

## XXVIII. Faith of the Patriarchs

February 12/13/14, 2019

Hebrews 11:17-22

**Aim:** To exhibit mature faith in our lives that trusts in God and His promises, as demonstrated in the lives of the patriarchs.

### A. Abraham (Hebrews 11:17-19)

*Phillips:* In Genesis 22 we read that God came to Abraham and tested him. This marks the fifth time that Genesis records God appearing to Abraham (Genesis chapters 12, 15, 17, 18, and 22). In the first of these encounters, God called Abraham to faith; in the second and third encounters God strengthened his faith; in the fourth encounter God rewarded his faith. Now in the fifth and last of these significant encounters between Abraham and the Lord, that faith would be tested by the most difficult of commands. The New Testament confirms that God tests the faith of His people (1 Pe. 1:7). God's purpose is the strengthening of faith by trial, the proving of faith by means of tests that God Himself provides.

#### 1. What God Asked (Gen. 22:2)

*Phillips:* God tested Abraham with the greatest trial imaginable: "[God] said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gen. 22:2). In the first place, this was a trial of Abraham's devotion to the Lord. Devotion to God is at the heart of His law (Dt. 6:5). The proof of love is always found in the willingness to sacrifice. God tested Abraham not merely by asking for a sacrifice, or even a great sacrifice, but the sacrifice of that which Abraham held most dear: his covenant heir, Isaac. The test of our Christian devotion always involves this, that we love not so much the gifts—great as they are—but the Giver Himself above all. The question is always whether we are willing to make God first—indeed, whether we are willing to make Him everything.

*Phillips:* We can expect God to test our devotion to Him in great or small ways. We will be challenged to sacrifice or subordinate our careers to His will. Or perhaps it will be a relationship that is dear to us, but that cannot abide with our higher devotion to Jesus Christ. It may be money; it may be a certain self-image or a lifestyle; it can be practically anything. God tests our faith in terms of our willingness to sacrifice for Him, and in this manner He also protects us from the idolatry to which our hearts are so inherently prone. Even good things He has given us, such as Isaac, this child of God's promise, God demands that we place back into His hand, always holding everything as a trust on behalf of the Giver and Possessor of all things.

*Phillips:* Second, this was a trial of Abraham's spiritual understanding. God had made great and surpassing promises to Abraham—possession of the land, offspring like the sand of the seashore, all the nations blessed through him—all to be fulfilled through this very son Isaac, whom God now commanded him to sacrifice. We can see how vexing this would have been. God's promise seemed to be pitted against God's command. If God was to be faithful to His promises to Abraham, then Isaac must live; but if God's command was to be obeyed, then Isaac must die. It seemed to be so inconsistent, so internally contradictory. None of us ever receive this particular command from God, since Abraham was fulfilling a unique role in history, but God may call us

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to obey Him in a way that seems spiritually counterproductive to ourselves or our projects. Like Abraham, we will have to summon up the spiritual understanding needed to obey God's Word.

*Phillips:* Third, it was a trial of Abraham's knowledge of God and trust in Him. I say this because of the horror of what was involved in this command. Abraham was to strike his own son dead. Furthermore, it was 'his only son.' This was not strictly true, for Isaac was not the only living son; the point is that he was the one child of the promise, the one heir of the covenant. William Lane writes, 'When Abraham obeyed God's mandate to leave Ur, he simply gave up his past. But when he was summoned to Mount Moriah to deliver his own son to God, he was asked to surrender his future as well.' Additionally, Genesis 22:2 reminds us of Abraham's deep love for this son: 'Take you son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.' This was godly and appropriate love, and no doubt an intimate and intense love from a father to his son and heir. The mere thought of plunging a knife into his chest must have been terrible for Abraham, much more so the act itself. Obedience required that Abraham know God and trust Him with unshakeable confidence.

### 2. What Abraham Did (11:17)

<sup>17</sup>*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son...*

*Phillips:* Abraham passed the test by obeying God. Hebrews 11:17 simply tells us, 'By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.' The Genesis account is considerably fuller (Gen. 22:3-10).

*MacArthur:* The proof of Abraham's faith was his willingness to give back to God everything he had, including the son of promise, whom he had miraculously received *because* of his faith. After all the waiting and wondering, the son had been given by God. Then, before the son was grown, God asked for him back, and Abraham obeyed.

*Hughes:* The story of Abraham's offering of Isaac is, of course, a story of towering faith. And the writer of Hebrews takes great pains to display the anatomy of such faithful obedience. The author states implicitly that Abraham's faith produced *immediate obedience* because the phrase 'when he was tested, [he] offered' indicates that his obedience came at the same instant he heard the call to offer Isaac. The Genesis account corroborates this when it says, 'Abraham rose early in the morning, [and] saddled his donkey' (Gen. 22:3). He did not stall, and he did not procrastinate. There was no arguing with God, no bargaining, no equivocating. Abraham had learned well from the lessons of life. Therefore, his obedience was immediate and explicit. Though every fiber of his natural being rebelled against what God was calling him to do, though his feet felt like lead, he did not turn aside. What amazing faith! Not only that, but he really did 'sacrifice' Isaac. The Greek perfect tense is used when the text says that he 'offered up Isaac'—and the perfect tense refers to a completed action in past time. This means that the *sacrifice actually took place* as far as Abraham's resolve and obedience were concerned. From the divine perspective, as well as from Abraham's perspective, Abraham did it! But immediately the *same* verb is used in the imperfect tense in the following statement—he 'was in the act of offering up his only son'—indicating that it did not physically happen. The point is, in terms of obedience to God, Abraham did it. He completely offered his beloved Isaac, the laughter and joy of his life.

