

Case Studies in Faith: Blessings At Death

These verses may seem a bit redundant or perhaps anticlimactic after the verses from last week concerning Abraham and Isaac. The drama of last week's event, as amazing as it was, is a rarity. These verses today have one thing in common that I want us to observe. We travel from last week's drama to this week's certainty. These three men mentioned in our verses today each had drama, failures, and success in their lives but what is mentioned is the common denominator they shared. They all died of old age believing in the promises of God so strongly that the feebleness of body did not detract from their rock-solid faith. Like their forefathers; Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham they all died not having received the promises but looking for them in the future. In their case, the covenant promises were passed on from one generation to the next, from father to son to grandson.

What made the difference in the lives of these men mentioned today? What was it that caused them to not fear death but to look straight into the eyes of death and rejoice? The difference was saving faith. God had given each of these men the gift of faith and in the end that was what carried them from this world to the next.

By way of contrast, I want to share a couple of examples of the last words of nonbelievers. **Edward Gibbon** a brilliant English historian who wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in 6 volumes from 1776 to 1789, said this on his death bed in 1794, *"This day may be my last. I will agree that the immortality of the soul is at times a very comfortable doctrine. All this is now lost,*

finally, irrevocably lost. All is dark and doubtful.” His eternal future was indeed dark, but not doubtful. **Thomas Paine**, the renowned American author and atheist who was very outspoken against anything Christian had these words at the end of his life in 1809, *“O Lord help me. O Christ help me. O God what have I done to suffer so much? But there is no God! But if there should be, what shall become of me hereafter? Stay with me for God’s sake! Send even a child to stay with me, for it is hell to be alone. If ever the devil had an agent, I have been that one.”* I could go on with many examples of unbelievers and their dying words. Most the examples I read had in common a fear for the unknown, a fear of death. Unless these folks had an unknown gospel experience in their final moments, their fear was understandable. As they drew their last breath, I wonder if they realized Hell was their final destination.

Notice the difference between these two examples unbelievers and the words of those who were believers as they approached death. **Thomas Goodwin** was the famous English Puritan from the 17th century. On his death bed said these words, *“Ah, is this dying? How I have dreaded as an enemy this smiling friend.”* **John Owen** who probably wrote the greatest exposition of the Book of Hebrews ever written with almost 4000 pages had these words as he died in 1683, *“I am going to Him whom my soul loveth, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love, which is the soul ground of my consolation.”* **Andrew Fuller** the great English Reformed Baptist pastor and author from the 18th century as he died said this, *“I am a great sinner; and if I am saved, it can only be by great and sovereign grace, by great and sovereign grace.”* There is a clear difference between the deaths of those who do not know Christ versus those who adore the Lord, even though none were perfect and all were sinners.

Before I was saved, I had a great fear of death. I was told I would not live very long due to my health problems. Yet, here I am and I no longer fear death for my future is with Christ. My father-in-law Cecil was raised in a church going family but became disillusioned with religion. He joined a church in order to marry Cleo. While serving in Europe during World War II he said what he observed changed his whole outlook about God. He noticed the difference of how non-believers and believers died. Non-believers died with fear, while believers had a peace. This opened his heart and soul to seek a relationship Christ and not allow man-made religion to guide his feelings and relationship with God.

This day, in our time together in God's Holy Word, I want to explore together three men who died in the Lord and exercised faith right up to the end. The human need addressed in these 3 short verses is the need to not fear death but bring glory to God through death. To me it is amazing that these examples of dying show no fear and all exhibit peace. Also, these verses show us the importance of our passing a legacy of faith to the next generation and beyond.

As we prepare to explore God's Word and meaning let us begin with prayer.

Isaac's Blessing (v. 20)

We begin in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 20, "[By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.](#)" Before we drive into verse 20, let me set the stage for Isaac's blessing of Jacob. In Genesis chapter 26 we read that after Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, God gives direction and blessing to Isaac, ²"[The LORD appeared to *Isaac* and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. ³ Sojourn in this land, and **I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring** I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. ⁴ I will multiply your offspring as the](#)

stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And **in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed,** ⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.’”

