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DYING FAITH

Hebrews 11:20-22

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The Puritans used to emphasize the importance of dying well. With the apostle Paul (Phil. 1:20), they desired that “Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” Matthew Henry wrote,

Though the grace of faith is of universal use throughout our whole lives, yet it is especially so when we come to die. Faith has its greatest work to do at last, to help believers to finish well, to die to the Lord, so as to honor 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 ... (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary* [Revell], 6:946).

When he was on his own deathbed at age 52, Henry said to a friend “You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men—this is mine: that a life spent in the service of God and communion with Him, is the most pleasant life that anyone can live in this world.”

Facing death is the acid test of our faith. Will it sustain us at that time? 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. In Isaac’s case, he does not state specifically that he was near death, but this incident happened when he was very old, feeble, and blind. In the case of the other two men, the author states specifically that they were dying. In each case, as they faced death, none of God’s promises was near fulfillment. Circumstances seemed contrary to their fulfillment. These men had lived all of their lives hearing about and believing in God’s promises, but God had not yet delivered. Even so, they all died with their faith and focus on things to come, believing that God would keep His word. They teach us that...

Faith faces death trusting God to fulfill His future promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises.

While there are some different lessons to be learned from each man, the author uses each example to drive home the same basic point. Each one died with faith in God's promises, even though circumstances seemed to contradict those promises. In the cases of Isaac and Jacob, they both had many failures in the life of faith, and yet, by God's grace, they crossed the finish line with a strong flourish of faith. They illustrate what Paul wrote (Phil. 1:6), "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." If, by God's grace, you and I have begun the life of faith, by that same grace we will die strong in faith, testifying to others that God's promises are true, in spite of our circumstances.

1. Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau shows faith in God's promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises (11:20).

"By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come." The 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 conferring 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 told Rebekah (Gen. 25:23), "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 confer 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, but the emphasis was probably on favorite son. Isaac probably was not deliberately going against God's revealed word. Rather, he probably didn't 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 conferring 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!" But the author doesn't go into such details or to the difference between the blessings on Jacob and Esau. His emphasis is rather that by blessing his sons, 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" (Gen. 27:33).

Just before Jacob fled to Haran, Isaac charged him not to take a wife from the daughters of Canaan. 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" (Gen. 28:3-4). 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.

The story behind Hebrews 11:20 is not flattering to any of the participants, except for Isaac's faith regarding things to come. Isaac seemed to be more interested in a tasty meal than in God's prophetic word. Esau was a profane man, who had despised his spiritual heritage for a bowl of stew. Rebekah deliberately deceived her husband and encouraged her son to lie. Jacob agreed to go along with the lies, taking advantage of his blind father.

But God used the whole soap opera, with each character acting selfishly without regard for God, to fulfill His sovereign purpose. God had chosen Jacob and rejected Esau. His purpose according to *His* choice will stand (Rom. 9:11-13). It does not depend on people fully understanding His purpose. Isaac obviously did not understand it at first. It doesn't depend on people obeying Him, although they should obey. But He used Rebekah's and Jacob's deception to fulfill His purpose. Paul relates this story and then says that God's purpose "does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

The story of Isaac blessing his sons is in the Bible so that we will learn to trust God, even when circumstances seem to contradict His promises. We may look at the sinfulness around us, even of those who claim to be His children, and think, "There is no way that the Great Commission will ever be fulfilled or that the church will bring glory to God's name."

But God has said that there will be some from every tongue and people and nation, purchased with Jesus' blood, gathered around His throne (Rev. 5:9). He has said that the church will be a pure and spotless bride, made ready for her husband (Eph. 5:27; Rev. 21:3). In spite of all of our shortcomings and failures, *His purpose will be fulfilled*. That should not cause us to shrug our shoulders in apathy or to sin that grace may abound. It ought to encourage us to be faithful in spite of disappointments with sinful people or ominous world events. It should cause us to be steadfast and immovable in the Lord's work, knowing that our work is never in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

2. Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons and his worship show faith in God's promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises (11:21).

There are two incidents here, in reverse chronological order.

- A. Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons shows faith in God's promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises.

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 (Gen. 35:22; 49:4). 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 (Gen. 48:19). So he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

There are three applications of this story.

- (1) God's ways are not man's ways; God's ways according to His sovereign choice, will triumph over man's ways.

The natural order would have been for Manasseh, the firstborn, to have preeminence over his younger brother. But Jacob himself demonstrated the same point, that God's choice of the younger over the elder would thwart man's ways. In spite of human ignorance and sin to do things man's way, God's way and His choice always triumph.

This applies to the way of salvation. Man's way is according to human choice and human merit. Good people who make the right choices are in; bad people who make the wrong choices are out. But God's way of salvation is according to *His* choice and purpose, not according to man's choice (Luke 10:22; John 1:13; 6:65, 70; Rom. 9:11, 15-18). As James 1:18 puts it, "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." Salvation rests on God's will and God's power.

- (2) As parents and grandparents, we should seek spiritual blessings for our children above worldly success.

Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of the second most powerful man in Egypt. They had been raised in the most luxurious conditions in the world. No doubt they were personal friends with Pharaoh's children. Servants attended to their every need. They had received the best education available at that time. They were heirs to a huge financial estate. They easily could have succeeded in whatever careers they chose in Egypt. In these circumstances, it would have been natural for a grandfather to bless his grandsons by saying, "May you prosper in Egypt even as your father has prospered. May you amass great fortunes and enjoy the best that the world has to offer!"

