



The Faith of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 11:20-22

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At first glance, these three verses seem to merely be transition, a necessary bridge, between two towering men of faith in the OT – Abraham and Moses, and the stories that surround them. It almost seems like the writer of Hebrews wants to move from the story of Abraham, which is filled with some amazing events – God’s calling of him out of Ur of the Chaldees, the promise and birth of the miracle child, and of course, the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of that son Isaac on Mt. Moriah – to the story of Moses, which is equally astonishing in its content, as we will look at next week. And in fact, a number of commentators see it that way, either tagging these verses on to the story of Abraham and treating them as an epilogue to his life story or treating it as merely an introduction to the story of Moses and the Exodus. But to do that is to miss some important lessons regarding faith and its power. These few verses are far more than a transition from Abraham to Moses – they trace the covenant promises of God, the grace and mercy of God, forward from Abraham along their route to their ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

The focus of these verses is faith in the future promises of God, the power of forward-looking faith. Each of these men are presented as men of faith, men of trust in God and in each case, the writer of Hebrews looks at the end of their lives, or in Isaac’s case, what Isaac thought was the end of his life, and highlights their actions as a result of their faith in the promises of God. The writer’s focus, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is on their faith in the final moments, their faith at the end of their lives, despite the fact that their lives were radically different from one another. They had different lives but the same faith.

Different Lives, Same Faith Just a quick overview of each of their lives shows us how different the operation of God’s grace is in the lives of His people. These men do not have cookie cutter lives at all. Isaac, and I mean this with all due respect, had a pretty uneventful and non-descript life. There are no great miracles associated with his life, no amazing exploits, no great “God-moments.” His is a pretty ordinary, pedestrian life as far as things

go, at least after his powerful display of faith when he trusted God and allowed his father, Abraham, to bind him and place him on an altar, believing, along with his father, that he would die but God would raise him from the dead. There are some acts of faith – marrying a woman he had never seen, Rebekah, and having kids – that’s always an act of faith. There are a couple of visions here and there and God blessed him abundantly and made him a wealthy man. There is also a misstep or two, but overall Isaac’s life, after Moriah, is not hugely memorable. He’s kind of like the guy that peaked out in high school.

Jacob’s life, on the other hand, is hugely eventful and marked, for most of it anyway, by scheming, deceit, manipulation and turmoil, always trying to control outcomes to his own advantage. God, to put it bluntly, was exceedingly patient with Jacob. The first real picture we have of Jacob is of him buying his older twin brother, Esau’s, birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Later on, he schemes with his mother, Rebekah, to steal the blessing of the firstborn from Esau when Isaac, who is blind, believes he is dying and sends his son Esau, who was great hunter, to go into the field and kill some game and bring it to him to eat, after which Isaac promises to confer God’s blessing upon him, to speak prophetically over his life. It’s an unforgettable story – how Rebekah cooks a special meal, how she covers Jacob with the skins of goats so he appears hairy like Esau and dresses him in Esau’s clothes so he smells like him, and sends Jacob into Isaac and Isaac, believing it to be Esau, gives him the blessing of God. Just as a side note, Jacob was the one that God had chosen to receive the blessing and to be the father of all the tribes of Israel, but Jacob’s manipulation is all on him.

After that he had to flee – Esau wanted to kill him – and went to live with his uncle, Laban. Along the way, God appears to him in a dream at Bethel, where he tells him, **“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”** (Genesis 28:13–15, ESV) Jacob awakes and builds an altar to God, promising that **“If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”** (Genesis 28:20–22, ESV) But the truth is, Jacob was really not changed. Not really, not yet.

He goes to live with his uncle Laban and gets a taste of his own medicine. Agreeing to work for 7 years in exchange for Laban's daughter Rachel, at the end of seven years of hard labor, Laban tricks him and gives him his homely daughter, Leah instead. Laban manipulates Jacob into working for him for another 7 years in order to get Rachel's hand in marriage immediately. Then to get back at Laban, he tricks his father-in-law out of great flocks to make himself rich. Having angered Laban, he is forced to flee from him as well. Having nowhere to go, he has to go home to where Esau is waiting.

For most of Jacob's life, he was a deceitful schemer. And despite his wealth, his grasping tendencies never blessed him –with each self-reliant and clever achievement he had to flee the anger of the people he had wronged. His life was chaotic as a result of his sin. And now here he was, about to face the music for his treatment of Esau. Finally, the night before he was to face Esau, God, in the form of a man came to him and broke him and wrestled him into submission beside the Jabbok River, putting his hip out of place. More than being broken physically, Jacob was humbled before God and he was made a man of faith. God changed his name there from Jacob to Israel and from that night on, he walked with God by faith. A long life of scheming turned to worship for the rest of his days.

