

FINDING HOME



Hebrews 11:13-16
36th Message
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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

One of the most famous and moving choruses in opera is *Va pensiero* in Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842)—that's Nebuchadnezzar. It is popularly known as the Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves. In exile in Babylon they remember their distant homeland with great longing:

Va, pensiero... Go, thought,
Go my thoughts on wings of gold;
go settle upon the slopes and the hills,
where, soft and mild, the sweet airs
of my native land smell fragrant!

O, mia patria, sì bella e perduta!
O my homeland, so lovely and lost!

Verdi set this to a mournful tune full of yearning, a tune that pulls at the heart strings. It was an instant classic. So much so that several times this chorus has been proposed as the Italian national anthem.

The chorus is inspired by Psalm 137:

**By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1-4 NIV)**

Perhaps you are more familiar with the rendition by Bob Marley:

By the rivers of Babylon,
where we sat down,
and there we wept,
when we remembered Zion.

But I think Marley's tune is too upbeat and jaunty for the wistful lyrics.

A similar mournful longing is conveyed in the Advent hymn:

O Come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until...

Until... Oh, what a pregnant word that is right there. A longing for the end of exile. A longing to find home again.

Home and homeland, people and place: these go together. The separation of a people from their homeland is usually traumatic. An exception would be when a group sets out to establish a colony, a new outpost of their homeland. The ancient Greeks and Phoenicians were particularly good at this. They extended their homeland to distant shores around the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea.

European colonial powers did this. They brought part of their

homeland with them as they established colonies. They wanted to feel at home in a very foreign land. The mission boarding school I attended was high up in the Cameron Highlands of Malaysia. In the 1930s the British developed the area as a hill station and they planted tea. The original building around which the school was later built, is a mock-Tudor house with leaded glass windows. It was built by an English tea planter in the middle of the jungle so he could feel at home while he drank his own tea. Nearby is Ye Olde Smoke House restaurant and hotel, also mock Tudor with leaded glass. Here all the Brits could feel at home.

Many Jews were taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, exiled far from home. Under the Persian King Cyrus there was a limited return home to the Land. But in NT times most Jews were in the Diaspora, dispersed in many lands. There was a further dispersion after the two failed Jewish rebellions against Rome. Jews were first expelled from Jerusalem in AD 70, then from Judea in AD 135. In medieval Europe there arose the myth of the Wandering Jew, never able to find home. This motif has made its way into literature and art.

In the later 19th century Jews began to return to the Land to settle and live. Zionism is the movement to reestablish Jews in their ancestral homeland. It arose because Jews who had attempted to assimilate in Western Europe realized that they would never be accepted. Europe would never be their homeland. They could never find home there. Christian Zionism advocates for this return as a fulfillment of prophecy. Israeli law grants the automatic right of return to anyone with at least one Jewish great-grandparent, one out of eight. A return home.

Zionism was promoted under the banner *A land without a people for a people without a land*. It was actually Christians who first promoted this idea before the birth of Zionism. But this was a myth. There *were* people in the land: Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all Palestinian because they lived in Palestine, and all speaking Arabic.

But Israeli governments have consistently denied Palestinian attachment to the Land, and refuse the right of return to those who fled or were expelled in 1948 or 1967. The current Israeli government denies that the Palestinians are even a people; therefore they don't have a homeland. The Palestinians meanwhile hold to the principle of *sumud*, steadfastness in the face of efforts to expel them. They remain attached to the Land. They continue to call it home.

People and Land, people and their home. These twin ideas lie at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and they lie at the heart of God's promises to Abraham. They loom large in the presentation of Abraham in Hebrews 11. These are controversial topics right now, not just in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but here in the US. Who belongs in *We, the People*? Who belongs in this land? Who gets to call this home? Again, People and Land, people and their homeland.

We continue working our way slowly through the section about Abraham in the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11. People and their homeland are dominant themes. Our passage today forms an interlude; it is a theological reflection upon people and homeland. The phrase *by*

faith, which occurs 18 times in the chapter, does not occur at all in this paragraph. This is one of the features that marks it out as an interlude.

¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16 NIV)

The paragraph starts on the note of death not life. *All these people...died*. All these people are Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob, mentioned in vv. 8-12. They lived *by faith*. But now they are dead. Nevertheless, they died still *in faith*. They were faithful to the end.

