

## Heb 11:20-22 Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph: Final Scenes of Faith

Today's sermon is about the faith of three old men at the very end of their lives. I know God does not always give the same circumstances as we approach death. But, how we handle death and particularly, what we do at the end of our life is so important. Death is still the greatest enemy; death and the things that accompany it in this life still present the greatest test of enduring faith. Jesus says, "**those who endure to the end will be saved**" (Mark 13:13). I often tell people. It is not how we begin the race, but how finish. And . . . God is a God of grace. The examples of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are for US as they hold on to the promises of God until the end. And as people of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ we must learn from them and be encouraged. With this in mind, I will retell parts of their stories and try to apply to our lives today. Let's begin with Isaac.

1. Isaac. In our text today we find Isaac at the very end of his life as he blesses both Jacob and Esau. And what an interesting story we have. Let me retell it from Gen. 27. Verse 1 says that when Isaac was "**old and his eyes were dim.**" So, he calls his favorite twin, his beloved son, Esau and says, "*I'm old. I will die soon. Please go, take your bow and arrow and go hunting. Then bring me some of the meat I love. And I will bless you before I die.*" Well, Rebekah, his wife was listening. And she immediately goes to Jacob, Esau's younger brother and says, "*Go quickly, bring a me two goats. I know how to cook good venison for your father. Then, you can disguise yourself, knowing your father can't see, by putting goat skins on your arms, and Isaac will bless you instead of Esau.*" So, Jacob obeys his mother, disguises himself, and takes the food to Isaac. And hearing the voice of Jacob, and wondering how the food was prepared so quickly, Isaac says, "*Who are you my son? Your voice is Jacob's, but you smell and you feel like Esau.*" And then they enjoyed a meal together and Isaac blessed Jacob. In vv. 28-29 we read the blessing: "**May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!**" This blessing is exactly the same promise God had given to Abraham, that God had given to Isaac. And now, by faith, it was coming to Jacob, right before Isaac dies. WHAT A STORY! Can you imagine such a scenario in your own household? Personally, I cannot! What can we learn? I have one application.

Application: God sovereignly works his plan in the midst of great sin. What was/is the plan of God? It wasn't a secret. God blessed Abraham with great promises that would eventually lead to eternal life (heavenly city) in the "seed" of a Messiah to come. Abraham blessed Isaac by telling him the same. And, God appeared to Isaac with the same promises (Gen. 26). God also appeared to Rebekkah. When she was pregnant with the twins, she felt the children "**struggling**" in her womb. And God said to her, "**two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger**" (Gen. 25:19-24). And surely Rebekkah would have told Isaac of these things. And at the end of his life, by faith he blesses Jacob.

But, oh what sin and turmoil do we find in this family. With Isaac we see at least two big areas of sin against God. First, he loved Esau more than Jacob. Or, at the least he discriminated against Jacob. And Gen. 25:28 says he loved him "**because he ate of his game.**" Esau was the "man's man," "*Daddy's boy.*" Jacob was "*mama's boy.*" And Esau didn't have the best character. He

despised his birthright and traded it away for a bowl of soup. He married foreign women and “made life bitter” for his parents (Gen. 26:35). Yet, Isaac preferred him over Jacob.

Second, as John Owen points out, Isaac did not enquire into the mind of God concerning Rebekkah’s vision. Or, at the least he did not understand it. Maybe his sins blinded him from understanding the truth that the blessing would come through Jacob and not Esau. And what about Rebekkah? YES, she had faith and knew that God would fulfill his promise through Jacob. But, taking things into her own hands, she convinced Jacob to lie and to deceive Isaac. And what about Jacob. Though he knows it is deceit, he listens to his mother and then deceives his father. And all the turmoil in the family results in great consequences as Jacob runs away for many years. There is lying, deceit, jealousy, selfishness, pride, and many others as well. Yet, through all of this sin in the family, God is working his plan.

Personally, I cannot condone the sins of this family. And none of us can use this family as an example to bring about the will of God in our lives. For God ALWAYS says to us “**Be holy as I am holy.**” However, God works in the lives of sinful people to carry out his plan. Think of your own families through the years. I’d be willing to bet that at times your life and the lives of your families looks more like that of Isaac’s than the families I grew up watching like *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best* as the Fathers are always in control, always well dressed; the wives wake up in the morning with perfect hair and makeup.

Brothers and sisters, our families are messy! Children, have you ever lied to your parents? Husbands, are you always patient and kind and thoughtful with your wife? Wives, I could ask the same. Are you often trying to get your way through selfish means and throwing tantrums in your heart . . . And then, you find that God still cares and IN SPITE OF your sins, he blesses. He still carries out his plan to bring you to himself and to carry you through this life? Why? Faith! In our story of Isaac, what does he do when he realizes it was Jacob as Esau comes in and pleads with him to give his blessing? He says, “**I have blessed him and he will be blessed**” (Gen. 27:33). I believe Isaac, at the end of his life, saw the plan of God by faith to bless Jacob. He recognizes the sovereign hand of God (even in their sins). And instead of murmuring and complaining, he yields and submits to the Lord.