Then there is Joseph, Jacob's favorite son by his favorite wife, Rachel. In contrast to his grandfather Isaac, his life is remarkable and in contrast to his father, Jacob, his whole life is marked by faith. Having been shown in a dream that he would rule over his brothers and that even his father would bow down to him, his brother's betrayed him and sold him into slavery and he ended up in Egypt. There, he became the overseer of the house of man named Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh. Potiphar trusted him and Potiphar's wife – well -- she lusted for him and tried to seduce him. By faith, he refused her advances, saying, ***“Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?”*** (Genesis 39:8–9, ESV) Mrs. Potiphar was not one to take no for an answer and fearful that Joseph would rat her out to her husband, she accused him of sexual assault and Joseph was thrown in prison.

It wasn't long, however, before the keeper of the prison put this man of faith in charge of all of the prisoners, so much was God with him. He lived by faith, never accusing God, never complaining against God. It came to pass that God gave to Joseph the ability to interpret dreams. And by God's providence, the day came when he was brought before Pharaoh to interpret his dream of the coming famine that would rock all of the ANE. After interpreting Pharaoh's dream and having given to him the plan to preserve the nation of Egypt and all the nations around her, Moses tells us in Genesis 41:38-43, ***"And Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?' Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.' And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain about his neck. And he made him ride in his second chariot. And they called out before him, 'Bow the knee!' Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt."*** (Genesis 41:38-43, ESV)

At 30 years old, he became the Prime Minister in Egypt. From that position, he saved not only the nation of Egypt, but his family as well. Stricken by the famine, his brothers, who thought Joseph to be dead, came to Egypt to buy grain. In an incredible story that we don't have time to cover this morning, by faith, Joseph forgave his brothers, brought his family to Egypt and resettled them in Goshen, reunited with his father, Jacob, and preserved the future of the people of God. He saved the nation of Israel from extinction.

Though the lives of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are radically different, what they all have in common is this – they died in faith; they died with their eyes firmly focused on the future, on God and on His promise that He renewed with Abraham, after the events on Mt. Moriah saying, ***"By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."*** (Genesis 22:16-18, ESV) Isaac, Jacob and Joseph all came to the end of their days having an

Unfading, Forward-Looking Faith Though I suppose the writer of Hebrews could have chosen a number of different episodes from the lives of each of these men to illustrate the power and glory of faith in God, he chooses to focus on the end of their days.

Of Isaac he writes, ***“By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.” (Hebrews 11:20, ESV)*** Now, I told you about the story of how Jacob and Rachel conspired to “steal” the blessing that by birth order should have gone Esau. I say “steal” because although God determined that Jacob would be the one through whom the 12 tribes of Israel would come, they still acted deceitfully and not in faith. So, you could ask, “How did Isaac act by faith when he was deceived and didn’t know what he was doing?” But the writer of Hebrews does not go into those details or describe the difference between the blessings on Jacob and Esau because that is not his focus. Rather, his point is that by blessing his sons, Isaac was acting in faith that God would fulfill all of his promises in the future. By pronouncing these blessings on his sons, Isaac demonstrated his faith that God’s promises would not fail even though at that time, in his rather ordinary life and miracle free, there was no indication they would be fulfilled. He came to the end of an uneventful life trusting God – living an ordinary life by faith.

Of Jacob, he says, ***“By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.” (Hebrews 11:21, ESV)*** The writer of Hebrews is speaking of blessing of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph had heard that his father was ill and so he took his two sons to visit his father. Jacob spoke to them of God’s faithfulness to him and of when the Lord had reaffirmed the Abrahamic covenant with him, and then he claimed both of Joseph’s sons as his heirs. Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn by Leah had forfeited his place through great sin. Placing his hands on their heads, choosing the younger, Ephraim, over the older, Manasseh, he blessed them by faith believing that God spoke by him and would honor every word that he spoke over these young princes in Egypt.

And what faith that is. Only by faith could he give a blessing to either of them. Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of the second most powerful man in the world. In physical terms, they had everything they could ever desire. He was pronouncing blessings over them and speaking of a land they had never seen and which Jacob did not yet own. But he speaks as if it is his, because it is, by faith. He foresees the nation of Israel growing and inhabiting the land of Canaan as if it were already theirs. He pronounces a blessing on these boys. What was he really giving these grandsons? He was giving the boys the spiritual blessings of

Abraham, which were far better than all the worldly blessings of Egypt. He gave to these boys the covenant promises of relationship with God, the covenant blessings of faith and they were far greater than anything Egypt could offer.

