We observe concerns about citizenship on all sides. Our political leaders debate issues of border security and the need for people from other countries to get legal permission to live and work here. Travelers face greater scrutiny everywhere. Unstable governments, porous borders, and desperate refugees create awful living conditions for millions around the world.

But none of this is new. The question of belonging to a community in a familiar location is as old as civilization. And the image of a wanderer in a place that is unwelcoming is central to the message of the Bible. It is, in fact, Jesus' story—the story of the eternal Son's journeying into his creation, being rejected at birth, and dying alone on a cross, abandoned by his friends. Jesus said of himself, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay His head." (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58.)

We are studying Hebrews 11. It recalls a number of stories of Old-Testament saints and their experience of faith, so that from them we can learn to have faith. The account of Abraham and Sarah is the longest of these, and we're considering their lives across three messages, of which this is the second. The main idea that introduced Abraham's and Sarah's story is that they lived in tents in the land where God had called them to be. That is, they lived as outsiders there.

Hebrews 11:8 focused on Abraham's obedience to God's command, "Go...to the land which I will show you..." (Genesis 12:1.) If we are Christians, we have heard a similar word from Jesus himself: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23.) The Christian life can be described as a journey. We leave the past, take up our cross, and follow the One who calls us. But our new world is not one of ease and safety. We find ourselves living in the midst of people who are antagonistic to Jesus and don't understand what motivates us. We will have opportunities and responsibilities that go with being sojourners.

Let me review a couple of things that we focused on in the last message (Discovery Paper 5243). First, we considered the fact that God's ways are not our ways. This observation is central to the story of Abraham and Sarah. Verse 11 made the point that they were allowed to bear and raise a child, but the promised child came much later than anybody could have reasonably expected, even beyond the time when it was physiologically possible for them to have children.

The other lesson we recall from the last message concerns living as aliens in a place that God assigns—a place where there is mystery, confusion, uncertainty, difficulty. It turns out that it would be impossible to grow as Christians if we were allowed to live behind the walls of a city made up only of people like us, where our every decision was cheered, where it was easy to follow the Lord and to do what was right, where good choices were always rewarded and bad ones were always punished. It's only in the darkness that we can bear witness to the Light.

There was a third idea in the text of the last message that we skipped in order to take it up now.

## Looking for something more

Hebrews 11:10:

**He was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.**

The life of faith makes us long for what we do not have yet. It makes us realize that we were made for something that this world cannot offer us. It opens our hearts to the possibilities of beauty and connectedness and love that relationships in this physical world will never be able to supply.

Verses 13-16:

**All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went 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 a city for them.**

At almost every point throughout this chapter, when a new idea is introduced, the phrase “by faith” is used. But in this paragraph that phrase doesn’t appear. Here the author has stepped back, realizing there’s a problem that he needs to deal with. The problem is death. God made promises to Abraham and Sarah, sending them on a journey. Some of the expected outcomes (e.g., Isaac’s birth) were realized—but they died too soon, before the story was over. Not all of the promises were fulfilled. So our author is raising the question, does death cancel the promises? Did God give up on Abraham and Sarah?

But reflecting on the fact that these patriarchal families died, the author says it’s exactly the opposite: death is actually the doorway that leads us to the great gifts that this life can’t provide. All the possibilities to which our hearts have been awakened in this life will be fulfilled in the world to come.

There are three concepts in these verses that help us to think about this.

### No turning back

The first concept is the refusal of the patriarchal families to go back, although they could have done so. Abraham left Ur in Mesopotamia. It was a wealthy, fertile region with an advanced culture. Abraham was called to leave that city and go to the pastures and hills of Canaan. We know from Genesis 12 that he sojourned for a while in Egypt and saw the great cities of

Pharaoh's kingdom. Abraham and Sarah could have left the journey they were on and gone back to the kind of life they had before. But we are told they rejected that option.

People like us don't go back either. Why is that? When the Christian journey gets hard and confusing, why don't we give up? "I'm done with this. Following Jesus doesn't work. I'm getting off of the narrow road and back onto the broad road. It makes sense for most people. I'm going to find a life that's more focused on me and less attentive to God."

