

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The Gallery of Faith - Hebrews 11: Isaac and Jacob

During 2005 my wife and I were both 60 years young and we celebrated 40 years of marriage. As part of that celebration, we had our family together and marked the occasion by engaging a photographer to take family portraits. In our lounge we now have a gallery of family portraits. Although we would not specifically call it a gallery of faith, it is our daily prayer that all the grandchildren will not only profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ but that each will become men and women of faith.

In this, the last talk in the current series on "The gallery of faith from Hebrews 11", we will consider Isaac and Jacob. Let us read the verses concerned. "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff", Hebrews 11:20-21.

Both Isaac and Jacob had similarities as well as tremendous differences. Isaac was the father of Jacob and his twin brother, Esau. Both were children of elderly parents, Isaac more so than Jacob. However, Jacob was a very ambitious person. Both were nomadic and shepherds becoming extremely wealthy in terms of the flocks, herds and servants they owned. When we read the historical accounts of their lives in Genesis we are brought to understand the ups and downs of the pathway of faith. Life was not easy for either. In order to arrive at an appreciation of God's record of their lives left in this remarkable faith chapter, we will need to consider some of the detail in Genesis. We will first consider Isaac.

### Isaac

Isaac had been the subject of God's promise to both Abraham and Sarah. By faith they believed that God would do what He had promised. As the child of promise, he was also the person through whom the covenants made to Abraham would be fulfilled: "By faith [Abraham] dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise", Hebrews 11:9.

In Genesis chapter 22, Isaac becomes a picture of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is an extremely interesting chapter. It is primarily about Abraham's faith, but, when we look at the detail connected with Isaac, we see the remarkable features of a submissive and willing offering, obedient to his father's will. God said to Abraham in verse 2, "Take now 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." The wording in this verse clearly indicates not only the close affection between Abraham and Isaac (Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love), but pictures that greater bond of affection between God the Father and His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The verse also points out what God had in mind a particular mountain for the offering up of Isaac. It does not stretch our imagination to consider that, before time, Golgotha was also in the mind of God for the greatest of all sacrifices. As indeed Peter states in 1 Peter 1:20, "foreordained before the foundation of the world". In verse 6, we read that Abraham took "the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac". And again, we read of Jesus in John 19:1, "He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha". Now, as the events unfold in Genesis 22, we see that Isaac was not offered on an altar a substitute animal was found, but not before we have Isaac's very searching question and his father's answer. In verses 7 and 8 we read, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So, the two of them went together." Therefore, it is not surprising to read in the New Testament the words of John the Baptist, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In the person of the Lord Jesus Christ we have the fulfilment of Genesis chapter 22. Where Isaac could go no further in the sacrifice, the Lord Jesus went all the way, even unto death.

Let us pick up one more point before leaving Genesis 22. Abraham upon arriving at the foot of the mountain said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." Notice the confidence in Abraham's words, "We will come back to you". Abraham had every intention of sacrificing Isaac but he also had confidence in the God of resurrection. Have we confidence in the God of resurrection? This is the Christian hope we are waiting for the Saviour to call us to glory. That call could come at any moment!

In chapter 24, although Isaac is only briefly mentioned, he is the reason for the servant's long journey to find him a suitable wife. Abraham wanted Isaac to have the most appropriate wife possible. The unnamed servant is sent on this important errand. The servant is a godly man who, at every major point in the quest, either sought guidance for the way forward or gave thanks to God for making his quest successful. There are two wonderful considerations with regard to this chapter. First, the servant is a wonderful example of how all God's people should be as servants of God. The second is the consideration of the servant as a picture of the Holy Spirit today, working in this world gathering out of it those who will form the Bride of Christ. When that work is complete, the Bride will be presented to Christ at the Rapture.