Today, our faith is in Jesus, in whom all God’s promises are fulfilled. And because of his sinless life, his sacrificial death on the cross, and his resurrection, our sins as people of faith are forgiven. And YES we sin. But, “*if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). We “*we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous . . .*” (1 John 2:1). And, just because God is sovereign to bring about his plan in the midst of our sin doesn’t mean that we have a license to sin. In Rom. 5 Paul speaks about the grace of God that came down to us in Christ, a grace that covers all our sins, past, present, and future. But, in Rom. 6:1-2 he says, “**Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! . . .**” At the end of the day, faith triumphs over natural affections.

Now, let’s turn our attention to the faith of Jacob.

2. Jacob. Verse 21 says, “**By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.**” There is a lot written about Jacob, the man who

is also called “*Israel*.” His name means “*supplanter*” or the one who “*grabs the heel*.” If you remember, when he was born, he came out holding onto Esau’s heel. To be a supplanter is to be a person who takes something over. This is fitting since he is the one who receives the blessing that the world would have given to his older brother. Jacob’s life is full of troubles, and like Isaac’s, full of sin. He gives in to the foolish desires of his mother (as we’ve seen). In fear, he runs far away from Esau and heads down to Uncle Laban’s family, where he would eventually find his first and second wife, and their concubines, with much trickery as Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel.

His sons eventually become the 12 tribes of Israel. On the way down God speaks to Jacob in a dream where he sees a ladder reaching from heaven to earth. And in this vision, God repeats his promise that He had given to Abraham and Isaac. He spends many years working for his uncle. And this part of his life reads much a soap opera. Finally, with his family, he runs away from Laban and heads back to Canaan, where he is unexpectedly reunited with his brother, who no longer wants to kill him. They eventually part ways and both multiply their families into large nations.

Many years later Jacob loses his favorite son, Joseph, the one born from his beloved wife Rachael, as his brothers sell him to slave traders in Egypt. They lie to Jacob and say he was killed by a wild animal. Meanwhile, in Egypt God blesses Joseph who later becomes the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt, possibly in the world. A great 7-year drought covers the area and eventually the family ends up in Egypt as Joseph provides for them as they settle in the land of Goshen and become a great people.

Now, I believe we see faith in action throughout Jacob’s life. But, none compares to the faith we see at the very END of his life. Jacob is about to die and he calls Joseph so he can bless his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Now, Jacob blesses all his sons. But why do you think it so important for our author to highlight the blessing of Joseph’s sons. Well, who was their mother? Her name was Asenath. She was an Egyptian, the daughter of a pagan priest, given to Joseph by Pharaoh. Their sons were raised in Egyptian culture by an Egyptian mother from a pagan family. And if left alone, where do you think they would live? What do you think their values would be? Do you think, on their own, they would consider the Land of Canaan? Interesting questions. It was so important for Jacob to pass the blessings of God and his promises to Joseph’s children. They needed to know that they would also be included as Abraham’s seed. And later, they will become the two half tribes of Joseph. (Quick App: It is so vital that we pass our faith to our children).

Now to the blessing itself. Jacob is close to death. He also cannot see. So, he invites Joseph with his boys. And he brings them to Jacob and places them on his lap. He takes Manasseh, the oldest, and puts him on Jacob’s right side so that Jacob would put his right hand on him. (It was so important for this ritual of faith that the right hand be the most important hand of blessing.) He places Ephraim on Jacob’s left side. In this way Manasseh would receive the greater blessing. So, Jacob then proceeds to cross his hands with his left hand going to Manasseh with his right going to Ephraim. In this way, the birth order is mixed up. The younger will receive the greater blessing. Jacob is upset. He tries to tell his father, “NO! “*Move them back*.” And he even grabs his father’s hand to stop the process. And Jacob says, “**I know, my son, I know. He also shall**

**become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations . . .”** What can we learn from the story?

Faith overcomes the interference of man. In other words, Jacob did not fear man. Jacob was old. He couldn't see. And when he crossed his arms to bless the children, what did Joseph do? He tried to stop him. Here we see Jacob's son, the wealthy, wise, and extremely powerful and popular "prince" of Egypt trying to tell Jacob how to give his blessing. And here we see the faith of Jacob shine. Jacob does not listen to Joseph. Instead, by faith his arms remain crossed as he gives his blessing. He could have said, *"Ok son, I see my mistake. I'll do it your way."* But he did not. He did not listen to the "reason" or the "ways" or the "traditions" of man, but instead did exactly what he was supposed to do, by faith.

