

[Voices Loud and Clear (October 2024), pp. 7-13]

**Abraham “made his home in the promised land” (Heb. 11:9, NIV).<sup>1</sup>**  
**(Brian Stiller)**


In these two mornings together, I want to direct our attention to Hebrews 11:8-10 as we reflect on the contributions of Pentecostals to Kingdom life. We will see two counterposing and interlocking ideas that call us to become not just either, but both. The first idea is about Abraham who “made his home in the promised land” (v. 9). The second idea is that “like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents” (v. 9).

We need to read that biographical comment about Abraham in context. The writer of Hebrews, when laying out in previous chapters the plan of God in Jesus for Jewish readers, describes the absolute superiority of Jesus in all aspects of creation and wraps up the argument with a call to persevere for Christ. Hebrews 10:37-39 states: “For in just a very little while he who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.”

With those verses as a prelude, in Chapter 11, the writer launches into an extensive soliloquy on faith. Nothing in Scripture matches this extraordinary painting of a landscape, describing how we interlock with all that the writer has told us about Jesus. It’s Jesus and us, connected and made alive by this process called faith.

Growing up in a Pentecostal pastor’s home on the Canadian prairies, I heard thousands of sermons, including many on faith. This theme was embedded in our living and thinking. In our small and often struggling church, resilience and planning were fuelled not only by trust in a

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version. 

caring and responsive God but by the faithful actions required of us. For surely, faith is an act. The superb flow of images and actions in Hebrews 11 gives us a descriptive analysis of what faith really is.

To understand faith fully, we could distinguish between the mind, heart, and will. With the mind, I choose to believe; it is this and not that. I can spell it out. This part of faith is cognitive. Meanwhile, the heart lifts me in hope. It frames my life. Third, faith is an act of the will based on trust in God. Faith is what I do. Of course, faith is aligned with belief and hope, but faith is more than that: it is an act made sure by the will. It is the actual outworking of what we do, based on the trust that the God of promise is a God of fulfilment.

Surprisingly, the writer of Hebrews throws us a curve in 11:6, stating that without faith we cannot please the Father. Really? Not by living a holy life or through consistent obedience? Is the writer saying that those things would not also please God? Of course not. But something happens in our relationship with God when we take a risk by faith, and with that, God is pleased.

I define faith as going beyond what I believe I can do, trusting that God will engage by his presence and provision. The story of Joshua crossing into the Promised Land provides an illustration. God's command was, "When the feet of the priest touch the water, then I will stop the water" (Josh. 3:13). I might have countered, "But I have a better idea: you stop the water, then we will walk across." God shakes his head. That's not faith. Faith is taking the risk, knowing that if he doesn't come through, we sink. It is an act based on our trust in his provision.

Abraham left his residence in Ur of the Chaldeans, bringing his family to the land that he was promised which was filled with people from other tribes and nations. In a sense, by making his home in the land, he did something contradictory to the preferred mode of operation for us Pentecostals in our early years. The "soon return of Jesus" theme filled our music, sermons, and

reading of world events. John Nelson Darby and his notes on the Bible secured our future, so we decided God was giving up on our world. Fixating on the certainty of his soon return obviated our need to be concerned about our own land at all.

Now, a century later, we see creation undergoing both micro- and macro-level change. A century ago, our eyes were heaven-directed. Heaven was coming soon, so “get me out of here, Lord.” However, in time we built churches, developed NGOs, trained pastors, and put systems in place to pay our bills and secure mortgages. Like it or not, we made our home here.

In most places, we Pentecostals are no longer the outliers on the edge of society, and our churches are no longer necessarily nondescript. Now that our enterprises are better financed, I wonder: what did the writer of Hebrews mean when writing that Abraham made his home there? Watch out for the next line: “Like a stranger in a foreign country, he lived in tents” (Heb. 11:9). But that is my second devotional. For now, let’s stay with this part of the text: “By faith, he made his home in the promised land” (v. 9).

You and I know the warning: “Be careful – you are so earthly minded that you are of no heavenly use.” But in this text – used to illustrate faith – Abraham lives in a place promised to him. It isn’t his yet, at least not by possession. That would take many more years. Even so, his act of living there affirmed the promise.

As Pentecostals, what does “living in the land” mean for us? We are now valued members of a global evangelical community. What might our unique and important offering be?

Today, evangelicals and the wider Christian world are increasingly acquainted with the Holy Spirit. That is largely because of us. We gave the Christian world new insight into the person, workings, gifts, and anointing of the Spirit of God. For most of Church history, the Spirit was caught in the shadow of the Father and the Son. As theologian Emil Bruner put it, “The Holy

Spirit has always been more or less the stepchild of theology, and the dynamism of the Spirit [has been] a bugbear for theologians.”<sup>2</sup>

The Pentecostal Movement opened up a fresh and revitalised understanding of the Trinity and emboldened the people of God in new ways. For centuries, ministry had been placed in the hands of clergy, those trained and approved to administer the grace of faith. All of a sudden, a plumber could invoke prayers for the needy and not have to wait for the approved clergy. Laity were stirred to witness, do missions, and trust God in their lives. Missions became evidence of the influence of this accelerator: the Holy Spirit.