The history of Isaac is mainly found in Genesis chapters 25 to 28. Like his father, Abraham, we have the high points as well as the low points in his life. In some issues of Isaac's life, his failures were similar to the failings of his father, Abraham. But the main point in his life was when he recognised God at work and then his faith became prominent as highlighted in Hebrews 11:20, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come." Now if we look at the whole event of Isaac blessing Jacob and Esau, we discover that things happened which we would not consider as being according to faith. Jacob and his mother conspire to deceive Isaac so that Jacob receives the firstborn blessing. We read about the deception and Esau's fury at missing the blessing and the dismay of Isaac when he realises what has happened. Chapter 27 of Genesis provides the full details. However, at the beginning of chapter 28 we have the simple statement in verse 1, "Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him."

What has happened between Isaac realising that the intended blessing has gone to the younger son instead of the older and this statement in chapter 28:1? Possibly the spiritual eyesight of this old man has been opened and he remembers what Rebekah had been told prior to the birth of the twins: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger", Genesis 25:23 (New International Version). The apparent error was indeed fulfilling the purpose of God. Therefore, on a human level we may consider that Isaac had been deceived but, on the spiritual level, the hand of God is seen at work despite human weakness. So, by chapter 28, I believe Isaac is now fully appreciating the ways of God and when he blesses Jacob again it is certainly by faith. This is an even greater blessing, "God Almighty bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be an assembly of peoples; and give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your descendants with you, that you may inherit the land in which you are a stranger, which God gave to Abraham", Genesis 28:3-4. This second blessing confers on Jacob the inheritance of the covenant, which God had given to Abraham and, in turn, passed to Isaac. Now the line of God's chosen people and God's purposes for this world will come through Jacob not Esau. So the summary in Hebrews 11:20, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come", is indeed correct.

Does this have a lesson for us today in relation to walking by faith? I believe it most certainly does. We need to be always spiritually aware of God's ways through reading the Bible. How we are to live and our actions must always be honouring to God and our Lord Jesus Christ. This life style will not be easy because this world is hostile to the people of God.

## **Jacob**

The history of Jacob largely occupies the remainder of Genesis from chapter 28. Most of Jacob's life is concerned with virtually using any means possible to obtain what he requires. Twenty years are taken up with Jacob's battle against his father-in-law, Laban, not a literal battle but one of deception. It should be stated that Laban was of the same nature as Jacob. The second priority was to avoid physical trouble at all costs. This is seen in relation to his brother Esau, the issue of the Shechemites and, of course, Laban. However, in each of the three situations where Jacob feared violence, it did not materialise. Laban is directly warned by God not to harm Jacob (Genesis 31:29), the slaying of all the Shechemite men resulted in the whole countryside being afraid of Jacob (Genesis 35:5), and the encounter with Esau proved to be a friendly affair (Genesis 33:4). Jacob's fears were far worse than the reality!

Let us just go back in time to the point when Jacob departs from the family home. Jacob has an encounter with the LORD in a dream. Although the LORD made unconditional promises to bless and keep Jacob, Jacob responded by turning the unconditional kindness of the LORD into a conditional agreement, see chapter 28. God seems to be in the background of Jacob's life as he struggles on. God is teaching Jacob that to do things in his own strength is futile. True strength is to rely solely on God's might. However, the occasion of Peniel, on the border of Canaan, when Jacob wrestled with God, appears to be the commencement of Jacob's spiritual growth. It is not as yet very mature, but it has commenced. To mark the change, God gives Jacob a new name, that of Israel. The basic meaning of the name 'Israel' is that "God prevails". However, in the context of Genesis 32:28, God expands the meaning to show that Jacob was like a prince who had wrestled with God and had extracted a blessing.

I said earlier that Jacob was a very ambitious man who used his wiles to further his ambition. At this point in time, Jacob sees life as hopeless but clings tenaciously to God. Jacob sees no other way out of his predicament! I am sure there are times in our lives when we seem to be surrounded by difficulties with no way out. This is just the time to cling to God, seek His assurance and gain the confidence to go on.

