

Hebrews 11:17-22

Patriarchal Faith

By faith Isaac...by faith Jacob...by faith Joseph... (vv. 20-22).

What does it mean to live by faith? We've been allowing this 11th chapter of Hebrews to answer that question for us. After placing such an emphasis on the superiority of Christ in the preceding chapters of Hebrews the author of this epistle now places a strong emphasis on the practical ramifications of the person and work of Christ.

If he is the brightness of his Father's glory and the express image of his person then we should have faith in him. If he has purged our sins and has taken his place at the right hand of God as our Great High Priest then we should have faith in him. If his priesthood is an everlasting priesthood and his sacrifice for our sins is a once for all completed sacrifice that is sufficient for all our sins then we should have faith in him.

Others throughout the history of redemption had faith in him and they didn't know as much about him as we know in this superior age of fullness. So in spite of the challenges and trials that this life brings to us we should, nevertheless have faith in Christ.

We've been drawing lessons from those in the past that had faith in Christ and we've discovered that they didn't have life easy either. And yet they continued in the faith and they made the plain declaration by their lives that they were seeking a country, a better country that is an heavenly. And when the believer makes such a plain declaration and strives to be mindful of the country he's seeking rather than the country he's come from then God is not ashamed to be called his God.

This morning we come to consider a three-some of patriarchs that all had faith in Christ. Each one could arguably be a study in itself for the book of Genesis reveals to us the lives of these men. But the author of Hebrews fires them off in rapid fire succession, as it were. Notice what it says beginning in v. 20:

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff. 22 By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.

It's interesting to note in these three verses that the author of the epistle makes reference to a particular time in the lives of each of these men. He does not deal with them as they were in the prime of their lives but he deals with them when they were close to the end of their lives – at least they thought they were close to the end of their lives. Isaac actually lived for quite some time after he blessed Jacob but he thought the end of his life might be near. It says of him in Gen. 27:1 that he was old and his eyes were dim and when he summoned Esau to him he says in v. 2 *Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death.*

Of the other two men the text in Hebrews says that they were dying. Note again the words of v. 21 *By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph*; and the words of v. 22 *By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel...*

So the focus in these verses is upon the dying days of the 3 patriarchs that are brought to our attention. We know, of course, that when a man is in his dying days very often his priorities will shift in such a way that things that were formerly thought to be very important now become not so important and spiritual things take on an added importance as well they should. All of a sudden the amount of money a man has made is a thing of little consequence. No matter how much he's made he can't take any of it with him. And even if he could it would do him no good before the judgment throne.

Eternity is at hand no matter how old or how young a person is. But when a man is advanced in years the importance of being rich toward God takes on an added importance and heaven and hell become imminent realities rather than distant theories. What lessons can we learn, then, from these three patriarchs in their dying days? This is the theme I want to focus on this morning. You see, these three patriarchs, while they were in many respects very different from one another, where faith is concerned they had some things in common. And so I want to draw your attention this morning to:

The Faith of Three Great Men in Their Dying Days

Would you note with me first of all regarding these men:

I. They Faced Death with a Calm Demeanor

I've pointed out to you already that the emphasis in these verses on these men (two of the three especially) is on their death. *By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph* (v. 21); *By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.*

I say that they faced death with a calm demeanor because you don't see them in a state of panic. You don't see them exerting strained efforts to hold on to their lives for as long as they possibly can. Indeed you don't see them even focused on themselves. Their focus, rather, is on their children. It is here especially that they demonstrate to us that they are not being mindful of the country from which they came but they are focused instead on that better country to which they're headed. And the matter of where they were headed was so settled in their hearts that they were able to think of others rather than be absorbed with themselves. So Isaac's focus is on his sons, Jacob and Esau. And Jacob's focus was on two of his grandsons. And Joseph's focus was on the succeeding generations that would follow him. This is why I say that they faced death with a calm demeanor.

Last week we noted the general statement in v. 13 that tells us *these all died in faith* which means that they lived their lives in faith and their faith endured right up to and including the time of their departure from this world. A faith that only benefits a man in

this world is really not all that precious if it doesn't prepare him to face the hereafter. So Paul writes in 1Cor. 15:19 *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.*

The reason for such a statement by Paul is obvious. Our time in this world is short. Our time in this world amounts to the duration of a vapor according to James. We will soon be able to see our breath when we stand outside on a cold day. If you were to try to measure the duration of any one of those vapors you see when you exhale, how long would any of them be? Let those vapors preach to you, the next time you see them, that they represent the duration of your life.

Several years ago, as a student, I came across a book in the library at BJU entitled *Voices on the Edge of Eternity*. The book contained a number of firsthand accounts of the death-bed experiences of Christians and non-Christians. I actually found the book on the internet yesterday only to discover that there are only used versions of it available at very high prices.