Now the theology of the Spirit has spread across Christians everywhere. No longer is it present just within our Pentecostal tribe. The multiple effects of this understanding have changed the Church. So how, then, might we view this text? It’s not that we want to always be different, in front, or on the leading edge. As grateful as we are for what has happened in this past century, we are all members of the body of Christ. We might reflect on this text from Hebrews in a couple ways:

**1. It’s a metaphor.** God’s promise to Abraham models Jesus’ promise to us. We too have a future “promised land,” both timeless and limitless.

**2. It’s an actual promise.** For Abraham, the Promised Land was an actual place for the people of God, situated and designed to bless the nations. It was real geography, not just an idea. It was part of God’s strategy to enter humanity, resolve our sins, and carry out his eternal plan for us and in us. This eternal God who crafted us in his image, and whose image is imprinted on us, seeks an unbroken relationship with us.

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<sup>2</sup>Taken from Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, (Cambridge UK:, The Lutterworth Press, 2002)

## **What is the application of this text today for**

### **Pentecostals and the wider Church?**

Let me take you to a parallel Old Testament story. It is not a perfect match, but it can help us see what was in God's heart for his people, whether within the Promised Land or on their way to it.

Jeremiah 29 is written to the Jews in exile. Nebuchadnezzar has taken them from Jerusalem to Babylon. There are five takeaways from this text: settle, be productive, raise families, promote peacefulness, and avoid distractions. In short, "be my people wherever you are." Bless the land and the people where you are located.

### **Engage the Culture**

One phrase we see in many vision statements today is to "engage the culture." Take a brief glance at our history: Evangelicals rose out of a reaction to theological liberalism's spread through much of the Protestant Church in the early twentieth century. Globally, among this conservative response, there was a move to disengage from culture, in contrast to liberal Protestantism's aspiration to be the ruler and designer of culture. In evangelical churches and even more so in Pentecostal communities, being as far away as possible from the general culture was seen as being more spiritual. In part, our spirituality was performance-driven: we were defined by the social sins we did not commit. We saw culture as a place the Spirit did not inhabit, and neither should we.

Today, we perceive a calling to engage culture, aiming to bring it under the rule and dominion of God. The danger is to assume that this engagement means us landing the kingdom of Christ into the world. Chuck Colson, as an aide to US President Richard Nixon, watched

clergy sidle up to politicians. Later, as a Christian leader, Chuck Colson said, “Remember, Christ’s kingdom does not arrive on Air Force One.”<sup>3</sup> Too often, we try to engage culture without a thoughtful analysis of what the Kingdom actually means. We become so enraptured by the glamour and power in our culture as to become seduced, interpreting our increased influence as reflecting God’s desires.

In some countries, I see Christians acting as if “living in the land” means aligning with particular political leaders, parties, or associations so as (we think) to gain spiritual advantage, when in fact we are in danger of losing our prophetic distance. When we get too close to power, we lose, by the very nature of our proximity, our ability to say, “Thus says the Lord.” Understanding what it means to “live in the land” requires a conscious effort to decipher what in fact it means to live under the reign of Jesus.

### **Lessons from Abraham**

Abraham’s taking up residence in the Promised Land offers us substantial lessons.

First, the God of creation owns all land. The implications of this truth are many, not the least of which is our calling to steward this land, which is ours by his creation.

Second, wherever we are, it is God’s territory. The sacred-secular divide, while helpful to keep religions from killing each other, sets up a false division of creation.

Third, whether we are caught in Babylon or have entered the Promised Land, God calls us to bless that land. Recall his words to Abraham: “I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2).

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<sup>3</sup> Chuck Colson, A statement attributed to Colson that is oft quoted but is more an example of an oral tradition surrounding Colson rather than explicitly stated in his writings.

After over one hundred years as Pentecostals, what have we brought to the land? Our understanding of the Holy Spirit was remarkable in Church history. When writing *From Jerusalem to Timbuktu*, I realised how little the church knew of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> This was a time of modernity when science ruled. As Pentecostals, in a sense, we were postmodern, believing that revelation and inspiration were also legitimate means of perceiving and receiving truth. But now we are the established Church. We are the new normal. And so, I wish to suggest some implications as we seek out a place in God's Kingdom life.

We begin by recognising ourselves as members of the larger body of Christ. The danger of feeling or acting in ways that smack of arrogance is unfitting. Like Peter discovering that the Gentiles were also within God's concern, we must remember that all of us stand on common and level ground before the Cross.

From there, as we reflect on the flow of history and these one hundred-plus years of our giving to the larger Church, we know that this is not the end. In fact, it may not even be the apex of his working among us. Are we living in the end times? Yes, we are, but we've been living in that era for two thousand years. And, until Jesus returns, we are in the centre of his flow and empowerment. However, we are also part of his eternal working. We are called to live in this tension of his possibly coming today, without becoming so brazenly sure of our interpretations that we make time predictions, when even Jesus said he didn't know the time.

