

WHAT MAKES GOD PROUD

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Hebrews 11:13-16
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Hebrews 11:13-16

In Frederick Buechner's novel *Treasure Hunt*, a man named Antonio Parr returns home after some weeks and finds that his small son and some other children have made a sign for him that reads "Welcome Hone," with the last leg of the *m* in *home* missing so that it tuns into an *n*.

When Antonio Parr first sees the sign, he says, "It seemed oddly fitting. It was good to get home, but it was home with something missing or out of whack about it. It wasn't much, to be sure, just some minor stroke or serif, but even a minor stroke can make a major difference."

Later, Antonio says the sign makes him think of the men and women featured in Hebrews 11, who kept looking for some small but crucial thing that was missing, "come hell or high water wherever they went till their eyes were dim and their arches fallen."¹

Can you relate to Antonio, who relates to the men and women of Hebrews 11? Even in the best of times, do you feel as if something is missing or out of whack?

In Hebrews 11:1-12, the writer of Hebrews defined the purpose of faith, which is to demonstrate the validity of what faith believes in, principally the hope of heaven. He also began to provide some examples of faith, displaying it in Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. In Hebrews 11:13-16, the writer reflects on the faith of the patriarchs.

Strangers and exiles

Hebrews 11:13-14:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

"These" who died would be Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah. They died without receiving the fulfillment of God's promises, particularly concerning the land of Canaan. They lived in the land but never came close to possessing it. By all appearances, the promise was a failure.

Nevertheless, they died "in faith," believing in the validity of the promises right up to the end of their lives, though what they saw with their eyes offered no evidence of eventual fulfillment. They died wanting more.

They died well. They died well because in their lives they saw the promises before they were fulfilled. They saw even beyond the eventual possession of the land by their descendants, for they chose to live in Canaan as though they were "in a foreign land, living in tents" (Hebrews 11:9). They "acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles" in it (Hebrews 11:13). (The word translated "earth" in verse 13 is the same one that is translated "land" in verse 9. In each case, the writer is talking about the land of promise, Canaan.)

Abraham and the rest of them were "seeking a homeland" different from the land of promise. The promises, they believed, would be fulfilled in their homeland. There were things they "hoped for" and "things not seen," but they could see them (Hebrews 11:1).

Not only could they see them, they could also appreciate them, for they "greeted them from afar." People living in foreign lands would often "salute" their countries from afar. So it was with the patriarchs, only it was time, not space, that separated them from their homeland. They believed God would close the distance. They saw, and they appreciated. They were "seeking" a homeland, which means, not least, that they were seeking God. They believed that God "exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6).

Seek God

The theme of alienation runs through much art. For example, the characters in Bob Dylan's songs often

confess that they don't belong. One character sings, in the 1960s, "And your long-time curse hurts, but what's worse / Is this pain in here, I can't stay in here, ain't it clear / That I just can't fit / Yes, I believe that it's time for us to quit." Another sings, in the 2000s, "Walking through the leaves, falling from the trees / Feeling like a stranger nobody sees."

Most people, even those who seem well-adjusted, at least on the outside, deep down can't shake the feeling that they don't belong. Moreover, many of us feel caught between the desire to fit in and the desire to stand out. It's hard to fit in and stand out at the same time.

Do you feel like a stranger here, as if you don't belong? Good. You're supposed to feel that way. You're in good company: Abraham, the father of faith, and his family felt that way.

By God's design, you're supposed to feel like a stranger, as if you don't belong, so that you will be motivated to do something about it. Some, feeling this way, will be constantly seeking a better place, a better community, or both. But that's not what the patriarchs did. They didn't seek a better place or a better community, at least on earth. They sought God and the heavenly homeland where he dwells.

Therefore, seek God. "Now set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God." (1 Chronicles 22:19). "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. . . ." (Matthew 6:33). Seek God every day until his kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. How do you seek God? Within certain limitations, anyway you can! And as you do, don't forget to greet the promises of a new heaven and a new earth from afar.

In the movie *Braveheart*, William Wallace, just before he's about to be tortured and executed, prays, "Lord, help me die well." By dying well he means not begging for mercy. Dying well, however, is not that complicated. If you seek God, then when you die, you will die in faith. You will die wanting more. In other words, you will die well.

C.S. Lewis observes:

The Christian says, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing

as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same."

The patriarchs, living in the promised land, looked ahead. What did they feel about the land they came from?