Three things are said about their status at death. First, negatively, *they did not receive the things promised*. They died without taking possession of the Promised Land, except for the burial cave that Abraham purchased. Does this mean that the promises failed? Did they live faithfully in vain?

No, because, secondly, they died looking ahead into the future. They weren't looking back to the past, wondering whether they should have left Ur or Haran. Nor were they looking to the present, seeking present fulfillment. They were looking ahead. There in the future they *saw* the fulfillment of the promises and they *greeted* or *welcomed* them. They *saw* and they *greeted*, as if they were greeting a familiar friend in the distance. Somehow they recognized that the promised things were on the distant horizon. With the eyes of faith they could see them there.

Therefore, thirdly, they were able to admit and accept that *they were foreigners and strangers on earth*. Abraham admitted this to the Hittites when he sought to purchase a cave for the burial of Sarah. He said, "I am a foreigner and stranger among you" (Gen 23:4). The phrase *on earth* could be translated *on the land*, referring to the Promised Land, or it can be translated, as here, *on earth*. It is perhaps deliberately ambiguous. They were foreigners and strangers in the land of Canaan. They were resident aliens, at home but not at home. They were in that liminal zone of being both resident and alien. The preacher credits Abraham and his family with greater faith than this: that he was not at home in this earth, because his true home lay beyond. Home would be found in some future, transcendental realm.

Those who understand that they are sojourners on earth, resident aliens, make it clear that they have a mental horizon far beyond the confines of this earth (v. 14). They are able to think more expansively. They are earnestly looking for a homeland, but recognize that this homeland is greater than a piece of real estate on this earth. That homeland is where they will finally and fully belong. They will find home. We will find home.

The alternative to such forward-looking thinking is a backward-looking gaze:

If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. (11:15)

The patriarchs could have remembered the land they had left, and wished themselves back home. They could have spent their lives looking backwards rather than forwards.

There are two reasons for being a sojourner, a temporary resident

in a land not your own, however long that temporary status may last. You may be a sojourner because you intend to return home, back to where you came from. This was my original attitude when I came here forty years ago: I would be here for 18 months on a J-1 exchange visa then return to Europe. Or you can be a sojourner because you intend to move on somewhere else, perhaps with the intent of finding home elsewhere. Finding home may be a return to the past or a journey further into the future. On an earthly plane I finally resolved my liminal status by becoming a US citizen a year ago. I ceased to be a resident alien. I exited my liminal space of being resident here as if at home, but also alien as if not at home.

When God was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, angels grabbed Lot and his family and dragged them out of the city:

"Flee for your lives! Don't look back, and don't stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!" ... But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. (Gen 19:17, 26)

Don't look back! But she did look back. This was not just a quick glance, but an intent gaze. She "looked back longingly" (NET). This longing gaze showed that she hadn't really left Sodom and Gomorrah behind. She hadn't left mentally, psychologically, emotionally, or spiritually. She wished herself among them.

The wilderness generation that God had brought out of Egypt looked back. Looking ahead, they were terrified. Looking in the present, they were fed up with manna. Looking back, they remembered Egypt:

The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Num 11:4-6)

We remember... but it was a selective memory: idealized, sanitized, glamorized. Their memory bore no relationship to the horrors of their enslavement in Egypt. A few chapters later, the ringleaders of Korah's rebellion attacked Moses:

"Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness?... Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey." (Num 16:13-14)

They redefined Egypt as the land flowing with milk and honey. They looked back and thought of their enslavement in Egypt as home. They grumbled that God and Moses had failed. They had given up looking ahead for a future home in the land of promise—despite the Lord's assurance that he would bring them into a land flowing with milk and honey. Better the past life that they knew than the future life that seemed a mirage in the distance. For them, finding home meant going back.

There is a stark contrast between the ten spies on the one hand and Joshua and Caleb on the other. The ten acknowledged that Canaan was indeed a land flowing with milk and honey, a fruitful and productive land. But there were giants in the land. These giants dominated their thinking. They filled their horizon. They looked through the lens of fear. Joshua and Caleb acknowledged that there were indeed people in the land, but they had confidence that God would be with them. They looked through a God-centered lens. So they were able to look into the future with optimism.

