

“Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph: Never Give Up”

Hebrews 11:20-21

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According to legend, Winston Churchill was giving a commencement address at a prestigious secondary school in England following WWII. After being given a lengthy introduction, Sir Winston walked to the podium, stared out at the audience for a few moments, and then said, “Never give up. Never, never, never.” Churchill then turned around and ambled back to his chair.

Well, even if that story is not quite true, some of you maybe wish that I would give a six-word sermon once in a while. Well, maybe some time, but not today. Six words would likely be the shortest commencement speech ever, but those particular words also describe the type of faith we see in our text today.

This summer we have been going through Hebrews 11, taking a tour of what I call the faith hall of fame. In recent weeks we focused on the chapters major exhibit, the story of a man of great faith, Abraham. He is the spiritual father of all who are part of God’s family. Today we see how that faith continued for the next three generations, with Abraham’s son, grandson and great-grandson, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

My hope is that as we explore the lives of these faith heroes of the past, our faith would be strengthened and would become a faith that never gives up. Let’s pause and pray this would happen.

Let’s begin by reading our text **Hebrews 11:20-21** **By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.**

When we go back to the book of Genesis, we find the writer, Moses, taking 26 chapters to tell the stories of these three men. The author of Hebrews gives them only 3 verses. There is obviously much more that could be written. Yet, what impresses the author about these three individuals is they had a faith that never gave up. To their final days, even as they stood on the threshold of death, their faith held firm.

Remember, God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the sand on the seashore, and from those descendants a great nation would come. Abraham believed that promise. So did Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Isaac’s faith is demonstrated when, as an old man, he blesses his son Jacob and says, (Genesis 27:29) “May the nations serve you and the peoples bow down to you.” Some of you remember how Jacob tricks his father and essentially steals this blessing from his older brother Esau. Yet it was God’s will that Jacob not Esau, would be the father of the great nation. In Genesis 28, Isaac knowingly reaffirms his desire that Jacob be the heir to the promise given Abraham.

When Jacob comes to the end of his life, he is a refugee in Egypt. There he blesses two of his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, who are Joseph’s sons. Then we have Joseph. He lived in Egypt most of his life, first as a prisoner, and then for 80 years as a leader of that country. Yet, he knew God was going to form this great nation, not in Egypt, but in Canaan, so that is where he wants to be buried. **Genesis 50: 24, 26** **Then Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.’ So Joseph died at the age of hundred and ten. And after they embalmed him, he was placed in a coffin Egypt.**

God made a promise to Abraham. Abraham died before he saw that promise fulfilled, but he was confident that God would keep that promise. As his son Isaac approached the end of his life, he believed God would keep that promise, even though he would not be alive to see it happen. When Abraham’s grandson Jacob, was about to die, he was still confident God would keep that promise, even though he knew it would not be during his lifetime. When Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, comes to the end of his days on earth. He is confident God is going to keep that promise, even though there seemed to be a detour in God’s plan for Abraham’s family who were all in Egypt, Joseph knows that one day his

descendants will return to Canaan because that is what God had promised.

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph: their faith never gave up, never. Their faith looked beyond death. Their faith gave them a firm conviction that death cannot frustrate God's purposes or nullify His promises. Their faith gave them a certainty that God would work His plan, so they could speak with confidence about what would happen long after they died.

As Leon Morris writes in his commentary, "Their faith, being stronger than death, in a way overcame death, for their words of blessing came true." What we read in **Hebrews 11:13** certainly applies to these three men. **These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.**

So how does knowing about three men who lived almost 4000 years ago, help us today? Well, I believe they provided a model of the type of faith the Lord wants us to have today. Let's consider three lessons we can learn from Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

Number 1, We need to trust God in the face of death. One of the important themes of Hebrews 11 is that death is a reality. We are only temporary residents of this planet. As Cat Steven used to sing, some of you remember, "We are only on this earth for a short while."

Psalms 90:10 KJV says, **The days of years are threescore and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years.** 70 or 80 years. 3000 years after that was written the average life expectancy in the United States in 2020 was 77.28.

