

## “Faith Demonstrated at Death”

Heb. 11:20-22

- INTRO. - Bible commentator Matthew Henry wrote, “Though the grace of faith is of universal use throughout the Christian life, yet it is especially so when we come to die. Faith has its greatest work to do at the very last, to help believers to finish well...so as to leave a witness behind them of the truth of God’s Word and the excellency of His ways.”
- It is at the moment of one’s death that a person’s faith is most clearly seen – and the way we leave this world makes a huge difference to those who follow behind us.
- John MacArthur says, “God is glorified when His people leave this world with their flags flying at full mast. If *anyone* should die triumphantly it should be believers.”
- A few weeks ago we talked about the Reformers, of whom many were willing to die as martyrs for the sake of the gospel. Dying well is a special grace from God, and there have been many examples of that throughout church history.
- And yet, a life of faith is demonstrated at death, *not only* by those who die as martyrs, but by every true believer in Christ. There are countless examples of those who died peacefully, knowing that they would soon see their Savior and Lord.
- Genuine faith is clearly demonstrated in our understanding of death. The world sees death as a great enemy, but believers see death as a great introduction – that of being introduced to our eternal home in heaven.
- This is why the Bible declares, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His godly ones.” (Ps. 116:15) This is why we can see death as something positive – not having to die as those who have no hope.
- And listen, how we die matters, and how we demonstrate our faith in God in our final moments of earthly life can have a radical impact on those who are coming behind us.
- That is what is emphasized in the passage of Scripture we will be looking at today. In Heb. 11:20-22 the account of Abraham is rounded out by a tracing of his family line through Isaac and Jacob to the twelve patriarchs, who are represented by Joseph.
- Generally speaking we refer to *all* of these men as “patriarchs” and the three mentioned in this text illustrate the significance of faith when facing death. All three of these men demonstrated their

faith in a dramatic way as they were dying physically.

- These are men who are very familiar to anyone who has studied the Bible (or been in Sunday School and church for any period of time). Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all demonstrated full, confident faith in their final hours before death.
- And, as you probably know, all three of these men had times when they failed to demonstrate faith, but at the end (just before entering into eternity) their faith was firm. And they were able to pass their faith on to their children as they died. They went out basking in the brilliant sunlight of genuine faith in God.
- And a key factor in this, is that they (like Abraham) died without receiving the promises of God. They all died without seeing the promises of the Abrahamic covenant fulfilled. They died without possessing any of the Promised Land.
- But they had received the promises, and for them, that was enough. By faith they passed them on to their children. And (hopefully) you remember that God's covenant with Abraham included three things – the possession of the land of Canaan, the creation of a great nation from Abraham's descendants, and the promise that God would bless all the nations of the world through these descendants.

- And yet, Abraham never saw any of these promises come to fulfillment – and by the time of the fourth generation after him (represented by Joseph) none of these things had yet come to pass.
- When Abraham died, he (no doubt) said to Isaac, “You will see the beginnings of these promises come about.” And when Isaac died, he said something very similar to Jacob – and Jacob did the same with Joseph.
- In fact, Heb. 11:13 applies to *all* these men: “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”
- When each of these men died, they were still fully convinced that God would ultimately keep His promises. They died with the firm conviction of things *not* yet seen. They died in full assurance of faith.
- They did *not* possess the Land of Promise, they did *not* see a mighty nation formed in their time, they did *not* see the world blessed through them – but they had God's promises, and that was enough. They never doubted that all of these promises would ultimately come true.

- They could see these things already fulfilled through the eyes of faith. They could claim them as if they had already become reality. They knew these promises of God *would* be kept, because they knew that God cannot lie, and that He is a faithful God who is absolutely trustworthy.
- Although *they* died, they knew that God's *promises* could never die. They died in the victory of genuine, biblical faith, and the dying utterances of these men of faith demonstrates that victory.
- I love the way Ron Phillips puts it. He says, "These faithful [men] climbed the mountains of life's difficulties, and with keen spiritual vision glanced over into the glorious future of all who believe."
- So, with all this in mind, let's move (now) to these three examples, and we begin with Isaac, who demonstrated a "forward-looking faith."

