

The Church Part Three: Foreigners Desiring a Better Country

Genesis 12:1-5a; Hebrews 11:8-11, 13-15

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • July 9, 2023

Dear Congregation of Christ: This is the third sermon in a twelve-part series that I'm preaching about the biblical, theological, and historical aspects of the church. In this series, I would also expound on the different names that the Holy Scripture uses for the church, such as the redeemed of Israel, Zion, vineyard of the Lord, temple of God, his flock, and Bride of Church.

The first in the series was "The Church, Gardeners and Guardians," an exposition of the Garden of Eden as God's temple and Adam and Eve as the first church. God commanded them to "work" and "keep" the garden as his stewards. They were to work the garden to prosper it and to guard the garden from evil, which they failed to do when they did not drive Satan out of the garden. The second in the series was "The Church, Shipbuilders and Lifesavers," a study of Noah and his family as the church and the ark that saved the church as Christ. The church has always built arks or ships of Christ that saved the lives of unbelievers.

Today, we will meditate on "The Church, Foreigners Desiring a Better Country," where we will focus on the life of Abraham, Sarah, and Lot as foreigner, strangers and pilgrims on the earth desiring to be citizens of a better country, the heavenly city whose designer is God and built on the foundation of his word.

Therefore, our theme this Lord's Day is, **The Church Part Three: Foreigners Desiring a Better Country**, under two headings: first, **Foreigners on Earth**; second, **Citizens of Heaven**.

The Church, Foreigners on Earth

God first called Abraham in Genesis 12:1, "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.*" Back in Genesis 11, Abraham's father Terah and his family left Ur of the Chaldeans in present-day southern Iraq to go to Canaan, about 1,000 miles west. From archaeological findings, Ur was a city of great wealth, craftsmanship and technology. But for reasons unknown, he settled in the city of Haran 600 miles north in present-day southern Turkey.

But we know from Stephen's speech before the Jewish high court that God commanded Abraham to go to an unknown land while he was still in Ur, saying, "*The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran*" (Acts 7:2). Without any complaint or argument, he left his father's family and country. Genesis 12:4 simply says, "*So Abram went, as the Lord told him.*" He was already 75 years old, and Sarah his wife, was 66. And verse 8 says he went, "*not knowing where he was going.*"

Abraham believed God's promises in Genesis 12:1-3. There were two main promises. The first was, "*I will make of you a great nation.*" But the Preacher says there was a problem with both of them: Abraham was "*as good as dead*" and Sarah was "*past the age.*" But Abraham and Sarah, though after 11

years had doubted God's promises, still believed that God would give them *"descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."*

The second main promise is, *"all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* In Galatians 3:16, Paul says that the promises were made to Abraham and his descendants through Christ in whom multitudes from all nations became Abraham's children, heirs of the promises made to him (Gal 3:29). All Jews and Gentiles like us are Abraham's children through faith in Christ alone as Savior. Another part of the promise to Abraham is that all peoples would be blessed through him. This promise has everything to do with the church, God's people today, not with Israel. Christians will bless other Christians, and unbelievers will be enemies of believers.

When Abraham reached Canaan, what did he do? Verse 9 says, *"by faith [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise."* It was hard enough for his household to leave the wealthy cities of Ur and Haran. It was even harder to settle in a foreign land by living in tents. This is as if you traveled all the way from Big Springs to Tierra Del Fuego in Chile, practically the bottom of the earth, in a camper, but when you get there, you live in the same camper for the rest of your life!

Why did Abraham do that to his family? The writer tells us in verse 10, *"For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."* But the only real estate that Abraham owned in his life was Sarah's tomb, a cave near Hebron (Genesis 23; Acts 7:5). Though he lived in the land of Canaan, he lived in tents with his family. He lived a different life from his neighbors. He worshipped one God, the creator in heaven, not many man-made gods. His life was based on God's law, not man-made laws. His life was a life that Paul calls non-conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of his mind through the Spirit (Rom 12:1-2). He was a foreigner, an alien, a stranger, a sojourner, an exile (1 Pet 1:1, 17; 2:11), and a "pilgrim through this barren land," a land where God does not pour out his spiritual blessings, except to Abraham and his household.