*Schreiner:* The author turns to one of the most significant events in the OT, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). The author notes that God 'tested' Abraham, and the narrative in Gen. 22:1

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begins with the words, ‘After these things God tested Abraham.’ Abraham received promises from God, which pledged to him land, offspring, and blessing (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-16; 15:4-5, 16; 17:5-6, 15-21; 18:18; 21:10-12; 22:16-18). Central to these promises was the promise of offspring, and the text cited above make clear that the promise would become a reality through Isaac, not Ishmael. In this sense Isaac was ‘the unique son’ (*τον μονογενη, ton monogenē*) of Abraham, or as the NIV puts it, his ‘one and only son.’ The promises couldn’t be fulfilled, however, if Abraham sacrificed Isaac, for the promises couldn’t be fulfilled through just any son of Abraham. They were guaranteed to *this son*, to Isaac. Hence, the Lord’s command to Abraham didn’t make much sense. It contradicted everything God had said. Nevertheless, Abraham trusted God by carrying out His instructions. Abraham had received the promises from God, and thus he did what God commanded, even though it contradicted what God had promised.

*Bruce:* What our author emphasizes is Abraham’s indomitable faith in the promises of God. God promised Abraham, long after the hope of progeny had receded for himself and Sarah, that he would have a numerous posterity, and at last the long-awaited son was born—the son on whose survival the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham depended. In this regard Ishmael and any other sons of Abraham did not count, for the word of God was quite specific: ‘Through the line of Isaac your posterity shall be traced’ (v. 18). Isaac was unique and irreplaceable—this is the point of the epithet rendered ‘only begotten’; he was, in God’s own words to Abraham, ‘your only son, whom you love, even Isaac’ (Gen. 22:2). And it was *Isaac* who had to be sacrificed! The ethical problem which the story presents to twentieth-century readers is not the problem on which our author concentrates. The problem to which he invites his reader’s attention is this: The fulfillment of God’s promises depended on Isaac’s survival: if Isaac was to die, how could those promises be fulfilled? And yet Abraham had no doubt that the one who had given the promises required the sacrifice of Isaac. What was he to do? It was Abraham’s problem: apart from the dictates of natural affection, how could the promise of God and the command of God be reconciled? It was for God, and not for Abraham, to reconcile His promise and His command. So, when the command was given, Abraham promptly set about obeying it; his own duty was clear, and God could safely be trusted to discharge *His* responsibility in the matter.

### 3. What God Said (11:18)

...<sup>18</sup>*of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”*

*Schreiner:* The author confirms that the promises were uniquely and exclusively given to Isaac. He cites Gen. 21:12. Here we have the story where Sarah wants to evict Ishmael from the house because he was mocking and deriding Isaac (Gen. 21:9-10). Abraham was grieved and didn’t want to carry out his wife’s command (Gen. 21:11). God, however, confirmed Sarah’s word. Abraham must follow her instruction, for the promise will be given through Isaac, not Ishmael. The promises, then, must be secured through Isaac, and yet God demanded that Abraham sacrifice him. If the readers are doubting God, if their circumstances make them wonder if they will receive the final reward, the author reminds them of Abraham’s situation. It seemed as if God were contradicting and nullifying His own promise!

### 4. What Faith Accomplishes

*Phillips:* This remarkable account (Gen. 22:3-10) raises some significant questions. How does faith overcome the natural objections to this command? How does faith pass this kind of test. I

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want to offer four answers, beginning with this: faith kneels before God in humble submission. Abraham must surely have had a long night before setting out with his son for the place of sacrifice. While unable to reason through all the problems, he must have knelt before God, trusted Him, and asked for grace to obey. It is worth pointing out that this greatest test occurred at the end of his life's journey of faith. Abraham's success here is the product of earlier and lesser trials, many of which he failed, as God honed and refined his character and his faith. Having received this command, Abraham must have reckoned that God's will was higher than his own will. Abraham worshiped God as God and therefore did not think to place himself in the position of judge of the Most High and Lord of heaven. Abraham's faith was rooted in conscious humility; his faith knelt before the throne of a God he would no longer dare to judge.

*Phillips:* In asking how Abraham resolved his problems and passed this test of faith, the second explanation is that the faith that receives God's promises must also obey God's commands. Abraham, who obeyed God's command, also 'had received the promises' (v. 17). The same faith that receives and relies upon God's Word in the promises is obligated to receive and obey God's Word in the command. It is the same God and the same Word. Faith accepts both promise and precept, commands and comforts. Christ as Lord as well as Christ as Savior, knowing that the one cannot be had without the other. Faith knows that the path of safety and of blessing is also the path of obedience.