(Genesis 26:2-5) Isaac received and believed the same promise that Abraham had believed. Like his father, he also was a sojourner in the land. Like his father, Isaac died in faith. Isaac also had his good and not-so-good times and behaviors like his father. So, both faithful and sinful behavior would also mark the lives of Isaac’s sons Esau and Jacob. Even though Jacob would deceive his father, Esau had sold his birthright to his brother prior to God blessing Isaac. Now as Isaac is old and nearing death, Jacob deceives his father and Isaac blesses him saying, ²⁸ “**May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine.** ²⁹ **Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!**” (Genesis 27:28-29) God blesses despite our weaknesses and failures for those who love Him and seek Him. We know that Isaac did not always make the best decisions, many times Isaac walked by sight and not by faith. But at the end of his life God controls events and Isaac does as God has ordained even by deception.

Isaac’s wife Rebecca was unable to have children. Isaac and Rebecca prayed and the Lord answered their prayer. Twins came. Esau was born first and then Jacob. But it was Jacob that would receive the continued covenant blessing of God. Isaac favored Esau over Jacob. Esau was the outdoorsman and Jacob liked it inside. Esau was the firstborn and by long held custom and cultural rights should have been the one to inherit the father’s blessing. However, God had something far different in mind. Even Esau followed God’s plan by selling his birthright.

The fact that God does not follow the birthright order set by men does not get much clearer than in Romans 9. Paul was teaching the fact that it is not physical descent that is one's claim to be God's child but it is God who decides and calls. Reading Romans 9 at verse 6, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'^(Genesis 21:12)⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.⁹ For this is what the promise said: 'About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.'^(Genesis 18:10, 14)¹⁰ And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac,¹¹ though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹² she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'^(Genesis 25:23)¹³ As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'^(Malachi 1:2-3)"

Right up until the end we see Isaac with a bit of rebellion trying to bless Esau. Where Rebecca came to understand Jacob was to receive and be God's chosen one and Isaac chose to follow cultural customs. Why? Because he was caught up in man's system. He related more easily to Esau and he was the firstborn. In John MacArthur's commentary on Hebrews, he writes, "If Jonah was the reluctant prophet, then Isaac, was the reluctant patriarch." As the reluctant patriarch Isaac at times followed the ways of man, but God's plan could not be changed by man and in the end when Isaac realizes what has happened, he does not revoke Jacob's blessing, probably now realizing as Rebecca had told him this was God's will.

God's choice of Isaac was not made because Isaac would be obedient. He did not choose Isaac because of some foreseen faith, even though, right up to the end there was a streak of rebellion in Isaac, God choose him because it is God who chooses. However, Isaac died in faith, submitting and obeying God. As parents we are called by God to raise our children in the Lord, prepare them to live in a broken world for God's glory. Parents are to teach their children God has always fulfilled His promises and they need to live in faith of God's future promises. We are to teach our child in the way of the Bible, teaching of God's Word. In the hierarchy given by God in the scriptures, it is ultimately a father's responsibility and by this he blesses his children and future generations and in turn they bless their father and mother.

Jacob's Blessing (v. 21)

Just like Isaac, Jacob was a less than perfect example of patriarchal faith. He lived a life that was hot and cold toward God. However, God's plan was for Jacob's blessing to be passed on to Joseph and his sons. Reading Hebrews 11:21, "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff." In Genesis chapter 48, Jacob whose name is now Israel comes to Egypt and is reunited with Joseph after many years. Joseph has 2 sons; Manasseh (*men·ash·sheh* - meaning *cause to forget*), the firstborn and Ephraim (*ef·rah·yim* – *doubly fruitful*). Israel blesses his grandsons and God directs him - he blesses Ephraim over Manasseh. As Israel begins, Joseph tries to intercede because he wants his firstborn to receive his father's blessing, just as his grandfather Isaac had wanted his blessing to be for Esau. Israel blesses as God directed and had chosen. Like Isaac, Joseph submits to the will of God and Israel closes by passing God's promise to Joseph and his sons, saying, "Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your

fathers.” (Genesis 48:21) Here we observe the covenant blessing being passed through another generation of God’s people. Israel knew he was approaching death and it was time to pass on God’s blessing and promises by faith.

