

## **“The Promised Blessing”**

**Genesis 48**

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**August 2, 2015  
Derek McCollum**

---

What does a mature faith look like? That’s the question we are asking today. As we finish up our study on the life of Jacob, we find him near death. He is living out his last days, and is finally reunited with his lost son, Joseph. Jacob’s life has been anything but smooth. His long history is littered with not-so-savory moments. He’s cheated his brother and his uncle. He’s been the head of a very dysfunctional family. But here at the end of his life we see the faith that has been built through his lifelong wrestling with the Lord. And it’s a mature faith that is a helpful one for us to see.

Hebrews 11—the great “Hall of Faith” chapter in Hebrews, lists Jacob among its examples of faith. And it’s this portion of his life—this incident in particular—that the writer of Hebrews highlights. So what does a mature faith look like? Let’s look at three traits today—a mature faith is 1) based on past experience, 2) eager to pass along God’s promises to future generations, and 3) aware of the unexpected nature of God’s gracious work.

### **Trait One of a Mature Faith: A mature faith is one that is based on past experience**

In verses 3 and 4 we read, “And Jacob said to Joseph, ‘God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’” Jacob is leaning here on the promises God has made to him in his lifetime. That term, “God Almighty”, “El Shaddai” in Hebrew, is the name that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all use when describing God’s appearing to them. There is a history here worth clinging to. God made a promise to Abraham, he made the same promise to Isaac, and he made the same promise to Jacob. It’s these long-lasting promises that Jacob now clings to late in his life.

Later in the passage in verse 15, he spells it out in greater detail. “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd

all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil...” It’s a beautiful example of a faith based on past experience. Jacob says that the Lord is the God of his fathers—Abraham and Isaac. He’s the God who has been faithful over generations in his family. He trusts his father and grandfather and clings to the God who they clung to. But more than that, this is a God who has proven himself faithful to *Jacob as well*. He says that the Lord is the God who has been his shepherd all his life. The Lord has protected and guided him. Jacob has personally experienced the gracious care of the Lord in his own life. He has seen God’s rescue and his protection. He has known God’s grace and love. He has experienced the Lord’s gentle leading. And then Jacob adds this line—“the angel who has redeemed me from all evil...” Jacob is using the term “angel” to refer to God, as in his life and in the life of his father and grandfather, the Lord appeared to them in human form. And he says that the Lord has rescued him from all evil. The term “rescue” has important connotations in ancient times. The “rescuer” was usually the nearest male relative, and his responsibility was to bail someone out if he fell into debt or slavery, or to avenge his murder. But Jacob had no next of kin present for most of his life (he burned that bridge early on with his brother Esau). Jacob says that the Lord was his “rescuer”, delivering him from the hand of his brother who sought to kill him or from his uncle who would keep him enslaved. But more than that, Jacob realizes here that it’s the Lord who has rescued him from the greatest danger—his own sin. God has redeemed him from all evil, including Jacob’s evil. The Lord has shown mercy and grace to Jacob, and it has built in him a mature faith.

Have you ever seen (or been) a father at a swimming pool with his young child jumping to him from the side? The child is almost always completely free of care or fear. She jumps to him with reckless abandon, even though she may not be able to swim. She can do so because she knows that her father will catch her. He’s her dad, after all—he loves her! And he has caught her before. That is past experience building current faith. That is the kind of faith displayed in Jacob here at the end of his life and it’s the kind of faith you and I are called to.

How can we put this into practice in our own lives? Well, here’s one idea—as you look at what the Lord is doing in you, look back over a long period of time. Take a look at what the Lord has brought you through and how he has shaped and molded you over the course of your life. Highlight the times that he has rescued you and

cling to those. Don't look with a microscope to the immediate present—you may be struggling with something right now that has you stuck. But look with a large lens at the big picture of what God is doing in your and through you over the course of your life. That past experience is what will build in you a mature faith now and in the future.

### **Trait Two: A mature faith is eager to pass God's promises on to future generations**

We're on to our second trait of mature faith now, and it has a future dimension. In verse 5, we read Jacob saying this to his son Joseph... "And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are." This is a bit of a confusing verse, but what is happening is that Jacob is making Joseph's two sons, *heirs to Jacob's immediate inheritance*. Jacob is in essence, giving Ephraim and Manasseh the inheritance of a son—he's giving them Joseph's inheritance. At the end of the chapter we see Jacob also giving Joseph an extra portion of the inheritance of land in Canaan. In doing this, Jacob is putting his grandsons on the same level as his other sons. He's adopting them as his own and making them full heirs to his inheritance. Ephraim and Manasseh will be listed among Jacob's sons and listed as tribes of Israel, just like Jacob's other sons.

