

Hebrews 11:13, 20-22
(Genesis 50:22-26)
“The All Died in Faith: Living as Strangers and Exiles”

Introduction

Next week, we will begin our annual weeklong celebration of the great mission entrusted to us by Jesus: the call to join God on mission and make disciples from every nation. That mission lies at the heart of the great story of human history giving it eternal meaning, and for Christians, it should also be at the heart of our personal stories, because the mission has not merely been entrusted to pastors and missionaries, but to the entire family of God.

But the way that so many of us were taught to tell our story of grace can lead to deadly misunderstandings. People frequently relate their stories simply by telling when and under what circumstances they received new life from Christ. It is the expected answer to such questions as, “When were you saved?” or “When were you born again?” or “When did you first come to know the Lord?” I am not mocking such questions. They have their place. But they imply that salvation is an event that can be dated and located, leaving us free to ask the further question of just how seriously we intend to let salvation actually transform the living of our lives.

But the Bible approaches the question differently. We are sometimes described as saved in eternity past when chosen in Christ, sometimes as saved when Jesus on the cross endured the suffering due unto us, sometimes as saved when we were born again and received God’s Spirit, sometimes as working out our salvation day by day, sometimes as saved when at last Christ comes, raises us from the dead and makes all things new. In a very real sense, every one of those descriptions is true, and understanding our salvation must involve all those perspectives.

There is a great comfort in remembering when and where Christ began to change us by his Spirit, to give us new heart affections and a new way of seeing things. But we must never forget that our Lord Jesus said, “The one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 24:13). In other words, the end of life is more important than the beginning. It doesn’t matter that you went forward and prayed a sinner’s prayer in the past if you are not walking with Jesus now and until the end of your life. Salvation is a life, a new life given by God’s grace, received through faith, and enlivened, lived out, in the new life of a Christ-follower.

Our text makes this clear, reminding us that the same was true under the old covenant. These great examples of enduring faith chosen by our author and recorded in this eleventh chapter of Hebrews, not only followed the Lord when he called them to follow. They followed to the end, and continued to trust God’s promises even though they had not yet received the promises in full measure. And

that is the reason that the three patriarchs we are studying this morning have nothing recorded here of their lives except that they died in faith.

Look with me at these pictures of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, noting first how much like us they were in their brokenness and humanity. Then look at how faithfully they trusted God's promises to the very end and died in faith, and so serve as illustrations of faith that endures and testifies to the end of life that God is faithful.

Body

1. Note how much they were like us in their brokenness.

Isaac: When we last saw Isaac, he was tied to the altar, ready to be sacrificed by his father, Abraham. We don't know the effect on him of this terrifying childhood event, whether it was faith building, seeing how God provided a substitute, or whether it was security shattering, seeing his Father ready to kill him. We do know that far less is said of him than of any of the other patriarchs. We have about twelve chapters apiece given to telling the stories of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, but only about two chapters to Isaac.

When threatened by danger, he pulled his father's ignoble trick of asking his wife to pretend to be his sister. In old age, he seemed to care for nothing so much as his favorite meal, wild game hunted and prepared by his favorite son, Esau. He even resisted the prophecy that God had chosen the younger twin, Jacob, rather than the first-born twin, Esau, and only submitted after being deceived by Rebekah and Jacob. Apart from God's grace, Isaac appears as a lazy hedonist.

Jacob: Jacob's name means "deceiver," and so he was. Rather than trusting God to fulfill his promise to bless Jacob over his older twin, Esau, Jacob connived with his mother to get both the birthright and the blessing. When running from Esau, he promised God, "If you bless me, then you will be my God and I will serve you." So, too, when mistreated by Laban, Jacob schemed to get the best of Laban's flocks for his own, and stole away with his family, flocks and herds without telling Laban. Apart from God's grace, Jacob comes across as a schemer and deceiver, willing to do whatever it took to get what he wanted.

Joseph: Joseph was clearly the most noble of the three, yet when he first appears as a boy, it is as a tattletale, telling on his brothers and getting them in trouble. Next, he appears as a braggart, boasting to his family of dreams in which they all bow down and worship him. He is the favorite of his doting father and doesn't seem to have a clue how much his brothers hate him for being the favorite. Apart from God's grace, he seems well on his way to becoming a self-righteous prig.