Oh, yes there are numerous folks, some in this room who make four score and ten, but there is no guarantee for any of us. In fact, the median life expectancy in the United States is 73.7, meaning half of Americans will die before they hit that age. In the newspaper this week I saw obituaries for people in their 60's, 50's, and 30's. The fact is, unless you happen to be still alive when Jesus returns, you will die someday, just like Isaac, Jacob and Joseph did. The funeral director who signs all

his letters "Eventually yours," is too far from the truth.

Now I don't think those Old Testament patriarchs had a very clear understanding of what would happen to them after they died. They didn't have even a part of the Bible to read. Christians today have a great advantage over them in that way.

We know about the promise of the resurrection. We know that in 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul says, because Jesus has conquered death, those who trust in Him will conquer death as well. We know that Jesus said in **John 11:25b, 26a** **Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.**

We know these things. And yet, many of us are not really comfortable with the prospect of dying. Maybe it is because we cannot shake all doubts of what lies beyond the grave. Or maybe it's because we are so attached to things and people here, we just don't like the idea of having to give them up.

I think of the little boy who said, "Maybe I will die someday, but I hope I don't die on my birthday, because it is not fun to celebrate your birthday if you are dead."

Now, it is not wrong to be uncomfortable with death. The Bible teaches that death exists in this world because of sin. Paul says death is the enemy, the enemy Jesus has conquered. The analogy often used is that death is leaving this life and crossing the river Jordan into the promised land of Heaven. And as the spiritual says, "Jordan's river is chilly and cold." It is not fun to die. Yet God has promised an eternal home in heaven to all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We don't need to be afraid to die, because we can trust God to keep His promises, even when death knocks on our door.

A couple of months ago I ended sitting next to my aunt in a church service in Wisconsin. This 70-year-old woman had just been put on hospice, as the doctors says there is little they can do for her cancer. Unless the Lord performs a magnificent miracle, she will not be on this earth very long. That is hard, especially for her three children who lost their dad to cancer when he was in his 40's. Buy, my aunt has great hope in God's promise of resurrection and eternal life.

In May I turned 66 years old. In my mind that sounds a lot older than 65. I will probably live for a few more years, but one day I will die. I wonder, when that day come, will I be confident in God's promises? I think so. Oh, not because I am Mr. Braveheart. Thinking about my death make me a little uneasy. But, I believe, that in His grace God will likely give me courage when that time comes. As one of the Puritans said, "The fear of death is ingrafted in the common nature of all men, but faith works it out of Christians."

In **Hebrews 2:14, 15** Jesus became human **So that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death-that is the devil-and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.** Friends, no matter how old you are, ask the Lord to strengthen your faith, so you can trust Him, even in the face of death.

Number 2, Don't expect to experience all of God's blessing in this life. Some folks embrace a "prosperity theology" that claims a Christian with enough faith never needs to experience sickness or poverty. Some call this the "heath and wealth gospel" or "name it and claim it." If you believe and say your cancer is healed, it will be. Or as one person says, "Your cancer is already healed, you just need to believe it." Or they claim, if you believe and say you have \$50,000 in the bank, it will be there.

Now we could spend a sermon or two just talking about the errors in this thinking. Yet the root problem is that these folks expect too much heaven on earth. As a Christian God has promised me a magnificent dwelling place in heaven, maybe a mansion. There won't be any leaky faucets and squeaky door hinges there. Yet, down here, no matter how nice of a house I have, it will not be perfect. Instead, I must look forward to a home whose architect and builder is God, which I will take possession of after I die, when I am in heaven.

Yes, the Lord has promised to heal all of our diseases, cancer, clogged arteries, ingrown toenails, whatever physical problems we have. Sometimes we will experience that healing in this life. I was reading recently how Reggie White, the Packers Hall of fame defensive lineman, insisted the Lord healed him of a hamstring injury he suffered in December 1995. He would be very upset when anyone was skeptical of that. I

remember he was expected to miss multiple games, probably the rest of the season, but he was back on the field the next week. I believe God healed Reggie, (Kidding), but because He is able to perform marvelous healings of which doctors can only dream.