He blessed Joseph's sons and he worshipped, by faith. He worshipped in gratitude to God for His undeserved goodness to him, for the blessing of seeing Joseph, whom he thought was dead, and for seeing his sons. He testified to God's shepherding care his whole life long though he had for years been a scheming deceiver. He blessed God for his redeeming love. And he worshipped, leaning on his staff, near the end of his strength, a man who had been a sojourner and stranger, as a man who had asked of his son, Joseph, ***"If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt, but let me lie with my fathers. Carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burying place."*** (Genesis 47:29–30, ESV) In faith, he said in essence, "I may be in Egypt, but I am not of it. I do not belong here." His hope was with God and with the people of God.

And then of Joseph he says, ***"By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."*** (Hebrews 11:22, ESV) Again, there is any number of episodes in Joseph's life that the writer of Hebrews could have chosen, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, to include in the chapter, but he chooses to highlight Joseph's words at the end of his life. At the end of his life, Joseph said, ***"I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.""*** (Genesis 50:24–25, ESV)

What is the significance of these words? Despite the fact that all of the greatest achievements of Joseph's life, his fame and renown and riches, were all found in Egypt, Joseph knew that his future lay with the promises and the people of God. He believed the promise of God to Abraham, ***"Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions."*** (Genesis 15:13–14, ESV) Joseph knew this, and to encourage the generations of Israelites that would follow him and who would be enslaved in Israel, Joseph commanded that his bones would be taken to the Promised Land. Think about it, in the days of slavery that were to come, every time an Israelite thought of Joseph's bones that were

put in a coffin and kept in possession of the tribes, they would be encouraged, “God will bring us out of this bondage one day and into the Promised Land.” Even before the slavery that was to come, his bones would be a constant charge to his sons not to make themselves Egyptians, not to be conformed to Egypt, or to seek their rest here, but to put their hearts and souls with the people and promises of God.

By doing this, Joseph was detaching himself from all of his successes in Egypt, and attaching himself to God’s people and God’s promises. He didn’t want a burial pyramid in Egypt where he would be revered as the man who saved Egypt from famine. Instead he wanted his final resting place to be in the land of God’s promise.

So now, in thinking about these men and the faith they showed at the end of their days, what can we glean from Hebrews 11:20-22? Let me give you four things to think about. There is much more for you to consider, but let me give you four.

Gleanings From Hebrews 11:20-22

1. Much of the Christian life is composed of waiting in faith upon the Lord. As I think about the lives of these men, I see a theme that much of our lives as the people of God consists in waiting upon the Lord and doing so, by faith. Not in passive and do-nothing sorts of ways, but actively waiting in faith. Longing, hoping, trusting in His Word, preparing, investing our lives in His kingdom purposes, believing the Lord, and teaching our children to do the same. Sometimes simple obedience in the face of the unknown, holding fast to His promises, acting according to his commandments, responding to what we know of God, is one of the most difficult things in the Christian life, but it is richly and eternally rewarding. ***“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”*** (Proverbs 3:5–8, ESV)

Beloved, faith offers no button for quick and convenient service. We must wait on the Lord. A harvest of righteousness takes time. Men and women who are impatient often give up

and become interested and devoted to something else. These men did not. God has a purpose in our waiting. It tests our faith and makes it like gold. It develops dependency upon God and patience, trains submission to God, and makes the blessing of God more rewarding and valuable. Matthew Henry said, “To wait on God is to live life of desire toward Him, delight in Him, dependence upon Him, and devotedness to Him.”

2. Only by faith can we bless anyone. When I look at Isaac and Jacob, it becomes clear that they were only able to bless their sons and grandsons by faith. They had never set foot in the land they of which they were speaking. Faith in God and in His promises was the operative principle of them blessing anyone and the same is true of us. We pray for people; we tell them the gospel; we can tell them of the inconceivable blessings that come through faith in Christ – forgiveness, a new nature, adoption into the family of God, real righteousness in Christ, a transformed life, an eternal inheritance; we speak of the love of God and the things laid up for those who trust in Him, and we do it all by faith. Whenever we preach or speak of the gospel, let us have faith, because without faith we do it all in vain. When we visit the sick, encourage the downcast, serve men on behalf of God, we must do it in faith that God will move through us and bless those efforts because faith is the lifeblood of all that we do for the sake of Christ. But not just in the so-called religious things, in all of life. Faith does not require great miracles. It simply means that you must trust in Christ. Faith is as much for the everyday as it is for the “spiritual days.” You need as much faith when you are at work, at the supermarket, at the sports field or in your home as you do when you are at church. What we would call ordinary things must be marinated with faith in God. Do not make the mistake that so many do of compartmentalizing your life. This part is for Christ, this part is for family, this part is for work, and this part is for play. Our whole lives must be consumed with faith.

