

“The Promise”

Hebrews 11:39, 40

Having powerfully presented to us a “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) from the Old Testament who model the kind of faith that pleases God (Heb 11:6) and therefore receives “the righteousness which is according to faith” (Heb 11:7), the author of Hebrews concludes with a startling statement. He says, “And all these... did not obtain the promise...”, going on to explain “God having foreseen something better concerning us, so that they should not be perfected without us” (literal). Something very profound is being said here, but its meaning isn’t immediately clear. What promise is he talking about? Who does he mean by us? What is the something better? And what is being perfected? To answer these questions we’re going to do some Bible study today to unpack the meaning of these verses. And when we do we’ll find a treasure waiting for us that will make many passages in the New Testament understandable. Things that once confused us will make sense. A big picture of God’s plan will emerge. And we’ll hear afresh a promise that will challenge each of us to go deeper in our walk in the Spirit.

The Promise

Earlier in this chapter the author spoke of promises in the plural. There was more than one. But here he speaks of the promise in the singular. In other words there is a promise these Old Testament saints did not receive. We need to identify what promise he’s talking about.

1) The author of Hebrews gives us a clue. He says this promise provided us with “something better” and those words take us back to Hebrews 8:6-13. He’s saying the promise is the New Covenant described by Jeremiah 31:31-34. It provides (Heb 8:6-13):

a) v 10 – A transformed mind and heart

- Revelation, the desire to obey
- 1 Corinthians 2:12-16 “the mind of Christ”

b) v 11 – The indwelling Holy Spirit

- An ongoing, personal relationship with God
- The power to obey
- John 4:14 “in him a well of water;” John 7:38 “rivers of living water;” John 14:17 “He abides with you and will be in you”

c) v 12 – A cleansed conscience

- The inner assurance that my sins do not cloud my relationship with God. They are forgotten.
- Hebrews 9:14; 10:2 “cleanse your conscience,” “no... consciousness of sins”

2) Jesus said the promise is the outpouring of the Spirit which began at Pentecost (Ac 1:4, 8; Lk 24:49; Jn 14:26)

3) Peter points to Joel 2:28-32 on Pentecost (Ac 2:16-21) and said the outpouring of the Spirit was the beginning of the promise (Ac 2:38, 39).

4) The early church expected all believers to receive this empowering (Ac 8:14-17)

5) Peter proved that God accepted Gentile believers by the fact that they had received the promise (Ac 10:44-48; 11:15-18)

6) Paul felt a believer was not fully equipped until they had it (Ac 19:2-7). He pointed to the same New Covenant realities in Romans 8:

- v 2 – “The law of the Spirit of life...”
- vs 3, 4 – Empowered to obey
- v 10 – The law written on the mind and heart
- v 11 – The indwelling Spirit
- vs 15, 16 – The inner assurance

Something Better

Before Christ, people were saved the same way we are today, by repentance and faith. They had much less revelation than we but God gave them the same righteousness because they believed wholeheartedly in the promises He gave them. But when the Messiah (Christ) came He brought a new era of the Spirit in which believers are: indwelt, transformed in mind & heart, empowered and assured by the Spirit’s presence & a clean conscience that they belong to Christ.

Us

By “us” the author means the Church, the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:11-22).

By “us” he also means the great number of people for whom God is delaying the return of Christ so they can hear the gospel and believe.

- Isaiah 53 – The atonement
- Isaiah 54 – The church empowered by the Spirit. Messiah’s people carrying salvation into the whole world.
- Isaiah 55 – Gospel call
- Isaiah 56:1-8 – Gentiles welcomed



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Made Perfect

Old Testament saints are awake and enjoying the Lord's presence just as those who've died since Christ came (Mt 17:1-4; Lk 16:22-26; 2Co 5:6), but all who believe, including those still alive, are waiting for something we have not received yet. And that is the new heavens and earth, the city which God has prepared for us (Heb 11:10, 16; Rev 21:9-14).

Summary

So, what is the author telling us in these verses? He said though Old Testament saints were made righteous and saved by their faith, they were not given the blessings of the New Covenant because God in His wisdom planned this gift for the disciples of His Son. In fact, He has delayed the arrival of the new heavens and earth until a great harvest of Jews and Gentiles is completed. A harvest which is carried out by people transformed by the Holy Spirit. But someday when this harvest is finished, both Old and New Testament saints will dwell together as one great redeemed family living in complete fulfillment of their greatest desire: the glorious presence of God.

Application

His words challenge each of us to make sure we are pursuing the blessings of the new covenant, and then, full of the Spirit, are reaching those for whom God has been waiting – delaying the fulfillment of His promise – so they too will live in that city.

QUESTION: Is it possible to receive the "righteousness which is according to faith" but not "the promise of the Father?"

ANSWER: No, not in the sense that God has not given it to us. In Christ we possess all things (1Co 3:22, 23). But "yes," in the sense that a person may not personally receive all of that gift. Because of false teaching, fear, ignorance and powerless churches & ministries, many Christians lead lives very similar to that of an Old Testament believer. They are indeed righteous by faith and the Holy Spirit is with them, but in practice they do not experience Him in any tangible way or see His supernatural gifts at work in them (1Co 12:8-10). They are saved but not living with the miracles promised by the New Covenant.

What should I do if I want to see the promise at work in me?

- Convince yourself of what Scripture promises you. Satisfy yourself that this is a Bible-teaching, not a Pentecostal-teaching.
- Thank the Lord for the promises of the New Covenant. Tell Him you believe He's given all these blessings to you in Christ.
- Ask someone in whom you see the power of the Holy Spirit to lay hands on you (Ac 8:14-17; 19:2-7). Then boldly open your heart and receive the Spirit into the deepest place inside. And you'll know when He's there!

Questions

- 1) Do you know that the Holy Spirit dwells inside you? Tell us how you know this?
- 2) What truth touched you the most from these two verses?