

Text: Heb. 11:13-16
Title: "Dying faithful"
Time: 4/24/2016 am
Place: NBBC

Intro - Have you ever thought about how you would like to die someday? I have had some nightmares before in which I fall from a high cliff or get crushed by some mechanical instrument, and I immediately wake up and think to myself, "Boy, I hope I do not die that way some day." You may remember that the risen Lord told Peter how he would die, and then Peter wanted to know how John would die, and the Lord said that this was none of Peter's business. Ultimately, it is the Lord's business, not ours, to know how we are going to die someday.

Our text this morning mentions that the faithful of this passage died (v. 13). We will later learn of the horrific way some of these heroes were willing to die for their Lord (vv. 37a). Their martyrdom testified to the truth that the world was not worthy of them (v. 38). This kind of thing is happening all over the world today. We are praying for the nation of Bangladesh, which has seen the strengthening of the Islamic State, and we read this past week about the 75 year-old pastor who was murdered and then not allowed to have a Christian burial.

The faithful die, and they often die as martyrs for their faith. But the phrase that begins our passage is actually saying more about how they lived than it is about how they died. They died in faith because they had been living faithful lives. One translation (NIV) puts the phrase this way, "All these people were still living by faith when they died." I would not call that a good translation in a technical sense, but it does bring out the author's meaning here. One commentator (Westcott) translates the phrase this way: "literally, 'according to faith' . . ., that is, under the influence and according to the spirit of Faith, inspired, sustained, guided by Faith. Faith was the rule of their lives, the measure of their growth, even to the end" (p. 362).

So in order to die in faith in this sense, you have to be living a faithful life. Paul did that: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:6-7). Because Paul had lived a faithful life, he was ready to die in faith.

None of us really knows how we will die, because short of committing suicide we cannot control that. But we can control whether or not we die in faith, because that has more to do with how we are living. I have titled the message this morning, "Dying faithful," and I want us to think about how we shall have lived when it comes time for us to leave this earth. Will we die faithful? Note four things from the text with me as we answer that question before the Lord.

I. The faithful die seeing God's promises without receiving them (v. 13a).

Ill: The eye of an eagle is an amazing thing. Scientists tell us that if we had eagle eyes we could see an ant crawling on the ground from the top of a 10-story building. They can see many more shades of color than we can, and they even have the ability to pick up ultra-violet light. The anatomy of their eyes that give them this ability include a far denser coating of their retina with cones, light-sensing cells, and a far deeper fovea in the back of the eye, also rich with these cells. Some researchers believe that the deeper fovea acts like a telephoto lens to see great distances.

Appl: Our passage speaks of Abraham's eagle-eye of faith, his ability to see over great distances. The word translated *afar off* is used only here and in Luke 17:12, where it speaks of the 10 lepers who called to Christ from a great distance. It is another example of unique vocabulary shared by the writings of Luke and the book of Hebrews, which reinforces my theory that Luke is the author of Hebrews.

So Abraham's faith could see a great distance, and that was true not in terms of distances of space, but in terms of distances of time. The content of what Abraham saw was the future that God

had promised, and his faith could not only see these things from afar, it could do so with great anticipation and enthusiasm. Jesus explains what Abraham could see from a distance in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad." God had promised the days of Christ in the Abrahamic covenant. This Son of Abraham is the One in whom all the families of the earth have been blessed (Gen. 12:3). Abraham could see those days centuries before they occurred. He died faithful because when he lived he had seen and had welcomed God's promises without receiving them.

Can we see like that? Can you see the future that God's promises have guaranteed you? Can we see the coming days of Christ's return? Like Abraham, we need faith that can see over great distances of time.

His promise says He died for our sins two thousand years ago. Do we have faith to see and welcome that promise? His promise says that He will soon return and that we must be ready, laying up treasures in heaven and not on the earth. Do we have eyes to see and welcome that promise?

Prov. 20:12 says, "The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made even both of them." That is true of the eye of the eagle. It is also true that the only way we can have Abraham's eye of faith and see over great distances of time the promise of God is that the Lord's work of salvation would give us that kind of ear and that kind of eye. Has He done that for you? He will if you ask Him to.

II. The faithful die as strangers and pilgrims on the earth (vv. 13b-14).

III: It has often been said that our country's founding fathers would have a difficult time recognizing our nation today. I think that is right. One difference that sometimes goes unnoticed is the way we value the concept of democracy today. One historian has rightly said that the word *democracy* was more like an epithet than a virtue in the days of our founding. When Alexander

Hamilton spoke at the New York Convention to ratify the US Constitution in 1788, he said the following about a pure democracy:

“It has been observed by an honorable gentleman, that a pure democracy, if it were practicable, would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved, that no position in politics is more false than this. The ancient democracies, in which the people themselves deliberated, never possessed one feature of good government. Their very character was tyranny; their figure deformity: When they assembled, the field of debate presented an ungovernable mob, not only incapable of deliberation, but prepared for every enormity. In these assemblies, the enemies of the people brought forward their plans of ambition systematically. They were opposed by their enemies of another party; and it became a matter of contingency, whether the people subjected themselves to be led blindly by one tyrant or by another.” [<http://news.discovery.com/history/us-history/what-founding-fathers-said-about-democracy-160404.htm>; accessed 4/22/16].

