

Abraham's Reward and Ours

by Anthony Buzzard

A careful study of the book of Hebrews reveals that “heaven” — meaning a location beyond the skies — is not the reward promised to Abraham and the Christian believers. If this proposition appears startling to some it may be because we have become accustomed, without careful reflection, to the idea that the dead are promised a heavenly home at death. Tradition has led us to believe that the dead are to be transported to their new residence in heaven when their life on earth comes to an end.

If students of the Bible find any such idea in the Scriptures it may well be that they are reading into the text what they expect to be there. But what does Scripture actually say?

Hebrews 11:8 provides the following information: Abraham obeyed God’s invitation by going out to “a place which he was to receive for an inheritance.” He then *lived in* that promised land as an alien (Heb. 11:9). He was “looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

Following the text closely we learn that Abraham’s promised inheritance was none other than the *land* in which he lived his life as an alien. That land was obviously not “heaven,” but the actual land of Palestine. Isaac and Jacob were fellow heirs of the same promise. So says Hebrews 11:9.

These famous patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were expecting, moreover, to inherit a city (Heb. 11:14) located in the land of promise *where they had resided as aliens* (Heb. 11:9). Their desire was for a better country and for the city which God was preparing for them (Heb. 11:15).

It was by faith in these promises, still unfulfilled, that Isaac blessed his children in view of “things to come” (Heb. 11:20) — notice carefully, not things to which Isaac expected to *go* when he died but things which would one day *come* — *come* to the earth.

The faithful of Old Testament times died without receiving the inheritance of the promised land (Heb. 11:13, 39). During their lives they persistently looked forward to the reward (Heb. 11:26). Their reward is expressly said to be the place to which Abraham journeyed during his life, and in which he actually took up residence (as an alien) (Heb. 11:8, 9).

Now we notice another step in the argument: Hebrews 12:28 equates the inheritance with the Kingdom of God, composed of the promised city and land: “Therefore since we are to receive a Kingdom...” The object of hope is then finally described as “*the city which is to come*” (Heb. 13:14).

Once again we note that it is not a city to which we *go*, but the city which is going to come to the earth. It will be built and established by Jesus when he returns. Had he not promised that the meek would “inherit the earth”? (Matt. 5:5) (It may be the first time you have grasped the meaning of those simple but matchless words!)

The “Heavenly” Things to Come

If Abraham expected a reward in a location removed from the earth, Hebrews 11:8 must be pronounced misleading in the extreme! The place in which Abraham lived is specified as the inheritance which he was destined to possess.

Keeping this crucial fact firmly in mind we should not misunderstand the references to the “heavenly country” and “the heavenly Jerusalem” in Hebrews 11:16 and 12:22. Must these phrases be taken as a contradiction of the earlier promise that Abraham was expecting to possess the land of Palestine? Can a “heavenly” country be on earth?

Hebrews 11:16 speaks of the “better,” “heavenly” country and the same verse defines the country as one which is being prepared. But notice carefully that verse 20 speaks in the same context of “things to come.”

At this point we must take the trouble to understand the biblical language properly. Quite simply the “heavenly” things which are in preparation are those things of the future (city and land) which are destined to appear on earth. They are “heavenly” not because they will be located in heaven but because they are being prepared by God now and will be manifested on earth. They will be divine because God Himself will provide them. They are things to come, things of the future age of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Jerusalem Above

Paul had spoken of the “Jerusalem which is above” as “the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26). However, he does not conclude, as so many do under the influence of cherished tradition, that we will go to heaven to find that city. On the contrary, like the writer to the Hebrews, he knew of Psalm 87:5: “But of Zion it shall be said: ‘This one and that one were born in her.’ A man shall say: ‘**Zion is my mother**’” (see the Greek, “Septuagint” version of the OT often quoted by New Testament writers).

It is that future Zion on earth described in Psalm 87:5 which is to be the mother of us all. The heavenly things of the book of Hebrews are simply the things of the age to come. They are things being prepared in heaven ready to be revealed in the coming age of God’s Kingdom on earth. No wonder the writer tells us plainly: It is “the inhabited earth to come concerning which we are speaking” (Heb. 2:5).

Lest we forget this important lesson we should draw a pencil line connecting the “heavenly country” of Hebrews 11:16 and “the things to come” of Hebrews 11:20. Then we should underline in bright colors the “city which is to come” of Hebrews 13:14. Thus we may learn that

“heavenly” did not mean to the writer to the Hebrews quite what it might instinctively mean to us.

Additional verses will confirm us in our belief that Abraham and the faithful of all ages are promised a reward in the beautiful, renewed earth of the future. “The meek will inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). “They will reign as Kings **on the earth**” (Rev. 5:10). How else could Abraham ever inherit “this country in which the Jews are living” (Acts 7:4)? Now there’s a text which has been quietly ignored for too long! “God promised that he would give **to Abraham** [the land of Palestine],” though during his lifetime “God gave him no inheritance in it” (see Acts 7:5). This is the original Christian view plainly expressed by Stephen.

Truly the place which Abraham was to receive for an inheritance was none other than the place in which he resided as an alien. Until the present day he has not received a square yard of it to call his own (Acts 7:5). He and his sons died without receiving the promises (Heb. 11:39). Christians are to rejoice in the same hope of life in the land, life in the Coming Age, life in the Kingdom of God on earth. For if we are Christians we are “Abraham’s offspring and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). We should seek to be properly instructed believers, baptized for the remission of sins, and living in preparation for the resurrection of all the faithful to rule with Jesus in the coming Kingdom of God on this planet.

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