As Christians, we too are foreigners, aliens, strangers, sojourners, exiles, and pilgrims while we are still in this earthly dwelling-place. In this world, we are surrounded by all kinds of ungodly people who are apathetic to our God and our Savior Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures, if not hate them outright. When Abraham made his pilgrimage from Ur to Canaan, the church then was made up of himself, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot. During their sojourn in Canaan, their lives were marred by opposition from the sinful world.

Twice, powerful men—the Pharaoh of Egypt and Abimelech king of Gerar—had sinful desires for Sarah, so Abraham was forced to tell a half-lie that she was his sister. Of course this is half-truth, since she is his half-sister. Then the men of Sodom wanted to break down the door of Lot's house to commit sexual immorality with the men visiting Lot. Faithful churches today are surrounded by a culture that the 60s sexual revolutionaries would be embarrassed, and could not have even conceived today's sexual culture. Worse, many "progressive" churches have embraced LGBTQ, transgenderism, and drag queen shows.

Evil men and culture surrounding us is not the only cause of troubles in the church; troubles can also come from our own sinful selves. How did Lot end up in Sodom? It was all about water rights and grazing rights. Both Abraham and Lot had great flocks and herds, that the land could not support both of them. So they parted ways. Abraham gave Lot the first choice, and Lot's mindset was earthly. He chose the land close to the cities, particularly Sodom, even when he most likely knew that *"the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD"* (Gen 13:13). Lot was overcome by *"the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions"* (1 John 2:16).

As believers and as a church, especially being a new church like yours, we must guard against these material desires and pride. We might not have a big, beautiful worship building full of people, but God does not regard outward appearances and numbers. He regards these things: hearts and minds that are always thankful and joyful in all circumstances; that long for the pure word of God preached and taught by faithful ministers; that worship according to God's word alone; and that are united—not in a skillful, eloquent minister—but in *"one body and one Spirit... one hope... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father"* (Eph 4:4-6). Lot's wife illustrates the tragedy of not being able to unload oneself of material desires and pride.

An incident in the life of Abraham has a striking parallel to the most major event in the Garden of Eden. After the serpent tempted Eve, Eve gave the forbidden fruit to Adam, so he also ate the fruit. When God confronted them, the age-old blames shifting started: Adam blamed Eve for giving the fruit to him, and Eve blamed the serpent. In the case of Abraham, Sarah offered her servant Hagar to him so she could bear a son for him, and Abraham willingly accepted her offer. After Ishmael was born to Hagar, and Hagar had contempt for Sarah, Sarah blamed Abraham for her troubles. Like Adam and Eve, both Abraham and Sarah had sinned. Abram *"listened to the voice of Sarai"* (Gen 16:2), and Adam in effect also listened to Eve's sinful offer. Both of them took God's promise into their hands, doubted God's promises, and instead listened to their sinful hearts. Abraham and Sarah's doubting hearts had a disastrous consequence: that of Hagar's descendants continuing their hostility against Abraham's descendants until this very day.

These two incidents characterize the church from the very beginning: troubles arise often from inside the church. False teachers, false prophets and heretics have been around in old covenant Israel and in the new covenant church. The early church, from the first six or seven centuries, was beset by heretical teachings so that councils were called, and creeds were written to prevent divisions. This situation is still with the church today. Many in the church listen to the voice of false teachers who have one hand on the Bible and the other hand on his jet, or yacht, or Lamborghini. But troubles in the church does not end in false teachers. Many in the church listen to ministers who divide the church because of, for examples, their heavy-handed leadership, bad decisions resulting from unwise counsel, preaching from the Internet.

Some church bloggers even recommend using AI (Artificial Intelligence) to help pastors in sermon preparation. One writer tested it by uploading John 4 into an AI app, and in less than ten seconds, came up with a homily of 352 words! So I can actually say actual facts, I asked an AI app to prepare a 30-minute, two-point Reformed sermon based on our texts today, with two points.