*Phillips:* Some may object that in this case the promise and the command stand in stark opposition. The command can be obeyed only by undermining the promise. The answer to that objection is that the faith that obeys God's command leaves the means of the promise's fulfillment to God. If God has commanded it, then God knows what He is doing and is able to work it out for good. Indeed, this is one of the striking differences between the one who believes in God and the one who believes in self. Those who trust in God do not find their solace in being able to solve the puzzle by adding up their own mental arithmetic. The Christian finds peace when he knows what God has revealed and commanded; even without understanding, his faith accepts it as true because it comes from God.

*Phillips:* The third explanation follows from this. On the one hand, faith obeys even without answers; but we also must observe that faith gains understanding through God's Word. God tested not only Abraham's devotion, but also his spiritual understanding. Part of the reason he was able to succeed in this test was the answers he found in what God had already revealed. This too is something that Hebrews makes clear: 'He consider that God was able even to raise him from the dead' (v. 19). This was not autonomous, unbelieving reason, but faithful reasoning from what God had revealed. This faith explains Abraham's willingness to take his beloved son's life. He believed that God could raise him back to life from the dead. This statement in Hebrews is not found in the Genesis account, but it is proved there. Genesis 22:5 tells us that when Abraham arrived at the appointed place he said to his servants, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.' Notice what he said: 'We will come back.'

*Phillips:* Where, then, did Abraham get the idea that if he killed his son God would raise him from the grave? First, he must have realized that God's promise required that Isaac be alive. If Isaac had to be alive and yet had to be killed, then God had to raise him from the dead. This logic makes sense, but surely there is something more. Remember the circumstances of Isaac's conception and birth, when Sarah was far beyond child-bearing age, all in a manner promised and predicted and produced by the power of God. All of this surely made clear to Abraham that

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God had power over life, and if He has power over life then He has power over death as well. This was the ultimate answer to Abraham's problem, as it is for all of our problems. With the knowledge of God's power to take and give life, Abraham was able to obey.

*Phillips:* Finally, and surely this is the most significant explanation, Abraham was able to obey because he knew and trusted God. Because he had really come to know God, Abraham was able to trust him completely, to rely upon the Lord as his God, and to honor Him by obeying. This doesn't mean that it was easy for Abraham to obey. Abraham must have died a thousand deaths during the three days' march to the place where he would sacrifice the son he loved. But it does mean he was able to obey by faith, and it will mean that for you if you come to know God, to study and understand His attributes, to realize that because He is holy then all His motives are holy, and that because He is almighty nothing lies beyond His ability to save. Because God is good, as Paul wrote in Romans 8:28, 'In all things God works for the good of those who love Him.'

### 5. What Abraham Believed (11:19)

#### a) *Literal Resurrection (11:19a)*

<sup>19</sup>*He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead...*

*Hughes:* And his logic was audacious. God had said that Abraham would have children as numerous as the stars and the sand—and Abraham believed God (Gen. 15:5-6). God had said that through Isaac the great covenant and blessing would come—and Abraham believed God even though his body was 'as good as dead' (11:12; cp. Gen. 17:15-22). Abraham knew Isaac had come through a miraculous prophetic fulfillment of God's word. He also knew Isaac had no children and, in fact, was not even married. Yet God had clearly told him to sacrifice Isaac. There was no mistake or misunderstanding. Therefore, Isaac was as good as dead! And from Abraham's perspective it was now God's problem, for God's word through Isaac had to be fulfilled. Abraham's breathtaking logic was: God could and would raise the dead. There had never been a resurrection, but he knew God *had* to bring Isaac back to life. There was no other way. God would keep His way!

*MacArthur:* Abraham knew that the covenant, which could only be fulfilled through Isaac, was unconditional. He knew, therefore, that God would do whatever was necessary, including raising Isaac from the dead, to keep His covenant. The thought of sacrificing Isaac must have grieved Abraham terribly, but he knew that he would have his son back. He knew that God would not, in fact could not, take his son away permanently, or else He would have to go back on His own word, which is impossible.

*Schreiner:* Faced with such a daunting situation, Abraham didn't doubt God's promise. He remained convinced that God would fulfill His promise *through Isaac*. He was convinced that if he sacrificed Isaac, God would raise him from the dead and fulfill His promises through a miracle. The narrative in Genesis bears out this reading. We read in Gen. 22:5, 'Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we'll come back to you.'" The words of the narrative here are not incidental or accidental; they are included for a reason. Abraham was convinced that Isaac would return. Somehow and in some way God would fulfill His promise through Isaac.

*Bruce:* Our author's statement that Abraham believed in God's ability to raise the dead is not a gratuitous reading into the narrative of something which is not there. When Abraham left his

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servants behind while he and Isaac went to the place of sacrifice, he said to them: ‘The boy and I will go on there and worship, and we will come back to you’ (Gen. 22:5). The plain meaning of the text is that Abraham expected to come back with Isaac. But how could he come back with Isaac if his son was to be offered up as a burnt offering? Only if Isaac was to be raised from the dead after being sacrificed. Abraham reckoned, says our author, that since the fulfillment of the promises depended on Isaac’s survival, God was bound (as He certainly was able) to restore Isaac’s life if his life had to be taken.