But instead, Jacob, the lowly shepherd, who is a pilgrim in Egypt to avoid starvation in the famine-stricken Canaan, adopts these two princes as his own and confers on them the blessing of Abraham. A worldly-minded parent could have thought, "Whoop-de-do! You're giving them a double portion of the famine-stricken land of Canaan, but you don't own a square foot of it, except for your burial cave! Here in Egypt, they've got everything that anyone could dream of having, and you're giving them a piece of dry ground that you don't even own to give away!"

But what was Jacob *really* giving his grandsons? By faith in God's yet unfulfilled promises, he was giving the boys the spiritual blessings of Abraham, which were far better than the worldly blessings of Egypt. Even though there was not a shred of tangible evidence that God would give the land to Jacob's descendants, Jacob believed God's promises and handed this off to his grandsons.

It is a tragedy that many Christian parents today hope more that their children and grandchildren will succeed materially than that they will succeed spiritually! They would be thrilled to hear that one of their kids got accepted into medical school or landed a fat contract with a professional sports team. But if they heard that the kids were headed for the mission field in a poor country, they would try to "talk some sense into them." They wouldn't want them to "throw their lives away" with nothing (materially) to show for it. Besides, they'd rather have the grandkids nearby. That is a thoroughly worldly attitude! First and foremost, we should want our children to walk with God, wherever that may lead them in terms of a career or a geographic location.

- (3) God is sovereign in assigning different gifts and places to His children, both materially and spiritually.

The story of Jacob and Esau shows that God is free to distinguish between individuals in the matter of salvation, according to His sovereign purpose (Rom. 9:10-18). But the story of Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh shows that God is free to give different material and spiritual blessings to those who are His children, according to His purpose. Some are wealthy, some are not. Some have powerful spiritual gifts, but others have lesser gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-7). Each of us is responsible to use what the Lord has given us to advance His kingdom, and not to compare ourselves with others or be envious that we had what they have been given.

- B. Jacob's worship shows faith in God's promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises.

Jacob's worshiping on the top of his staff happened before he blessed Joseph's sons (Gen. 47:29-31). 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.

There is a discrepancy in that the Massoretic text, which lies behind our Old Testament, says that he worshiped at the head of his *bed*, whereas the LXX says that he worshiped on the top of his *staff*. The Hebrew language was written with consonants only until the sixth to eighth centuries, A.D., when Hebrew scholars added the vowel points. The noun in question reads *bed* if pointed in one way, but *staff* if pointed another way. Since the LXX was translated about nine centuries before the Massoretic pointing was added, it probably best reflects the original text, *staff* (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], pp. 4488-489).

Either way, 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. The staff may be symbolic for the pilgrim life that Jacob had lived as an heir of

the promise to Abraham. His hope was not in this life, but in God's promises for a better country, namely, a heavenly one (11:16). So even though he was dying as a poor man in a foreign land, he died in faith in God's promise.

3. Joseph's mention of the exodus and his order about his bones show faith in God's promises, even when circumstances seem to contradict those promises (11:22).

Both things refer to the same incident (Gen. 50:24-25). 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. They were doing quite well in Egypt at this point, thanks to Joseph. Their enslavement followed his death. It would still be over 200 years before Moses led them out of Egypt and 40 years after that before they entered Canaan. Yet Joseph made mention of the exodus, and ordered that they take his bones when they left Egypt.

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 didn't 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 for the future.

The temptations of success and comfort are often much greater than the temptations faced by those in poverty. The poor man more readily sees his need to trust in the Lord, but the rich man can easily trust in his riches and forget the Lord. The story of Joseph's bones should remind us not to put our hopes in material success, but to realize how empty riches are when we're on our deathbed. But how rich we truly are if our hope is in God's promises about eternity! What does it profit to gain the whole world and yet to lose your soul (see Luke 9:25; 12:15-21)?

Conclusion

Many years ago, a ship known as "The Empress of Ireland" went down with 130 Salvation Army officers on board, along with many other passengers. Only 21 of the Salvation Army people survived. Of the 109 that drowned, not one had a life preserver. Many of the survivors told how these brave people, seeing that there were not enough life preservers, took off their own and gave them to others, saying, "I know Jesus, so I can die better than you can!" (In "Our Daily Bread," Fall, 1980.)

A young woman was about to be operated on for throat cancer. Her chances of survival were slim. At best, she might lose the ability to speak for the rest of her life.

"We're going to begin now," the surgeon told her, "so if you have anything you'd like to say...."

For a moment or two the young woman remained silent, though her mouth moved several times as if to speak. Finally, she said in a calm, clear voice, "Blessed be the name of Jesus." I don't know the outcome of her surgery. I do know that she trusted God's promises, even though circumstances seemed contradictory.

Faith faces death 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, who all "died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance" (Heb. 11:13).

Discussion Questions

1. Why is belief in God's sovereign election essential for solid assurance of salvation?
2. How would you answer the charge that if God's purpose in salvation will be accomplished, then we don't need to witness?
3. Should Christian parents leave a large inheritance to worldly children? Why/why not?
4. Why must a believer's hope be in God's promises for heaven, not on health and wealth in this life?

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