

Faith that Rests in God's Plan and Purpose

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Date: 26 October 2025

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[0:00] We've got quite a long scripture reading today. We've got two different readings. One's quite long and then one's very short. The first one's from Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

Near the end of that book, chapter 47, verses 29, and then into chapter 48 to verse 22. And then after I've read the big Genesis passage, I'm going to read a short passage from Hebrews. So there's Bibles at the back of the church. If you don't have a Bible, you're very free to get up and get one whenever you like. The words will also be on the screen, and they're in the bulletin. This is Genesis 47, 29 to 48, 22.

And he said, Swear to me. And he swore to him. Then Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed. After this, Joseph was told, Behold, your father is ill. So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

And it was told to Jacob, Your son Joseph has come to you. Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. And Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the battle of Canaan, in the land of Canaan, and blessed me, and said to me, Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you.

[1:37] And I will make of you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession. And now your two sons who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt are mine.

Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance.

As for me, when I came from Paddan, to my sorrow, Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way, when there was still some distance to go to Ephraim. And I buried her there on the way to Ephraim, Ephraim, that is Bethlehem. When Israel saw Joseph's sons, he said, Who are these? And Joseph said to his father, They are my sons whom God has given me here.

And he said, Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them. Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and kissed him, and embraced them.

[2:41] And Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face. And behold, God has let me see your offspring also. Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth.

And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right, towards Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand towards Israel's right hand, and brought them near to him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn.

And he blessed Joseph and said, The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys, and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac, and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him. And he took his father's hand and moved it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, Not this way, my father, since this one is the firstborn, but your right hand, put your right hand on his head.

But his father refused and said, I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.

[4:15] So he blessed them that day, saying, By you, Israel, will pronounce blessings, saying, God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. Then Israel said to Joseph, Behold, I'm about to die, but your God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you, rather than to your brothers, one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.

And in Hebrews chapter 11, verses 20 to 22. By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave direction concerning his bones.

Well, as Chris indicated, we're working our way through Hebrews chapter 11, and we come this evening to verses 20, 21, and 22.

[5:32] By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

By faith, Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. It's been described as one of the most compelling works of Christian devotion, published in 1650.

The Saints' Everlasting Rest by the Puritan minister Richard Baxter. Baxter is a book that has really stood the test of time. That's not true of all Baxter's writings.

But it was written when Baxter himself was gravely ill and thought he should die. He was in his early 30s, I think around 31, and he began to write his own funeral sermon, a gathering of his final thoughts to preach to himself as death approached.

He told his parishioners at Kidderminster, far from home, cast into extreme languishing by the sudden loss of about a gallon of blood, I bent my thoughts on my everlasting rest.

[6:50] And the book is essentially a reflection on the text of Hebrews 4 verse 9. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God.

It's a book about the glory of heaven. Or as it states on the title page, a treatise of the blessed state of the saints in their enjoyment of God in glory.

And Baxter encourages his readers to think and meditate often on the delights and pleasures of the new heaven and earth. Our everlasting comfort is to be found in the enjoyment and possession of the living God.

And it's perhaps hard to think of anything more counter-cultural than that. For thoughts of heaven and glory are remarkably rare in the contemporary church.

Bruce Mill, a Scottish Baptist minister, wrote these words, This is a serious situation because Christianity, as reflected in the foundational documents of the New Testament, is consistently orientated towards its heavenly hope.

[8:29] If I can put it this way, the life of faith is always the life of heavenly hope. And that's part of what we see in our text this evening.

Hebrews 11, verses 20 through 22, our attention is drawn to the immediate descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and then Joseph.

Indeed, their stories run in the book of Genesis, from Genesis 21 to the death of Joseph in Genesis 50, over half the book.

And yet, surprisingly, in this great chapter that's all about faith, living by faith, the author of Hebrews chooses to highlight not Isaac's willingness, as Chris reminded us last week, to be laid on the altar as a sacrifice, nor Jacob's wrestling with God at the Jabbok River, nor Joseph's resisting of temptation in the house of Potiphar.

These great dramatic acts of faith are not his focus. Instead, to illustrate faith, our author takes us to three scenes at the close of these individuals' earthly lives.

[9:49] He was wanting to show us how these men faced death, how they persevered in the life of faith to the very end.

They each continued to hold on to the promise of God. In verse 13 of the chapter, he says, these all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth.

And so, what we have in these verses are three very brief portraits of mature faith. Three men looking forward in faith, trusting in God's promises right to the end of their lives.

Here are these men looking to the future with God. And as we consider these verses tonight, let me highlight three things about their forward-looking faith.

Their faith in the future that God had for them and their descendants. And the first thing I want you to notice with me is that their faith is faith in the God of surprising ways.

[11:17] By faith, we're told, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. And so, the writer's taking us back to Genesis chapter 27, those events surrounding the blessing of Jacob and Esau.

Both these sons are blessed. But it's a famous story because Isaac is deceived in that story into giving Jacob the primary blessing rather than Isaac's eldest son, Esau.

Back in Genesis 25, God speaks to Rebekah, Isaac's wife. Two nations are in your womb. Two peoples from within you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other.

The older shall serve the younger. That's Genesis 25-23. And this is what God decreed would happen.