A better country

Hebrews 11:15-16a:

If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Ur of the Chaldeans was the homeland of Abraham and his family. They were looking for a homeland, yes, but not the one they came from. They weren't thinking of—literally "remembering"—Ur.

They entered a land in which they never settled down and were never safe from danger. If they had wanted to be settled and safe, they had the opportunity to return. But they didn't take advantage of it. They remembered where they came from, of course, but not in a way that made them want to return.

They wanted something better. Unlike their descendants who left for Egypt but wanted to return once they reached the wilderness, these men and women looked forward, not backward.

They "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one." No matter how desirable any land proved to be, they didn't want it. It had to be heavenly for them to desire it. It had to be permanently filled with the presence of God. Therefore, they were content to live here as strangers and exiles. They were content to be discontent, if you will.

How to remember

Some, feeling as if they don't belong, would seek to somehow return to a better place, maybe the home from which they came. There's nothing wrong with going home, of course, if God leads you there, but going home will not dispel your sense of alienation. Home, wherever it is, will always feel at least just a little bit like "home."

It's not as if we shouldn't remember the past, though. The Scriptures are filled with admonitions to remember. If there are events and environs and people from the past that you really enjoyed and really miss, they were all gifts from God, not least to give you a taste of what it will be like in the heavenly homeland once it comes to earth. The better country is not where you came from; it's where you're going. Look back, sure, but look back in order to look ahead.

A few weeks ago, after my father's death, my brothers and I gathered in his house, which is the house we grew up in, to sort through things. We unearthed all sorts of gems that triggered sweet memories for the three of us. The growing-up times were great—mostly. I realized, though, especially as I was diving into Hebrews 11, that the sweet memories are mostly pointing forward in time, not backward. The best days on earth only give us a foretaste of the better days when heaven comes to earth.

What does God feel about those who seek him?

Not ashamed

Hebrews 11:16b:

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Because Abraham and his family desired a heavenly country, "God is not ashamed to be called their God." The Lord, in fact, identified himself as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). Why is he not ashamed to be called their God? Simply because they desire a heavenly country.

Notice that the verb "be called" is in the passive voice. Although the Lord is not ashamed to call himself the God of the patriarchs, as in Exodus 3:6, he is not in this case said to be doing so. Others are envisioned as possibly calling him their God. It's as if someone were accusing God of guilt by association—by association with Abraham and his family.

Given what we know about the patriarchs from the book of Genesis, it might come as a bit of surprise to hear that the Lord does not back away from being called their God. The sins that might have caused him to do so are of no account in view of their desire for a heavenly country.

Make God proud

If God is not ashamed, what is he? The writer is not saying that God is not ashamed in order to say that God has no feelings whatsoever. The writer is using a negative in order to emphasize a positive.

If a father sees his daughter doing what's right and good and beautiful, what is that father feeling? Certainly, he's not feeling shame. However, he is not likely to approach his daughter and say to her, "I'm not ashamed of you." The father is not feeling shame, but it's not as if he isn't feeling anything. What is he feeling?

What is God feeling about those who seek him? What's the opposite of shame? Pride! God is proud of those who seek him, of those who want to dwell with him in the better country. If you seek God, he is proud of you. He is pleased with you if you seek him (Hebrews 11:6). Make God proud by seeking him.

It's as if God is being called names because he cares for us. But God stands up for us. He cannot be shamed because of us. He stands up for his association with us. He's proud to be with us, to love us, to care for us. He's proud to be called our God and cannot be shamed into disowning us. We can picture ourselves at God's side, with God bursting with pride and proclaiming to all who will listen: "Do you want to know what to call me? Call me her God! Call me his God!"

God says, ". . . and I will be their God, / and they shall be my people" (Hebrews 8:10).

How can it be?

Notice that the writer does not say that God is proud of those who find him, although he most certainly is. He says God is proud of those who seek him. Of course, the Scriptures promise that those who seek him will find him, perhaps by glimpsing here and there on the present earth, definitely by seeing Jesus face to face on the new earth (Jeremiah 29:13, Matthew 7:7-8, 1 Corinthians 13:12, 1 John 3:2).

