



FAITH IN THE FACE OF DEATH

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- Hebrews 11:20-22

Faith in the Face of Death

In Hebrews 11:20-22 we're going to see what the Spirit of God will teach us here in this brief passage about the faith which defeats death.

In this 11th chapter, we've been talking quite a bit about the subject of faith. It's not really a subject that we can belabor, because it's one which the Spirit of God calls to our attention repeatedly in order that we might be reminded of it. We are to live by faith.

And we come tonight to verses 20, 21, and 22, which deal with faith in the face of death. Matthew Henry said, "Though the grace of faith is of universal use throughout [the Christian's life], yet it is especially so when we come to die. Faith has its great work to do at [the very] last, to help believers to finish well, to die to the Lord, so as to honour him, by patience, hope and joy—so as to leave a witness behind them of the truth of God's word and the excellency of his ways." End quote.

Certainly we would be reminded that God is greatly glorified when His people leave this world with their flag flying at full mast. If anybody should die triumphantly, it should be a believer. When the spirit triumphs over the flesh, when the world is consciously and gladly left behind for heaven, when there's anticipation in the soul and glory in the eye as we enter into the presence of the Lord, then we're dying as pleasing unto the Lord.

Now, here in this chapter on faith, the Holy Spirit presents to us three great examples of men who face death with full faith. They hadn't always lived their lives full of faith; they had been intermittently faithful men. And frequently, as we study their history in the book of Genesis, we will find them to be unfaithful. But at least when it was all said and done, and they were making their exit, they exhibited great faith.

And I really believe, people, that a God-given and a God-sustained faith is not only sufficient to enable even the feeblest saint to overcome the lust of the flesh, the attractions of the world, and the temptations of Satan, but it is also able to give him triumphant passage through death. And yet it's amazing to me how many believers who say they have faith find it very difficult to face the issue of dying.

Every Christian who has, in the main current of his life, walked with God in faith will find that the last hours of his life may be the sweetest hours of all. In Psalm 37, verse 37 say this, “Mark the perfect man and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace.”

So it was with these men. Their life was a little cloudy and a little dingy and a little dim from time to time, but at least they went out basking in the sunlight of true faith. Let’s look at these verses. Let me read them to you.

Verse 20, “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was 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.”

Now, as you read that passage, you begin immediately to think, “How in the world could you ever get anything out of that?” But there is so much material behind the scenes. The writer of Hebrews, of course, is writing to Jewish readers, and they fill in the history themselves. They understand all the backlog. All you’ve got to say is, “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come,” and they can stick the history in themselves. Unfortunately, we can’t do that. So, perhaps we need to spend a little bit more time entertaining what this is all about.

The point that the writer wants to get across is that all these men died never having seen the fulfillment of God’s promise. And so, they passed it on to their children by faith. You’ll remember that God had appeared to Abraham, and basically in the Abrahamic covenant promised three things. First, the possession of the land; God said, “I’m going to give you a land.” Secondly, He promised Abraham that He would raise up seed, and it would become a great nation. So, He promised him the land and a great nation. Thirdly, He said, “Through your seed the world will be blessed.” So, that was the third dimension.

Now, Abraham lived a full life and never saw any of those things come to pass. Not one of them. He died then in faith saying, “Isaac, you’re going to see the beginnings of these things.”

Isaac died in faith saying, “Jacob, you’re going to see the beginning of these things.”

Jacob died in faith saying, “Joseph, you’re going to see the beginning of these things.”

Joseph began to see those things, but really died in faith saying, “Ephraim and Manasseh, you’re going to see the beginning of these things.” And they did.

And we have seen the fulfillment of these things. And so, all of these men died never really seeing the fulfillment. It says in verse 13, if you back up—and it’s talking there about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, picking it up from verse 9—it says, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims in the earth.”

So confident were they that they passed on the promises to their children. And that’s exactly the point of their faith. In death they had seen nothing, and yet they believed God that their children would see the fulfillment—why?—because God always kept His word, and they believed it even though they never saw it.

Abraham didn’t see the fulfillment; he believed it would come. Isaac was still a nomad and a wanderer, but he believed it would come. Jacob was in exile in the land of Egypt, but he believed it would come. And Joseph had attained greatness, but his greatness was the greatness of a stranger in a foreign land, and yet they all by faith believed that God would fulfill the promise He made because they knew God was a covenant-keeping God. And so, they died in faith. Not one of them ever doubted that the promise would come true.

They didn’t die in the despair of unfulfilled dreams. They didn’t die saying, “Oh, it never came; it never came.” They died saying, “It will come,” because they believed God. They died, then, defeating death, knowing that they would die, but the promise of God could never die.

Now, that’s a magnificent kind of faith. If we could listen to their minds and hear their thoughts, perhaps we would hear something like this, “God’s promise of a people and this land is true, for God never breaks a promise. I may not live to see it, but it will come, and I am a link in the chain of fulfillment.” That’s what they felt.

So it is important, then, to establish these men as men of faith. In writing the book of Hebrews, He wants to tell these Jewish people—mainly Jewish Christians, but also Jews who had intellectually assented to the gospel but never really believed it fully—He wants them to know that this faith principle of the new covenant is nothing new. So He goes back all the way to beginning of history and shows how that every real man of God is a man of faith. See, the Jews had gotten into a works system. They believed they pleased God by their works.