Yet, at the same time, I know that many Christians get sick and do not get better. Christians with great faith can still get cancer and die when they are 30 years old. There are Christians with great faith who go through life in a wheelchair. Joni Erickson Tada is one of them. Why hasn't God healed her? He will, friends, He will. Just not in this life. It is in heaven where every believer in Jesus will receive an "incorruptible body." A body without flaws. When that happens all the crutches, eyeglasses, hearing aids, blood pressure pills, and false teeth will be thrown away, because then there will be perfect healing.

Now, probably none of you expect God to give you unlimited wealth and perfect health. Yet, many Christians, especially in the United States seem to think God has guaranteed a relatively easy road for them to follow throughout their lives. Sometimes it works that way.

Quite a few of you in this room would say "God has blessed me in many ways. I have had a good career or job for a long time. Our family is very close. My health is good. I have a lot of friends. Life has been very good."

If that is true for you, that is wonderful! Praise God! Things may continue that way. But there is no guarantee. A car accident this afternoon could totally change things. Within a few seconds you could become a widow, or a quadriplegic, or you could be sued for every dime you have.

If something like that happened to me, I would feel devastated, but I should not be shocked. God has promise us many blessings, but He has not told us when we will receive them.

I am afraid many of us see heaven as a dispensable, optional part of our faith. Some folks think, "Yes, it will be nice to go to heaven, but I am really excited about all the blessings the Lord is giving me right now."

Folks, Jesus and Paul would tell us, the real reason that following the Lord is worth it, is because

“Great is your reward in heaven.” That is where the bulk of God’s blessings will be. **1 Corinthians 15:19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.** It is foolish to expect we will experience all that God has promised in this life. Heaven is where many of His promises will be kept.

Number 3, We must never give up on God. never, never, never. Even when the promises of God seem just a pinpoint of light in the midst of deep darkness, we must keep trusting Him. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were people of faith, whose hope was in God. Even when they were about to die, and the fulfillment of God’s promises was still along way off, they knew God would not let them down. He would do just as He said. Of course, the problem for them and for us is that God’s timing is different than ours. In “the Voyage of the Dawn Treader,” part of C.S. Lewis’ Chronicle of Narnia, Lucy, the little girl, is talking with Aslan, the great lion who represents Jesus. She says, “Aslan, when will we see you again?” He says, “Soon.” “How long is soon?” Lucy asks. Aslan replies, “For me, all times are soon.”

Folks, that is what God says to us. “Do not give up, because soon, very soon, I am going to do what I have promised” and when that happens, you will have no regrets if you have faithfully trusted and followed Jesus. Yet, if you give up on Him, if you have turned away and been doing things your own way, there will be regrets.

In his book, “No Night too Dark,” my friend, Steve Halliday writes, *“We must always remember that no matter how desperate our circumstances, God can turn evil on its head. No matter how great our mistakes, failures and blunders, God can somehow transform them into incredible blessings. No matter how deep our pain, God can reach into our lives and exchange suffering for glory.”*

Friends, it may seem your life right now is like being in the bottom of the 9th, down by 10 runs, 2 outs, no one on base, and an 0-2 count. Things are grim. You may feel like swinging and missing the next pitch on purpose, just to get it over with.

But, friends, do not give up. Do not give up on God. Keep trusting Him. And keep obeying Him.

These words by C.S. Lewis in “the Screwtape Letters,” have helped on more than a few

occasions. *“Our cause, (Screwtape means the devil’s cause of evil) our cause is never more in danger than when a Christian, no longer desiring, but still intending to do God’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and then still obeys.”*

In other words, if you still trust and obey the Lord, even when there doesn’t seem to be any reason to do so, you have the devil beaten.

Friends, maybe you wonder, “Okay, so how can I have a faith that trusts God in the face of death, that doesn’t expect all of God’s blessings in this life and that never gives up on God, never?” The answer is God’s grace, and practice. You cannot develop that kind of faith on your own, so you need to ask God to cause your faith to grow.

Yet, what you can do is look around every day and remind yourself and others how God has demonstrated His love and faithfulness to us. When it is hard to see how He is doing that, you need to turn your eyes upon Jesus, upon His cross, and glory in the fact that through His death and resurrection, Jesus has made you an heir to God’s great and precious promises. That, friends, is a reason to never give up. Never, never, never.