

Strangers Walking toward the Goal¹

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Hebrews 11

8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who also inherited the same promise, 10 because he was waiting for the city with permanent foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

11 By faith Sarah, even though she was old and barren, received the strength to conceive, because she was convinced that the one who had made the promise was faithful.

12 Abraham was as good as dead, yet from this one man came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

13 All these people died having faith. They did not receive the things that were promised, yet they saw them in the distant future and welcomed them, acknowledging that they were strangers and foreigners on earth.

14 For people who say such things make it clear that they are looking for a country of their own.

15 If they had been thinking about what they had left behind, they would have had an opportunity to go back.

16 Instead, they were longing for a better country, that is, a heavenly one. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered Isaac—he who had received the promises was about to offer his unique son in sacrifice,

18 about whom it had been said, “It is through Isaac that descendants will be named for you.”

19 Abraham was certain that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did get Isaac back in this way.

[International Standard Version]

A few years ago, I went to the German Embassy in Minato-ku, Tokyo. I was surprised when I saw a sign in big letters saying “All men are foreigners.” Well, if we take a flight to Shanghai, we all become foreigners within just a couple of hours.

I would like to title today's sermon as “Strangers Walking toward the Goal.” I would like to talk about the following three points:

Firstly, I would like to talk about the people of God in the era of the Old Testament, focusing on two significant men; Abraham and David.

The second point revolves around the people in the New Testament, who have obtained true salvation, namely the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews and Peter.

Thirdly, I would like to have a discussion with you about some 'serious advice.'

Let us begin with the traveling people of God in the Old Testament. Israelites were people of God who were always traveling. That is to say, they were foreigners who left their own country. Even while they lived in the promised land of Canaan, they had to live as foreigners.

Exodus 6

4 I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land where they lived as resident aliens for a time.

This covenant was established with them. Now let's look at what happened as a result of this covenant through two significant persons. Actually, the Bible briefly explains it as follows, not just to these two men, but to all believers. Without the chapter 11 of Hebrew, the entire Old Testament is very vague and hard to comprehend.

Hebrews 11

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Abraham was called the father of faith. But he had

1 『目標をめざす旅人』、2014年4月15日、吉祥寺学び会、ゴットホルド・ベック

another unimaginably wonderful name; the Bible tells us that he was a 'friend of God'. In the Genesis, chapter 12, Abraham was described as;

Genesis 12

1 The Lord told Abram, "You are to leave your land, your relatives, and your father's house and go to the land that I'm going to show you.

2 I'll make a great nation of your descendants, I'll bless you, and I'll make your reputation great, so that you will be a blessing.

3 I'll bless those who bless you, but I'll curse the one who curses you, and through you all the people of the earth will be blessed."

4 So Abram left there, as the Lord had directed him.

He had no idea where they were headed. Still, he obeyed. And it is described in detail in Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 11. Abraham obeyed what he was commanded to do. Consequently, he experienced that the Lord always stays close and the Lord is the one who stands by his promise faithfully. Jesus explained this himself;

John 8

56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day, and he saw it and was glad.

In 2000 B.C., Abraham was already aware, inspired by the light from above, of the great work of God, which would be presented as the salvation through Jesus. Abraham was greatly pleased to see this inspiration and could confess, "I am an alien and exile on this earth." Not only Abraham, but David too had the same attitude. David was recognized as a man who fulfilled the will of God. He lived 1000 years after Abraham. Let's look at some verses;

1 Chronicles 29

10 Then David blessed the Lord in the presence of the entire assembly. David said, How blessed you are, Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, from eternity to eternity!

11 To you, Lord, belongs the greatness, and the valor, and the splendor, and the endurance, and the majesty because all that is in heaven and on earth is yours. To you belongs the kingdom, Lord, and you are exalted as head over all.

12 Both wealth and honor proceed from you, and you are ruling over them all. You control power—you control who is made great, and how everyone becomes strong.

13 And so, our God, we are giving you thanks, and we are praising your wonderful name!

14 But who am I, and who are my people, that we make such voluntary offerings as these? For all things come from you, and from your own hand we

are giving to you.

