

Hebrews

Faith That Defeats Death

Hebrews 11:20-22

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INTRODUCTION:

All Stand and Read Scripture.

Hebrews 11:20-22 (NASB95)

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. ²¹ By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning on the top of his staff*. ²² By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

Prayer

As a review...Isaac was the son of Abraham. Isaac was spared by God when Abraham was supplied a Ram sheep in place of Isaac just as Abraham was ready to sacrifice him.

Jacob and Esau were sons of Isaac. They were twins. Esau was born first, but Jacob was born while holding on to his brothers ankle.

Joseph was the son of Jacob and Rachel and lived in the land of Canaan with ten half-brothers, one full brother. He was Rachel's firstborn and Jacob's eleventh son. Of all the sons, Joseph was preferred by his father, who gave him a "long coat of many colors".

As the author of Hebrews gives multiple examples of those who lived and died in faith, he briefly mentions Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. He calls attention to incidents from each man's life just before he died. Their faith was manifested by believing God's promises even though one of God's promises was near fulfillment.

BODY:

I. Isaac's Faith.

Hebrews 11:20 (NASB95)

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come.

This story comes from Genesis 27. Isaac was old and blind. He called his favorite son, Esau, and requested that he bring back some fresh game and cook it up his favorite way. Then he would bless Esau.

The father's blessing involved placing a double portion of the family inheritance on the firstborn son, coupled with prophetic words about his future. At the birth of the twins, God had directly spoke to Rebekah.

Genesis 25:23 (NASB95)

²³ The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb; And two peoples will be separated from your body; And one people shall be stronger than the other; And the older shall serve the younger.”

Jacob, the father of the nation Israel, was the younger. Esau, the father of the nation Edom, was the older. Isaac, however, had a natural liking toward Esau, whereas Jacob was a mama’s boy.

When mama overheard that dad was about to place the family blessing on the older son, she went into action with a plan to secure the blessing on her favorite son. Whether she thought that she was rescuing God’s prophetic word from oblivion or whether she just was running interference for her favorite son, we do not know. Isaac probably was not deliberately going against God’s revealed word. Rather, he probably did not understand the significance of that word and was just following custom with his favorite son. But he had not exerted much effort to inquire of God as to the meaning of the prophecy or how he should apply it. He seems far more interested in tasting his favorite meat than in following God’s ways.

I assume that you know the story, how Jacob dressed up in his brother’s garments and took mama’s stew to his aged father to con him and his brother out of the blessing. **Being deceived**, Isaac inadvertently fulfilled God’s earlier prophecy to Rebekah by placing the blessing on Jacob.

You may wonder, “How did Isaac act *by faith* when he was deceived? He didn’t even know what he was doing!” Isaac was acting in the faith that God would fulfill the prophetic aspects of the blessing in the future. To his credit, when Isaac discovered that he had been deceived, he did not revoke the blessing in anger. Rather, he seemed to realize that God’s word to Rebekah at the birth of the twins would truly come to pass. So he told Esau that he had blessed his brother and then affirmed, “Yes, and he shall be blessed”.

Then he said to Jacob, “**May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May He also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you, that you may possess the land of your sojournings, which God gave to Abraham**” Jacob didn’t even have a wife, let alone *a company of peoples* descended from him! Neither Isaac nor Jacob owned a square foot of the promised land, except for a burial cave! But by pronouncing the blessing, Isaac demonstrated faith that God’s promises would not fail, even though there was no indication at that time that they ever would be fulfilled.

Hebrews 11:1 (NASB95)

¹¹ Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

II. Jacob’s Faith.

Hebrews 11:21 (NASB95)

²¹ By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning on the top of his staff.*

There are two incidents here, in reverse chronological order.

This event is recorded in Genesis 48. Jacob and all of his sons and their families had migrated to Egypt to endure the famine. Joseph heard that his father was ill and took his two sons to visit his aged father. Jacob recalled God's appearance to him, when the Lord reaffirmed the Abrahamic covenant. Then he claimed Joseph's two sons for himself as heirs. In effect, this meant designating Joseph as the firstborn, who received a double portion of the inheritance. Reuben, the natural firstborn, had forfeited his position by having relations with his father's concubine, Bilhah. So now Joseph's two sons each receive a full portion of the inheritance.

But, when Jacob went to lay hands on the young men for the blessing, he deliberately crossed his hands, laying his right hand on Ephraim, the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh, the older. This troubled Joseph, who tried to correct his father. But Jacob replied that he knew exactly what he was doing. Jacob predicted that while both sons would be great, the younger son's descendants would be the greater of the two. So he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

Jacob's worshiping on the top of his staff happened before he blessed Joseph's sons. Joseph had heard that his father was near death, and he visited him privately. Jacob asked Joseph to swear that he would **not** bury him in Egypt, but rather in the Cave of Machpelah with his ancestors. When Joseph swore that he would do so, Jacob bowed in worship.

The point is to show an old man whose body is weak, but whose faith is strong in God's promises. Although all of his descendants are now living comfortably in Egypt, he doesn't want to signal that that is okay. When Joseph agrees to bury him in Canaan, he worships God because he sees in Joseph's promise a glimmer of hope that God will fulfill His promises.

III. Joseph's Faith.

Hebrews 11:22 (NASB95)

22 By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

As he was dying, Joseph told his brothers (fellow Jews) that God would bring them back to the land which He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Then he made them swear that they would carry his bones with them when they returned to Canaan.