I've never forgotten the account from that book of the death-bed experience of the French philosopher Voltaire. I was able, with a little searching, to find accounts of his death that were drawn from the book or from the same sources that the book drew from. It is a controversial matter as to the veracity of the account. Since it casts atheism in such a poor light there are many atheists who deny it. Listen to a portion of the account of Voltaire's death:

“When Voltaire felt the stroke that he realized must terminate in death, he was overpowered with remorse. He at once sent for the priest, and wanted to be ‘reconciled with the church.’ His infidel flatterers hastened to his chamber to prevent his recantation; but it was only to witness his ignominy and their own. He cursed them to their faces; and, as his distress was increased by their presence, he repeatedly and loudly exclaimed, ‘Be gone! It is you that have brought me to my present condition. Leave me, I say; be gone! What a wretched glory is this which you have produced to me!’

“Hoping to allay his anguish by a written recantation, he had it prepared, signed it, and saw it witnessed. But it was all unavailing. For two months he was tortured with such an agony as led him at times to gnash his teeth in impotent rage against God and man. At other times in plaintive accents, he would plead, ‘O, Christ! O, Lord Jesus!’ Then, turning his face, he would cry out, ‘I must die-abandoned of God and of men!’

“As his end drew near, his condition became so frightful that his infidel associates were afraid to approach his bedside. Still they guarded the door, that others might not know how awfully an infidel was compelled to die. Even his nurse repeatedly said, ‘For all the wealth of Europe I would never see another infidel die.’ It was a scene of horror that lies beyond all exaggeration. Such is the well-attested end of the one who had a natural sovereignty of intellect, excellent education, great wealth, and much earthly honor.”

It would not be true to say that every Christian who has ever died did so with no fear or agitation. The death experiences of Christians vary widely in accordance with God's sovereign wisdom but unlike the person with no faith, the believer in Christ is given grace. I'm reminded of the last scene in Pilgrim's Progress when Christian's wife, Christiana comes to the Jordan to cross it. The narrator of the scene describes how the Jordan seemed unusually shallow on that occasion which was perfectly suited to the frail and timid demeanor of Christian's wife.

And so we know and are assured that just as surely as Christ gives his followers grace to live he will also give them grace to die. Listen to the words of Paul as he expresses to Timothy his knowledge of his own impending death in 2Tim. 4:6-8:

For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. We also know that we have the promise of Christ's presence when we enter into the valley of the shadow of death. Ps 23:4 *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

For these reasons the Christian has every advantage when it comes to facing death. Through Christ he can face death with the assurance of sins forgiven – through Christ he can face death with the sure hope of heaven – through Christ he can face death in the knowledge that there also awaits him a crown of righteousness that was won for him by Christ's life and death. What a blessing, then, to be able to face death with a calm demeanor because the issues of death have already been settled by the death of Christ. But not only did these 3 patriarchs face death calmly, but consider with me next that:

II. They Bore the Burden of Succeeding Generations

Again the words of v. 20 *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. V. 21 By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; V. 22 By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.*

In each instance we find a passing of the baton, as it were, in a relay race. We find a continued burden for the cause of truth and a desire as well as an assurance in the minds and hearts of these 3 patriarchs that the cause of redemption would advance in the next generation and in the generations to follow.

This is, of course, the greatest legacy that we can bestow upon our children. We convey to them the blessings of salvation and we commit to them the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a wonderful thing when parents are able to bestow on their children the treasures that they leave behind in this world. Some children benefit much from their inheritance. When I worked in printing the man that owned the company had inherited that company from his Father who had started the company in his own garage. This man saw

the company grow to include about 100 employees. Sadly he also saw the same company go out of business. And doesn't that illustrate for us the transient nature of the goods of this world? But even had the company succeeded and enabled that owner to pass on even greater riches to his own children the question that Christ raises would still apply: *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?* (Mk. 8:36).

This is why I say that the greatest legacy parents can bestow upon their children is a spiritual legacy. You may not be able to leave a dime to your children when you pass from this world, but if you've taught them the way of salvation then you've left them with that pearl of great price that is worth selling everything to gain.

This is why you pray for your children and this is why you train your children and this is why you meet as a family around the word of God and bring your children to church – because you, like these 3 patriarchs, bear the burden for your children. This is the mark of true faith.

I can remember having a conversation with my dad on the subject of child-rearing some time before my dad passed away. My dad had not contributed anything to my spiritual development except, I suppose, the freedom for me to decide for myself what path I would follow in terms of my religion. And in the course of this conversation he was suggesting that I leave that same barren legacy with my children – i.e. the legacy of deciding for themselves what path they'll follow.

Now, in a sense, your children will decide for themselves. It will be their decision to accept Christ or reject Christ but that doesn't excuse us as parents from the burden of exerting all our influence and all our teaching and all our praying toward leading our children to go on with Christ. The trouble with my dad's outlook, you see, is that he was an unbeliever who didn't appreciate the truth of the gospel. He treated the gospel as if it were false or at best optional. That is definitely not the way that a parent with faith treats the gospel or treats his children.