How can it be that God is proud of those who seek him? Because those who seek him glorify him. Listen to Sam Storms:

Think of God as if he were a desert oasis. As I see it, you can magnify an oasis in either of two ways. The most obvious way is by jumping into its refreshing, cool, life-giving waters and drinking to your heart's delight. But you can also honor the oasis by the painful sorrow you feel in not yet having reached it as you continue to press on in the spiritual desert. When you ache for the refreshment of the oasis, even though you're still hot and dry and thirsty, when you grieve because of the absence of its life-giving waters, you magnify the oasis even before you have opportunity to enjoy it. So too with God.

Isn't this what we see in Psalm 42:1-2? "As a deer pants for flowing streams, / so pants my soul for you, O God. / My soul thirsts for God, / for the living God." What honors the water: the deer bent over drinking, after a long journey in the desert, or the deer diligently panting for the water while yet in the desert? Both! Actually drinking is the best and most satisfying way to honor the water; but until you get there, continue to thirst for it. For in doing so, God is glorified!³

The evidence

The evidence for God's disposition toward the patriarchs is that "he has prepared for them a city"—that is, a heavenly city. Not only has he already built it, he has also already "prepared" it. It has been built with their particular needs in mind.

God has prepared this city for us as well. He knows all our nuances and what kind of place will best suit our needs for eternity. With all the money and land in the world, we couldn't build a home like this. We don't know ourselves that well. And it's a done deal. It's been prepared. It's ready for us. God is ready for us.

Listen to the words that Jesus' sheep will one day hear: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Matthew 25:34).

It makes a difference when someone prepares for us, doesn't it? When someone prepares for you, you know that the person has been thinking of you. You know that the person cares for you. Someone doesn't make careful, thoughtful preparations for someone she's ashamed of, does she?

No wonder Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob wanted to dwell in tents on earth. No wonder they were seeking a better place. If the better place has been prepared for us by God, who knows us intimately and is proud to be called our God, we too can be content with our earthly "tents" while fiercely longing for the better homeland. For there, we will see the God who is not ashamed of us, the God who is proud of us, face to face forever. Until then, like the patriarchs, we can be content to be discontent.

For a sneak peek of this place, check out Revelation 21:1-22:5. And as you read it, use your faith. Use your imagination. Picture yourself there. As I read, I envision a Tuscan hill town, with a beautiful piazza in the center where we can gather, sip our espresso, and share our stories of faith. I also envision a trout stream just on the outskirts of town. If the city isn't that, it will be something better than that. It might be something else for you.

We want something more. It may seem that God doesn't value our desires, but already, he has prepared a place for us that meets our desires beyond our deepest longings. He has prepared a place where we can be with him forever. He has prepared a city for us. He sent his Son to die for us so that we could live with him there. To see his children wanting something more—to see them wanting the city—causes God to beam with pride.

Change in plans

Remember Frederick Buechner's character, Antonio Parr, whose son wrote him the "Welcome Home" sign? Buechner said that when he sat down to write the scene, he originally intended to show Antonio Parr's great joy at returning to his home after such a long absence.

But then out of nowhere, and entirely unforeseen by me, there came into my mind that sign with the missing leg of the m. I hadn't planned to have it read home instead of home. It was in no sense a novelistic device I'd contrived. It's simply the way I saw it. From as deep a place within me as my books and dreams come from, there came along with the misspelled sign this revelation that although Antonio Parr was enormously glad to be at home at last, he recognized that there was something small but crucial missing, which if only for a moment made him feel, like Gideon and Barak before him, that he was a stranger and exile there . . .

Where do you look for the home you long for if not to the irrecoverable past? How do you deal with that homesickness of the spirit which Antonio Parr speaks of,

that longing for whatever the missing thing is that keeps even the home of the present from being true home? I only wish I knew. All I know is that, like Antonio, I also sense that something of great importance is missing which I cannot easily name and which perhaps can never be named by any of us until we find it . . . In the meanwhile, like Gideon and Barak and the others, I also know the sense of sadness and lostness that comes with feeling that you are a stranger and exile on the earth and that you would travel to the ends of that earth and beyond if you thought you could ever find the homeland that up till now you have only glimpsed from afar.⁴

Seek God. Make him proud.

Endnotes

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home: Recollections and Reflections* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 17-20.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2015), 209.
3. Sam Storms, "How Can I Worship When I Feel Nothing?" *Crosswalk*. April 10, 2018. <https://www.crosswalk.com/church/worship/how-can-i-worship-when-i-feel-nothing.html>.
4. Buechner, 17-20.