And so, as they went back in the history that they had to face, it was revealed to them that always it had been faith and never works. You'll never earn your way to heaven; it can't be done.

I always think of the little song I knew when I was a kid, "You can't get to heaven in a putt-putt car, 'cause a putt-putt car won't putt that far." And I don't care what your putt-putt car is; you can't get to heaven any other way than by faith. You never heard that? Well, we ran in pretty risqué circles.

But anyway, you—no matter what commodities you put together to get to heaven, you can't get there. Not by the best possible works that you have to offer. You only get there by faith. And that's the promise of the new covenant, and that's what He's trying to get across to these Jewish readers in this little Jewish community: that the only way to please God is by faith, not works.

And so, He says, "Drop everything, just believe God. Everybody else always has." And, of course, they always felt that they were tied into the tradition of their fathers, and their fathers had all done it this way. And He takes the 11th chapter to prove that their fathers did it the right way: by faith.

He starts out with Abel. And in Abel we saw the life of faith. Then went to Enoch, the walk of faith. Then Noah, the work of faith, obedience. Then Abraham, the pattern of faith. And now we come to these three, and we see faith that conquers death, the victory of faith.

And these men were like sailors. You know? They were out on the sea in their ship, and they could see the shore afar off, and they could see it on the horizon, and they looked at it, and they never landed, but they saw it.

And so, they looked, and they saw God's promise, but they never were able to really touch the shore. And so, again, we enter on the lesson of faith. But let's face it, back in chapter 10, verse 38, He established the great principle: the just shall live by faith. That's it. And that, incidentally, is a quote from Habakkuk, and Old Testament prophet. So, nothing is new.

Then in the 6th verse of chapter 11 at the very end it's—at the very beginning, I mean, it says, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him. Faith is always and only the way a man apprehends God and salvation." Isn't it great? Isn't it great that you don't have to do some work? Think of the words of the apostle Paul, "We're saved by grace; that not of ourselves, not of works lest any man should"—what?—"boast."

We'd all be saying, "Well, I did this, and I did that," and God would not get the glory.

So, God just took it all apart, said, "There are no works involved; it's only a matter of believing." Faith alone, not with anything, but faith alone brings a man into a real saving relationship with a loving, living God.

Now, these three men faced death with true faith. And so, they are great illustrations. Let's look, first of all, at Isaac. And not really going to preach at you; we're just going to kind of wander through Genesis in a minute and see what comes to light in the various verses.

But anyway, Isaac is in verse 20, "By faith Isaac"—again, "by faith" is the commodity that's being sold in every one of these little vignettes through the 11th chapter—"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come." Now, he never saw the things to come. By faith he had the knowledge that they would come to pass. You see, he passed on the blessing to his children, knowing that God would bless though he never saw the blessing.

Abraham had been promised the land, the nation, and the blessing to the world. He never saw it. He died as a foreigner. The only thing that Abraham ever owned was a plot of ground for a grave. That's all. But Abraham didn't die in despair; he died in hope, and he passed on the

promise to his son Isaac. And he believed that Isaac would be the next step in the fulfillment of the promise.

Well, now Isaac does the very same thing. He knew the principle of chapter 10, verse 23, where it says, at the end of the verse, “For He is faithful that”—what?—“promised.” He believed it.

Now, the writer here in verse 20 says very, very little about Isaac, and the reason is because the readers would be so very familiar with him. Since we’re not Jewish scholars, we’ll look back a little bit at him. It’s interesting, however, that Isaac lived longer than any of the four patriarchs, and yet though he lived the longest life, the very last is written about him.

Of the other patriarchs, there is about 12 chapters apiece, and of this man, there’s a condensed story in just 2 chapters: Genesis 26 and 27, with a few other references in other chapters. And I guess the reason is that Isaac was perhaps the least spectacular of any of them. He is very ordinary. He is rather passive, kind of willy-nilly mousey. Just kind of a - what you might say, the unspectacular son of a spectacular father, and the unspectacular father of a spectacular son. He was sandwiched between the spectacular; he himself being very ordinary.

He lived a relatively quiet life. He was weak spiritually, and there really wasn’t too much to say. But let’s look at it, because I think there’s some interesting lessons, and I’m going to just go through the text and let the Holy Spirit do the teaching and application, which He can do much better than I, obviously.

Genesis 26. And you might want to turn there, because we’re going to stick around there in that for a little while. Keep your finger in Hebrews 11; we’ll jump back and forth.

Now, in chapter 26, we have a list of all of Isaac’s faux pas, all of his failures, and there were many, and perhaps more than even this list. But his life was filled with so many failures, so many places where he just didn’t really take God at His word and obey.

First of all, just picking it up in verse 3 of chapter 26, because we don’t have time to go into every detail, God had given specific instruction that they were not to go down into Egypt in

verse 2, but to “dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of.” Now, they were not to go to Egypt as had been done in the past. And He says in verse 3, by Abraham, “Sojourn in this land”—now that means just be a stranger there. Just kind of float loose in this land—“and I will be with thee and bless thee; for unto thee and to thy seed, I’ll give all these countries, and I’ll perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father.”

Now, he wanted to sojourn in a land known as Gerar. Gerar was one of the areas occupied by the Canaanites, a pagan people. He was only to sojourn, which means he was only to be a stranger there. Then you come over to verse 6, and what do you see? “And Isaac”—what?—“dwelt there.” Instead of being a sojourner there, he landed there and put his roots down. That was the first big mistake he made. And so, consequently, he really extricated himself from the Promised Land for the period of time which he dwelt in Gerar.