#### I. ISAAC – A FORWARD-LOOKING FAITH (v. 20)

- Look with me at v. 20, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come." The original promise was given to Abraham, but he passed it on to his son Isaac. And since the promise was *not* fulfilled in his lifetime, he passed on the blessings of the promise "by faith."

- And in the same way, Isaac passed on the blessings of the promise to his sons, Jacob and Esau. And (of course) the covenant passed on to Jacob (the younger) instead of Esau, but all they had (at this point) was the promise of its ultimate fulfillment.

- The promise itself was the inheritance – and yet, these Patriarchs cherished *that* as much as anything else in this world. They valued it above possessions, fame, or worldly power. And they were absolutely certain that these promises would ultimately come to pass.

- In fact, if you read the biblical account, you see that God re-confirmed his covenant promises to each successive generation. Exodus 6:3 tells us that God had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to re-affirm His covenant relationship.

- And it's interesting, that even though Isaac lived longer than any of the other Patriarchs, less attention is given to *him* than any of the others. Abraham and Jacob both have 12 chapters in Genesis devoted to them – but Isaac has only 2 chapters.

- It is probably accurate to say that Isaac was the least spectacular (and most ordinary) of the descendants of Abraham. We know more about his *failures* than his *successes*, but there is one

significant event that occurred in a place called Gerar (a Philistine city).

- Because of a famine, Isaac had moved his family there, and while he was there, God appeared to him and said, “Sojourn in this land and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham. And I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed...” (Gen. 26:3-4)

- Here is where God re-affirmed the covenant promises to Isaac. In other words, the promise was passed on directly to Isaac by God. This affirmation alone should have kept Isaac from fear – knowing that God would have to protect him to keep the promise – and yet, (at the very first sign of danger) he took things into his own hands.

- He proved himself faithless, as he told the men of Gerar that Rebekah was his sister instead of his wife. Of course, he was afraid that those Philistines might kill him to take Rebekah, (and *in* this he was only following his father’s footsteps, because Abraham had done the same thing in regard to Sarah), but the point is, that he failed to trust the Lord’s protection.

- The Bible *does* tell us that Rebekah was beautiful, and the Philistines were certainly *not* above doing what Isaac feared, but the promise of God should have led Isaac to trust fully in His protection.

- In fact, if you read the biblical account, God *did* intervene on his behalf. God providentially created a situation where the king was able to look out his window and see Isaac caressing his wife.

- And interestingly, this pagan king was more concerned about the ethics of this matter than the Patriarch was. In Gen. 26:10 Abimelech sharply rebuked Isaac, saying, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.”

- MacArthur says, “God’s grace prevailed, though it was through an unbeliever, with no help, or even expectation from Isaac.” This episode demonstrates his lack of faith – and it is significant to point out that Abraham lied like this about Sarah on two different occasions (Gen. 12:13; 20:2).

- Both men are pointed to as examples of faith, and yet we see that their faith was *not* always ironclad. That ought to be an encouragement to *us* (by the way) because we know we also have “feet of clay.” Even when we generally trust God, we also have points in our lives where our faith may falter.

- But in spite of his failures, God blessed Isaac and he became a wealthy man. The Philistines became envious of him, and they kept stopping up the wells that he dug. This was used of God to bring him back into the land of Canaan, where he dug a well that remained.

- This was in Beersheba, and there Isaac “built an altar...and called on the name of the LORD.” Again, the Lord re-affirmed the covenant. Gen. 26:24 says, “And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, ‘I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, and multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.’”

- Now, another thing we need to know about Isaac is that he had to trust God to provide a son for him (just like his father Abraham had). Rebekah was barren (just as Sarah had been) and Isaac prayed earnestly for a son.

- Gen. 25:21 says, “the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived.” In fact, she gave birth to twin boys. And I’m sure you know the story. The oldest one was a rugged outdoorsman, a hunter who brought good meals for his father. For this reason, he was his father’s favorite son.

- The younger son, Jacob, was (kind of) a mama’s boy and pretty much stayed inside. He had smooth skin instead of hairy skin like his brother. In our

day and time we might compare Esau to a strong, athletic superstar -- and Jacob to a shy stay-at-home recluse.