What about us? Are we looking backwards or forwards? Are we looking through a pessimistic lens or an optimistic one? Are we afraid of the future? Or do we look to the future in anticipation? Are we tempted to turn back, or do we faithfully press forward?

Faced with demographic and cultural changes, many are wistfully remembering former times, a former golden age: be it the 1950s, or the confederacy, or the founding fathers, or the pilgrim fathers. These all recall a particular telling of American history. In this way of thinking, finding home means returning or restoring some mythical past age. This is in response to seeing both the present and the future in fear. Being afraid of what the country is becoming.

This was not true of the patriarchs. Abraham had left a sophisticated, highly-cultured city in Ur. But he and his family were looking ahead. They were desiring a better homeland. A homeland that could never be achieved on this earth:

Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. (11:16a)

The patriarchs had a small footprint in the land. They owned no property save the burial cave for Sarah. They had desires beyond what the physical land could provide, even though it was the land promised by God. They had greater longing because God had made them capable of greater longing. They were capable of thinking beyond the visible. This is a hallmark of faith, as laid down in the first verse of this chapter about living by faith:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. (11:1-2)

Faith and hope, confidence and assurance. Faith is in the present, hope is in the future. But faith in the present includes confidence about that hope in the future. The things we hope for are things we do not see—either because they lie in a realm beyond our current perception, or because they lie in the future. But faith accepts their reality. All the OT saints of this Hall of Faith illustrate this first verse. The whole chapter is a commendation of the faith and hope of these ancients.

The patriarchs were seeking home. Abraham left home in Ur and Haran. He was a sojourner in Canaan; he did not find home there. He and the others who recognized they were sojourners were seeking home, in the future, in a transcendental realm. They were seeking a heavenly homeland. They were seeking home in God's realm. They were seeking God.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (11:16b)

Therefore draws this paragraph to a grand conclusion. Abraham's desire for a heavenly homeland indicates that he had a desire for God himself. Therefore God is not ashamed of them. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob do not shame God. Many of us are from an honor-shame culture, so we can understand this. The preacher uses a double negative: *not ashamed*. Thereby, rhetorically, he means a strong positive: God is greatly honored to be identified with Abraham and his family.

God is honored to be called their God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He revealed himself to Isaac: "I am the God of Abraham your father" (Gen 26:24). He revealed himself to Jacob: "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac" (Gen 31:42). At the Burning Bush he revealed himself to Moses, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God

of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). Four times at the Burning Bush he identifies himself this way to Moses.

At critical moments in Israel's history this identification of "the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel [Jacob]" is invoked: by David as he prays for Solomon who will build the Lord's temple (1 Chr 29:18); by Elijah as he calls upon the Lord on Mt Carmel in the contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:36); and by King Hezekiah as he summons all Israel and Judah to return to the Lord (2 Chr 30:6).

The Lord is not ashamed to be identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is honored to call out a new people in his name.

God brought the Israelites out of Egypt to Mt Sinai to meet with him. There he took them to be his people: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He literally put his name on the high priest, who represented the people before God. On the high priest's turban was a gold plate inscribed, *Holy to the LORD* (Exod 28:36; 39:30). Quite literally he bore or carried the Lord's name.

This helps clarify the third commandment, usually translated "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). As Carmen Joy Imes has argued, it should be translated, "You shall not bear or carry the name of the LORD your God in vain" or to futility.¹ Israel bore God's name. Israel belonged to him as his people. Their behavior should not render that identity futile. Sadly it did.

God was not ashamed to be called the God of Israel. They were not an exceptional people in terms of any intrinsic quality. What was exceptional was that God chose to be called their God. He took them as his people. He put his name on them.

God is not ashamed to be the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. At both the Baptism and the Transfiguration of Jesus, God spoke from heaven: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; 17:5).

The Father was not ashamed looking down on his beloved Son dying on the cross. The Romans intended crucifixion to impose maximum shame. It was the most painful, degrading, humiliating, shaming, honor-stripping form of public execution. God did not consider his Son to be shamed. He did not turn his face away. He did not abandon him. Jesus was not the derelict on the cross. I think the Father looked down with pleasure—not on the suffering of Jesus, but that Jesus bore all that suffering yet remained faithful. He was tested in every way as we are and beyond, yet without sin. God looked down: This is my Son!