Then, of course, he lied. In verse 7 we find this little incident, “And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, “She is my sister,” for he feared to say, “She is my wife,” lest, said he, the men of the place should me for Rebekah; because she was fair to look upon.

Now, he had a—he had a real beautiful wife: Rebekah. Beautiful on the outside. As we shall see in a little while, she wasn’t so beautiful on the inside. But she was beautiful on the outside, and he thought, “Boy, I don’t want to say this is my wife; they’ll kill me and get her.”

Now, he didn’t care about whether they got her or not; he just cared about staying alive. Because when he told them she was his sister, for sure they’d try to get her, because that was somewhat inconsequential. So, he was selfish.

But it’s interesting, “And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech, king of Philistines, looked out through a window and saw, and behold”—and in the Old English says—“Isaac was sporting with Rebekah” “his wife.” And there are all kinds of ways to translate that; I’ll leave that up to you. Some of the versions say “caressing” and so forth.

But anyway, the king looked through the window, and he said, “Aha, you don’t sport with your sister.”

“And Abimelech called Isaac and said”—verse 9—“Behold, of a surety she is thy wife; and how saidst thou, ‘She is my sister?’”

“And Isaac said unto him, ‘Because I said, ‘Lest I die for her.’”

“And Abimelech said, ‘What is this thou hast done unto us? One of the people might lightly have lain with thy wife, and thou shouldest have brought guiltiness upon us.’ And Abimelech charged all his people saying, ‘He that toucheth this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.’”

In spite of his lie, God was gracious and protected him. So, he not only stayed in the wrong land, but he lied. And he was really kind of messed up. And God all the time is trying to get him to get out of there, but he kept his roots down. So, finally, God went through a long process to get him out.

Verse 12, “Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold, and the Lord blessed him.”

You say, “Does the Lord bless people like that?”

Yeah, well, you see, the Abrahamic covenant was—mark it—unconditional. And the blessing came to him because he was the next one in the line of the Abrahamic covenant, even though he was kind of a crummy character from time to time, God still kept His promise. This proves the unconditional character of the Abrahamic covenant.

“And the man became great, and went forward”—and that’s exactly what the promise involved—“and grew until he became very great”—he went from great to very great—for he had possessions of flocks, possessions of herds, and great store of servants, and the Philistines”—what?—“envied him.” Great people aren’t always popular.

“For all the wells which his father’s servants had digged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth. And Abimelech said unto Isaac, ‘Go from us; for thou art much mightier than we.’” You know how they wanted to get rid of

him? They filled up all his wells with dirt. Now, that's a lot of work to dig a well. If you got all those flocks, you got to have water. And the Philistines ran around, they figured the best way to get rid of this guy is cut off the water supply. So, they filled up all his wells with dirt. So, Isaac became Isaac the well digger.

Verse 17. He still wouldn't leave. He didn't get the message yet. "And Isaac departed from there"—oh, you say, "Praise the Lord"—"and he pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar"—he didn't go very far at all, went over the hill. And he sojourned there? No, what did he do? He "dwelt there" again.

"And Isaac digged again the wells of water"—he's a persistent fellow, kind of mousey. He didn't really do anything against the Philistines; he just went somewhere else and started digging more wells. And this is interesting, "Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father, for the Philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham. And he called their names after the names by which his father had called them.

"And Isaac's servants digged in the valley and found there a well of springing water. And the herdsmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, 'The water is ours.' And he called the name of the well Esek because they strove with him."

So, the herdsmen drove them out. So, passively Isaac goes, verse, "And they digged another well, and strove for that also, and he called the name of it Sitnah. And he removed from there and digged another well"—and he just keeps going because everybody takes over his wells. You see?

"And he moved from there and digged another well; for that they strove not. And he called the name of it Rehoboth. And he said, 'For now the Lord hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land. And he went up from there to Beersheba.'" Hallelujah, because then he finally snuck in the backdoor of the Promised Land. The only way God could get him there was to have the Philistines keep filling up his wells. At last he was home.

And then in verse 24, "And the Lord appeared unto him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham thy father. Fear not, for I am with thee, will bless thee, multiply thy seed for

My servant Abraham's sake. And he builded an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there, and there Isaac's servants digged a well."

Finally got into the Promised Land and dug a well. But it took a lot to get him home. And so, he was kind of like a prodigal son; when he finally got there, God was faithful and took him, threw His arms around him and blessed him. But that's how grace operates.

So, Isaac's life was kind of weakly and sickly and sinful. Yet even through it all, he believed God. And he finally established himself in the scroll of faith because of one great act that kind of wrapped up his life, and he kind of backed in the backdoor on that one, too. He finally wound up doing the right thing only because everybody set it up so he couldn't help but do the right thing, even though he thought he was doing something else. An amazing character.

Now, let's see what this thing was that he did. Back up to chapter 25, verse 21. "And Isaac entreated the Lord for his wife because she was barren." And this is an interesting thing, because here's the same problem that Abraham faced, and all these promises of the seed that's going to be so great like the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven, et cetera, et cetera, all these promises. And it's apparent that it had to be a miracle of God because both of these women were barren—both Sarah and Rebekah.