- But our focus in this passage is on what happened at the point of Isaac’s death, and it is significant to remember that, it was at this point that he asked Esau to go out and kill “some game and prepare a savory dish” for him before he pronounced his final blessing on him.

- Perhaps Isaac was thinking more of his stomach than the blessing, but this was his request. However, Rebekah got wind of this and came up with a scheme for her favorite son Jacob to get the blessing instead.

- Of course, Rebekah knew that it was God’s will for Jacob to get the blessing (because He had revealed to her that the older would serve the younger) but (again) she felt like she had to do something to help God out.

- MacArthur says, “This story is of no credit to Isaac, Esau, or Jacob [*not* to mention Rebekah]. Isaac insisted on giving the blessing to the son whom he knew was *not* God’s choice. Esau, who had despised and sold his birthright, thought he could just as easily buy it back. And Jacob, at his mother’s instigation, tried to secure the blessing by deception rather than by faith. [Really] the entire family acted shamefully.”

- They either tried to do the wrong thing, or they tried to do the right thing the wrong way. And (of course) God intervened in all of this and accomplished His perfect will – but this seems to be anything *but* an example of faith to follow.

- However, the example that the author of Hebrews points to, is the one time in which Isaac really *did* demonstrate faith, and that was just before his death. Once it became obvious to Isaac that Jacob was the chosen recipient of the promise, then he bestowed the blessing on him.

- If Jonah was the reluctant *prophet*, Isaac was the reluctant *patriarch*. He finally said “yes” to God’s way. He finally (by faith) passed the promise down to Jacob (God’s chosen recipient).

- Ron Phillips asks, “Where does faith enter into this scheme?” He answers, “Faith is clearly seen when Isaac, knowing he has been deceived, refuses to reverse the decree and give the blessing to Esau (Gen. 26:30-41).”

- In fact, we find a very interesting comment in chapter 12 of Hebrews. In vv. 16-17 it says, “...Esau...sold his own birthright for a single meal...[and] afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.”

- Even in the face of this weeping and pleading from his favorite son, Isaac understood the will of God for Jacob to receive the blessing. Therefore he issued the *primary* blessing on Jacob, even though he gave a *secondary* blessing to Esau.

- But you could almost say that God had to put his back to the wall before he came around to this, although he finally did. As he faced his death he put his hands on Jacob and blessed him as the recipient of the covenant.

- So, in some ways, we would have to say that Isaac was a blot on the biblical record, but he ended up as an example of faith in this important sense – he had to pass the blessing of the promise down to his son “by faith,” because none of the patriarchs had seen any of it come to pass at this point. (Pause) Secondly, we see:

## II. JACOB – FEEBLENESS-OVERCOMING FAITH (v. 21)

- Look with me at v. 21, “By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.”

- Are you catching a theme here? These all have to do with when these men *died*, and the blessing of the promise of the covenant they passed on to their descendants.

- In *this* case, it is Jacob, who blessed the sons of Joseph as he was “leaning on the top of his staff.” Interesting -- Why was he leaning on the top of his staff? Because he had wrestled with God and his hip was “out of joint” to the end of his life.

- That’s why I am calling this “feebleness-overcoming faith.” Of all the things about Jacob’s life the author of Hebrews could have focused on, he chose (inspired by the HS) to emphasize his feebleness at the end of his life.

- In fact, in many ways, we would have to say that Jacob’s life was much like his father’s. He was up and down (as far as faith goes) – so at one point he is trying to bargain with God and at another point he is readily acknowledging God’s sovereign rule.

- In fact, God appeared to Jacob 5 times – and on every occasion it was for the purpose of chastening and correction. Jacob (the deceiver) had a lot of rough edges that had to be smoothed out – but at the end of his life he died as a man of faith.

- And like what we saw with Isaac, God re-affirmed to him His covenant promises. In Gen. 28, (where Jacob saw the vision of the ladder descending from heaven), v. 13 says, “And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your

descendants shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.’”