In about seconds, a sermon was produced. This technology is scary for our already mindless culture. For example, how would a teacher assign a report to an elementary class, or a research paper to college students? Would the teacher trust that the report or paper was actually written by the students? In the church, how would the congregation trust that sermons were actually prepared by the pastor, and not by AI? This is a difficult and dangerous technology, so that an article in *Christianity Today* concluded, “A chatbot can research. A chatbot can write. Perhaps a chatbot can even orate. But a chatbot can’t preach.”

However, even when Abraham doubted God’s promise with its dire consequences, he was a faithful and obedient man of God all the way to the end. He fought against the sinful culture surrounding him because he was looking forward to God’s heavenly country. We too must be counter-cultural, *in* this world, but not *of* this world. He was truly “set apart” by God to be holy and righteous, different from the godless world around us. May we reflect this “set-apartness” by our mindset and behavior among our unbelieving neighbors, so they too would ask why we think and behave so differently from them (1 Pet 3:15).

The church then and now is God’s chosen people who live on this earth, surrounded by a sinful, godless world and culture, and desiring to live in an eternal, better country.

The Church, Citizens of Heaven

Abraham obeyed because of God’s promise of a land, but ultimately, his gaze was heavenward, “*he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God*” (v 10). And his desire was “*a better country, that is, a heavenly one*” (v 16). The heavenly city is the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-2). Its foundations are the teachings of the twelve apostles of Christ and his prophets (Rev 21:14; Eph 2:20). But the main foundation is Christ himself, the chief cornerstone of the church (Eph 2:20; Psa 118:22). As the hymn says, “the church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.” God is the only designer and builder of the church. He is at the same time the architect, engineer, and building contractor of the church. If God is not the foundation, designer and builder of a church, then it is not a church.

Although we are citizens of our earthly countries, we desire and look forward to a better citizenship in a better country where we will all dwell with God forever. All people in that country will be of one faith, one Lord, one mind, and all will be in perfect communion with God and with one another. No more conflicts within God’s people, sufferings, persecution, and death. No more living in tents and campers. There, we would have arrived, no longer aliens, strangers, sojourners and pilgrims, but full-fledged citizens of heaven.

Like Abraham, all true believers must look forward to their final home, God’s holy, heavenly city. God also calls us to live like Abraham did in our earthly pilgrimage. But our ultimate gaze must always be our eternal residence, the heavenly city (Heb 11:9-10, 13). Though we live in our own homes and own cars and other earthly possessions, we must acknowledge that all of these are temporary and are “*passing away*” (1 John 2:16-17). We are dual citizens: citizens of heaven first (Eph 2:19; Phil 3:20), and citizens of our nation second (Rom 13:1-7).

As you think about your life as “pilgrims through this barren land,” Colossians 3:1-2 exhorts us, *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”* We are often too occupied and too focused on the cares, thorns and thistles of our earthly existence. Rather, we are to look heavenward, because everything on earth will be of no value; only things that are above matters in eternity. Again, in Romans 8:5, Paul reminds us, *“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”*

In a great reversal, every Lord’s Day worship service, we are transformed from earthly pilgrims to heavenly citizens. In this great reversal, all unbelieving citizens of the world become the foreigners, aliens and strangers, while we who worship the true God are changed into permanent citizens of a better, holy, and heavenly country.

Dear brothers and sisters: Peter says that we Christians are “sojourners and exiles” in this world (1 Pet 2:11). We are temporary residents of this world, and exiles in a foreign country. We must fully participate in the civil, social and cultural life of our cities and nations. We have no enduring earthly city (Heb 13:14), but citizens of heaven (Phl 3:20). Therefore, we are dual citizens of two kingdoms: the earthly kingdom of man and the heavenly kingdom of God. But our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, so we also see ourselves as only sojourners and exiles, aliens and strangers in this world.

Since the kingdom of God on earth is the church, we are to participate in the life of the church. We are commanded to assemble together every Lord’s Day for worship; to be united in one Lord and one faith; to obey God’s commandments; to repent whenever we sin; to hear the word of God read and preached; to partake of the sacraments; to pray for the church, for one another, and for our civil authorities; to use our spiritual gifts for the building up of the church; to guard the church from all false teachings, errors, and divisions; to live godly and holy lives; and to witness to the world by proclaiming the good news of salvation in Christ to those around us.