### b) *Figurative Resurrection (11:19b)*

*...from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*

*Phillips:* As they walked up the mount, Isaac asked his father about the lamb for the burnt offering. ‘Where is the lamb?’ he asked. To this, Abraham gave a provocative answer: ‘God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’ (Gen. 22:0). This shows us how much Abraham was able to understand, even though he lived at such a primitive time in redemptive history. Genesis tells us how God provided for Abraham (Gen. 22:11-14). It is on the basis of this account that Hebrews concludes, ‘Figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.’ Isaac did not die and have to be resurrected, but God spared his life and honored Abraham’s faith.

*Phillips:* Christians have long seen the episode atop Mount Moriah as a picture of God’s provision of another sacrifice, the true sacrifice and Lamb of God. ‘Where is the lamb?’ asked Isaac, just as the whole of the Old Testament asked that same question. Years later, in the Israelite priesthood, lamb after lamb was slain day after day at the temple. Yet all the while everyone knew that mere animals could not really take away sin. ‘Where is the true lamb?’ the priests and people must often have asked. The answer was finally given by the last prophet of the old dispensation, John the Baptist, who saw Jesus walking alongside the Jordan and cried out, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ (Jn. 1:29).

*Phillips:* It is interesting to note the Greek text in Hebrews 11:19 does not say that Isaac’s deliverance was ‘figuratively speaking’ like a resurrection. The word it uses is ‘parable,’ so that verse 19 literally reads, ‘Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and *as a parable*, he did receive Isaac back from death. Christians have long understood this to mean that Isaac’s death illustrated and pointed forward to another death, the true death that takes away our sin.

*Phillips:* Indeed, the parallels are striking. Abraham was a father asked to sacrifice his son. The expression ‘one and only son’ doesn’t exactly fit here, although Isaac was singular as the child of promise. But perhaps the real purpose of the phrase is to point us to another Father who did give his one and only Son as a sacrifice. John 3:16 tells us, ‘For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.’ There is considerably more to this. Isaac carried wood for the offering on his back, just as Jesus Christ would later carry his cross to His own place of sacrifice. Abraham and Isaac’s journey through the valley of the shadow of death totaled three days, and for three days Jesus Christ lay in the tomb before He, as Isaac prefigures, was raised by the power of God. Indeed, some Christians see the ram in the thicket as a symbol of Christ’s human nature, offered up to death for us, and Isaac as a symbol of Christ’s divine nature, which though taken to the place of death is not allowed to die.

*Schreiner:* Isaac functions, then, as ‘an illustration’ (*παραβολή, parabolē*) or type or figure of the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Abraham, so to speak, received Isaac back from the

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dead, but that even anticipated another Son and another Father. In the latter instance the Father actually handed over and sacrificed His Son, and the Son gladly and willingly gave His life for the salvation of His brothers and sisters (2:10-18). Those who obey God are always rewarded, and thus the Father raised His Son from the dead. Isaac's return typologically points to and anticipates that greater resurrection. The readers, like Abraham, are called on to trust God, even when it looks as if everything conspires against the fulfillment of the promise. God's word always comes true, even if it takes a resurrection to bring it to pass. For if God fulfilled His promise to Abraham and was faithful to Jesus, He would be faithful to them as well.

*Bruce:* And in fact, as far as Abraham's resolution was concerned, Isaac was as good as dead, and it was practically from the dead that he received him back when his hand was arrested in mid-air and the heavenly voice forbade him to proceed further. He received him back from the dead, says our author, 'as a type' (*parabolē*)—meaning, probably, in a manner which prefigured the resurrection of Christ. The sacrifice of Isaac was early treated by Christians as a detailed parable of the sacrifice of Christ.

*MacArthur:* As it turned out, because he did not actually die, Isaac became only a 'type' of the resurrection. He was offered up but he was not slain. God provided a substitute. It was the fact that Abraham 'offered up Isaac' that proved his faith. The final standard of faith, its real proof, is willingness to sacrifice.

*Hughes:* What astounding faith! No wonder he is the father of all who believe. No wonder he is called the friend of God. How could I ever rise to such great heights of faith? We must understand that Abraham's great faith did not begin with the offering of Isaac. Certainly he did begin in faith (as all spiritual life must) when he stepped out from Ur and began his sojourn. And it was a great act of faith to believe God's promise that he and Sarah would be parents when they were both 'as good as dead.' But we must also remember the down times in Abraham's life, his lapses of faith—for example, the occasions on which he lied to save his own skin, saying Sarah was his sister (Gen. 12:13; 20:11-13) or when, impatient for an heir, he and Sarah took matters into their own hands and engaged Hagar to become the mother of Ishmael (Gen. 16:1-15). We must understand that it was through ups and downs that Abraham grew in faith—until he became capable of the ultimate display. The road to strong faith is never smooth. Faith will be tested. Inevitably there will be times of uncertainty and doubt and even despair. But the soul that clings to God will experience growth and notable triumphs of faith.

### **B. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (Hebrews 11:20-22)**

*Phillips:* Verses 20-22 consider the faith of the heirs of Abraham in the three generations that followed: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. To summarize their faith, the author looks at each of these three at the end of their lives, offering portraits of ripened faith that confirm the statement made in Hebrews 11:13: 'These all died in faith.'

*Hughes:* When Abraham died, he was succeeded by patriarchs who were nevertheless similarly imperfect men—Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. But what impresses the writer of Hebrews is that when they came to what they considered to be their final hour, they had a faith that looked beyond death—they were sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they did not see (cp. 11:1). They all were convinced that death would not frustrate God's purposes—that His word would be fulfilled.