In the same kind of way, we must not be influenced by the reasoning of the world and of the wisdom of this world, the "ways" of the world, the "traditions" of men, but instead live by faith in the promises of God. We must not live in fear of man, but in fear of God. How easy would it have been for Jacob, at the end of his life, to just let things be, knowing that Egypt had great blessings for the Hebrews. Brothers and sisters, we must live by faith, even if it seems easier to join the ways of the world. I think of the Rugby player in Australia who lost his place on the team. I think of famous surfer (girl), also in Australia, who refused to surf or support a competition because of their stance on gender. I think of the bakers who refused to bake a cake that went against their conscience. Why would we go so contrary to the ways of the world? Faith. Let's move on (examples abound).

3. Joseph. Finally, we see the faith of another dying man, Joseph. Look at v. 22: **"By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."** The story of Joseph has always been my favorite. At the age of 17 he was carried away into a foreign country, away from EVERYTHING and EVERYONE he ever knew. He was surrounded by idolaters and possibly never came in contact with a child of God. He had no Bible to read. He lived through endless trials and temptations. Thirteen years in prison as an "innocent" man did not make him bitter. And later with all the spoils and riches of Egypt, he did not waver in his faith as he trusted the promises of God. And it is interesting that the author of Hebrews does not mention all these things, but instead ONLY mentions the final scene of his life.

So what does he do? He recalls God's promise and prophecy to Abraham. In Gen.15:13 we read: *"Then the LORD said to Abram, "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."* Joseph reminds his family of this future "exodus" and then gives directions that his bones must be taken back to Canaan. Later with Moses we read in Ex. 13:19: **"Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here"**

So, what can we learn from the faith of Joseph at the end of his life? We learn that faith looks beyond the riches of this world. Here we have the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt. Great wealth. Great prosperity. Great influence. All the things this world can give! However, neither the luxuries or the honors he received in Egypt made him forget the promises of God, nor bound his soul to the things this world can give. Because of faith, his mind was engaged in higher things, heavenly things, not the perishing treasures of this world. As we will see with Moses, he **“considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt . . .”** (11:26). This is sooo important! Brothers and sisters, it is only as our hearts look to heaven that we are able to look down with contempt upon that which this world prizes so much.

This is why we must always look to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith. You/we must look to Christ, the Prince and the King of heaven! For in HIM all the promises of God are fulfilled! (2 Cor. 1:20). Now, I am not saying riches cannot be had in this life. God certainly gave to Joseph; and he certainly gives to some of his people now. And we can be good managers of God’s gifts. But, by faith, we know that these are only gifts and they must be used for his glory. And, at the end of life, we know we cannot take these things with us.

Two applications:

Notice the special power of grace given at the end of life. At the end of life we find Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph’s heart resting upon what they had heard from God, firmly embracing his promises, and with unshaken confidence announcing the future blessing of their posterity. What an amazing grace God gives his people of faith and what he does even at the end of life. I saw this with our brother and my good friend, Zack. Though his mind and his speech were failing, his faith was not! What special grace I witnessed with Zack in his last days! What peace! What comfort! The normal terrors for those without faith were not to be found with him. ONLY Faith in the promises of God can work like this! This is not so for the world. The person of the world may appear to prosper, and his journey through life seem to be smooth and easy, but how does he fare in the supreme crisis? What support is there for his heart when God calls him to pass out of time into eternity? What about us?

Faith overcomes the world. This is exactly what we see with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. At the end of their lives, their faith is what stands. And I must ask, *“Faith in what? Faith in whom?”* . . . God and his promises. And, ALL God’s promises are fulfilled in Christ. This is why 11:26 says that *Moses considered the riches of Christ . . .* So, fast forward to the end of Jesus’ life. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he speaks with his disciples about what is soon to happen. He says, *“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* Here, he speaks of the cross, and also the resurrection. On the cross, he took our sins upon himself as a sacrifice to God. Also, he took the wrath that we deserve. And then he rose again. And now he sits at the right of hand of God where he rules. In this way, he has overcome the world. By faith the patriarchs looked forward. We look back. But in both cases, faith looks to the ONE who has overcome the world.

Life is messy. Life is full of sin and its consequences. But God is faithful! He is moving history to the end He has planned. Continue to look to Christ. And, press on! Press on until the end! And in the end, faith will prevail!

Through our years of flying to Sydney has been some of the most turbulent flights ever. But, in the morning when the sun starts to come up over Sydney after the long 15 hour flight, and the plane flies in over the ocean the passage has always been peaceful and quiet, every time. In the same way as A.W. Pink reminds us: “*cloudy and dark are the hours of our lives, but the sunset will bathe them with radiant splendour at its close.*” The same can be said of our lives. If there is faith, this is how we will pass into eternity.