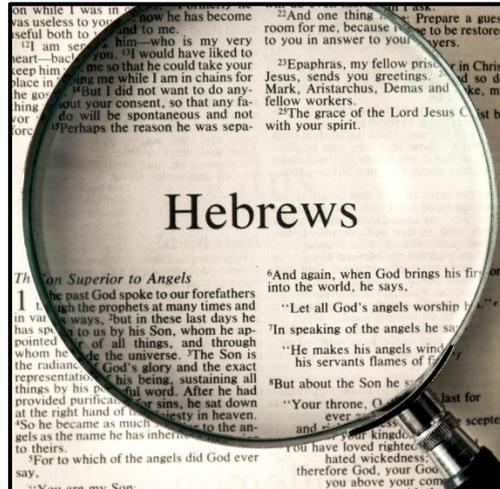


The Book of Better Things



Peter McArthur

Hebrews has been called “The Book of Better Things”. The word “better” appears 11 times.

- Christ “**having become much better than the angels**” (1:4)
- “**Beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation**” (6:9)
- “**Without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better**” (7:7)
- “**So much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.**” (7:22)
- “**But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.**” (8:6)
- “**Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.**” (9:23)
- “**For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.**” (10:34)
- “**But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.**” (11:16)
- “**God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.**” (11:40)
- “**Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.**” (12:24)

It's also been referred to as "The More Excellent Writings" because the phrase "more excellent" can be found twice in the Book.

- Christ "**having become much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.**" (1:4)
- "**But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.**" (8:6)

However one of the most striking passages is chapter 11 verse 16. "**God is not ashamed to be called their God**".

Now what a strange text, because is it possible that God could be ashamed? What does it mean? Well first off, God is never ashamed by anything He does. The meaning here is that the giants of Faith in chapter 11 had acted in such a way that God could never be ashamed of them. The Greek apparently means "He is not ashamed of **them**".

Often God referred to Himself as "their God" but they didn't always act like that for their part. But now He is delighted to have been called "their God" and He's not ashamed to be called so. When we act in the manner God wants us to, we are in a very real sense "alive". That's why it's so important to be "in Christ" because in that place we are truly "alive" – even if we die!

Now here's an important truth: In the Old Testament God declared He (and His children) could not come into contact with anything dead – unless it had been offered as a sacrifice to Him. But because now we are "in Christ" who is alive, none who believe in Him are dead! "**He is not God of the dead, but of the living**" (Luke 20:38).

Because the heroes of faith had commended themselves to God by their faith, He's willing to acknowledge them as His very own. And what is it in particular they did to receive that accolade from God? They "**desired a better country**" than just the Promised Land of Canaan.

"They desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." (Heb 11:16).

See the link? They wanted something more, something markedly better, and because they had this spiritual insight God honours them and says, "I'm not ashamed at all to be your God because you understand there's something better and more excellent to come". Partly because of this He prepares a city for them, the same one that the Messiah went away to complete after His resurrection. "**I go to prepare a place for you**" (John 14:2-3).

Something wonderfully deep and true happens to those who know in their inner being that there's more to come. A symbol of this truth is found in the crossing over from the Holy Place (the Inner Court) into the Holy of Holies. In the Tabernacle Tent and later the Temple, there were 3 courts. The Outer Court, then the Inner Court (or Holy Place), and finally the most special place, the Holy of Holies. It symbolises a journey, from the Outer to the Most Holy.

There is a demarcation line we all need to cross, a place of inner holiness of the heart (not the outward things of religion), where we die to the lure of a Promised Land and yearn deeply for a "**better country**" where a city is being prepared.

When we come to that crossing, we have to be willing to die to all that is flesh, even though it might be very enticing and perhaps “proper”. In His presence all flesh must wither and die, because only the spiritual can live there.

One of the things that quickly rises up and doesn’t want to die is the “religious mind”. This attitude, this spirit will fight for its own life and pretend to everyone around that’s it’s alive and real and even spiritual. Those with discernment will quickly see it’s all a cloak of pretence – which sadly can so easily deceive the naïve believer, and occasionally even fool the mature.

The demarcation line between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies is a spiritual attitude that sees beyond the present and yearns for that which cannot (yet) be seen behind the veil. You know it’s there; you believe with all your heart it’s there, and you want to be in that place – but first you must die. You died when you first came to Christ, but now you’re a pilgrim journeying towards the Great City, and you’re going to have to die again – to self, religiosity, and the temptation to settle down in the Promised Land. It won’t take courage to do that, it won’t be a sense of wanting “more” even; it will be a matter of faith, a faith deeper than what you had when you first started your pilgrim walk with Jesus.