God raised Jesus from the dead into the new creation. Jesus was taken up into God's very presence, taking his humanity with him. At last, a human being has found home: home in God's presence. Thereafter the NT Epistles consistently refer to God as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God was not ashamed to be identified as the God of Abraham. He was not ashamed to be identified as the Father of his Beloved Son dying the cross. God is not ashamed to have this shameful death be the center of history—literally the crux at the center. The apostle Paul was not ashamed of the gospel: the gospel of a crucified man. No wonder this was scandalous to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks, to Gentiles. But God is honored.

He is honored to be our God when we enter into Christ. We are baptized not *in* the name of the triune God, but *into* the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We belong to the triune

God. God is not ashamed to own us.

So many of us are used to thinking of ourselves as worthless sinners, even after we have turned to Christ. God might tolerate us. But he is certainly not honored to identify himself with us. The Scriptures show otherwise. At the center of this identification is our Lord Jesus Christ. God's one and only became human, taking our flesh and blood. He died in faith, having lived a human life to perfection, to its end goal. God raised him into the new creation and into his presence. When we enter into Christ, as symbolized in baptism, we enter into the beloved community that is gathered around his Beloved. God is delighted to welcome us into his family. He is not at all ashamed to be our God. Indeed this is what he has made us for.

Many have a negative view of how God regards us because they had a bad role model in a parent or other person in authority. They may have grown up in an environment of negative, critical comments, with little positive affirmation. I have twice heard Paul Young speak—he is the author of *The Shack*. Both times he said it took him fifty years to wipe the face of his father off of the face of God.

What face do you see when you think of God? How do you think God views you? Can we all affirm that God is not ashamed to be called our God. Indeed, he is honored to identify with us as his people.

God told Israel his desire was to dwell with them his people. Immediately after sealing the covenant at Sinai, he instructed the people to make him a tabernacle, a dwelling place, where he could dwell in their midst. When it was finished he filled it with his glory. Then he invited his people to draw near. He told them to offer up ascension offerings which would rise up into his presence and be accepted as a fragrant aroma. He welcomed his people into his presence.

The tabernacle no longer exists. The temple no longer exists. But God has prepared a city (v. 16b). This city will loom larger as we approach the end of Hebrews. In the Jerusalem of the OT, God's presence, the king, and the people all dwelt in the city. God in the temple, the king in the palace next door, and the people all around. The city was in the midst of the Land. Temple, City, and Land were all holy.

In the New Jerusalem, as we heard in our Scripture reading (Rev 21:1-7), the city is of vast size as if it fills the whole earth. God spreads his glory over his people. God has prepared a city for us. A voice from the throne says,

“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (Rev 21:3)

The one seated on the throne, God himself, says,

“It is done... Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” (Rev 21:6-7)

God will not be ashamed. He will be deeply honored to take us as his people. God has prepared a city for us, saying “I am your God, you are my people, and I will dwell with you.” The Holy Spirit is a guarantee or downpayment of this.

The preacher's goal in writing this “word of encouragement” (13: 22), this homily or sermon, is to encourage his readers to look ahead and not look back. Don't be like the wilderness generation that died before finishing their journey. They looked back and wanted to go back, as if it were home. Instead, keep running the race. Keep moving forwards toward the finish line. There we will finally be home.

He urges his readers not to forsake meeting together. We need to meet together regularly to encourage one another to keep looking ahead, to keep moving forwards, to not look back. A major purpose of our Sunday morning gatherings should be to refresh our memory and refresh our resolve to keep moving forward. As stated each week on our worship sheet:

We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. Our desire is to praise God and receive afresh his Spirit in us, to affirm that we are family reconciled to one another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.

When we know that our home is ultimately with God we can live freely in this world without undue attachment to it. Without looking to this world to satisfy all our longings.

We are not our own, we have been bought with a price. God has put his name on us. He is not ashamed to be our God. We are his beloved people in Christ through his Spirit. We find our home in him.

1. Carmen Joy Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (IVP Academic, 2019).

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