

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 37      January 26, 2020   Isaac, Jacob & Joseph  
Hebrews 11:20-22

## Introduction

## Teaching Notes

“What makes the dying faith of these three men so significant, is that, like Abraham, they died without seeing the fulfillment of God’s promises. They passed them on to their children by faith. They had received the promises by faith and had passed them on by faith. In His covenant with Abraham, God had promised three things – possession of the land of Canaan, the creation of a great nation of his descendants, and the blessing of the world through these descendants. But Abraham never saw any of these things come to pass. He died in faith, saying, “Isaac, you will see the beginning of these promises.” But Isaac also died in faith, saying the same thing to Jacob; and so Jacob also to Joseph. Hebrews 11:13 applies to all four 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.” Yet they were so confident in God’s Word that they passed on the promises to their children. They believed what they had never seen, and they passed on what they had never seen to their children. That is the assurance of faith. They had no inheritance to pass on but the promises of God, and these were considered a great treasure to bequeath their children. They had not seen the land possessed, the nation established, or the world blessed, but they saw the promises, and that was enough.”<sup>1</sup>

The author of Hebrews continues to follow a chronological format through Genesis as he lays out for us the examples of the Patriarchs, the ‘fathers’ of the faith in example after example of the things they did which serve to reveal the faith they all lived by. But, as it is easy to observe, the AH is very selective rather than comprehensive in each person’s life. In the case of Abel and Enoch, he is forced to be brief due to the paucity of facts in the OT text about these men, but in the case of Noah, Abraham and Sarah, he has to select what to comment on out of a lot of information supplied by the texts.

Here in vv. 20-22, he has interestingly chosen to reflect on only the ends of these people’s lives – Isaac, Jacob & Joseph – although, at least for Jacob and Joseph, there is a lot more that could have exhibited their faithfulness. They were Abraham’s son, grandson and great-grandson.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, Hebrews, Moody, 1983, p. 338

## Isaac

## v. 20

For Isaac, the child of promise, the heir, the long-awaited one by Abraham and Sarah, who would be the seed who would anchor the long journey through time to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, and both his son, Jacob, and grandson, Joseph, all the main, far-reaching promises of the Covenant were still future ( Note Gen. 15:13-21 ).

So, despite their weaknesses, ( and for Isaac and Jacob especially, there were many of those ), they all trusted God and responded in faith to His revealed promises. They may have had a much more rudimentary understanding of God's redemptive plans and promises of a massive progeny, a nation and the land promised to Abraham through him to them, than we have as believers 4,000 years later, but they were steadfast and put their trust ( of course, imperfectly ) in God.

So, we begin with Isaac in v. 20. In Genesis 26:3-5, we have God coming to Isaac to reaffirm His covenant with him. Just prior to this, the Bible records Abraham's death ( Gen. 25:19-34 ), and v. 11 tells us "*God blessed Isaac, his son.*" Then, Genesis 25:19-34 gives us a brief biography of Isaac's life, wife and sons, Jacob & Esau. The account listed in vv. 24-34 provides a brief introduction into what Genesis 27:1-46 will lay out in greater detail, which is a very important narrative in the storyline of the Bible.

It is this narrative, part of which is tightly related to Hebrews 11:20, which forms the facts that the AH turns to when he refers to Isaac's faith.

Isaac's life was apparently mostly uneventful, and is captured historically in Genesis 21 ( his birth ) to Genesis 35:28-29 ( his death and burial ). In fact, most of what Genesis records is about the passing on of his blessings to Jacob and Esau. It is interesting that Rebekah ( Isaac's wife ) is told in Genesis 25:23 that the younger son ( who turns out to be Jacob, by mere seconds – cf. vv. 24-26 ) would receive the blessing, contrary to the tradition which ceded the bulk of blessing to the firstborn, which in this case, was Esau. So this early in the lives of the twin boys, Rebekah knows that much of God's future plans. Probably, as one result of that, Rebekah favoured Jacob, and ultimately helped him to deceive Isaac so he would get the birthright blessing. But Isaac favoured Esau, who was a man's man, a hunter & outdoorsman who regularly shared his tasty game with Isaac. There is a possibility, according to Gen. 26:34-35, that Rebekah was also getting back at Isaac for his marrying of 2 other wives.

Let's consider Genesis 27:1-46 and 25:29-34, 36. The blessing that Isaac bestows on Jacob, thinking he was Esau is found in 27:27-29. Both blessings, to Jacob and Esau, are based on Isaac's understanding of God's sovereign control and it is this faith of Isaac that is the key to the author of Hebrews' presenting this aspect of Isaac's life as representative of his whole life of faith.