God blesses what is done in faith; it is the bone and the marrow of what we do in the name of Christ. Believe that the prayers you offer will be heard, that the words you speak will transform and edify, that they acts of grace that you do will bring forth fruit. Believe that God is active and keeps His promises.

3. By faith, we must look to what is truly valuable. As each of these men died, they testified to what was truly of worth, what was of eternal worth – faith in God and the promises that will be fulfilled for those who trust in Him. All of these men were wealthy men, but Joseph stands apart as a man who was rich in wealth, in power, and in influence.

Yet even he understood that that his ultimate treasure was not to be found in Egypt or in this earth. We must live with the same spirit. This is not our home; there is nothing here that is worthy of your ultimate allegiance. The longer we live the more the spirit of “Give me my staff, I live for another land to where I must go. Take up my bones and do not bury them here” must capture our hearts. Make a mark for what is of eternal significance. Spend your energies wisely.

4. By faith, we must take our place in God’s eternal plan to glorify Christ before every living soul. When I think about each of these men, one thing that they all have in common is this – they each saw themselves as players in the unfolding drama of God’s eternal plan to redeem a people and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ before all people. They did not see themselves as the star, not as the central figure, but as players in a larger drama of which they had real but limited knowledge. Imagine Joseph for instance. If he had a narrow view of the promises given to Abraham and had been given to pride and self-absorption, he may have seen himself as the fulfillment to the promise **“in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”** After all, he was the instrument that God used to preserve the known world during the great famine that struck the ANE. They knew the promises of God, knew only dimly of all that God had in store, but they trusted Him and took their place in the eternal plan of God.

The eternal plan of God centers not on any one man, nor on any one man’s ministry. The eternal plan of God is centered on His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, on His action to save a people for Himself out of all the nations of the earth, a people whom He redeems through faith in His substitutionary sacrifice, a people whom He rules by His grace and commands by His love, a people who will bring eternal glory to Him as worshippers of the saving God, a people who make much of Him and little of themselves. The eternal plan of God is centered in His Son Jesus Christ. And that eternal plan rolls on as gospel is preached and its truths are lived out, as men and women come to faith and live by faith and pass that faith to others. It will continue until it culminates in the return of Christ in power, the judgment of all peoples, and the consummation of all things to the glory of God. This is what the plan of God is all about. The Apostle Paul describes the certain end to which all things are progressing in Philippians 2:10-11, **“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”** (Philippians 2:9–11, ESV)

God is at work, making the fame of His name known, building His kingdom, unshakable and eternal, calling out a people who will exalt Him, and who will exchange the smallness of their individual lives for a role in the great drama of the ages, a people who will adorn the name of the Lord with praise. By the grace of God, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were chosen for a role in His story, and so have you. Our life's role is to bring God glory, to tell His story, to reflect His greatness and majesty, to reflect His beauty, to shine a light upon Him. He is the star of the story, not us. Throughout the pages of Scripture and of history, this truth rings clear, when you come to Christ, your life isn't about only you anymore. It is about the King of kings and Lord of lords.

If you have not trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord, the story of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, dying in faith, trusting in God, ***“looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10, ESV)***, won't make any sense to you at all. You remain in your sins, and you do not see the glory of God in Christ, the one who has died to redeem you from your sins and bring you out of the smallness of your life into the eternal drama of God.

And if you are a Christian we always need to be reminded, in fact, over and over again, that your life is not to be the story of the wonderful plan that God has for you personally and all that you can get. It is not about you primarily. The story is God's, the glory is Christ's and you are called to a role in that story through faith in the one who alone has saved you and who commands your faithfulness.

We must all come to the place of living out the reality that the Lord is before all things, He is the end of all things, He is through all things, He is the originator of all things, all things come from Him, He is the sustainer of all things, He is the giver of all good things, and everything is ultimately about Him. These men knew that and so must we. Let us make much of Christ and little of ourselves, to the eternal glory of God.

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