Joseph demonstrated many instances of strong faith in God throughout his lifetime. He had resisted the seductive attempts of Potiphar's wife. He remained true to God while imprisoned unjustly. His faith enabled him to interpret dreams on more than one occasion. He dealt in a godly manner with his brothers who had wronged him. He administered the food relief program fairly, without greed. But the author of Hebrews skips all of these examples of faith and picks out the one about Joseph's bones! Why?

The main reason is that it shows us a man facing death at a time when God's promises seemed unlikely ever to be fulfilled. God had given the promises to Abraham more than 200 years before, but here were his descendants living in Egypt, not in Canaan.

By so doing, he was disassociating himself from all of his success in Egypt and associating himself with God's people and God's promises. He did not want a grand tomb in Egypt, where future generations of Egyptians could pay homage to the man who had saved their country from ruin. Instead, he wanted his final resting place to be in the land of God's

promise. His burial instructions were a strong exhortation to his people not to be satisfied with the blessings of Egypt. They should only be satisfied with God's promises.

CONCLUSION:

We have seen the faith that was exhibited by Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph as they were nearing death. The question that remains is "**How did the faith of these Old Testament saints save them?**"

A common misconception about the Old Testament way of salvation is that Jews were saved by keeping the Law. But we know from Scripture that that is not true. Listen to what Paul tells us. I am reading this time from the Holman Christian Standard Bible because I believe it is clearer.

Galatians 3:10-14 (Holman Christian Standard Bible)

¹⁰ For all who **rely on the works of the law** are under a curse, because it is written: Everyone who does not continue doing everything written in the book of the law is cursed. ¹¹ Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because **the righteous will live by faith.** ¹² But the law is not based on faith; instead, the one who does these things will live by them. ¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written: Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed. ¹⁴ The purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles by Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Some might want to dismiss this passage as only applying to the New Testament, but Paul is quoting...

Habakkuk 2:4 (NASB95)

⁴ "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; **But the righteous will live by his faith.**

Paul taught us the purpose of the Law.

Galatians 3:24 (NASB95)

²⁴ Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

Paul makes the point that keeping the Law did not save either Old or New Testament Jews.

Romans 3:19-20 (NASB95)

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; ²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

The purpose of the Law was to make us **conscious of our sin.**

The law was never a substitute for or a barrier to faith. Under Moses a Jew could be saved by faith and counted righteous before God, just as Abraham and many others had believed and had been saved. They looked forward to the Savior, just as we look back.

To prove this, Paul points us to Abraham, who was saved by faith.

Romans 4:3 (NASB95)

³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Again, Paul is quoting the Old Testament to prove his point.

Genesis 15:2-5 (NASB)

² Abram said, “O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³ And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.” ⁴ Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” ⁵ And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

Abraham tried to speed up the promise of God by listening to Sarah and having a child by his Egyptian maid, Hagar. But God followed through with his promise and Abraham and Sarah had a son, Isaac, and Abraham believed. His belief was "**credited to him as righteousness**". I want you to note that Abraham could not have been saved by keeping the Law, because he lived over 400 years before the Law was given!

So, "**How did the faith of these Old Testament saints save them?**"

The clear message of the Bible is that the way of salvation has always been through faith. In the Old Testament, it was faith in the promise that God would send a Savior someday. Those who lived in the time of the Old Testament looked forward to the Messiah and believed God's promise of the coming Servant of the Lord. Those who exercised such faith were saved. Today we look back on the life, death, and resurrection of the Savior and are saved by faith in Jesus Christ's atonement for our sins.

Romans 10:9-10 (NASB95)

⁹ ...if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰ for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

The gospel is not an exclusively New Testament message. The Old Testament contained it as well. As early as Genesis 3 we see the promise of a coming Savior.

Genesis 3:15 (NASB95)

¹⁵ And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.”

Listen to how Paul quoted from Genesis to the Galatians.

Galatians 3:8-9 (NASB95)

⁸ The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “**All the nations will be blessed in you.**” ⁹ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Genesis 12:3 (NASB95)

³ And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Throughout the Old Testament there are hundreds of promises that the Messiah would “save His people from their sins”. Clearly, Old Testament saints were aware of the promised Redeemer, and they were saved by faith in that Savior, the same way people are saved today.

How does our faith defeat death and bring salvation?

Most obviously, the statement that Christ has conquered death refers to His resurrection. These three words—“**Christ conquered death**”—define the most important difference between Christianity and all other religions. No other religious leader ever predicted his own death and resurrection, based his claims about himself and his teaching on that prediction, and then kept that promise.

Jesus’ resurrection marks the first time in history that someone rose from the dead **never to die again**. Others who were resurrected eventually died a second time. The resurrection of Jesus was a true and total defeat of death. As the Holy Son of God, Jesus overcame death once and for all.

Christ conquered death because He was sinless. The curse upon mankind in the Garden of Eden, brought about by their sin, was plainly stated.

Genesis 2:16-17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ The Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it **you will surely die.”**

Not only did sin put them on the course of physical death, but it immediately caused them to have a spiritual death which separated them from God.

As Paul said in Romans, “**The wages of sin is death.**” But Jesus Christ had no sin. Therefore, death had no power over Him. The death of Jesus on the cross was a voluntary sacrifice for **our** sin, and, given His sinless perfection, His resurrection logically followed.

John 10:17 (NASB95)

¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again.

Our faith is able to defeat death through Jesus by trusting God to fulfill His future promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises. By so doing, we join Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Hebrews 11:13 (NASB95)

¹³ 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.

What a Day That Will Be!