So, Isaac prayed because his wife was barren—"And the Lord was entreated by him, and Rebekah his wife conceived. And the children"—she had twins within her—"struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it be so, why am I thus?'" That's a very obscure phrase in the Hebrew, very difficult to translate. I would prefer the translation, "Why do I yet live? Why am I yet?" In other words, "This is such a violent struggle, how am I even living." "And she went to inquire of the Lord."

"And the Lord said unto her" in verse 23, "'Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be born of thee; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people'—now here comes the key—"and the elder shall serve the younger."

Now, it was the law of primogeniture that the oldest son was the leader of the family, and that the second son in line served the first son. But here the promise is it's going to be reversed: the elder will serve the younger.

“And when her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red all over like an hairy garment”—that’s what it says—“and they called his name Esau. And after that came his brother out, and his hand took hold of Esau’s heel; and his name was called Jacob. And Isaac was threescore years old when she bore them. And the boys grew. And Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.”

Now, here we have these two that are born. And it is by the design of God sovereignly that Jacob would rule over Esau. Even though Esau had the right of first born, the primogeniture, God designed that Jacob should be the line of Messiah.

Now you say, “Isn’t that rather arbitrary on God’s part?”

“Arbitrary” isn’t the right word; let’s say it’s absolutely sovereign. Now, if you read Romans chapter 9, and you look at verse 11, you find just exactly that very statement that God chose these children on the basis of His own free sovereignty. Listen to what it says, “And not only this, but when Rebekah also had conceived by one, even by our father Isaac (for the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth) it was said unto her, ‘The elder shall serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.’”

God says, “I have the right to choose whomever I will; I choose Jacob.” Before they were ever born or ever did good or wrong.

You say, “Oh, that’s not fair.”

That’s exactly what Paul thought you’d say, so in verse 14 he says, “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For He saith to Moses, ‘I’ll have mercy on whom I’ll have mercy; I’ll have compassion on whom I will have compassion.’” God does what He wants.

You say, “Well, He can’t do that; it’s not right.”

He says in verse 19, “Are you saying that God is at fault?” And you know what the answer is? “Nay, but, O man, who are thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, ‘Why hast thou made me thus?’”

The potter has the right to make any kind of vessel he wants. Don’t ever question the sovereignty of God. When the world was in chaos, no man had a right to tell God to create it or not create it anew. No man existed. God did what He wanted. That which was left inert in creation had no reason to complain that it wasn’t given vegetative power. Nor do vegetables have any reason to complain that they aren’t animals. Nor do animals have any reason to complain that they aren’t men. Nor do our first parents complain that they were created inferior to angels. Nothing—watch it—nothing has any claims to make on its maker. Nothing.

Paul said He had the same right over all as the potter has over the clay to make one vessel to honor and to allow another vessel to be unto dishonor. If a man—listen—if a man had no claim on God when he was innocent, did he gain some claim after the fall? Not at all.

It’s interesting, too, from a human realm that I reserve the right to bestow favor upon whomever I want. Am I going to claim something for myself that God doesn’t have? And so, as we have been the objects of God’s grace, we have nobody to thank but God. And everything is done, according to Ephesians 1, as to the praise of—what?—His glory. So, God is God, and God does what His sovereignty designs to do.

And so, the children were born, and when they came out, verse 26 says the little baby—interesting thought—Jacob had a hold of Esau’s heel, which was symbolic of the fact that he would be grasping Esau’s birthright later on.

Now, “The boys grew up, and Esau was a hunter”—27—“a man of the field; and Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents.” He was the homebody. “And Isaac loved Esau.”

You say, “Why did he did he love Esau? Is Esau a nicer guy?”

No, “Because he did eat of his venison.” You know that old Isaac was a materialistic, fleshly, lustful old bird that just wanted good meat. And that’s why he attached himself to Esau. We

think of these patriarchs so often as some kind of ethereal, supernatural, holy people. This guy just like meat, and Esau provided it.

“But Rebekah loved Jacob.” Why? He scouted around the house and did little diddly things. See? And you see the difference, you know, Jacob boiled pottage. Jacob was a cook in his mother’s kitchen. Anyway, enough of that.

“Esau came from the field”—you see, here’s robust, rough Esau—“and he was faint.” Too much hunting, and he kind of—a little bit tired. “Esau said to Jacob, ‘Feed me, I pray thee, with that same red’”—that’s really all it says there. Whatever was in there, he didn’t even know; “Whatever that red stuff is, I want it”—see? Doesn’t even identify it. Pottage, whatever that is, is just put in there in italics.

“He said, ‘Feed me with some of that red’”—he didn’t care what it was—“‘for I faint’ and therefore was his name called Red.” Edom means red.

Now, Jacob is a pretty smart guy, pretty shrewd. Esau and his father were a lot alike; they wanted something to eat, and if they could get something in their stomachs, they were pretty happy. Jacob was a lot more careful than that. He saw something possible here, “And Jacob said, ‘Sell me this day thy birthright.’”

Now, this guy must have really been hungry in the first place. In the second place, he must have thought very little of the birthright. Right? Very little. And it’s true; all he wanted was something in his stomach. And he didn’t care about the future. He was a man; he was a pragmatist for the moment.

“And Esau said, ‘Behold, I am at the point to die, and what profit shall this birthright do to me?’