- This is a restatement of the Abrahamic covenant. This promise was so precious to Jacob, that much later in his life, he was so determined to have it, that he wrestled with God all night that he might obtain it.

- And yet, *that* is how he became feeble. It was at that point where God touched the socket of his hip and he ended up limping for the rest of his life. And yet, this is something that he would later glory in. His staff became (really) a symbol of glory to him, reminding him of his own weakness and the unlimited power of Almighty God.

- But the point of emphasis (here in Heb. 11:21) is his act of faith at the very end of his life. Unlike his father, he did *not* try to circumvent God’s will for the sons of Joseph.

- As I’m sure you know, Jacob had 12 sons, and Joseph was the youngest (except for Benjamin). But he was the chosen seed through whom the blessing of the covenant was to pass through.

- Joseph himself had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Both of them were blessed by Jacob, but

(again) the youngest son (Ephraim) received the primary blessing.

- By *this* point God had changed his name to Israel, and according to Gen. 48:21-22, “Then Israel said to Joseph, ‘Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers. And I give you one portion more than your brothers...’”

- The blessing of the promise continues to be passed down, in this case a double portion of blessing for the two sons of Joseph, along with the promise that God would free them from the bondage of Egypt.

- But again, the point is, that Jacob died as a man of faith, believing God for the promise, and passing on the blessing to the next generation. (Pause) This leads us (finally) to:

### III. JOSEPH – FUTURE-INSTRUCTING FAITH (v. 22)

- Look with me at v. 22, “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.”

- *All* the Patriarchs died without having received the Promised Land. But in Joseph’s case, *he* spent most of his adult life in Egypt – *not* even in Canaan. His was the fourth generation after the

covenant was given, but he could *not* even claim to be a sojourner on the Promised Land, much less to have obtained possession of it.

- By this time it had been over 200 years since God had made the initial promise to Abraham. 200 years of promise – but no fulfilment in sight. In fact, at the point of Joseph’s death, there were no Israelites in the Promised Land at all. They were all in Egypt.

- The author of Hebrews does *not* even mention Joseph’s life – only his instructions at the *end* of his life. Of course, we know that he was one of the most unfairly-treated men in the Bible. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, he was lied about, falsely accused, and imprisoned unjustly. Yet he remained faithful to God and God blessed him abundantly.

- And I’m sure you know *last* part of the story – because of a famine in Canaan, Joseph had brought his father and all of his brothers to the land of Egypt in order to provide for them. They ended up becoming slaves in Egypt for many, many years.

- Jacob’s body had been carried back to Canaan after he died, but in our present passage we see where Joseph gives instructions that *his* bones are to be taken back there as well. He did not want his final burial place to be in Egypt but in the Promised Land.



- If he could *not* inherit the land, at least the land could inherit him! The “orders concerning his bones” were eventually carried out – but *not* until the Exodus from Egypt.

- Once again we have a Patriarch who lived by faith, never seeing the promise fulfilled, but still clinging to it. We read some of Joseph’s final words in Gen. 50:24. *There* it says, “And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.’”

- He made his brothers promise that they would carry his bones up out of Egypt and bury them in the land of Canaan. He did this “by faith” fully believing that God would ultimately keep all His promises.

- And it’s interesting (and highly significant) that of all the events in Joseph’s life, the Spirit of God through the author of Hebrews could have highlighted, he chose this one.

- Ron Phillips writes, “The Holy Spirit could have mentioned Joseph’s purity when he refused the advances of Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39). The Spirit could have chosen his conduct while in jail, or his interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream (Gen. 40). His faith is also illustrated in the magnanimous way he

forgave his brothers (Gen. 43-45). Rather, the Holy Spirit chose the dying utterance of Joseph.”

- You see folks, death is the acid test of genuine faith. What you believe at the end of your life is what you truly believe. What you believe as you step into eternity reveals what you are staking your eternity upon.

- All these men died in faith, fully trusting God and fully believing that He would keep His promises. In addition to the *earthly* promises, (as we have seen) they *also* believed in some very important *eternal* promises – and it was because of that, that they became models for *us* to emulate.

- MAKE APPEAL

- PRAYER