Most of Isaac's life, as recorded for us in Genesis, seems to be based on events that had to do with his passing along of the blessings of God to his 2 sons, which is why Heb. 11:20 focusses on that – *“By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.”*

Certainly, one of the things that contributed to Isaac's hope and encouragement in the faith was God's repeated promise of the Abrahamic Covenant – as in Gen. 26:3-5. So, to the one who had been the original 'son of promise', Abraham's son, God promises the same thing He had promised to Abraham ( in Gen. 12:2; 13:14-17; 15:18-21 & 17:8 ). The promise again includes: (1) That God will be with him and bless him. ( v. 3a ); (2) To Isaac and his offspring, God would give all the lands ( v. 3 ); (3) God will establish the oath He swore to Abraham...IOW – it is not done now because Abraham is dead ( v. 3c ); (4) God will multiply Isaac's offspring and he repeats the land promise ( v. 4 ); and (5) God will ensure that in Isaac's offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed ( v. 4b ). Verse 5 starts with “Because” of Abraham's obedience to God's voice, the keeping of God's charge ( faithfulness ), and Abraham's keeping of God's commandments, statutes and laws. Although Abraham's faithfulness was not perfect, it was ( Gen. 15:6 ) *“counted to him as righteousness”*, so God is not saying that Abraham somehow earned God's esteem and blessing as a direct result of his own deeds which were often flawed.

It is interesting that on the very heels of this Covenant confirmation ( 26:6-11 ), Isaac commits the same sin and mistrust of God that Abraham had in Egypt regarding Pharaoh and Sarah. Isaac's sinful misstep is with the Philistine king, Abimelech. Then, at the end of chapter 26, somewhat reminiscent of Abraham's tryst with Hagar, at 40 years old ( cf. 25:19-21 ), Isaac married additional wives - Judith the Hittite and Basemath, also a Hittite. Note how the chapter ends, *“and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah.”* We next go to chapter 27, to Isaac in his old age, and the story of Rebekah and Jacob's deception to get Esau's birthright ( 25:23 ), which is followed by the passage that Hebrews 11 recounts. Are you sensing an underlying theme yet? Faithful people often do dumb, faithless things, yet God still calls them faithful!

## Jacob

## v. 21; Genesis 49; 47:31; 48:8-20

The first thing we need to clear up is the word 'staff' here in v. 21. According to John MacArthur's ESV Study Bible, it should read, *“head of his staff”* because according to Genesis 47:31, what Hebrews is quoting is translated *“leaned upon his bed”*. The 2 words in Hebrew have exactly the same consonants. OT Hebrew manuscripts, between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, took the word as 'bed'. The LXX ( Septuagint ), in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC, rendered it 'staff'. *“staff”* seems more likely, although both could be factual.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence ( Gen. 48:2 ) that this event took place in Jacob's bed-chamber, but the AH follows the LXX reading, which probably makes more sense, that Jacob, although in his bed-chamber, was up, leaning on his staff for support as he blessed his sons.

<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur ESV Study Bible, Crossway, 2010, comment on Hebrews 11:21, p. 1868

This seeming discrepancy, although I point it out for your edification, is not really significant for the main point of what the author is conveying to the reader. Jacob was on his death bed and yet he worshipped in either case, leaning on the head of his bed or over the top of his staff. Importantly, for us, is that, at life's end, though his life was often characterized by deceptive, even sinful actions, he acknowledged his trust in God who had blessed his life abundantly, and would continue to bless him in death. Just as God had promised the Abrahamic Covenant's blessings to Isaac his father, God also promised the same to Jacob – cf. Gen. 18:13-15; 35:9-15.

The main underlying theme of Genesis 49, which is the point of the Hebrews reference to Jacob's faith, is the blessing bestowed on his children, and note 49:28 – *“All these are the twelve tribes of Israel”*, which tends to accentuate for us why these blessings are not only important, but prophetic. For example, the blessing bestowed on Judah ( vv. 8-12 ) is a prophecy of the Messiah, who descends from Judah, and the reference to *“scepter”* and *“ruler's staff”* in v.10 point to the anticipated kingship of the Messiah.

Verse 10 here is particularly critical. Although the ESV does not use the name *“Shiloh”*, the KJV and NKJV do. The NKJV reads like this;

*“The scepter shall not depart from Judah,  
Nor a lawgiver from between his feet,  
Until Shiloh comes;  
And to Him shall be the obedience of the people.”*

*“Shiloh”* means “to whom it belongs”, so it is a reference to the one to whom this kingship really belongs, the rightful King. At this point, of course, the nation Israel, still in seed form in Gen. 49, has no king, and will not have one until I Samuel 10. The rightful King, this Shiloh – “the One to whom the Kingship rightfully belongs - is the Lord Jesus Christ, *“the Lion of the tribe of Judah”* ( Rev. 5:5 ).<sup>3</sup>

There is an interesting connection if we go to Ezekiel 21:18-27 – and especially note vv. 25-27. Ezekiel, using some of the same wording as Jacob in Genesis 49, announces God's judgment on the house of Judah for her transgressions – see v. 26. God would remove the turban ( Lit. *diadem or crown* ) i.e., end Judah's rule or kingship via a Babylonian victory over Judah. Verse 27 then talks about what God would do with that kingship / kingdom – “A ruin, a ruin, a ruin I will make it. This also shall not be, until he comes, the one to whom judgment belongs [ Shiloh ], and I will give it to him.”