“And Jacob said, ‘Swear to me this day,’ and he swore unto him, and he sold his birthright unto Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils”—that’s kind of like a bean—“and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and when his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.”

The character you see of Esau is clearly indicated there. In Hebrews 12:16 it says he's a profane man. And the word "profane" literally means he is outside on the threshold, which means he's the guy that you sort of wipe your feet off. It's okay to walk on him; he's common stuff. That's literally the root of it. He's just common; he had no real great aspirations or great longings. He wasn't the beautiful drapes hanging inside; he wasn't some lovely picture. He was just, you know, the porch that everybody walked on. Everything was very mundane for him; the lowest level of apprehension satisfied him.

It's interesting, too, I think, to note that Jacob didn't really, although he thought he was getting the birthright, he didn't really get it by this little bargain. In fact, as it turned out, he had to run from Esau, and he spent years hiding from Esau. And finally, he only obtained the birthright when Esau came back and left it there. And so, it really didn't pay off. Esau abandoned it in—I think it's Genesis 36, and then Jacob entered into the inheritance.

If you want a great characterization of Esau, look at verse 33 and 34. And you come down, "Jacob said, 'Swear to me this day,' and he swore unto him. And he sold his birthright unto Jacob." And here's a great characterization of Esau, "He did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way." No thought for God. Passionate, impulsive, incapable of estimating the true value of anything that doesn't immediately appeal to the senses, preferring the animal to the spiritual. He was indeed profane, common.

And so, there were two things, then, that indicated that Jacob was to be the—the heir: the prophesy before birth, and the selling of the birthright which proved that Esau didn't want it anyway.

Now, with that as a background, let's go to chapter 27 and see how it all comes out at the end. Verse 1, "And it came to pass that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim so that he couldn't see, he called Esau, his eldest son, and said unto him, 'My son.'

"And he said unto him, 'Behold, here am I.'

"And he said, 'Behold now, I am old; I know not the day of my death'"—oh, he's sneaky—"now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field and take me some venison and make me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me

that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die.” That’s all he cared about. Talk about crass. If this guy had a full belly, he was happy. “I’m about to die; I want something to eat.” That’s all you got on your mind you’re about to die? He was really crass.

You want to hear something sneaky? He lived 40 more years. And you know something? He knew he wasn’t dying. He wanted to sneak in the blessing on Esau. The hurry and the secrecy, you know, which characterized this action are also suspicious. And in addition, his self-desire for personal gratification and feasting is indicative of the fact that he wanted Esau to get the birthright. He knew the purpose of God. Surely Rebekah had communicated to him in these years of marriage. Surely she had told him what God originally said. And surely Jacob had reminded him that Esau sold him the birthright. Certainly he knew that. And listen, incidentally, Jacob is not given the approval of God for the trickery he pulled on Esau or for not helping him with the food apart from selling his birthright. That isn’t a right thing to do. Jacob had a good thought; he wanted something that was very good, but he wanted it in a wrong way, and he went about it in a wrong way.

But nevertheless, Esau was not to receive the birthright. And I’m sure, as best we can tell, Isaac must have known this. And so, he wanted to circumvent and get Esau the blessing. And when he did this, he began to set up a chain reaction of evil things that were really the devil’s effort to thwart God’s plan, but God just twisted them around and brought His plan to pass in spite of them.

Verse 5, “And Rebekah”—he was going to have Isaac come back with the meat—or Esau come back with the meat and then just bless him; that’s what he says very clearly at the end of verse 4, “My soul may bless thee before I die.” And he’s not even going to die.

“And Rebekah heard when Isaac spoke to Esau his son.” She was sneaking around, you know, the old ear to the door, and she heard this. “And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison and bring it.” She was a deceitful woman. She was a proud woman. She was a selfish woman. She wanted her own way, not the Lord’s. She really showed a lack of total faith in God because God could have brought about what was right in His own way. But she was going to help God, just like Sarah hiring Hagar to come in there and give Abraham a child - everybody wants to help God - and just created havoc.

“And Rebekah”—let’s go through the plot—“Rebekah spoke unto Jacob her son saying, ‘Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying, ‘Bring me venison and make me savory food that I may eat and bless thee before the Lord before my death. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command thee.’” Now she’s going to plot with Jacob as to how to beat Esau out of the blessing. “Go to the flock and fetch me from there two good kids of the goats; and I’ll make them savory food for thy father, such as he loveth.” You know, how would you like to have the record of your testimony in a whole chapter nothing but the fact that you like to eat?

Verse 10—just ridiculous—verse 10, “And thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat and that he may bless thee before his death.’

“And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, ‘Behold, Esau my brother is an hairy man, and I am a smooth man.’” Now, old Isaac is blind, and he’s just going to say, “You’re not Esau.” See? “There’s no hair on your arms.”

“My father, perhaps, will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me and not a blessing.’

“And his mother said unto him, ‘Upon me be thy curse, my son’”—she wants to accept the blame; now watch—“only obey my voice and go fetch me them.” “Go get those two goats.”

“And he went and fetched”—this would have been his chance to be a man—“and brought them to his mother. And his mother made savory food, such as his father loved. And Rebekah took the choicest raiment of her eldest son Esau”—ah, she goes and gets Esau’s best clothes, get that scent of Esau, you know?—“and put them”—that was before Ban; so, you know that clothes, you know, had things like—so, “put them upon Jacob her younger son. And she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands”—can’t you imagine that little operation, getting hairy skin off a goat attached to his hands?—“and upon the smooth of his neck.” Goat hair all over him. And Esau’s cloak. Looked like he was going to a Halloween party.