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*MacArthur:* The three patriarchs mentioned in Hebrews 11:20-22 illustrate the power of faith in facing death. These men had not always lived faithfully. They trusted God imperfectly, just as we do. The emphasis of this passage, however, is on the faith that Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph exhibited at the ends of their lives. Each one faced death in full, confident faith. For that they are in the Hebrews heroes gallery. What makes the dying faith of these three men so significant is that, like Abraham, they died without seeing the fulfillment of God's promises. They passed them on to their children by faith. These men never doubted that the promises would come true. They did not die in the despair of unfulfilled dreams, but in the perfect peace of unfulfilled promises, confident because they were God's promises. They knew by faith that God would fulfill the promises because they knew He was a covenant-keeping God and a God of truth.

*Schreiner:* When we think about all that could be commented on in the life of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, it is remarkable that in every case the author reflects on what they said in their old age or when they were on their deathbed. He doesn't comment on anything these people *did* in their lives that manifested faith. Instead, he zeroes in on what they *said*, and how they prophesied about the future when they were about to die. In every case they continued to believe in the promises at their death, even when it became apparent they wouldn't be fulfilled in their lifetimes.

### 1. Isaac (11:20)

<sup>20</sup>*By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.*

*Phillips:* As we read the account of Isaac in the Book of Genesis, he does not come across as the boldest man of faith. His life was mostly uneventful, while God blessed him richly. Most of the biblical material about him concerns the passing on of the blessing to his sons Jacob and Esau. This is what the writer of Hebrews focuses on in verse 20. Genesis 25 tells of the birth of these twin boys, Esau the older and Jacob the younger. They were born in answer to Isaac and Rebekah's prayer for her barrenness. During her pregnancy the Lord informed Rebekah that the younger son would receive the blessing (Gen. 25:23), so they knew from the start this much of God's plan. However, Isaac preferred Esau. Genesis 25:28 tells us in unflattering terms that Isaac liked him better because Esau was a skillful hunter and Isaac 'had a taste for wild game.'

*Phillips:* In one of the Bible's more famous episodes, Jacob tricked his aged and blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing instead of Esau. In this manner, the prophecy God had given was fulfilled and God's plan was upheld. Isaac had told Esau to kill some game and prepare his favorite dish, after which he would give him the blessing. But at his mother's urging, Jacob went to Isaac in his place, having covered himself with animal skins to present the feel and smell of Esau and having brought a meal like the one his father wanted. Isaac therefore gave Jacob the blessing he had intended for Jacob's twin.

*Phillips:* When Esau returned to find that Jacob had stolen the blessing, he begged his father to undo what had happened. 'Bless me, even me also, O father!' Esau cried (Gen. 27:34). But Isaac, apparently recognizing the working of God's plan, knew he could not undo what had been done. In giving such blessing as he had left to give, he informed Esau that he would indeed serve his younger brother. Some blessing! Apparently the writer of Hebrews has in mind this response to God's providential control when he writes, 'By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.'

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*Hughes:* Actually, when Isaac pronounced the blessing, he meant to give the blessing of the firstborn to Esau, but he was deceived (Gen. 27). Nevertheless, after the blessing was given to Jacob, Isaac knew that it was binding and would not fail. In fact, he later blessed Jacob with full knowledge of what he was doing (cp. Gen. 27:33; 28:1-4). The main thing is that by faith Isaac knew his blessing would be perfectly fulfilled in the future.

*Schreiner:* The author considers Isaac's blessing of both Jacob (Gen. 27:27-29) and Esau (Gen. 27:39-40). In both instances, Isaac was confident God would fulfill His promises to them in the future. Isaac relied on the same promises as Abraham and was confident God would grant him offspring, land, and universal blessing in accord with the covenant He enacted with Abraham.

*MacArthur:* Just as his father had done with him, Isaac passed on the blessings of God's promises to his sons by faith. He had absolute certainty that they would come to pass. For the time being, the promises *were* the inheritance, which the patriarchs cherished as much as most people cherish material possessions, fame, and power. However, in the manner of the blessing, the entire family acted shamefully. Father and son tried to do the wrong thing in the wrong way, and mother and son tried to accomplish the right thing but in the wrong way. God produced the outcome that Jacob and Rebekah wanted, but not for their reasons or by their methods. He did not honor what they did any more than what Isaac and Esau did. God only honors faith, and none of these had acted in faith. The right outcome was the result of His faithfulness, not theirs. Not until the irreversibility of the blessing was obvious Isaac began to evidence faith. Only when he realized that the blessing was going to be on God's man regardless, did he acquiesce. He finally said yes to God's way. God had to box him into a corner before he believed; but he did believe. As he faced death, he blessed Jacob with the blessing that neither he nor his father had possessed and that neither Jacob nor his sons would possess. Isaac blessed Jacob in faith, knowing that God would fulfill the promises in His own way and in His own time.