As we move on through Jacob's life, we find God becomes more prominent. In chapter 35 God instructs him to return to Bethel, set up an altar and therefore worship his God! It also becomes a time for family reunion although there are sorrows. Verse 8, "Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died". This is followed by the death of Rachel as she gives birth to Benjamin, verse 18. This incident of Benjamin's birth is again instructive to us as to Jacob's faith: "And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni; (meaning Son of My Sorrow) but his father called him Benjamin, (meaning Son of the Right Hand)". In this little incident, Jacob turns the sadness into joy. This is surely an example of faith growing in Jacob. It would be wrong to think that life was now becoming easy for Jacob. His eldest son, Reuben, disgraces himself and, by the time we reach chapter 37, his family is almost totally out of control as they sell Joseph into slavery, followed by deceit to cover up their villainous deed. Israel disappears for a while into the background as the Scriptures are taken up with the life of Joseph from slave to prince in the land of Egypt. With the famine, Israel appears again on the pages of Scripture, as events unfurl to reunite Joseph with his father, Israel. Again, we find the ways of God unfolding in Jacob's life. On his journey to Egypt to see his long lost son, Jacob stops off at Beer-sheba to offer sacrifices to God. Here, God once again speaks to him, "I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes" (Genesis 46:3-4).

Notice what God says to Jacob, "Do not fear". As we have seen already this morning, Jacob was a man prone to being afraid. Here God seeks to put him at ease. If Jacob had been anxious about going to Egypt, then surely no more! In addition, God provides further encouragement, "I will make of you a great nation". Here is the promise of future greatness. And even further to allay Jacob's anxiety, "I will go down with you to Egypt". What more could this aging servant, who was one hundred and thirty years old, require! Right from those early days when he left home, God had spoken to him, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you" (Genesis 28:15). Once again God reiterates His promise. Finally, God states, "I will surely bring you up again". Yes, Jacob would leave Egypt in a coffin and be buried beside his father and grandfather in the land of Canaan, there until the day of resurrection, when his eyes will see his God, and the land which God had promised to him and his descendants. Jacob's journey was in accordance with the will of God. Similarly, as we live out our lives in the will of God, we can be assured of His guidance. We know that we have the Spirit of God within us who will never leave us as we, too, have the promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

Jacob arrived in Egypt and came before Pharaoh. He is seen to be greater than Pharaoh for he blessed Pharaoh (Genesis 47:7). This aged patriarch in the strength of his God is able to rise above the circumstances of life and bless this mighty monarch! Outwardly Jacob was a shepherd and Pharaoh the supreme ruler in Egypt. Spiritually, Jacob was the servant of the Almighty God and Pharaoh was a poor man in his sins! Let us ever be mindful of the dignity that God has placed upon us. Paul writes, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For, I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:16-18). Outwardly the world might not think much about Christians, but as children of God we are blessed beyond measure. We are waiting the grand "tomorrow" when the whole of creation will see the "sons of God" (Romans 8:19).

Finally, as the life of Jacob draws to a close, there are two incidents brought together in Hebrews 11:21. The first is at the end of Genesis 47. Jacob makes Joseph promise that he will take his body back to Canaan for burial. And as the promise is made Jacob worships: "Israel worshipped as he leaned on the top of his staff (New International Version)." The second incident is in chapter 48 when Jacob blesses the two sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim. As with himself so long ago and God's promise that the elder should serve the younger (Genesis 25:23), here Jacob discerns the ways of God and sees that the natural order of things must give way to the spiritual. Let us read the blessing: "And [Jacob] blessed Joseph, and said: "God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; let my name be named upon them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (Genesis 48:15-16). In the blessing, Jacob had put his right hand on the younger, indicating that Ephraim would be greater than his older brother, Manasseh, see also verses 17-20.

So we see the full scope of events that led the Spirit of God to summarise Jacob's life, "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff" (Hebrews 11:21). You will notice that the Spirit of God seems to reverse in Hebrews the two events of Genesis 47 and 48. Faith draws to a close as Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph but we are left with this final thought of worship. Did Jacob worship again? Let us consider that worship should be the last thing on our lips as we leave this world for it will be our main occupation in heaven!

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