“And she gave the savory food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.” Here’s Jacob all dressed up in this ridiculous regalia, with a handful of meat for Isaac. You know, she operated on the principle that the Lord helps them who help

themselves. You know what? The Lord helps them who are at the end of themselves. And Jacob joined in.

Here comes the chain of lies, verse 18, “He came unto his father and said, ‘My father.’”

“And he said, “‘Here am I’”—I don’t know why they went through all that all the time, but anyway—“‘Here am I’”—these twins apparently sounded alike, even though they were perhaps not identical but fraternal, although that would be an unusual situation, but apparently they were because of the difference in the hair.

“‘Here am I; who art thou, my son?’” So, there was enough similarity that it was a little hard to tell them apart.

“And Jacob said unto his father, ‘I am Esau thy firstborn’”—that’s the first lie—“‘I have done according as thou badest me. Arise, I pray thee. Sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me.’

“And Isaac said unto his son, ‘How is it that thou has found it so quickly, my son?’”

And then another lie, and here he drags God in—shameless, “‘Because the Lord thy God brought it to me.’” Oh.

“And Isaac said unto Jacob, ‘Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not.’

“And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father. And he felt him and said, ‘The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.’ And he recognized him not because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau’s hands. So he”—what?—“blessed him. And he said, ‘Art thou my very son Esau?’

“And he said, ‘I am.’

“And he said, ‘Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son’s venison, that my soul may bless thee.’ And he brought it near to him, and he did eat; and he brought him wine, and he

drank. “And his father Isaac said unto him, ‘Come near now, and kiss me, my son.’ And he came near and kissed him. And he smelled”—I told you—“the smell of his raiment”—and he said, “That’s Esau”—“blessed him and said, ‘See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed.’” The thing came off.

“Therefore, God give thee of the dew of heaven, the fatness of the earth, plenty of grain and wine. Let people serve thee and nations bow down to thee. Be Lord over thy brethren”—that’s what he wanted to hear—“let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee. Cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.” And he got the blessing.

Then Esau showed up, verse 30, “And it came to pass, as soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, and Jacob was yet scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting.” Here comes Esau.

“And he also had made savory food and brought it unto his father and said unto his father, ‘Let my father arise and eat of his son’s venison, that thy soul may bless me.’

“And Isaac his father said unto him, ‘Who are thou?’” “Haven’t I been through this once before?”

“And he said, ‘I am thy son, thy firstborn Esau.’

“And Isaac trembled very exceedingly and said, ‘Who? Where is he that hath taken venison and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before you camest and have blessed him? Yea, and he shall be blessed.’” And I believe there’s a great pause before that last sentence. And that last statement of verse 33 is the one great faithful act in the life of Isaac.

You say, “What does it mean?”

It means that Isaac had blessed Jacob. “And he”—Esau coming back—“said, ‘Who? Where is he that hath taken venison and brought it to me, and I have eaten of all before thou camest and have blessed him?’” Then he stopped, realizing that against his own will, against his own plot, against his own fleshly design for Esau, God had granted the blessing to Jacob. You see? And so he says, “All right, God.”—“Yes, and he shall remain blessed.”

And so, finally, the thing climaxes out with faith. “God, if that’s what you insist upon, I buy it.” Now, keep in mind this also, that whether he blessed Jacob or Esau, he did believe in the Abrahamic promise being passed to one of those two sons. So, his faith was legitimate. It finally became obedient even though against his own will. Doesn’t that show you when God wants to work His purposes, He’ll work them? That doesn’t make what Jacob and his mother did right. They wanted a good thing; they got it in a bad, bad way.

And then immediately after that, from verse 34 through verse 40, he gives a lesser blessing to Esau. And he said to Esau, essentially, that he was going to be blessed. He gives him almost the same words, but he blesses him with a wonderful blessing. And he says in verse 39, “Thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, the dew of heaven from above. And by thy sword shalt thou live and shalt serve thy brother”—that was the only difference; that he would serve Jacob. And so, they were both blessed. And yet, isn’t it interesting that his faith is real because he is blessing them in the fulfillment of a promise that he can never see fulfilled? So, even in the midst of death, he is aware that God will fulfill the promise.

Incidentally, Esau joined Ishmael as a father of Arab people. And again, problems for the Jew. And so, though Isaac’s life was kind of a blot on the Old Testament, yet in the climax, he finally succumbed in submission to God and said in verse 33, “Yea, and he shall be blessed.”—“Let it be. God has forced the issue; I’m content with God’s word.” And he passed the blessing to Jacob, a lesser blessing to Esau. Here was a man who faced death with the absolute confidence that God would carry on, after he was gone, and fulfill His promise in his children.

All right, secondly—and just briefly; we’re not going to spend nearly as much time—we see Jacob, Hebrews 11:21, “By faith Jacob”—now he, of course, the one son who was blessed with the right to be the line of Messiah—“By faith Jacob, when he was dying”—now it’s his turn to die, and he’s not seeing the fulfillment—“blessed both the sons of Joseph and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.”