Michael Barret clarifies this,

*“The Babylonian judgment removed Israel's king and the throne was vacant until Christ came, the rightful King who will reign forever.”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Michael PV Barrett, *Beginning at Moses*, Ambassador-Emerald INTL, 1999, p. 193

<sup>4</sup> IBID, p. 193

So what is in sight here in Gen. 49:10 is the Abrahamic Covenant, “the seed” of Gal. 3:16, and the Davidic Covenant, the One who would tie it all together, Christ, to rule all the nations under Davidic rule.

Now, I think it was important to turn our focus on this first, but the AH focuses on Gen. 48:8-20. By his faith, God had shown Jacob what he states in vv. 19-20, which is why he had crossed his hands to give the right hand of blessing to Ephraim, the younger of Joseph’s two sons, rather than Manasseh, the elder son. Joseph had made his sons stand in a particular order, anticipating that Jacob’s right hand would automatically bless Manasseh, but then Jacob crossed his hands and blessed the wrong son in Joseph’s eyes. Joseph tries to correct Jacob – vv. 17-18 - ( who by this time in his life, has virtually no sight ), but Jacob explains he did this on purpose – vv. 19-20.

By singling out this passage from all that Genesis 47:29-50:1 contains, the AH is pointing out that it was by faith that Jacob did this the way he did, and then even defended his action to Joseph, so that Joseph would know it was purposeful, because it was of God.

## Joseph

## v. 22; Gen. 50:24,25

Joseph’s story in the Bible is lengthy – running from Genesis 37 to 50:26, closing out the book of Genesis and preparing us for the start of the book of Exodus, and he is also notably mentioned in Exodus 1:1-8, and that Exodus passage gives us a reason why God’s people, Israel, begin their captivity in Egypt. It is helpful to be aware that this event ( going into slavery ) was a divine prediction of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 15:13-14.

Most of us are probably fairly familiar with Joseph’s storyline in general. In short, however, here it is: He was Jacob’s favourite son, and this led to the jealousy of 10 of his 11 brothers, who were going to kill him, but Reuben suggested selling him to slavers instead ( his intent was to rescue Joseph, but that failed ). So Joseph went to Egypt as a slave and his multi-coloured coat was dipped in goat’s blood and sent home to Jacob so he’d believe Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. In Egypt, through a series of unlikely but God-controlled events, Joseph rose from slave to a prison cell to second in command of Egypt! Then, in a position to help his family in a time of severe famine, he did so, and the whole family, all of those who would make up the nation of Israel in time, came to Egypt to be spared from death by hunger. When Jacob died, the 10 brothers expected Joseph to avenge himself on them, but instead, he spoke the now famous words of Gen. 50:20. By this, Joseph expresses his total faith in God. But again, this is not the passage that the AH selects for Hebrews 11:22.

Instead, he selects Genesis 50:24-25 ( which is fulfilled in Ex. 13:19 ). This seems to be a rather obscure passage compared to the many things that could be said about Joseph’s life. But, this passage does ‘carry the mail’ for the AH’s purposes, surprisingly perhaps, due to other passages available to him.

Notice in Gen. 50:24-25 – God had made His covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – personally – but there is no textual reference to Joseph having personally received this promise. The only possible exception to what I have said here would be Gen. 48:15-16,19-20, where Jacob, as he was dying, promised this blessing – v. 16 & 19 – which is a referral or at least an allusion to the Abrahamic Covenant. It is also quite likely that Jacob had told Joseph and all his children of that Covenant.

So, Joseph, in Gen. 50:24-25, makes a definite, clear referral back to the Abrahamic Covenant, *“God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.”* It is on this basis that he adds what v. 25 records, *“God will surely visit you and you shall carry my bones up from here.”* This too is a clear indication that Joseph understood that God’s covenant promise did not include Egypt as part of the land blessing, and he fully expected that Israel ( his family ) would eventually leave Egypt and go to that promised land of Genesis 15:13-19. When they did, Joseph did not want his remains left behind in Egypt, in his case, likely as a mummified corpse in an Egyptian sarcophagus.

As the book of Exodus begins, on the heels of Joseph’s death ( Gen. 50:26 ), Israel is about to enter the prophesied era of their indentured servitude, and were about to be *“afflicted for 400 years”* – cf. Ex. 12:40 / Acts 7:2-18. Joseph appears, by his words, to know that they would not leave Egypt immediately upon his death, but after a lengthy sojourn in Egypt. They would come out in the future at the point where God’s plan had come to fruition. This was no idle request by Joseph – he wanted to be there when they left Egypt, rather than in an Egyptian grave, so Exodus 13:19 supplies us with the fulfillment of what Joseph asked them, many years later, at the Exodus. Notice even further into the OT – Joshua 24:32, where this event is mentioned again.

So, we have observed the way and reasons why the AH and the Holy Spirit have graciously directed our attention to these 3 heroes of faith, looking at the ends of their lives, as a sort of synecdoche<sup>5</sup> of their entire lives, to show the culmination of lives of true faith. They had faith that persevered and endured and was there at the end as at the beginning. These things are shared with us per Romans 15:4-6, which tells us that these things were written for our learning, and thus requires our application of these principles.

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<sup>5</sup> “Synecdoche” – definition: A figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice-versa ( e.g., “new faces at the meeting” )