Interestingly enough the word “Hebrew” means “*one in transition*”. So this Book is all about those in transition; about pilgrims. The root word of “Hebrew” means “*to cross over or pass through*”. In the Bible, it seems to have primarily referred to those who traversed rivers. The symbolic meaning of this is obvious; we are pilgrims passing through to somewhere better – through a river by the way!

The Hebrews had to pass through the Red Sea. Then through the Jordan River. Then came water baptism in the Jordan for John, Jesus and many others. Now we’re still crossing over from one thing to another, into greater and better and more excellent things prepared by God for those who love Him. We are still pilgrims, still in transition, still moving forward – and it won’t (cannot) stop until we arrive home in the City prepared for us all.

The reason chapter 11 of Hebrews is so loved by so many is because it inspires us to believe that faith is like a great springboard into the very heart and purpose of God. It encourages us to take the higher view, gaze upon the grander panorama of the Father’s purpose. This is something greater and more profound than simply “wanting more of God” or experiencing a revival or seeking after “deeper truth and revelation” – because even all these things must die, as good and as fine and as “holy” as they might seem.

Only faith in Him, and He not being ashamed of our attitude, will deliver us home. Please understand that I’m not saying we should get into religious works; we still only arrive because of what Jesus did for us. He is still the only way, but His attitude was to do His Father’s will (John 5:30) and to keep His eyes on things above – to a better place. So we also should remember it’s a journey, and works certainly will not get us there, but faith and obedience will!

For the Jews “faith” is not so much about “belief” but more about what you do and how you act; it’s about obedience. So when you read in chapter 11 about “faith” why not substitute the word “obedience” and see how it impacts you? An interesting little exercise!

All the desire for revival, for pressing into deeper truth, for wanting more of Him, are quite acceptable in themselves. The issue is that they are not where life is found. So many moves of the Spirit and revivals have blessed us. But eventually they all faded and even stopped, and the fire and the life ebbed away. So much so that after a few years there's often hardly an expression of what they once were. I read of a man who got saved in the great Welsh Revival. Many years later he was invited to attend another revival meeting by an enthusiastic Pastor. A "revival" of sorts had seemingly broken out in the Pastors' church, but upon witnessing it, the old man simply said, "**I was born in the fire, I cannot live in the smoke**".

Life is found in the Father's purpose for us available through His Son. Everything else is fine, but it is NOT our source of life, nor should we pander to it. That's actually what "Abba Father" means in the Hebrew ("*source*"). He is the source, He is our revival, He is our continuing revival hope. As wonderful and encouraging as past revivals have been, when we try to imitate them or manufacture them by reproducing some method, we'll actually produce a false life that soon empties itself.

No doubt that's why the Father sends "new mercy and grace" each day (Lam 3:22), so we draw on that freshness and not rely on yesterday's spiritual experiences. Remember, what is "good" will eventually give way to the "better", but we should yearn for the "best". So let's focus on that one solitary thing that is best of all – the grand purpose for which we were created, to enjoy God's presence forever. **Don't hold anything as dear as Truth!**

We are still pilgrims, still meant to be journeying on, still looking for the City, still keeping our focus on He who initiated this all and who alone will bring it to completion (Phil 1:6). Thankfully, so very thankfully, it's not our ability that will bring it to pass. It's what He's resolved from before Eternity, and He will bring it to the purposed End.

Along this journey we might become weary and discouraged. Part of the reason for this can be the undue attention we give to "anointed" ministries, "proven" prophets and "gifted" saints. When we begin to put our hope in them (as important as they are to the Body), we unwittingly settle down in the Promised Land. We stop journeying, we no longer live like pilgrims, and we forget to keep our eyes "**on things above**" (Col 3:2). Of course should someone challenge us about this, we'd quickly defend ourselves. But deep within we know it's true and the gracious Holy Spirit convicts us to start walking the pilgrim path once more.

I hope some of this makes sense to you. Maybe it's just that I'm getting older and thinking differently, but I hope it's more than that. I hope (and pray) that we won't forget we are pilgrims, and here in the *Book of Better Things* there's an echo from the past saints of chapter 11 that will encourage us to get moving again on our pilgrimage to the City.

More and more, may we be dissatisfied with everything that imperfectly satisfies us in the natural. May the City increasingly fill our thoughts and may He who is preparing it for us always be at the centre.

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Grace in Messiah,
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