Now, the life of faith for Jacob was like his father Isaac; it was up and down. It wasn’t the shining sun on a clear day; it was the sun trying to break through the fog and the denseness of sin even in the life of Jacob. He was an up and down individual. He walked by faith

sometimes; he walked by sight other times. He was holy sometimes; he was sinful sometimes. He was anxious for the Lord to be his God in Genesis 28:21. He glorified God in the tribute he paid to Laban in chapter 31. And though he was afraid of Esau, he yet sought the Lord in chapter 32.

So, he was a man of faith even though his faith really didn't really maintain itself through his whole life. But during the closing time of his life, he believed the promise of God enough to pass it on to Joseph's two sons. You remember their names? Ephraim and Manasseh. And so, he passed the blessing on to them. Of all of Jacob's sons, God had chosen—and you remember how many sons he had? Twelve sons. God had chosen the birthright to go to Joseph. And that's an interesting thing because Joseph was not the firstborn son of Jacob.

Deuteronomy 21:17—just a couple of notes and we'll hurry by—says this, “But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he hath, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.”

You remember that Jacob went to find a wife. Found a beautiful girl. Remember her name? Rachel. And he worked to get Rachel. And he got Leah. And Leah was a loser. Right? Seven years and he got Leah. The devil was trying to thwart God's plan. Well, I should say—yeah, seven years more and he finally got Rachel. And it was the firstborn of Rachel that God gave the right of firstborn. And that firstborn of Rachel was Joseph. And so, it was the son of the hated—the firstborn of the hated, the one rejected, who finally got the right of primogeniture or the right of the firstborn.

In Genesis 48, we find the blessing that Jacob gives to Ephraim and Manasseh, and we'll look at this. It's an interesting footnote for you. Some people think that there were only 12 tribes in Israel. There actually were 13. Joseph was divided up into two tribes: Ephraim and Manasseh. There were only 12 tribes that had land. Which tribe had no land? Levi. Levi was the possession of the Lord. So, there were 12 landed tribes. In addition, the 13th tribe was Levi, the priestly tribe.

All right, coming to Genesis 48, verse 1, “It came to pass after these things that one told Joseph, ‘Behold, thy father is sick.’ And he took with him two sons—his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.” Jacob's getting ready to die.

“And one told Jacob and said, ‘Behold, thy son Joseph cometh unto thee,’ and Israel strengthened himself and sat upon his bed.” Sat upon his bed. Hebrews said he leaned on his staff. You put the two together, he got up and sat on the edge of the bed and leaned on his staff. That’s what it’s saying. He was infirm at that point, but he resurrected himself out of that bed and got something to support himself in order that he might bless those two with the promise of God.

Verse 3, “And Jacob said unto Joseph, ‘God Almighty appeared unto me at Luz’”—or Bethel, maybe you’re more familiar with that name—“in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, and said unto me, ‘Behold, I will make thee fruitful, multiply thee. I’ll make of thee a multitude of people and give this land to thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession.’”“ Isn’t that wonderful that God told him that? You know something? He never got any of that. God said, “I’ll bless thee; I’ll multiply thee; I’ll make a great nation; I’ll give you the land,” and he got none of it. But you know something? He believed God. He believed that God would do it; only God didn’t do it to him, so he knew God would do it down the line.

So, he called in those two boys and said, “I’m going to pass it on to you.” And the writer of the Hebrews simply says it that way, “By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph, while he was worshipping, leaning on his staff.”

Verse 5, ““And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were born unto thee in the land of Egypt, before I came unto thee into Egypt, are mine. As Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine.”” In other words, “Just as if they were firstborn, they shall be mine.”

You say, “Well, how did Jacob know to bless these two?”

It’s obvious; God revealed it to him, and he obeyed. Here’s his act of faith. He really believed that God’s promise would be fulfilled in these next two young men.

Verse 8, “And Israel”—another name for Jacob; God gave him the name Israel; for the first time we see that name coming into the Bible in connection with Jacob—“And Israel beheld Joseph’s sons, and said, ‘Who are these?’

“And Joseph said unto his father, ‘They are my sons, whom God hath given me in this place.’” You see, God had to tell him this; he didn’t even know these boys.

“And he said, ‘Bring them, I pray thee, unto me, and I’ll bless them.’ Now, the eyes of Israel”—or Jacob—“were dim for age so that he couldn’t see. And he brought them near unto him; and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said unto Joseph, ‘I had not thought to see thy face, and, lo, God hath shown me also they seed.’”—“I didn’t even know if I’d live to see you born, and now look; I see your children.”

“And Joseph brought them out from between his knees.” And, of course, he didn’t even know if he’d live to see him ever come back from Egypt either, but now he was seeing his children. “Joseph brought them out from between his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. Joseph took them both”—watch this one—“Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel’s left hand”—now watch this, the blessing was the right hand. So, Jacob brings his two—Joseph brings his two boys, Ephraim and Manasseh. He makes sure Ephraim gets on the right hand, and he makes sure Manasseh gets on the left. Now, let me make sure I get this right; verse 13 is a little bit tangled at this point, watch it carefully—“He had Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel’s left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel’s right hand”—he wanted Manasseh to get the blessing.

“And Israel stretched out his right hand, laid it upon Ephraim’s head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh’s head, guiding his hands knowingly”—isn’t that good? He had them all set, and here’s what Jacob did just like that—“because Manasseh was the firstborn. And he blessed Joseph and said, ‘God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God who fed me all my life long unto this day’”—see, he’s a believing man—“an Angel who redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads, and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.’