It is not surprising that, when we become settlers, we become concerned with the issues of living and occupying in the land. Household management takes over. The writer of Hebrews

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Stiller, *From Jerusalem to Timbuktu*, (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2018) pp 23-47

understood that, as one also living in the time and era of grace, with Jesus as the centre. We are still in that era. What would Jesus make of “living in the land” as it relates to his Church today?

When Jesus spoke to his own chosen race, the people inhabiting that very land God had promised much earlier to Abraham, he used blunt, direct, and unequivocal language. He looked into their faces and said who the actual inheritors of the promise would be. He didn’t say, “If your father is Abraham [...]”. I’m sure what he said stirred some dust among those listening. Here is what he said: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land” (Mt. 5:5).

What does he mean by “meek”? And what does meekness have to do with inheriting the land? We might tend to associate inheriting the land with mischief and deceit, as in Jacob’s dealings with Esau, or with Joshua moving his people in and pushing out existing tribes.

But Jesus has another take on the question. “Meek,” we know, doesn’t mean “weak”. Rather, it refers to a patient, waiting person, looking for an alignment of factors that allow for the inheritance to materialise.

This picture might be helpful. A racehorse is powerful, trained, and determined to be at the front of the pack, but to be great, it must also be meek. Muscles taut, driven by a competitive spirit, it pounds down the racetrack, yet holding its explosive breakout power in check, waiting for the timing of the rider. When the jockey sees circumstances in their favour, a slight touch of the riding stick or a gentle murmur in the horse’s ear triggers a release of adrenaline. The racehorse leaps forward in the final leg of the race, now in full stride, pressing for the win. To be meek is to wait for the right time, to hold one’s gifts and vision under control, until the signal is given.

Meekness is a state of mind, also shaped and influenced by patience and humility. My prayer for our community is that meekness will characterise our people, churches, and ministry



as we wait for the signal of the Spirit. From this flows our inheritance, our dwelling in the land that gives us presence, grace, and wisdom to bless the nations.

If the meek are inheritors of the land, what central and dominating concerns of Jesus might call us to a new season of meekness? For one thing, the teachings of Jesus touch the full spectrum of our lives. The core elements of love, hope, and faith are broad categories, but Jesus doesn't let us get away with only affirming broad categories. He cuts into the heart of who we are, how we think, our prime concerns, and how we live them out daily.

One word that has gone global today is *empower*. Power shapes our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. This is biblical and appropriate. But what is meant by power? Is it power to influence the community politically, to ensure that policies are supportive of our witness and value? We need to filter such assumptions through the grid of what Jesus actually said, not only to those who were living in the Promised Land, but to us whose future is truly the eternal promised land. At the core of the role and calling of the Spirit is Jesus. He is the *raison d'être* of the Spirit.

I suggest we ask ourselves what it means to “make our home” in this land as we are empowered by the Spirit. What is the Spirit's aim or objective in giving us power? And how did Jesus intend this power of the Spirit to be used?

We Pentecostals have been a catalyst for the Church to learn about the Spirit. Those barriers are essentially broken. So now, what is there of the life and presence of Jesus that the Spirit says needs our attention?

We could compile a list of words, stories, and promises of Jesus that apply to what he might want us to understand by “occupying the land” today. I have noted his promise that the meek shall inherit the land. With this in mind, try rereading some of Jesus' stories, such as the

Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Go back and scour the Sermon on the Mount, or take a crack at the story about paying taxes to Caesar. In the life of Jesus and in the outworking of his life in the Early Church, we will find striking answers to the questions of what power is and how it is to be used.

When I was leading the Evangelical Alliance in Canada, part of my assignment was to interface with senior political leaders. One day, I was scheduled to meet with the Prime Minister. My committee and I had carefully gone over which issues I would raise with him. I arrived at the Parliament buildings in Ottawa and was ushered to a side room, awaiting my appointed time. As I waited, I opened my Bible to Daniel 11, which I had recently been studying. As I reread the opening verses, I felt an inner nudge to drop my agenda and bless the country's leader. It seemed so contradictory to my reason for being there, but as we sat together and, after some general conversation, he asked what was on my mind, I said, "Mr Prime Minister, I'm not here to ask for anything other than to encourage you." After a few minutes of sharing Bible verses and prayer, my appointment ended. I had no idea whether my behaviour was appropriate.

The next week, while I was boarding a plane, Canada's Minister of Justice saw me and called me over. He asked, "Brian, what happened with you and the Prime Minister last week?" My heart dropped. Had I crossed a line? But he smiled and said, "At our Cabinet meeting, the Prime Minister told us of his meeting with you. He ended by saying that if we ignore the evangelical community, both the government of Canada and the people of Canada are the losers." I discovered then the life-giving impact of a blessing.

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This essay is part of the **Global Pentecostal Voices Initiative** sponsored by **City Harvest Church in Singapore**. See [www.chc.org.sg](http://www.chc.org.sg)

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This essay is published in **Voices Loud and Clear** edited by Kong Hee Byron D Klaus and Douglas Petersen published by Regnum Books UK.

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