15 For we are aliens and vagrants in your presence, as were all of our ancestors. Our days on the earth pass away like shadows, and we have no hope.

Isn't this testimony, this confession of David so wonderful? He was the king who ruled everything. But he kept saying, "No, it is not me. The Lord, all things belong to you."

We can see from verses 1 to 15 that King David was totally overwhelmed by his God, was fascinated by him and praised him. Can we say that we too are overwhelmed by the Lord just like David was?

David understood from his experience that he was an alien and stranger on this earth after all, and the Lord was his only hope and delight. He was the greatest king of Israel, who could rule 12 tribes, who could totally defeat all hostile foreigners.

However, regardless of his great strength and vast wealth, he was always a stranger. The Psalm 39 clearly indicates what was on his mind.

Psalms 39

12 Hear my prayer, Lord, pay attention to my cry, and do not ignore my tears. I am an alien in your presence, a stranger just like my ancestors were.

Just like Abraham, David foresaw the day of Jesus that was to come in the far future. Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2 describes David as;

Acts 2

25 For David says about him, 'I always keep my eyes on the Lord, for he is at my right hand so that I cannot be shaken.

26 That is why my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices, yes, even my body still rests securely in hope.

27 For you will not abandon my soul to Hades or allow your Holy One to experience decay.

31 he looked ahead and spoke about the resurrection of the Messiah: 'He was not abandoned to Hades, and his flesh did not experience decay.'

As we can see from these verses, David already knew in advance about the resurrection of Jesus. People of the Lord God lived by faith and died by faith in the time of the Old Testament. That is to say, they could see something invisible and thus confess that life in this world was provisional and it would never fulfill them.

Now, I would like to talk briefly about the true church in the time of the New Testament.

Hebrews 13

14 For here we have no permanent city but are looking for the one that is coming.

Those who have encountered Jesus and are accepted by him are all on their way to this permanent city. Thus, they are all foreigners and strangers in this world. We should all aspire for the permanent city. All things in this world are transient and will never completely fulfill us.

Now, why don't we think about Peter? Peter wrote in his letter;

1 Peter 2

10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.
11 Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and exiles to keep on abstaining from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.
12 Continue to live such upright lives among the gentiles that, when they slander you as practicers of evil, they may see your good actions and glorify God when he visits them.

Jesus confessed in his prayers. One of the most well-known prayers of Jesus can be found in John, chapter 17, as we all know;

John 17

16 They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.

So confessed Jesus in his prayers. Those whose ultimate goal is in something transient in this world are so miserable. Those who feel truly satisfied in this world are also pitiful, aren't they?

I forgot whether he was German or Swiss, but Jung-Stilling was a very well-respected believer of Jesus in his day. Once, he testified; "Those who long for their home country in heaven are blessed. They will absolutely get back to their own country."

We have no permanent city here. In addition, we, who were redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus no longer belong to this world and thus are all strangers and foreigners. Because of these reasons—this is the third point of today—, we do need some serious advice. It was because we, like Jesus who is our head, did not belong to this world, that Paul and Peter had to write these words in their letters;

Romans 12

2 Do not be conformed to this world, but continually be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may be able to determine what God's will is—what is proper, pleasing, and perfect.

Not only Paul, but Peter too said;

1 Peter 2

11 Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and exiles to keep on abstaining from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.

Why do we need this serious advice? I guess that three real-life examples answer the question. These examples are Lot, Saul and Demas.

When Lot heard the voice of the Lord, he obeyed the Lord and left his own country just like Abraham did. However, his life could not be a good testimony for the Lord. He chose good land to live in for himself. He only thought of himself. He could never be free from material desires throughout his life. He always cared about himself alone. Later in his life, he came to live in the very rich and abundant city of Sodom with citizens who were totally apathetic to God. In fact, he was rescued from the demolition of Sodom, which proved his belief in the Lord. But still he did not walk the way that fulfilled the call of the Lord.

