

“Abraham’s [Great] [Grand]Son’s Faith” – Hebrews 11:20-22

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 11...

This may be the shortest sermon I ever preach here... The reason for that is that we will end our time with a video documenting that mission trip to Rwanda, which I think you will enjoy. So we are just going to look at three main verses today in Hebrews 11 and see what we can learn from them about the character of faith. So to that end, let’s look at the text. We left off with what Hebrews 11 said about Abraham. Today we will see what it says about Abraham’s son, grandson, and great grandson, beginning in verse 20. Follow along as I read. This is God’s Word...

“By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.” (Hebrews 11:20-22)

There are three men highlighted for faith in these verses—Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Besides being descendants of Abraham, these three have certain things in common related to faith. We will get to those in a moment. To begin let’s consider the specific stories that the author of Hebrews is drawing our attention to, beginning with Isaac.

Isaac, as we have seen, was the son of promise given to Abraham. You will recall from recent weeks that God made a covenant with Abraham, promising him, among other things, innumerable offspring and a line that would ultimately bless all nations. That line is the line that leads to Jesus, the Savior. So this Abrahamic covenant is what is shaping the unfolding of history from Abraham until the end of the world. But the line of promise that would lead to the Savior had to begin with another offspring—Isaac. Abraham passed on the promises to his son and expected him to do the same with his sons and so on. In other words, it was not a covenant made with just Abraham. It was made with all of his offspring. God made this clear to Abraham, saying:

“I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” (Genesis 17:7)

Beyond the covenant, God also prophesied to Abraham about the future of his descendants. Among those things forecasted, we read this in Genesis 15...

“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. ¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.’” (Genesis 15:13-16)

So the entire Exodus—the story of the Hebrew people’s slavery and deliverance in Egypt—was predicted to Abraham generations before it actually occurred. But that information didn’t stay with Abraham. He passed the Word he had received from God—covenant and prophecy—down to his offspring and invited them to believe the Lord with him. They in turn were to do that with their descendants. One generation to the next, God’s revealed hope was meant to exchange hands and awaken faith in hearts. The faith of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph has this inheritance in mind.

Verse 20 states, “*By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.*” There is a lot of backstory that is just assumed in that sentence. Jacob and Esau were twin brothers, but Esau was technically the firstborn with Jacob clutching at his heel. Ordinarily that would mean that the blessing of the father would fall to Esau, but God had different plans. It was revealed to Rebekah, the boys’ mother, that the blessing would actually fall to the younger.

Instead of trusting God to fulfill that promise, Rebekah and Jacob sought to manufacture the outcome through deception. When Isaac was old and his sight had failed him, Jacob pretended to be Esau and allowed Isaac to bless him. He stole the blessing. As you can imagine Esau was not too thrilled about all that. But to Isaac’s credit, he seems to recognize that God is at work, the oath is binding, and God’s plan would not fail, so he refuses to revoke the blessing. Indeed, he later blesses Jacob with full knowledge of what he was doing (Genesis 28:1-4). In addition, Jacob does, however, give a secondary blessing—a consolation prize—to Esau. And in that sense he “*invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau*” (Hebrews 11:20). His faith was demonstrated because he knew that each blessing would be perfectly fulfilled by God in the future.

Many years later, Jacob demonstrated the same faith when he passed on blessings to his children. Hebrews 11:21 says, “*By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.*” This is a reference to Genesis 48. Jacob, who by then was also called Israel, had many sons, including Joseph, who had risen to second in command over all of Egypt, the superpower of the day. When it came time to bless the sons of Joseph—Manasseh and Ephraim—they were brought to their grandfather, Jacob, whose health was failing him. The older boy, Manasseh, was placed at Jacob’s right and the younger boy, Ephraim, was placed to his left.

That little detail alerts the reader to the fact that Manasseh, as the older child, was expected to receive the greater blessing, which was associated with the patriarch’s right hand. But Jacob crosses his arms, placing his right hand on the head of Ephraim and his left on the head of Manasseh. Joseph was upset by this and tried to correct his father, thinking it was a mistake. But Jacob made a deliberate choice at the direction of the Lord. Both are blessed. But Ephraim receives the greater blessing. Jacob had faith in the Lord, defying convention.

Fast forward in time to when Joseph himself was an old man and you get to the story referenced in Hebrews 11:22. The text says, “*By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.*” Remember the prophecy that God had given to Abraham? How the people would be slaves in a foreign land for hundreds of years until God brought them back to the land of Canaan? That oppression had yet to occur, but the prophecy had been passed on the Joseph and he received it in faith. How do we know? Because this is what we read in the last verses of Genesis:

“Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.’²⁶ So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.” (Genesis 50:25-26)

Israelites were not typically embalmed, but Joseph was so confident in the promise of God that he made the Israelites promise to preserve his body in this fashion so that he could be buried, centuries later, back in the land. And sure enough, Moses would eventually carry the mummy of Joseph out of Egypt (Exodus 13:19) and Joshua would later bury him in Shechem when the Promised Land was conquered (Joshua 24:32).

All of these stories demonstrate faith, but we might wonder, of all the stories the author of Hebrews could have mentioned in the life of these men, why choose the three specific stories that he did? What do they have in common? It seems to me there are three things we could mention this morning. First of all, each one had a...

Finishing Faith

Did you notice that each story of faith involves faith at the end of life? What that shows us is that each of these men died in faith. In fact, the writer of Hebrews has already told us that in verses 13...

“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. (Hebrews 11:13)

What an incredible statement! They died in faith. They received the promises for future realities and they embraced them in faith. They recognized that even though the promises would not be entirely fulfilled in their lifetime, they were nonetheless certain. Even at the end of their life, when their bodies were old and weak, they were not shaken. They believed.

Friends, the end is more important than the beginning. Remember how often we have seen the author of Hebrews impress upon us the necessity of enduring faith. All true believers will persevere in faith. They will not abandon the faith. They will die in faith.

But that is not to say that they will be faithful throughout their life. Of these three men, only Joseph had a reputation for faithfulness throughout his life. The other two—Isaac and Jacob—do not come across as stellar examples of faith throughout most of their lives. In fact, they are kind of scoundrels. Isaac seems pretty selfish as an adult and displays a self-serving favoritism toward one of his kids. Jacob’s name was pretty much synonymous with deception. He cheated his brother out of his birthright. He stole his blessing. He deceived his father-in-law. He acted pretty cowardly again and again. But in the end, both of the men finished well. The text says they “*died in faith*” (Hebrews. 11:13).

May the same be said of each of us. You may have squandered most of your life in selfish living, but, if there is still blood coursing through your veins right now, there is still hope for you to share this same legacy. You can live the rest of your life in faith. Why would you not? It’s not how you began. It’s how you will finish. Finish the race with faith! Let that be the legacy of all of our senior adults in this place. The thing that matters to us more than anything is for us to be able to say, with absolute confidence, on the day you pass from this life, “he [or she] died in faith!”

But these men possessed more than just a finishing faith. They also possessed a...

Forward-Looking Faith

Look again at verses 13 and following...

“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. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.” (Hebrews 11:13-16)

John Piper’s remarks on these verses are very fitting. He writes,

“The writer wants us to realize that the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac...Jacob [and Joseph]) were sojourners, exiles, refugees—and so is everyone who lives by faith, including those of us who even know Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Not even the coming of the Messiah has brought all the promise to us. What the coming of Jesus has done is put the foundation of the promises on a visible, demonstrable footing. In Christ all the promises of God are Yes (2 Corinthians 1:20). But the promises are still future. And we are still aliens and exiles and sojourners, just like the fathers and like the other Old Testament saints...A sojourner living by faith in God's promises is ‘seeking’ another country (see Matthew 6:33). He is not settling in here. He is sitting loose to things, and is unwilling to be conformed to this age. He is ‘seeking’ the one he has greeted from afar.”¹

This should be the character of our faith. It is a forward-looking faith. In the words of Hebrews 11:1, it is “*the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*” (KJV). It looks ahead in hope. It believes the best is yet to come. It recognizes this world is not our home. And this is the kind of faith that we see in these three patriarchs at the end of their life. And it’s inspiring.

Those of you who are senior adults in this place, listen to me for a second. Some of the most impactful moments in my life have come from seeing this kind of profound faith at work in the last years, months, weeks, days, and moments of a person’s life. People pay much closer attention to how we end the race than how we started it. You have an opportunity in your last days for people to see a compelling vision of faith that they won’t see in the same way in the lives of your younger church family. The seniors who have impacted me the most, changed my life in fact, have been the ones who exuded this kind of faith. The ones who, even when stripped of every comfort this life has to offer, looked ahead in hope to the glory that Christ has purchased on their behalf. The ones who knew they were ever closer to the Savior who died for them and rose from the dead. Men like Rudy Gimble and Kenneth Culpepper (just to name a couple), who exhausted every ability and ounce of energy they had in service to others and in witness to Christ. Men who lived for Christ and made it clear that they believe to die was gain. Why? Because this world was not their home. Seniors, one of the most important things you can do for the younger generation in this place and in your life is to show them this kind of faith. We need to see that because when we do, it builds our faith...

And this leads me to the last characteristic. The faith of these men was a...

Fostering Faith

That is to say that it was used to build the faith of future generations. The stories that the author of Hebrews has chosen from the lives of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, each have to do with them passing on promised blessings and encouraging confidence in the Word of God to the next generations. They were using their final days to foster the faith in the next generation. Again I say, what a legacy!

It seems to me there is a choice that we face as we get older. I recognize that I am not very old by comparison to many of you so I say this humbly as one who is punching above my weight. But it seems to me there is a choice as to what kind of person we will become later in life (if we are blessed with older age). There are the “Good ol’ Days” seniors and the “Glory Days Ahead” seniors. Let me explain.

The “Good ol’ Days” senior is the one who is always talking about days gone by. They are focused on what is behind, what they have lost, what has been taken from them, what has changed in this world, and so on. Not surprisingly they are sometimes marked by grumbling and a complaining spirit. As a result, they often, perhaps unintentionally, adopt a posture that is antagonistic to the generations that are coming up. Every interaction seems to be negative or non-existent.

But there is another kind of senior, one that I'm so thankful we have so many examples of here at Southern Oaks—the "Glory Days Ahead" senior. These are those who have a much more optimistic tone because their hope is not in this world. They are not trying to get back to days gone by as much as they are hoping in the life that is to be revealed. Their faith is obvious to all. This world is not their home. You see them and it's obvious that they are convinced their best days lie ahead. And as a result their disposition to the younger generation is much more nurturing and engaging. It's not because they agree with all the preferences of the younger generations. They surely do not. And that's okay. It's because you agree with the promises of God and that the life to come is going to be beyond compare.

And when the younger and less experienced generations that I am a part of get to rub shoulders with seniors like that—those looking forward to glory in hope—we are touched beyond compare. We need that. I speak from experience because some of the most impactful people in my life have been those kinds of seniors. They have fostered faith in me because they lived out their faith, even when life was not as comfortable or ideal as it once had been. They have forecasted, like a mirror into the future, reminding younger men and women, boys and girls, that they will not always have the advantages that they have now, but they can still have Jesus. And we need to see in you and your faith that Jesus is enough.

So how are you fostering faith in the next generation? What kind of legacy with you leave? Will it be a legacy of faith? Will it be a finishing faith? A forward-looking faith? Will it foster faith in others? Remember, it's not about how you have started or how much of your life has passed. You have an opportunity, no matter how much time you have left on earth, to show us the same kind of faith we see at the end of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph's lives. This would be the greatest gift you could give us.

I have some homework for you. I would like to challenge each of you to read 2 Timothy this week (especially you seniors). It's a short book. It won't take long. In it you will find the Apostle Paul, a man who believes his life is likely winding down, writing what he knows could be his final word to Timothy, a younger man who he cared deeply for. What would you say, if you had one more letter to write someone younger than you? Paul gives us a wonderful model and I believe his priorities are worth all of us emulating.

But that is true for all of us. Every single one of us, regardless of age, should be investing in the younger generations, fostering faith. There are always people younger than you and there are always people who are not as far along as you are spiritual. God has surrounded you with such people. Be salt. Be light. Use every day like it's your last and maximize your efforts at seeking first the kingdom. As C.T. Studd said in his memorable poem:

Two little lines I heard one day,
Traveling along life's busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart,
And from my mind would not depart;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, yes only one,
Soon will its fleeting hours be done;
Then, in 'that day' my Lord to meet,
And stand before His Judgement seat;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, the still small voice,
Gently pleads for a better choice
Bidding me selfish aims to leave,

And to God's holy will to cleave;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, a few brief years,
Each with its burdens, hopes, and fears;
Each with its clays I must fulfill,
 living for self or in His will;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

When this bright world would tempt me sore,
When Satan would a victory score;
When self would seek to have its way,
Then help me Lord with joy to say;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Give me Father, a purpose deep,
In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep;
Faithful and true what e'er the strife,
 Pleasing Thee in my daily life;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Oh let my love with fervor burn,
And from the world now let me turn;
Living for Thee, and Thee alone,
Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.

Only one life, yes only one,
Now let me say, "Thy will be done";
And when at last I'll hear the call,
I know I'll say "twas worth it all";
Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for Christ will last.²

Let's Pray...[Ushers come and be seated]

We are going to close a little differently today. [Response Cards] Remember, it doesn't matter your age. You can always invest in the next generation. Our church supports a ministry called Anchor of Hope, which was started by one of our very own families. They serve children in the country of Rwanda by providing a means of education for children and resources for their families. Last week a mission team from our church returned from serving alongside Anchor of Hope in Rwanda and we have a video documenting that trip. It's a little longer than our usual videos, but I think it's worth it in this case because it's important for you to see where some of our resources are going and the work they are accomplishing.

In this video you will meet Jacklyn, who took in her sisters children when her sister died. She is truly an example of someone sacrificing much for the sake of the next generation. You will also get a glimpse of some of the construction and children's ministries that the team was engaged in on the trip. The kids you will see are

by and large kids that are supported through Anchor of Hope. You'll see some familiar faces along the way. So sit back and enjoy as we collect the offering for today...

[Presentation of Gift and Announcements]

¹ John Piper, "The Hoper of Exiles on the Earth," a sermon preached on June 29, 1997, to Bethlehem Baptist Church and accessed online, as of August 10, 2019, at the following website: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-hope-of-exiles-on-the-earth>.

² Drawn as of the day of preaching from the following website: <https://joshuavandermerwe.wordpress.com/2014/01/23/only-one-life-a-poem-by-c-t-studd/>.