2. But also note how steadfastly they endured to the end.

Isaac: We could also have told of how tenderly Isaac mourned the death of his mother, Sarah, and of how comforted he was by Rebekah, whom he took to his heart as wife, or of how he sowed and reaped and prospered, and became known and envied as a man greatly blessed by God.

But the key moment highlighted by our author is when he was old and full of years, and the moment came for speaking his final words of blessing or curse to his sons, he spoke the words that pointed them both ahead to God's faithfulness, giving Jacob the blessing, but also telling Esau that the day would come when he would break his brother's yoke from off his neck. This is the key: to the very end, we find him trusting God to keep his promises to Abraham and his family, promises of a great nation and of a world-wide mission, that through the one who would one day come, all the nations on earth would be blessed. This is the final testimony of his life.

Jacob: We could have told of Jacob at Peniel, wrestling with the Lord all night, refusing to stop until he received the blessing. But our author focuses on Jacob's final scene, down in Egypt on his deathbed, blessing each of his sons and prophesying their futures, instructing them to bury him in the land of promise whenever the Lord chose to lead them back, and then "bowing in worship over the head of his staff." What a picture of enduring faith, of the complete trust of a man whose life had become witness and worship!

Joseph: And what stories we might tell of Joseph's nobility and integrity, the more injustice he suffered, the more he trusted God's faithfulness and proclaimed God's Word. We might tell how he stood before Pharaoh and pointed away from himself to the faithfulness and power of God, or of how he forgave his brothers for selling him as a slave.

But the scene our author highlights is, once again, the final scene, the deathbed testimony. He reminds his brothers that what they had intended for harm, God had meant for good, comforting and consoling them to the end. He pointed them ahead to the day when God would visit them in Egypt and lead them back to the land promised to Abraham, asking them to take his bones with them in that day and bury him, along with his father, Jacob, in the land of promise, in the tomb purchased by Abraham to bury his family.

Conclusion

What are we to make of this? What do these deathbed scenes have to do with us? Just this: Every one of us will one day die. Perhaps we'll have the blessing of seeing it coming, of being able to reflect upon our lives and being surrounded by those we

love. What will our lives say to them? How will our stories end? What will they tell of God's great story of redemption?

Will we be crushed with regret at having spent so much time, energy and money on things that are passing away and so little on things that will matter forever? Will we point those around us to the faithfulness of God and the blessing of living for him, even when we have not yet seen the consummation of his promises? "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." We have seen so much more than they, the Christ, the cross, the empty tomb, the Spirit outpoured, the church down through the ages, the great ingathering of which we are privileged to play a part.

Think of how dramatically the world has changed, how much greater the challenge of world evangelization may seem compared to the day when Jesus entrusted his disciples with the great mission of making disciples from every nation: in 100 A.D. there were 800 million people on earth. By 1900 there were 1.5 billion, by 2000, 6 billion, and by 2014, 7 billion. Yet overwhelming as these figures seem, consider this: the growth of the church worldwide has completely outpaced population growth. In 100 AD the ratio of non-Christians to professing Christians was 360 to 1. By 1900 it was 27 to 1, by 2000 it was 5 to 1, and by 2014 it is 3 to 1. One third of the world's people claim to be Christians.

In spite of strong resistance to the gospel in areas as yet unreached, the church has unparalleled resources for reaching the nations, incredible tools when put in the Master's service. Jesus has told us that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached to every ethnic group, and then the end will come." Peter has called upon us to "patiently hasten the day of the Lord." How in the world can we do that? By getting on with the task, by making the Lord's priority our priority. When we lie dying, what else will matter except what ultimately matters and endures to eternity?

Don't miss it! Don't live for nothing and realize when it is too late, that you did not endure to the end, but wasted this precious life on experiences you no longer even remember and things you can no longer enjoy. Jesus calls to us even now and says, "Trust me. I am the way, the truth and the life. Follow me. Abide in me. Make disciples of all nations. And the one who endures to the end will be saved."

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