As parents we possess that pearl of great price and our heart's desire is that we pass on that pearl of great price to our children. And shame on the parents that are negligent in that duty who fail to watch for their children or who allow so much of the world to infect their children that their children fail to appreciate the worth of that pearl of salvation.

We know, of course, and must sadly acknowledge that there are children who, in spite of their parents efforts do not come to value that pearl of great price but cling to the worthless and transient things of this world and desire only the world's goods and the world's pleasures. It's a hard-rending thing for a parent who has the desire to pass on a spiritual legacy to their children only to have their children despise such a legacy.

And in such a situation the very worst thing that a parent can do is to give up on their children. At the International Congress of Free Presbyterians this summer the very last message of the Congress was preached by Rev. Reggie Cranston from our church in Port Hope. He preached on the theme of perilous times in the home. The theme of the Congress

was Old Paths in perilous times and Reggie's assigned topic was perilous times in the home.

Reggie made a very interesting observation about the home of Joseph and Mary. He pointed out that here was a home that knew the presence of Christ day by day. Who can imagine what it would be like to have the very Son of God present in the home continually? Here was a home that had an advantage that was unlike any other home in that day. Here was a home that would have been marked by godliness and holiness. Here is a home that would have been truly sanctified and yet in spite of such untold advantages we still read in John's gospel that his brethren didn't believe on him. Listen to the first 5 verses of John chp. 7:

After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him. 2 Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand. 3 His brethren therefore said unto him, Depart hence, and go into Judaea, that thy disciples also may see the works that thou doest. 4 For there is no man that doeth any thing in secret, and he himself seeketh to be known openly. If thou do these things, shew thyself to the world. 5 For neither did his brethren believe in him.

In spite of the most advantageous home environment that was graced with the presence of Christ his own brethren still didn't believe in him. When you come to Acts 1, however, we read in v. 14 that *These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.*

The unbelieving brethren of Jn. 7 are now gathered with the others in prayer in Acts 1 and as Rev. Cranston notes – the thing that has happened in between these chapters is Calvary. Christ has died on Calvary's cross. And so this example coupled with the glorious truth of Christ's atoning death must compel us as parents not to give up on our children. We still must pray for them and plead with them. We still must love them and if that seems hard then you need only reflect on how unlovable you were at the time Christ loved you and gave himself for you.

The mark of patriarchal faith, then, is the desire and the effort to bear the burden for our children. May we be enabled by God's grace to pass on the blessings we know to the generation that follows us. May that succeeding generation be the generation that rises up as that generation of Joshua's day which conquered Canaan.

And so we have these two marks of patriarchal faith. They faced death calmly and they bore the burden for their children and the succeeding generations. Would you consider finally that:

III. They Engaged in the Activity of Heaven and Earth

The activity of heaven and earth is, of course, worship. Note the words of v. 21 *By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.*

When you consider, in addition to this specific term, worship, that the activity of blessing someone is also an activity of worship. *By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come* – i.e. he invoked God's blessing upon Jacob and Esau. Jacob invoked or called on God in prayer to bless the children of Joseph. And at the time Joseph spoke of the departing of the Israelites from Egypt, we read in Gen. 50:25 that *he took an oath of the children of Israel saying God will surely visit you and ye shall carry up my bones from hence.*

So in each instance we see that the faith of these patriarchs was accompanied with worship. This is, at the end of the day, where our faith takes us. Let not the person who doesn't worship flatter himself into thinking he has faith. He may give assent to the truth of the gospel but if he's never been moved to worship then he never has been truly believed.

We don't know that much about heaven. We know that it will exceed all that we can ask or think but when it comes to the descriptions of heaven we're only given a glimpse – a snapshot, as it were. We do know, however, that worship will be the primary activity of heaven.

Those that live by faith find their souls thrilled when they read in Rev. 4:9-11 *And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, 10 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.*

It comforts our hearts to think that on this very day, Mr. Allamon, Bunie's dad, is now knowing his first Sabbath day in heaven and is engaged in worship in heaven. And the day will be upon us sooner than we realize in which all the redeemed in Christ will be gathered around his throne perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God for ever.

Our worship of Christ is foundational to all that we are and all that we do. If we would pass the baton of God's truth to our children then they must see that we are taken up with Christ in worship. They must see in our worship that we esteem Christ above all else. And if we would face death with the fear of death removed it will be because we've learned to trust in the One that we worship and we worship him because he was slain for us.

And so I wonder this morning as we bring this meeting to a close – could your faith be characterized as patriarchal faith? Is the object of your faith the same as theirs? They had faith in Christ and their faith in Christ enabled them to face death and it burdened them to pass on the truth of the gospel to their children and it compelled them to worship the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. May God help us to have in the good and right sense the faith of our fathers. And may we, in that faith, walk obediently as our fathers walked; trust as our father's trusted; submit to our God as our fathers submitted and worship as they worshipped. And may we by our obedience and trust and worship hand down our spiritual legacy to our children and our children's children.