Appl: The further our nation drifts from the moorings of our founding fathers and their constitution, the less it feels like our home. This is why a homeland is often called a *fatherland*. We do not use that term *fatherland* much anymore, but our author uses it at the end of v. 14 (*country = fatherland; patris from pater meaning father*). We are told here that Abraham died as a faithful man because he died as one who was searching all his life for his true fatherland. Part of this meant confessing that no fatherland was to be found among the kingdoms of this world. He lived as a pilgrim and a stranger in this world, because he knew he belonged to another world, a heavenly world (v. 16). Neither Ur nor Canaan was Abraham’s fatherland, and New Boston is not ours.

It is, of course, our hope that our children will have a freer and more blessed America than the one we have had. As part of a God-ordained government of the people, by the people, and for the people, we have a responsibility to do our part to work toward that end. We must seek to be a blessing to our land the way

Abraham was a blessing to his neighbors in Canaan. But I believe that more and more we are beginning to realize that we have lost much of the blessed nation we inherited from our parents. We wonder whether after this election we shall ever see that recovered at all.

What does that mean for the faithful believer? Well, in a sense, it means that nothing really has changed. When America was at her best, faithful believers were called to be pilgrims and strangers, and should she sink to levels that make her unrecognizable as the land of our founding fathers, faithful believers will still be called to be pilgrims and strangers here. Our fatherland is not of this world. Do you and I have Abraham's faith to live for a homeland that is not of this world? A good measure of that is your commitment to the local church, I believe. The local church transcends national governments as a universal work of God on the earth, a kingdom not of this world. The faithful die as strangers and pilgrims on the earth who are committed to their local church's gospel ministry. Those who neglect their church in favor of this world are not faithful strangers and pilgrims in it.

III. The faithful die not having turned back (vv. 15-16a).

Appl: Those two little words at the beginning of verse 16, *but now*, are two very important words when it comes to understanding the faith of Abraham. The author's point is that a sinner's life can be expected to have been one thing, *but now* that saving faith has come it has been forever and irrevocably changed. What changes is not our location, we are still in the world, but rather our longing; we no longer long for the possessions, pleasures, and pride of the world; we long for the next.

Ill: A second century letter written to defend the faith describes this change that the faith of Abraham makes. It is titled "A Disciple to Diognetus." We do not know who the disciple was, nor do we know which Diognetus this was, but clearly the text of the letter was written to describe Christians in such a way as to defend them in the midst of a hostile environment. Part of the letter said this:

“Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, language, nor by the customs which they observe. They do not inhabit cities of their own, use a particular way of speaking, nor lead a life marked out by any curiosity. . . .

“Instead, they inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, however things have fallen to each of them. And it is while following the customs of the natives in clothing, food, and the rest of ordinary life that they display to us their wonderful and admittedly striking way of life.

“They live in their own countries, but they do so as those who are just passing through. As citizens they participate in everything with others, yet they endure everything as if they were foreigners. Every foreign land is like their homeland to them, and every land of their birth is like a land of strangers.

“They marry, like everyone else, and they have children, but they do not destroy their offspring.

“They share a common table, but not a common bed.

“They exist in the flesh, but they do not live by the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, all the while surpassing the laws by their lives.

“They love all men and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life.

“They are poor, yet make many rich. They lack everything, yet they overflow in everything.

“They are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor they are glorified; they are spoken ill of and yet are justified; they are reviled but bless; they are insulted and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if raised from the dead. They are assailed by the

Jews as barbarians; they are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to give any reason for their hatred.”

This letter describes people who could have turned back, but they did not. They were faithful in their difficult day. They died in faith. Will we turn back in the difficulty of our day? If so, we will not die faithful. The faithful die not having turned back.

IV. The faithful die to receive their reward (v. 16b).

Appl: In chapter 2 we learned that there is an important sense in which our Savior will never be ashamed of us (vv. 10-18; note v. 11). If we are saved by the blood of Christ, He will not be ashamed to call us His brothers.

But our passage this morning tells us that there is a sense in which God may be ashamed to be called our God. Should we not die in faith, there is a reward to be lost. A city is prepared for those who die faithful. But what shall be for those who die unfaithful? Our passage does not say.

Conclusion: Will you die faithful? You have no control over how you will die, but you can decide how you shall live. If you live faithfully, you will die faithfully. To live faithfully, you must see and welcome God's promises not yet received; do you see them and welcome them? You must live as a stranger and a pilgrim on this earth and not turn back; have you resisted the temptation to turn back in difficult days? If so, God is not ashamed to be called your God, for He has prepared for you a city. If not, ask the Lord for forgiveness and for strength to be faithful to Him as He has been to you. Ask him for faith to live faithfully and to die faithful.

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching