

Faithful to the Death

a sermon in the series
Hebrews: An Epistle of Encouragement

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Hebrews 11:20-22

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was a-dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, [leaning] upon the top of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.

Hebrews chapter eleven is a chapter about great exploits of faith. Many commentators have called it “God’s hall of fame of faith.” As we read through this eleventh chapter and study its teachings, its doctrine, its examples of faith, two particular things amaze us. First, the outstanding power of God is displayed in ordinary people. You cannot read this chapter and not be astonished at how this supernatural God works through such natural men and women.

I wish most Baptists weren’t afraid of God; that is, I wish they weren’t afraid of His supernaturalness. We tend to reject the Charismatic’s mysticism by an overreaction that leads to a denial of the miraculous. Yet when we are in a difficult circumstance, we cry for God’s miraculous deliverance. We really don’t want miracles. But when one is needed, we hope for such. It’s really true, you don’t want a miracle, because to need a miracle means you’ve got to be between a “rock and a hard place.” You’ve got to be in the spot where you cannot do anything to change the circumstances in order for a miracle to occur. So, the truth is, you don’t want to ever get in the place where you need a miracle, but, thank God, when I need a miracle, I know a miracle working God!

I serve a God that’s supernatural, and all through this chapter you see how God does great exploits through ordinary human people, and, may I say, weak people. There is not one in this great chapter that in and of himself is really outstanding, because the Bible tells us that He uses weak things to “confound the wise.” He uses weak things to “put to flight the mighty,” and again and again you see this in this eleventh chapter. You see God using men like David to put to flight armies and kill giants, and you see Daniel’s marvelous faith in a lions’ den. This is the caliber of miracles of faith in this chapter.

But on the other hand, the second thing that astounds me most about this chapter is that there are also great acts of faith acclaimed here that are not really anything supernatural or out of the ordinary. You see God taking ordinary weak people and ascribing to them great faith when they

did some things that were quite ordinary, like giving out the order of their funeral service. As I told you, this week I lost a sister-in-law, and prior to her death she had planned her entire funeral service. Well, we're going to find out today in our text that Joseph did the same thing. He had burial plans dictating to his family what was to take place at his burial. And God says of that one thing, "great faith," and stamps upon the life of Joseph an accommodation that he was pleasing unto God.

And so today, these three men, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are not noted for one single miracle in their lives, although God could have cited some, especially in the case of Joseph, but they are not recorded in this eleventh chapter for any of the miraculous things that occurred in their lives. Rather, God chooses some very mundane, ordinary things by which He relays to us some important truths about faith.

This should encourage us today. Often we think of faith as something that has to be always connected with the miraculous, as something that moves mountains. And again I want to say, thank God we serve a God of the miraculous who can move the mountains, but God inserts in this "hall of fame of faith" a few instances where mountains were not moved, oceans were not divided, giants did not fall, and armies were not put to flight. He records some ordinary things and says that faith caused these people to do what we would call "ordinary." You see, God's as much a God of the ordinary, mundane, and routine things of your life as he is of the miraculous. And he's as much a God of the minutia as He is of the miraculous.

Let's read our text together: Hebrews chapter eleven verse twenty through twenty-two:

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was a-dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.

Nothing out of the way of ordinary, and yet God says, "Great faith. Put Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in the chapter of great faith." Let's take each one of these three men and quickly go through why God records these particular instances of their lives, and then we will make some practical, and, I hope, applicable statements to our everyday, routine lives.

The faith of Isaac here is outlined in verse twenty. Isaac is credited as having faith in that he blessed his two sons Jacob and Esau. I think at this moment parents ought to take note and listen intently. God records that the greatest act of faith that Isaac ever did was that he blessed his sons. Dads, you and I have the opportunity to do that every day, not only with our sons, but also with our daughters. We are living in an age where dads seem to be disconnected in the home. An absentee dad can occur even when dad's present in the home because he is so detached and not in-tune with his children or his wife. He can be right in the home and still not actually be a part of the home. God says there is something special about a father blessing his children.

Fathers, I want you to notice that your sons and your daughters need your affirmation. They need to know that dad does love them and cares about them. And they know that dad loves and cares about them by words of affirmation. Now I am not talking about trying to build your children's self-esteem. The problem with most of us is we have too much self-esteem. I find no substance to this pop-psychology of self-esteem. I'm talking about letting that child know that they mean something to you, and that you love them, and that you are there supporting them. Such does not happen by bringing them presents or doling out twenty-dollar bills when Friday night comes along so they can go have a good time with their friends. No, it is by actual words and actions that say, "I care. I care not necessarily for what you do but because you are mine."

In addition to words and actions of affirmation, there should be words of praying for God's blessings on their lives. Fathers, we need to be prayer warriors for our children. Your children need someone to intercede for them, someone who is committed to plead their cause and need before the throne. And who else but you should be that person? It ought to be you. It ought to be you praying for your children, and your children ought to know that you pray for them. They need to know.

Isaac is credited as having great faith because he blessed his sons. You say, "That doesn't take great faith." Oh yes, it does. Raise kids today—it takes faith. But I want to show you something even more interesting here in the faith of Isaac. Isaac is credited as having faith even when he did something he thought was right, but in truth was wrong. He blessed the wrong son!

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come (Hebrews 11:20).

He blessed both Jacob and Esau, but do you remember the story? Isaac thought he was dying, yet he did not die until many years later. We know that Jacob served Laban his father-in-law for twenty years, and Isaac is still alive. He actually died several years later. In fact, Rachel, Jacob's wife whom he loved, died before Isaac died! Isaac really missed the time of his death. He says to Esau, "Esau, I don't know how many more days I've got left so you better go. Please, one more last dying wish. Would you fix me some of that venison the way I like it? And then I'll bless you, I'll give you my dying blessing." And yet, he died many, many years later.

You will also remember that his wife Rebekah heard that the blessing was coming, and Rebekah had something that Isaac didn't. She had a promise that God had made with her when she was carrying the twins. The promise was that the younger would be the master of the older. The older would actually serve the younger. Jacob would be the promised heir of the Abrahamic covenant. Thus Rebekah plots with Jacob's deceptive spirit to fool Isaac, and to lie to him, and to say that Jacob was Esau. As a result, Isaac blessed Jacob with the blessing that he intended to give to Esau.

It seems strange that the Spirit of the Lord inspires the writer of Hebrews to insert Isaac's name and to credit him for having faith when he blessed the child that he wasn't intending to bless when he was not really dying. Yet this is exactly what God says. It was faith, good faith, great faith!

What should we make of this? It seems to me that we should first deduce that faith does not mean perfection. To have faith in God does not mean perfection, but living with a confidence in what God has said. And that's what Isaac had here. Even though he blessed the wrong son, in his mind he thought he was blessing Esau. Had he known that it was Jacob, he would have not granted the blessing that God wanted him to give to Jacob. But God nonetheless states concerning Isaac that he had faith. Why? Down deep Isaac had this determined spirit that what God had promised his father Abraham would come to pass. He believed the promise that from one of his sons would come a nation that God would prosper and bless above all other nations. It was for this faith that God blessed Isaac and gives him honorable mention in this chapter of faith.

Surely there is a lesson for you and me, that often we do things in our lives that might not necessarily be the right thing. We make mistakes, we're less than perfect, but if our heart is fueled by the promises of God, God says that's faith. I know that sounds strange to us, that God would accept as great faith one who did something incorrectly, yet God looks at our hearts and sees what our ultimate goal is, and it is this that He judges as faith.

There have been many things in the last eight years that we've attempted to do, believing the Lord wanted us to do it. Some of them, I believe, looking back in hindsight, were, and some of them weren't. But this passage gives me great hope that in the days we were trying to do what we perceived to be the will of God, even though it might not have been perfect, God looked on our hearts and saw we were still holding onto the promise of His blessing. He knows that we are trying to serve Him with all of our hearts, and somehow, somehow, God is able to say that's being faithful. For this I am thankful.

I'm not excusing sins since I am not talking about sin. I am talking about when with your heart and within your mind you are trying to serve the Lord the best way you know how, though sometimes it's not necessarily the way you intended, but God in His providence is working in that for His ultimate Glory. When Esau came back with the venison he learned what had transpired. But Isaac didn't change the blessing. He maintained that the will of the Lord had been done.

Let us move to the faith of Jacob. Jacob was dying. He truly was dying. Perhaps he had learned a lesson from his father—don't predict your death before its time. Jacob asked for Joseph to come. Joseph came and brought with him his two young sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. The Bible tells us in the Genesis account that Jacob blessed Joseph, and then he asked for Manasseh and Ephraim to be brought before him. Our text in verse twenty-one says,

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph.

Now this is an interesting phrase for by it the writer of Hebrews is reminding his audience that before Jacob died, he took Ephraim and Manasseh, who were his grandsons, and he adopted them from Joseph and made them full fledged sons. Jacob had twelve sons, and he blesses the other sons. But he does something special with the sons of Joseph. He takes Ephraim and Manasseh and he blesses them and gives to them the birthright of Joseph. He restores to Joseph what was

his but which through the deceit of Joseph's brothers, and also through the deceit of Laban, had been lost. You must see the story to understand the principle. After Isaac blessed Jacob, through Jacob's having deceived him, Esau swore he would kill Jacob. Jacob flees for his life and goes back to his mother's brother, Laban. Jacob falls in love with one of Laban's daughters, a beautiful young maiden named Rachel. A contract is made between Jacob and Laban that Jacob would work for Laban for seven years in return for Rachel in marriage. In the end the deceiver, Jacob, is deceived by his father-in-law. On the night of the wedding, Laban substitutes his older daughter Leah for Rachel. And the next morning when the sun rises and the light of day exposes the new Mrs. Jacob it turns out not to be the love of Jacob's life. Laban works out another agreement with Jacob that if he would consent to work for him for another seven years he would give Rachel to Jacob. Of the two sisters it was Rachel that Jacob loved.

But because of Jacob slighting Leah, God caused Rachel's womb to be barren and blessed Leah with children. Leah bore Jacob his first born son, Reuben. Reuben being the oldest meant that the birthright and the promise of the Abrahamic covenant should be his. But had it not been for the deception of Laban, Jacob would have never married Leah. It was Rachel that he loved and her first-born son was Joseph. Thus the birthright really belonged to Joseph. He was the son of the wife that Jacob loved and had worked fourteen years for. On his deathbed Jacob remembers. He knows God's ways; he knows the oldest is to be the one who is to carry out the promise of the father. But he restores the son of his favorite wife. He gives him the blessing by taking Manasseh and Ephraim and blessing them. Now what is the significance of this? Here is the significance, when he, being old and blind, blesses Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph guides Jacob's left hand on Ephraim and Jacob's right hand on Manasseh, because Manasseh is the oldest. The right hand is the symbol of blessing, prosperity, and power. But Jacob crosses his hands and he puts his right hand on Ephraim and his left hand on Manasseh and he made Ephraim the stronger. Why would he do this? What is his reasoning that he goes against the protocol of blessing? The answer is obedience. He did what God had revealed to him. God had revealed to him that he was going to choose Ephraim to be stronger even than Manasseh. Jacob obeyed God in the hours preceding his death. In other words, Jacob is listed in this hall of fame of faith not because he dreamed a dream and saw God and a ladder coming down from heaven. Nor is he listed in this eleventh chapter because he wrestled with God by night and God blessed him. Not one of the miracles of Jacob's life is mentioned in this chapter of faith. He is recorded in this chapter because in his hour of death, when a man is tempted to go out in the right frame and make sure that everybody is happy with him, he does what is not normal. He does what is contrary to the accepted, and he blesses the younger because God told him to do it. He was faithful even unto death.

Let us now see why Joseph is listed in this eleventh chapter of Hebrews. When you read about the life of Joseph, there are so many things that display great faith. I think about the dreams that Joseph had. I think about Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. I think about him there in that dungeon in Egypt when he had been wrongfully accused of adultery and how he tenaciously clung to righteousness. Would we not look at that and say there is great faith? When everything around him looked as if all the promises and dreams of God were not real, he still believed. Yet the thing that God highlights about Joseph's life is none of this. Here is what the writer of our text says,

By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel.

He gathers his brothers who are still living and he tells them that one-day God is going to take them out of Egypt and is going to take them back to their homeland. In that land of promise a nation will be established, and when that happens they are to take his bones back with them and bury them in the family cemetery. It is this act of faith that God recorded as perhaps his greatest act of faith. How do you explain the significance of this? Well, the whole book of Hebrews is an epistle of encouragement. He is writing to people who have been discouraged, persecuted, and afflicted. He wants to encourage them. When you are going through difficulty and every circumstance around you does not seem to bear the fact that you are an “overcomer” and “more than a conqueror through Christ Jesus,” you need hope. It is then that you must practice patient endurance. You must patiently endure by holding on to the promise that fuels your hope rather than believe the difficult circumstances. When Joseph was dying he realized the temptation for his family. They had lived in Goshen, which was the most fertile land of all of Egypt. It could have been very easy for them to become comfortable there. But he remembered there was a promise that God had made to his father and his father’s father and his great-grandfather Abraham, a promise of a land. He believed that promise and knew Egypt was not the promised land. In short, Joseph believed God kept His promises.

Please hear me, my dear friend, I know it might seem like the tides of opposition have been unleashed upon you and all of hell has armed itself against you. It is at such time that you must hold on to the promise unto death just as Joseph did. He was so confident in the promise that he said “Here is what I want you to do at my funeral, don’t put me in one of the pyramids. I want you to take my bones back to Israel with you.” And the Bible tells us that before Moses and the children of Israel left Egypt they went and got the bones of Joseph. I wonder what had happened during those four hundred years. Do you suppose that when an Israelite would walk by the burial place of Joseph he would be reminded that there was coming a day when the promise was going to be fulfilled? I believe that the tomb of Joseph was a reminder to them to keep believing, keep dreaming. After the exodus they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Every day they heard that bag of bones rattle through the desert and every time it was a reminder that one day finally they would arrive to the land of promise. You may not be carrying a bag of bones around with you but God has given you a covenant, a promise that He will be faithful to you until the day you die. You can live with that promise and you can die with it.

I want you to notice three things about these three men and we will conclude. I have gone through all the history that you might know the practical lessons of why they are in this great chapter. First, I want you to see that great faith doesn’t always require great miracles. It is simply trusting in a great God. Faith doesn’t always mean you have to move mountains. It simply means believing in the integrity of God. Faith is for the mundane as it is for the miraculous. You need as much faith when you are on the job site as you do when you are here at church. In fact, you need it more so. You need faith when you and your wife are communing; you need faith as you teach your children. The things that we would call ordinary in every part of our everyday life must be saturated with trust in God. In other words, don’t leave any part of your life to chance. Entrust it

to God who has a plan for it. How much of your life have you entrusted to God? Your church life? Your ministry life? Why not all of your life? Don't make the mistake that many American Christians are making today by compartmentalizing their life. This part is for God and this part is for work and this part is for play and this is for family. No, your whole life should be consumed with God. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Every part of your life should be saturated with trust in God.

Second, I think the next great lesson is the greatest of all tests. The greatest of all tests is not to trust God in times of poverty, but in times of prosperity. Notice every one of these men were very wealthy men, especially Joseph. When Joseph was age thirty, he was elevated to Prime Minister of Egypt. He lived probably sixty or seventy years in great prosperity. Anybody and everybody had to do whatever he told them to do except Pharaoh. He lived in the wealth of all of Egypt. Dear friend, it would seem to me it would be easy in the comfort and prosperity of Egypt to get lax in your faith. The truth is it is not hard to believe when you have no other option but to believe. It is easy to have faith when you have no other option but God. But what about when you have every other resource at your disposal? Do you trust God then? Even with all of Joseph's prosperity and resources he didn't stop believing in God or His promises. It may require more faith to be faithful in times of advantage rather than at times of adversity. Blessings and not burdens are sometimes the greater test of faith. Some of us are enduring that test right now. No doubt there are some here who are facing the test of a burden, adversity, and affliction. But many of us are facing a great test and we don't even know it. It is the test of God's blessings. I fear the quickest thing to turn the heart of a Christian cold is God's blessings. Think about your own walk with Christ. Which is more difficult to do, continue to seek God with all of your heart, when everything is going right or when everything is turned upside down in your world? When is it the easiest to seek God in prayer? Well, my friends, when everything is turned upside down, we pray more than any other time. We need God, but when we think we need not God as much, fellowship with God can wane so easily. That is why I want you to know that the greatest test of your faith today may not be a problem, it may be prosperity. And you may be flunking the test because you have compartmentalized God to another aspect of your life and you shelve Him there only until you need Him. Faith is to substantiate all of your living and be the foundation for all that you do.

Third and last, faith must be maintained to the end, and death is the greatest test of faith that we all must face. If you notice every one of the writer's recordings of these three men had something to do with death. The great testimony of their faith was when they were dying. That tells me that the greatest challenge of our faith may lie ahead of us. None of these men were to be remembered for their great acts of faith while living but in their faith in their dying. Now I think it's safe to predict that the majority of us will not perform a miracle during our lifetime. You will not divide any seas, or cause the dead to live, or open a blind eye. But we all must face the greatest enemy of the human race and that is death. We must all face our own death. It is only by faith in Christ that we can conquer the enemy that is called the equalizer. It doesn't matter how powerful or how rich you might be, you must face death. And you face it all alone just like every other person has to face it. Here will be the greatest test of your faith. No challenge perhaps greater

than the passing from the only world in which we have ever known into a world which we have never seen.

As I told you earlier, my sister-in-law died Christmas morning after a long battle with cancer. As we remembered her life I could not think of one great shining moment in which by her hand she changed world events. I could not think of one instance when she performed some daring act of bravery. She was a mother, a wife, a grandmother. She enjoyed her children and her family. She was a very giving person. She was greatly involved in her church, but none of these things would cause a historian to pen her name. Why, these were things we all do and are considered part of our everyday, average, normal lives. But disease and death brought to her a challenge and she by faith rose to the occasion. When it appeared that God was not kind she believed him to be nothing but kind. When it seemed to others that God had made a mistake and let cancer eat at her, she believed that God could make no mistakes. When it was whispered among some that God could not be loving to let one of his servants suffer so much pain, she believed that God could be nothing but loving. Death provided her the means to rise and shine and demonstrate great faith. Death one day will provide you the same opportunity. How will you fare?

Why are Jacob and Isaac and Joseph remembered because of their deaths? Because it is a reminder to us that the greatest test is yet ahead of us. How will you die? You will die the same way in which you live. If you don't live by faith now, it probably will be that you will not die by faith either. Don't think that death will change your circumstances. You will do what you have learned to do. You will resort to your reflexes. If you have trained only natural reflexes, that is all you will have in the hour of your departure. But if you have trained the spiritual man, then it will be the spiritual reflexes you will rely upon as you trust in God. If you will live by faith, you will die by faith. So the writer of Hebrews reminds his people be faithful even to death by living by faith. When the hour of death comes, you will be able to face it. You know it is amazing as I look at your faces right now that most of you are young. We have a very young congregation. Perhaps you think I am speaking to the older brothers and sisters. No, I am speaking to us all. Death can come to one of these children before night falls. It can come to your house, and it can come for you. So I ask you this question, how will you die? I pray it will be the same way you lived, by faith in Jesus Christ. But if you have no faith in Christ, don't look for it when you die. "Now is the acceptable time, today is the day of salvation." Now is the moment to reach out for Christ and live by Christ that you might die by Him. Amen.