Well, there's a reason we don't do that, and the patriarchal families didn't do that. It's because going back is not so much a matter of geography anymore, but the breaking of a relationship. Going back means we lose intimacy with the One who called us on the journey. The reason Abraham was in the Promised Land was because when God said to go there, he was going to be Abraham's companion along the way. Going back means we have to leave the presence of God. And however chaotic and hard to understand life is in God's presence, we can't imagine life without him.

The gospels record the story of the feeding of five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13). It's one of the great miracles of the New Testament. A large crowd has gathered, and Jesus feeds them all with only a child's loaves and fishes. People are astonished at the miracle, and when Jesus leaves, a great multitude follows him the next day. Jesus talks to these people who are beginning to follow him as disciples (John 6), and he challenges them: the reason they're following him is not because they're interested in God; it's because they're interested in food.

After hearing this, a great many of these folks depart. Then Jesus asks the twelve, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" And Peter says something interesting: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life." (John 6:68.) If you read between the lines a little, he is basically saying, "To be honest, it would be much easier if we could depart, but we can't—you have the words of eternal life." If we go back, we lose Jesus' presence. If we leave him now, we are leaving life itself, and we can't do that.

## **A place for us**

The second concept that helps us in this text is that of the city of God. Hebrews 13:14 says that it is a lasting city. In 11:10 we were told that this city is one that has a strong foundation, whose architect and builder is God.

The patriarchal family had to live in tents while other people got to live in cities. But part of what is being taught here is the idea that even the most durable building, or the most permanent city in this world, is not going to last forever. Consider the temple of the Jews. When they wandered in the wilderness, they worshiped in a tent (the tabernacle). They were finally permitted to build a temple, but the temple was destroyed in judgment. The temple was rebuilt, and it was destroyed again. Abraham watched Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of the plain, get destroyed by fire from heaven. The most permanent dwelling in this world is only temporary. The most secure environment, the most powerful army, the best-defended borders—not one of them can last. But there is a city that has foundations, that is made by God, that will last forever.

The second thing about the city of God that we should think about is the phrase at the end of verse 16: “for them.” God has prepared it with his children in mind. Perhaps you have built a house yourself, or remodeled a house. Sometimes people think if they could just design and build their own dream house, it would be perfect. But of course, when you get into your dream house, it’s not perfect. Things still don’t work, and the great ideas turn out to not be so great. Your preferences change over time. It’s not suited to you in exactly the way you thought it would be just because you made it. But there is a dwelling made for us by One who knows us better than we know ourselves. Jesus said the night before he died, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:2-3.) There’s a sense that what is awaiting us in the future is the best possible place for us; it lasts forever, and it is exactly suited to us. All the things we have hoped for, longed for, and dreamed of are being prepared for us.

The last thing about the city of God that we should think about is the statement, “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.” If he is not ashamed, it means he regards them well, believes in them, loves them. It’s a powerful thing to imagine that God is not just making a place for us, but he has a warm heart toward us, welcomes us, approves of us, delights in us.

There’s an old story you’ve probably heard. FDR was returning to the U.S. by ship. There was a great retinue of people around him, security and important political figures and so on. When the ship docked in New York City, of course there was extraordinary fanfare, with military guards, reporters taking pictures, a band playing *Hail to the Chief*, and on and on. But ten layers down on this same ship was a missionary couple tucked back in some closet, retiring after spending decades of their life serving overseas, giving their life away for God’s sake. They were the last ones off the ship, and as they came down the gangway onto the dock, everybody had left. No one had come to welcome them home. The husband expressed frustration and sadness: “We’ve given our lives to God, and there’s not one person here to welcome us home! No one even knows.” But his wife turned to him and said, “There is a welcome waiting for us. We just aren’t home yet.”

We must realize that there is no way God could give us everything he has prepared for us here. There has to be another world, another place where things are different. So our hopes grow stronger, our longings grow greater, our tears more frequent. We find ourselves wanting the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God, the city that lasts forever, the city that he has prepared for us.

So how will we live now? We will live as faithful sojourners, anticipating the world to come. I want to close with Jesus’ instruction on preparing for the world to come in the Sermon on the Mount. I ask you to reflect on and pray about getting ready not for this world, as if it would pay off, but for what is still to come.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in

and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be....Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?...But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:19-21, 25-26, 33, NRSV.)

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