*Bruce:* The one incident from Isaac's career which the author mentions as a token of his faith is his blessing of Jacob and Esau—their names are given in this order and not in the order of seniority, perhaps because this was the order in which they received their father's blessing. Nothing is said about the deception practiced on Isaac, in consequence of which the blessing which he had intended for Esau was bestowed on Jacob. The line of promise ran through Isaac, and as Isaac himself had received from God a reaffirmation of the promised blessings after Abraham's death (Gen. 26:2ff.), so he determined to transmit those blessings to the following generation. When he learned that Jacob had received the blessing intended for Esau, he made no attempt to revoke it; rather he confirmed it: 'yes, and he shall be blessed' (Gen. 27:33). Yet he did reserve a blessing for Esau, and although it was not the blessing bound up with the promise, yet it was a blessing concerning 'things to come,' as truly as Jacob's blessing was. Isaac, like his father, believed God, and his faith too was an 'assurance of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen.'

### 2. Jacob (11:21)

<sup>21</sup>*By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.*

*Phillips:* Jacob too presents a less than sterling life-history. What Jacob did to gain his father's blessing became a life pattern. He tricked his father to steal Esau's blessing, and he went on to trick his father-in-law Laban out of great flocks in order to make himself rich. Jacob's grasping tendencies did not truly bless him, for with each self-reliant achievement he had to flee the anger

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of those whom he had wronged. Finally, this pattern brought him to the end of his prodigious mental resources. Beside the Jabbok River, God wrestled Jacob into submission, and the grasper was made a man of faith (Gen. 32). God changed his name from Jacob to Israel, and thereafter he was a model believer. Hebrews 11:21 tells us about the end of his life, saying, ‘By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.’

*Phillips:* Just as Isaac had blessed his sons Jacob and Esau, the time came for Jacob to pass on his blessing to the next generation. Years after the dramatic events by which Jacob was wrestled to faith, Jacob and his family had come to Egypt during a famine. After the amazing sequence of events recorded in Genesis 37-42, Joseph was serving in Egypt as prime minister to Pharaoh. Genesis 48 tells us of Jacob giving Joseph the blessing of the firstborn, and then passing on his blessing to Joseph’s two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

*Phillips:* Verse 21 really tells of two different episodes: the giving of the blessing and Jacob’s request that Joseph promise to have him buried in the land of his fathers, a request we are told was made as he worshiped God while leaning on his staff. ‘Do not bury me in Egypt, ‘ he said, ‘but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.’ ‘I will do as you say,’ Joseph answered. “‘Swear to me,” he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worship as he leaned on the top of his staff” (Gen. 47:29-31). This picture of Jacob worshiping God as he leaned on his staff, near the end of his strength, presents a beautiful picture of faith. It was fitting for Jacob to make this request in this way, for the staff was the sign of Jacob’s pilgrimage. Jacob’s final act of worship, leaning upon the top of his staff, was characteristic for one who lived his life as a stranger and a sojourner.

*Hughes:* Aged Jacob, leaning on his staff, had Joseph bring his sons to be blessed. The older Manasseh was placed by his right hand in order to receive the greater blessing, and the younger Ephraim on his left. But Jacob, responding to the direction of God, crossed his hands, reversing the blessings (Gen. 48:17-20). Thus, by faith in God’s word he was sure about the future even though it was contrary to human convention. Nothing, he was convinced, would thwart God’s purposes. And, indeed, in the course of time the tribe of Ephraim became a leader in Israel.

*MacArthur:* Unlike his father, Jacob did not try to circumvent God’s plan for his heirs. Joseph, though younger than all his brothers except Benjamin, was the chosen son to bless, just as Jacob, though younger, was chosen above Esau. In fact, Joseph received a double blessing, in that his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, were both blessed; although again the younger son, Ephraim, received the greater blessing (48:19). Consequently, instead of only one tribe descending from Joseph, as with his brothers, two tribes (often referred to as half-tribes) descended from him.

*Schreiner:* The future-oriented character of faith continues in Jacob’s life. Like Isaac, Jacob blessed his sons when he was old. In fact, Jacob was near death. But he didn’t view his death as a contradiction or refutation of God’s promises, for he prophesied about what God would do in the future in the life of Joseph’s sons (Gen. 48:1-22). In the MT of Gen. 47:31, Jacob gives thanks ‘at the head of his bed,’ while in the LXX he worships at the top of his staff. Hebrews clearly follows the LXX here. In either case, the main point of the verse is the same: faith looks to the future and trusts in God’s promises.

*Bruce:* Jacob in his turn demonstrated similar faith. Isaac was misled by the plotting of his wife and younger son into given the younger son the blessing which he had designed for the elder; but when Jacob on his deathbed blessed the two sons of Joseph, he deliberately bestowed the greater

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blessing on Ephraim, the younger son. But he blessed both of them concerning ‘things to come,’ as he himself had been blessed by Isaac; and thus, while his earlier career had been marked by anything but faith, as he endeavored repeatedly by his own scheming to gain advantages for himself, yet at the end of his days he recognized the futility of all his scheming, and relied on the faithfulness of the ‘Mighty One of Jacob.’