It is important that we understand that life is short. Let me ask, both fathers and mothers, but especially fathers, “What type of blessing will you leave to your children?” As James instructed, ¹³“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’— ¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” (James 4:13-17) As we have seen with Isaac and Joseph one cannot change the will of God, so it is far better to seek God, understand His will and live it out. It is our fallen human nature to want to be in control, but God calls us to submit to Him for He is truly in control. Whether one freely submits to God or not, God’s will – His will, will be done as He has decreed. I say take the less painful way or path in life and submit to the Lord’s will.

It is also important to note that the covenant blessing passed through those whom God determined that it would pass through. It was the people chosen by God not those chosen by men for their own desires. It was also not based on these patriarchs being perfect or being sinless. The covenant passed through them because God made a promise to Abraham and God cannot lie; His promises will come about.

Some two hundred years had passed from the time God made the promise to Abraham. In that time, none of Abraham’s descendants had lived in the Promised

Land. Four generations had come and gone and none ever received the promise. Yet, by faith they believed and looked forward to the day in which they would be fulfilled. Isaac and Joseph looked to the future with God, as did Abraham. As the writer of Hebrews makes clear earlier in chapter 11, ⁸“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. ... ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

(Hebrews 11:8-10) They all knew they were sojourners on their way to heaven.

Joseph’s Blessing (v. 22)

Joseph knew prophetically that God’s people would not remain in Egypt. He knew that when the time was right God would fulfill all His promises. Reading verse 22, “By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.” The writer is referring to chapter 50 of Genesis where, ²⁴“Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but **God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.**’ ²⁵ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.’ ²⁶ So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.” (Genesis 50:24-26) God revealed to Joseph his descendants would not remain in Egypt. Joseph saw the exodus years before it ever happened. He knew God would somehow bring everything to pass and His promises were true.

All three of these men died in faith. All three looked forward to the fulfillment of the promises. Their faith at times wavered in life but they were steadfast in the face of death.

When faced with death, people are honest because the need to lie is over. When faced with the last few moments of life what really matters comes out. How will you die? Will your last words be words of confidence in the promises of God? Will your last words be that of encouragement to your family? Will you speak of the promises of God? I am convinced that how we will die is something we should contemplate while we are strong and healthy. While traveling through this life we should strive to bring glory to God and if we do this, it will not be a problem to bring Him glory at the time of our death.

Abraham died not in the Promise Land but knew his destiny was in heaven with God. He knew God would give his descendants the Promised Land. Joseph lived and died in Egypt, but he was no Egyptian. He lived and died in a foreign land as he watched and waited for the heavenly city. Joseph saw the future and knew God's promise for His people to live in the Promised Land would be fulfilled.

Do you have the confidence in God that these men had? Do you believe the covenantal promises of God so strongly that even when faced with death you will be able to die in faith? Paul said it clearly and strongly, ²¹ **For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.** ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.” (Philippians 1:21-26) Beloved this is not your home it is but the journey to reach our true eternal home of heaven. Live your mortal life to the glory of Christ and die to the glory of Christ. The worst this world can do is take your

mortal life, but then you will be in heaven with God and it does not get any better than that.

Isaac lived at times by faith and at times by his own will, but when it came to death, he knew that mortal death was but the passage to heaven and God. By faith Joseph knew that when his eyes closed and he was buried, he would open his eyes and see all God's promises fulfilled. Joseph went to death in faith and peace and the promise of God.

Let me ask, "Does the thought of dying terrify you?" No sane person wants to die. For the unsaved - death is terrifying but it is so gracious of God to give His children grace in dying so that our fears are alleviated and His glory is magnified.

Remember as **Thomas Goodwin** the famous Puritan from the 17th century, said as he approached death, "*Ah, is this dying? How I have dreaded as an enemy this smiling friend.*" God calls His children by faith to not fear death but live and die in such a way to bring glory to God. My beloved if we live in this manner, if we live by faith, we will instill and pass on the legacy of faith to the next generation and take every opportunity to share the saving Gospel of Christ with the lost. By this be so, may be known as people of faith. Amen!