

VESPERS SERMON Hebrews 11: 13-22

We've been exploring the heroes of faith in Hebrews chapter 11- big names like Noah and Abraham and Sarah. We've learned that faith is not just what we believe in our heads, faith is living out what we believe. Faith lets God work according to his timetable, not ours. Faith is trusting in what we cannot see. Tonight we will look at Abraham and 3 of his descendants- Isaac his son, Jacob his grandson, and Joseph, his great-grandson. Most of the book of Genesis revolves around the stories of these 4 men and their families and how God worked out his promises through them. Hebrews 11 gives us a peek at their faith.

Last Sunday we learned from Abraham and Sarah, a middle-aged couple with all life could offer except the one thing they wanted most- a son to carry on the family name. God saw that Abraham was a righteous man and promised him a son, a family heritage that would outnumber the sands of the sea, and a land for his family to settle. So Abraham obeyed God's call to move to the place that God would give them. And 25 years later, Abraham and Sarah welcomed their son, Isaac, just as God had promised.

Tonight, Hebrews tells us another pivotal story about faith from Abraham's life. Genesis tells us that when Isaac, the son of promise, was around 14 years of age, God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah in a place God would show him. So Abraham left for Mount Moriah early one morning with Isaac, some kindling wood, and two of his servants. When they got to the place, Abraham told his servants to stay where they were while he and Isaac went further to worship, and then they would both come back to them. As Abraham and Isaac walked, Isaac asked, "I see the fire and the wood for the offering, but where is the lamb?" And Abraham assured him, "God himself will supply the lamb, my son." Do we hear the Abraham's faith in what he could not see? Abraham built an altar, placed the wood on the altar, and Isaac laid down on the wood. Then as Abraham raised his knife over Isaac, the angel of God told Abraham, "Stop! Now I know you will obey," and then Abraham noticed the ram God had prepared. After Abraham sacrificed the ram to God, he and Isaac returned to the servants. Abraham's intention was enough, he had passed the test of his faith.

It is a dramatic story with difficult questions. We know from scripture that God despised the practice of other religions to sacrifice their first born children. So why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? How could Abraham say he loved his son and then prepare to kill him? Since it says God was testing Abraham, is it right for God to test his people in such a dramatic and dangerous way? How is this different than when Muslims say their God has told them to be a suicide bomber? I don't propose to even begin to answer all the questions. But what we can say is that this is a dramatic story of total faith.

Verse 17 of our reading says it was *by faith* Abraham obediently offered his son. There's that phrase we've heard over and over- *by faith. He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.* Abraham had faith in something he had never seen or heard of before- that his God had the power to raise the dead. Even if Isaac died on that mountain, Abraham absolutely believed he would share the future with Isaac because God had promised him that future. Wow. How much faith in God does it take to step out and do whatever God says to do no matter how impossible it seems? Actually, that's the wrong question. Hebrews wasn't about measuring how big

people's faith was; it's about how big the God is in whom they placed their faith. And we see a big God in these stories- big enough to raise the dead to life. How big is the God we trust? Is God big enough to keep his promises in our impossible situations?

Now let's look at three of the descendants of Abraham- Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Hebrews tells us what each man did by faith as they neared the end of their lives. We don't like to talk about dying very much, we may talk to our families about what to do with our body and our belongings, but talk about dying? But we're all going to die one day and these 3 men teach us about dying in faith. By *faith Isaac*, the promised son of Abraham, blessed the future of his two sons, Jacob and Esau. This means he declared over them that God would pass his promises on to his sons' lives, to include them in his promises. He didn't just pass on his wealth and land, by faith he passed on their place in God's promises, the place he had held. What are we passing on to our kids? Do we talk to them about God, about their faith and ours? Our kids' real faith in God will last longer than any inheritance we can pass on.

"By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the top of his staff." Jacob passed the blessing of God's promises on to his grandsons so their faith in God would be strong after he was gone. He told them of God's promise that they would become part of a great nation, and encouraged them to live up to God's promise in their own lives. Notice that Jacob worshipped even as he was dying. This reminded me that some of the most meaningful times I spend with people as they are dying are the times we sing hymns and pray together at the bedside. It's beautiful. I want my final words in this life to be words of worship and trust in God like Jacob.

Then there is the faith of Joseph. *By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.* Joseph and his entire family lived in Egypt at this time. Joseph knew that God had promised his people a land of their own. Here we see that at the end of his life, Joseph trusted that God would keep his promise, and would one day bring his people out of Egypt. At his age, he knew he would soon be buried in Egypt. By faith in God's promise he asked his sons to dig up his bones and bring them along when God finally leads them out of Egypt back to the promised land so he could be buried in Canaan. That's faith in action beyond the grave.

I passed over the first few verses of today's scripture reading and I'd like to return to a couple phrases. *All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw and welcomed them from a distance. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.*

Each of the heroes of faith we have been exploring died before they saw the promises of God play out. They lived their lives with faith in God's promises and died waiting. But instead of going to their death angry, or disappointed, begging God to let them live longer, or wondering why God didn't take them home sooner, Hebrews says they "died in faith." Their faith did not grow weak at the end of life; they still could see the city waiting for them they had looked forward to their whole lives. All of us are going to die, but here is a way to die in faith. Verse 13 says they "welcomed them (the promises) from a distance." Welcome is the greeting of travelers who can see home down the road, but who do not yet enjoy its comforts. To die in faith is to see by faith what is to come and to greet it joyfully as we see it drawing closer. To die in faith is to leave the length of our lives in God's hands, whether we live long or

we live short lives. Either way, we can die in peace because we know to whom we are headed. We know that the One who has walked with us in this life will walk with us in the valley of the shadow of death. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 teach us how to live by faith and also how to die in faith.

Our text ends with this wonderful thought: *God is not ashamed to be called their God.* Was it because these heroes were such perfect followers of God? Sometimes, like with Enoch. But Noah had sex with his own daughters after the flood was over, Abraham pawned Sarah off to Pharaoh to protect himself, Sarah laughed at God's promise of a son the first time she heard it and then lied about it, Jacob was a cheat, Joseph acted like a spoiled brat as he was growing up. There are no perfect people in this chapter. Or in this room.

Romans 3:23 says We all sin and fall short of the glory of God. So how it is that God is not ashamed of us? It's because of his amazing grace. *God is not ashamed to be the God of imperfect people who put their trust in his Son.* Believing in Jesus means trusting in his death to cover our sin, and trusting nothing else- no religious acts, no prayers, no good deeds, no good words, or good intentions. Only trusting in God's grace can make us right with God. God is not ashamed to be called the God of those who trust in him alone. And that is really good news. It's good news we can live by and good news to die by.