### 3. Joseph (11:22)

<sup>22</sup>*By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.*

*Phillips:* Finally, we have Joseph, who by faith ‘at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.’ Out of all the exciting events of Joseph’s life this seems a strange summary, but it fits the approach of viewing the patriarch’s faith at the time of death. Joseph’s story is well known: betrayed by his brothers, he ended up a slave in Egypt. Trusting God, he was ultimately delivered and raised up to be prime minister to Pharaoh, with great power and wealth. When a famine struck Canaan, the family arrived as refugees, only to find their long-lost brother as the keeper of Egypt’s grain. Jacob, who had mistakenly thought Joseph dead, rejoiced, and the covenant family came for what would turn out to be a very long stay in Egypt.

*Phillips:* God’s prophecy to Abraham told him of the events that were now transpiring in Egypt. His descendants would be aliens in another land, enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years, after which God would deliver them in a great exodus (Gen. 15:12-16). We know that this prophecy stayed in the family, because Joseph was aware of it and trusted what God had revealed about His plan. Therefore, as His own death approached, he exhorted the others to believe the promise of deliverance, and directed that his remains be taken out of Egypt when the exodus took place. Despite the fact that his palaces and great riches were all in Egypt, and even though his great achievements were there—the earthly monuments to his wisdom and skill in saving the nation from famine—Joseph knew that his future lay with the promises of God. To show this, and no doubt to encourage generations of enslaved Israelites about the exodus to come, Joseph directed that his bones be taken for burial in the tomb of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Promised Land. If he could not live there in life, then he would go there in death, trusting in the God of the promise.

*Hughes:* The last patriarch mentioned here, Joseph, was sure nothing would annul God’s promise that Israel would one day possess the land. This is remarkable because he had left Canaan when he was seventeen (Gen. 37:2) and lived in Egypt until his death at the age of 110 (Gen. 50:26). But in fulfillment of his faith’s directive, Joseph’s mummy was carried out of Egypt by Moses (Ex. 13:19) and later was buried in Shechem by Joshua when he conquered the land (Jos. 24:32). The overall point is that all these patriarchs ended well, for they had learned to trust God’s bare word. They were sure regarding what would happen after their deaths.

*MacArthur:* Joseph spent all of his adult life in Egypt. Though a fourth-generation heir of the promise, he could not claim even to have sojourned in the Promised Land, much less to have inherited it. It had been some two hundred years since God made the initial covenant with Abraham. Two hundred years of promise, and no fulfillment in sight. IN fact, by the time of Joseph’s death, *none* of Abraham’s descendants (that is, the descendants of promise) lived in the Promised Land at all. Because of the famine in Canaan, Joseph had brought his father and his brothers to Egypt. Jacob was carried back to Canaan after he died, and Joseph would be satisfied

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if only ‘his bones’ could be buried there. If he could not inherit the land, at least the land could ‘inherit’ him. It was not until the Exodus that Joseph’s bones were actually taken to Canaan (Ex. 13:19), but his heart and his hope had always been there.

*Schreiner:* The faith of Joseph is similar to what is said about Isaac and Jacob. Joseph at his death (Gen. 50:24-25) reminds his heirs about the promised exodus of Israel. God will deliver Israel from Egypt and bring them to Canaan, and Joseph wants his bones to be brought with them. Joseph is in effect saying that Egypt is not his home. Canaan is his home. The lesson for the Hebrews is clear. Like Joseph they should be looking forward to and trusting in what God will do in the future. He will certainly deliver His people. Furthermore, their home is not on earth. Even though Joseph was a ruler in Egypt, he recognized that he was an exile, that his true home was in Canaan. So too, the readers should recognize that their true home is the heavenly city; and like Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph they should trust God’s promises even in death.

*Bruce:* Joseph also, at the end of his days, showed the same firm faith in the fulfillment of God’s promises. Joseph’s career certainly presents instances of faith in abundance, such as his steadfastness under temptation and his patience under unjust treatment. Other writers enlarge on his righteousness, his fortitude, and his wisdom; but the one incident singled out by our author to illustrate his faith belongs to the end of his life, because, above everything else recorded of him, it expresses his conviction regarding ‘things to come’ (see Gen. 50:24-25). Joseph had spent the whole of his long life, apart from the first seventeen years, in Egypt; but Egypt was not his home. Even when the rest of his family came down to Egypt at his invitation, he knew that their residence there would be but temporary. Just as his father Jacob had insisted on being carried back to the promised land for burial, so Joseph made his relatives swear that they would perform the like service for him. And in due course the coffin which contained his embalmed body was carried from Egypt when the Israelites left that land under the guidance of Moses, and was buried at Shechem after the settlement in Canaan.

### 4. Lessons

#### a) *Patriarch’s Faith*

*Phillips:* Hebrews 11:1 says, ‘No faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ Surely this is what we find in the record of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, who trusted in things unseen, spiritual realities made tangible to them only by faith. Their faith *was* focused on spiritual realities. It was rooted not in things of this world, but things of heaven. These three family members had varied experiences. But they were all looking to God for spiritual blessings while they lived like pilgrims in this world. In this way, they demonstrated that their citizenship was in heaven, and they each showed a concern to pass on a spiritual inheritance to their children. We will be diligent if we possess the same faith.

*Phillips:* The faith of these men was first spiritual, but second, it was forward-looking, as the passing of the blessing demonstrates. None of these men experienced the fulfillment of the promises when they died, but were looking ahead to what God would do in the future. This is why they took the passing on of God’s blessing so seriously.