The next example is the king called Saul. He, of course, belonged to the Lord God just like David. And he was made king just like David was. However, these two men were fundamentally different at the root. Saul sought honor and desired to be praised by people. He was disobedient and ended up taking his own life.

The third example is a man called Demas. Of course, not only was he a believer of the Lord, he was a co-worker of Paul. He served the Lord. He intrinsically did not belong to this world, and should have acted as a foreigner. Nevertheless, he went back to the love of his life in this world. This world became a pleasant place for him with which he was totally satisfied.

He conformed to this world. Although we are intrinsically foreigners in this world, we are always facing the danger of becoming like Lot, Saul and Demas, aren't we? This is exactly the reason why we need serious advice. Let me read these two pieces of advice again because they are so critical;

Romans 12

2 Do not be conformed to this world, but continually be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may be able to determine what God's will is—what is proper, pleasing, and perfect.

1 Peter 2

11 Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and exiles to keep on abstaining from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.

What does it mean to “abstain from the desires of the flesh?” It is to surrender all your desires, that is, your ego, to death. It is nothing but the denial of all things that come from the flesh—your thoughts, your intentions as well as your emotions. It means war. That was the reason why Paul had to write these words.

“Abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.” It means a war against your soul. Needless to say, the function of the soul is to think, to desire and to feel. In other words, we need to separate our soul and spirit. Thus, if you fail to deny your thoughts, your intentions or your emotions, it puts you in danger of the same failure as that of Lot, Saul and Demas.

Let me read some words Jesus said to Simon;

Luke 22

31 “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has asked permission to sift all of you like wheat,
32 but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail. When you have come back, you must strengthen your brothers.”

The devil attacks us desperately. However, Jesus is the complete victor, who never stops praying for us day and night and who lives for us. Jesus desires our lives to be good testimonies through which many people receive his blessings.

So, Jesus asked Peter to “strengthen his brothers.” We are all foreigners. What we desperately aspire for is the permanent city. Forget everything about yourself and remain focused on the things that are above. In addition, strengthen your brothers and sisters. The Lord is still calling to us today. Of course, what we can see from the Gospels is that Jesus himself was the foreigner.

Luke 9

58 Jesus told him, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest.”

He did not have his house, not even his own room. He was not so different from beggars. Obeying the Lord is surely not an easy thing to do. But it is still a life that is filled with joy. Brothers and sisters in the early churches confessed sincerely;

2 Corinthians 5

1 We know that if the earthly tent we live in is torn down, we have a building in heaven that comes from God, an eternal house not built by human hands.

2 For in this one we sigh, since we long to put on our heavenly dwelling.

3 Of course, if we do put it on, we will not be found without a body.

4 So while we are still in this tent, we sigh under our burdens, because we do not want to put it off but to put it on, so that our dying bodies may be swallowed up by life.

5 God has prepared us for this and has given us his Spirit as a guarantee.

6 Therefore, we are always confident, and we know that as long as we are at home in this body we are away from the Lord.

7 For we live by faith, not by sight.

8 We are confident, then, and would prefer to be away from this body and to live with the Lord.

9 So whether we are at home or away from home, our goal is to be pleasing to him.

So wrote Paul to the brothers and sisters in Corinth. He wrote almost the same things to people living in the town called Colossae. He wrote this letter to encourage them.

Colossians 3

1 Therefore, if you have been raised with the Messiah, keep focusing on the things that are above, where the Messiah is seated at the right hand of God.

2 Keep your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.

3 For you have died, and your life has been safely guarded by the Messiah in God.

4 When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, then you, too, will be revealed with him in glory.

5 So put to death your worldly impulses: sexual sin, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

The call of Jesus was so compelling;

John 14

1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

2 There are many rooms in my Father’s house. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going away to prepare a place for you?

3 And if I am going away to prepare a place for you, I will come back again and welcome you into my presence, so that you may be where I am.

It is an unimaginably wonderful promise. I will conclude

this sermon with these verses;

Jude 1

24 Now to the one who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand joyful and faultless in his glorious presence,

25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus the Messiah, our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority before all time and for all eternity! Amen.

End