“And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him. And he held up his father’s hand to remove it from Ephraim’s head unto Manasseh’s head”—even though Manasseh was the firstborn. Here again, there was a crossing away from the firstborn as God was working His plan. And he tried to move his

hand—“And Joseph said unto his father, ‘Not so, my father, for this is the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head.’”

“And his father refused and said, ‘I know it, my son; I know it.’”

You say, “Well, if he knew it, why was he doing this?”

Because he was following the command of God. “‘He also shall become a people’”—sure, Manasseh will become a people—“he shall be great; but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he; his seed shall become a multitude of nations.’ And he blessed them that day, ‘In thee shall Israel bless, saying, “God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh,”’ and he set Ephraim before”—or above—“Manasseh.

“And Israel said unto Joseph, ‘Behold, I die, but God shall be with you and bring you again unto the land of your fathers.’” Now, you see, he had belief that God would fulfill His promise completely. That’s trust. So, Jacob died as a man of faith, just as his father Isaac had died.

Then we come lastly - and just briefly - and mention him, Joseph. Joseph died as a man of faith also, verse 22 of Hebrews 11. “By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel and gave commandment concerning his bones.” This is interesting. Joseph is dying here, and, of course, at this point he’s spent the great portion of his life in Egypt. And he’s dying, and he’s going to have to be buried there, but he says, “‘Now, I want to tell you people about the departing of the children of Israel’”—they’re going back to the Promised Land—“‘and I want to make sure you take my bones when you go.’” Now, that’s faith.

He was in Egypt. You know that it had been 200 years since the promise that God was going to do this? Two hundred years since the promise. The promise recorded in Genesis 15 of the possession of the land. Two hundred years, and they’d never been there yet. And he says, “‘You guys are going to be going back pretty soon. Will you pack up my bones and take them when you go?’” That’s faith. How did he know that? He knew it because he believed God’s promise. His faith was strong.

In chapter 50, verse 24, “Joseph said to his brethren, ‘I die, and God will surely visit you and bring you out of this land’”—isn’t that good? He believed God. God had said there as a land, and he never saw it, but he believed it would come. “‘God will bring you out of this land unto the land which he swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’ And Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bone from here. So, Joseph died, being 110 years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in’—where?—“in Egypt.” He died in faith.

You say, “Well, what ever happened? Did they ever get his bones over there?”

Sure they did. You know, that’s the end of Genesis and—bang—as you begin Exodus they move out. In chapter 13, I think it is, verse 19—yes, good, I hit one right today anyway—“And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him”—when Moses took off for the land—“for he had solemnly sworn the children of Israel saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones away from here.’” So, when they packed off in the Exodus, they packed up old Jacob—or old Joseph, what was left of him, and took him with them.

Now, here are people dying victoriously. Let me wrap it up by just a couple of thoughts. These are men who believe God in the face of death. They’re men who lived by faith in their lives, but the faith that they showed at their death was the consummate kind of faith. And really, let’s face it; the acid test of your faith is does it do you any good when you’re dying. Right? If your faith is no good then, it’s no good.

Now, there’s only two reasons to fear death. Are you ready for this? Only two reason. Number one, you fear for yourself. The only one reason to fear for death to begin with is because you’re afraid for what’s going to happen to you. Now, if you’re a Christian, should you fear? What’s there to fear? So, if you’re fearing death for yourself as a Christian, that’s ridiculous. For death for you is only to go into the presence of God.

Job even knew that. The oldest book in the Bible, Job said, “Even if worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself and not another, though my reins be consumed within me.” Job knew he’d see God.

Should a Christian fear death? Of course not. Read 1 Corinthians 15, “O death where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?” Jesus Christ has conquered death. If you’re a Christian, what are you fearing death for, for yourself? No. “Far better to die. For to me to live as Christ and to die as”—what? If a Christian fears death, then his faith isn’t any good somewhere. Do you believe God has a place for you? Do you believe there’s a place in the Father’s house that Jesus has prepared? Then what would you fear? What could you fear?

There’s another reason to fear death. You say, “I don’t fear death for myself; I fear death for others.” Oh, really? That’s got to rank at the height of egotism. “Well, if I die, who’s going to carry on the work?”

Tell the mother who dies and fears for her children that God loves her children more than she can love them, and that God knows better to care for them than she does.

I liked what the minister said at the funeral of Lyndon Johnson when he was using Moses as an illustration. You remember? At the funeral of Moses, the text says, “Moses is dead; let us arise”—isn’t that good? “Moses is dead; let’s get going.” You see, Moses was wonderful, but God has made it for a long time without Moses. He can make it for a while without me.

It’s estimated that 3.5 billion people populate the earth. In 100 years, none of them will be here. And you know what? God will still be working if Jesus doesn’t come.

You know, Paul died. The apostle Paul died. He actually did.

You say, “Well, I’m concerned about others.”

That’s ridiculous. God has a perfect plan; He’ll work it out with you in it, in your place, and with somebody to fill in when you’re gone. Everybody dies. But God lives; Jesus lives; the Spirit lives - and the work goes on.

I think about life sometimes and would just die anyway, be with Jesus. But let me say this to you that may not know Jesus Christ and by faith you don’t know God. I say to you, you better fear death, for death is indeed the grim reaper that shall separate you forever from good and God and life in hell. And that’s tragic.