*Phillips:* Hebrews 11 also emphasizes how faith handles the prospect of death, and this is a third feature of the patriarch’s faith. It is obvious that these men trusted in God’s resurrection, for they faced death with a calm serenity, Jacob worshiping God while resting on his staff. It is always a mark of Christian faith to approach death with a peace that comes from God.

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*Phillips:* Fourth, and finally, the faith of all three patriarchs was firmly fixed upon the Word of God, and therefore upon the plan God revealed through it. They received God's revelation in faith, and in His plan they saw that they were joined to His grand redemptive purpose, stretching back in history through Abraham and those before him, and reaching forward toward eternity future. They saw that by the grace of God they played a part in that plan, and that they were links connecting others to God's true Promised Land. In the promises and prophecies of God's Word, they saw the substance of things to come just as we must, and they knew how to face the present as well as the future, which is what faith does for the believer.

### b) *God's Plan*

*Phillips:* If understanding God's plan was essential to these patriarchs, and if they are spoken of in Hebrews 11 as models for our faith, then the plan of God must be of great importance to every Christian. Abraham and his descendants knew some things about what God had in store, and what they knew, they trusted. We have the whole Bible, which tells us far more, and what we have we too must trust. The Bible shows that God's plan centers on the work of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners. It is in Christ that these promises to Abraham have come true. Our passage in Hebrews 11 makes clear three things about God's plan.

*Phillips:* First, God's plan cannot be manipulated. The patriarchs knew a great deal of information about their future, yet that did not give them control over future events. Isaac illustrates this best. He wanted to give Esau the blessing, even though he knew God had foretold that it would go to Jacob. When he was old and blind, Isaac arranged to bless Esau, but the blessing was not Isaac's to give or to manipulate. Jacob's trickery in gaining the blessing may not commend him as an example of piety, but it does show God's ability to implement his own plan. One reason we cannot manipulate God's will is that we cannot discern it except as He has spoken it in His Word. If we know that God has a plan, but we cannot predict the future, what are we to do? We are to submit to God's Word. We are to trust and obey, step by step as God leads us through this world; like the pilgrims, we are on our long journey home.

*Phillips:* The second point from this passage is that God's plan cannot be taken for granted. Whenever we think we are sure of what God has in store for us, we are likely to be surprised. Joseph learned this lesson when he brought his two sons before Jacob to receive his blessing. Genesis 48 tells us how Joseph brought them before his father and carefully placed the older son, Manasseh, by Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim, the younger, by his left. The Bible describes what happened then: 'But Israel reached out his right hand and put it on Ephraim's head, though he was the younger, and crossing his arms, he put his left hand on Manasseh's head, even though Manasseh was the firstborn' (Gen. 48:14). When Joseph saw his father's right hand on his younger son Ephraim, he protested, 'Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head' (Gen. 48:18). But Jacob refused, and his crossed arms provide a firm reminder that we cannot assume God's plan or take it for granted.

*Phillips:* This means that we can expect to be surprised by God, and that we must keep our eyes focused on Him always. He will start things in unexpected places, do things through unexpected people, all to show that He is the One who is orchestrating a plan that works according to His own secret will. How often it glorifies God to work in contrary ways, contradicting normal expectations. Jacob's crossed arms remind us that God's plan is not subject to human standards and conventions. In the logic of the ancient world, the oldest son always received the chief blessing, but God operates differently. Indeed, none of the three figures in our passage were the oldest according to the flesh (that is, by birth). Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were all younger sons,

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but they were also the ones who received God's blessing. They received their position according to grace, by faith, and this is how God operates in the world.

*Phillips:* God's plan cannot be manipulated, and we must not take it for granted. But third, this passage shows us that God's plan cannot fail. Isaac was a weak man, Jacob was a cheat, and Joseph was a victim. Yet through these three generations, God steadily wove His plan toward the end He had designed. Into Egypt went His people, right on His schedule. Isaac sought to give the blessing to Esau, but God's plan overruled; Joseph lined up his sons before his father, only to watch Jacob cross his arms. Years later Pharaoh would determine to hold Israel in slavery, yet God's people would carry out Joseph's body in the exodus. Nothing can change or thwart God's will and plan (cp. Is. 46:9-10). This means that we must not judge God's intentions by the appearance of our circumstances. God is working according to His plan, for the good of those who trust Him. Of one thing we may be perfectly sure: Jesus Christ reigns now upon the throne of heaven, and history is leading to His exaltation as Lord of lords.

### c) *Abraham's Faith*

*Hughes:* But Abraham is the transcending example, because he had learned the logic of faith: first, that God's word never fails, and second, that it must be obeyed at all costs. So the questions for us are: 1) Does God's Word say it? Not does the pastor say it, or does the committee say it. Rather, is it the clear teaching of God's Word—the Scriptures? And, as a point of fact, most of God's Word is very clear as to what it means. As Mark Twain said, it is not what we do not understand about God's Word that troubles us; it is what we do understand! We can, and must, ascertain what God's Word says. 2) Do we believe it? Do we believe what God's Word says about Jesus? Do we believe what it says about salvation? Do we believe what it says about judgment? Do we believe what it says about riches? Do we believe what it says about purity? 3) And finally, do we obey God's Word?

For next time: Read Hebrews 11:23-29.