But they are not just heirs to land, they are heirs to promise. They are brought in to the covenant people of God, through whom, God promised Abraham, He would bless the world. Joseph's children are formally made heirs to these promises.

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses charges all of Israel to hold fast to the Lord and to pass down His covenant promises to their children. Those who have been brought in to God's covenant family are to be taught God's character, His work in the world, His past salvation, and the necessity of remaining faithful to him. We are given that same responsibility. We have been given that same gift. The Lord has taken us and made us his own. He has adopted us through the work of Christ on our behalf, and we have been given the wonderful responsibility of passing on God's covenant promises to others. That's the second trait of a mature faith: it is eager to pass along God's promises to future generations.

If you are a parent, this is your calling. And as a parent, I know it can feel like a daunting calling. Many of us want to teach our children about the Lord but don't know how. Let me offer a few short suggestions. First, just begin talking about God in natural ways. You don't have to make a big deal of it. Deuteronomy 6 says to teach your children diligently—to talk of the Lord's work when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down. This just means that it's natural talk, woven into daily discussion about friends and school and sports and meals. Secondly, try to open God's Word in your house together. It may work well around dinner for you or at bedtime or at breakfast. Just open God's Word for a bit and read together. A good story Bible is helpful for this, and my favorite is the Jesus Storybook Bible. Finally, share your struggles with your kids—in appropriate ways—let them know that you are walking in dependence on Jesus. They need to know that YOU depend on him if they are going to depend on him as well.

### **Trait Three: A mature faith understands the unexpected nature of God's gracious work**

Verses 17 through 20 recount the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh. They also display the unexpected nature of blessing that shows up throughout the Bible. As Joseph brings his two sons near to their grandfather, he deliberately places Manasseh on his left and Ephraim on his right. And he does this so that Manasseh will be at Jacob's right hand when he blesses him. In ancient culture, the right hand was the hand that showed prominence and place, and so the blessing on the right was reserved for the firstborn, who was to inherit the larger share of the inheritance and the larger portion of honor. Manasseh is the older, so Joseph brings him to Jacob's right hand. But Jacob, when giving the blessing, crosses his hands, putting his right hand on Ephraim and his left on Manasseh. "No, no, dad, you've got it wrong," says Joseph, "this one is older... put your right hand on him." But now an old man, mature in his faith, Jacob knows what he is doing. And unlike his own stealing of blessing when he was younger, Jacob now deliberately puts the younger above the elder.

This shouldn't come as much of a surprise to us. It's Isaac, not Ishmael, who the line of promise comes through. It's Jacob, not Esau. It's David, the youngest of his brothers, who God establishes on his throne. God often works in ways we don't expect. We've seen the theme run through this story that God can even use sin and

deception to accomplish his redemptive plans. God's sovereign work in bringing redemption to the world is so often not the way in which we expect it to come.

Living by faith—cultivating a mature faith—includes entering into the unknown and trusting in God's good and perfect plan. It may not come as we often think it should. God may cross his arms with your life and it may confuse you like it confuses Joseph here. But a mature faith understands that God's plan is right and true.

I love the words of this hymn:

Whate'er my God ordains is right: His holy will abideth;  
I will be still whate'er He doth; And follow where He guideth;  
He is my God; though dark my road,  
He holds me that I shall not fall: Wherefore to Him I leave it all.

Whate'er my God ordains is right: Though now this cup, in drinking,  
May bitter seem to my faint heart, I take it, all unshrinking.  
My God is true; each morn anew  
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart, And pain and sorrow shall depart.

God's plan of redemption, of course, came in the most unexpected way. A baby, born in poverty to an unwed teenage girl would be the way God chose to save the world. God "crossed his arms" in sending Jesus to save us in such an unexpected way. And this Jesus—King of the Universe—would sacrifice himself in order to redeem us from all evil. He would lay down his life so that we might be adopted by His Father. He would spread out his arms in death so that we might be saved.

If you desire a mature faith, look then to the Christ. Look to the open arms of Jesus on the cross. See what he has done for you. Let that past experience shape your current faith. And let it show you a future as well. Just as Jacob promised Joseph that God would bring him again to the land of his fathers, God promises us that he will bring his good plan to completion. He is making all things new and he is preparing a good home for us with him. This is what we build our faith on.