That's a kind of reversal of social and cultural expectation. It's a reminder that God Himself does not conform Himself to human standards or conventions.

[12:30] And as the story unfolds, Isaac pursues really his own agenda. Esau is his firstborn, his favorite.

Tradition demanded that he would receive what was known as the birthright, receiving a double portion of the inheritance, assuming leadership of the family upon the father's death.

But as the story again is unfolds, Esau despised that birthright and sold it to Jacob for a bowl of stew. But despite that, Isaac resolves to formally bless Esau before he dies.

And he really acts in rebellion against what God had decreed. It appears not a very good example of faith because his actions really fly in the face of what God has revealed to him.

He chooses to do things His way. The blessing must go to the eldest, Esau. But God, of course, has other ideas. And through a combination in Genesis 27 of Isaac's poor eyesight, Rebekah and Jacob's machinations, Isaac is deceived into blessing Jacob rather than Esau.

[13:54] When Esau eventually appears on the scene, it's too late. We read in Genesis 27, 33, Isaac trembled very violently and said, Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me?

And I ate it all before you came and I have blessed him. Yes, and he shall be blessed. Isaac's eyes were dim, but even he could see the providence of God.

In Genesis 27, he doesn't revoke that blessing. He doesn't renounce Jacob. He doesn't express any condemnation. He makes no actual attempt to change anything.

He simply accepts what God has done. Because he's been outwitted, not by Rebekah and Jacob, but by God. The God of surprising ways.

This is what God had decreed would happen. And this is the mysterious will of God. Isaac doesn't argue about it. He simply accepts it. His accidental blessing of Jacob is repeated in a more willing fashion in the following chapter.

[15:02] Chapter 28, God Almighty, Isaac tells Jacob, God Almighty, bless you, make you fruitful, multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. May he give the blessing of Abraham to you, to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham.

And so, against the social convention of his day, even against his own inclinations, Isaac comes to willingly bless the younger before the older. And that is faith.

Because it recognizes that God is God. That he works in his own way. His plans and purposes cannot be thwarted. He can be trusted to accomplish his purposes even when things don't go according to our plans.

And that is something that we come to learn in the life of faith. God fulfills his promises in his own way. Abraham is promised to be the father of a great nation.

His wife, Sarah, is barren. She can have no children. Well, I don't think it could be made any clearer that the fulfillment of this promise lies really in God's hands alone.

[16:21] The family line would be expected, of course, to come through the firstborn male, but instead it's, instead of Ishmael, it's Isaac. Instead of Esau, it's Jacob. Instead of Reuben, it's Joseph.

Because he is the God of surprising ways. And we see this in the following verse, which references and which Chris read for us, Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph in Genesis 48.

By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph. And in that chapter, as we read it, while the act of blessing was taking place, Jacob crosses his hands and blesses Ephraim, the younger, before Manasseh, the older.

And this is God's choice. This choosing of the younger brother is really a pattern, a motif, that we see right throughout Genesis and indeed in many other parts of the Bible.

Because God is not bound by human convention and man-made tradition. He is a God of surprising ways. His hands often bless the most surprising of people.

[17:27] He chooses David above his brothers. He chooses a persecutor Saul to become an apostle and a missionary to the Gentiles.

You never know what God will do in one sense. We look to Manasseh, and God does a greater work through Ephraim. We look to the strong, God chooses the weak.

Remember Paul's words to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 1, Consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.

Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

[18:28] No human being can boast in the presence of God. Because here is the God who overturns human expectations. God's blessings do not come by right or privilege or status or rank, but only by grace and only through faith.

There is never any place in the Christian church for this idea of Christian celebrity or status. That's a lesson that often can be a long time in the learning.

God is always faithful, but He is not always predictable. And His plans and purposes are often, are always far better than we can think or imagine.

Put your faith, put your future in the hand of the God of surprising ways. And then secondly, faith not just in the God of surprising ways, but faith in the God of goodness and grace.

By faith, Jacob, when dying, verse 21, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. And that initial reference is again Genesis 48, Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph.

[19:54] And we're told that when Israel saw Joseph's sons, we read in verse 8 of chapter 48 of Genesis, who are these? Joseph says, these are my sons whom God has given me here.

Bring them to me that I may bless them. The eyes of Israel were dim with age. He could not see. Joseph brought them near him. He kissed them. He embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, I never expected to see your face.

And behold, God has let me see your offspring also. There's something, there's a wonderfully moving scene. Jacob, this old man, at the end of his life, his eyesight diminished.

He kisses and embraces these grandsons. It's a scene that Jacob could not have imagined in his wildest dreams. Not only had he been reunited with his lost son, Joseph, whom he had thought had been killed, he also has this opportunity to see and to know Manasseh and Ephraim.

I never expected to see your face. And behold, God has let me see your offspring also. These two sons, a gift of God to Joseph in Egypt, are now blessed by Jacob.

[21:10] They're formally welcomed into the covenant family. It's all a wonderful surprise to Jacob. It's almost one of these things, almost feels too good to be true.

Because for years, Jacob's life had been marred by pain and loss and grief, and now in an unexpected way, he had received back not only his son, Joseph, but his sons also.

It's a reminder of the goodness of God. And of course, God is good all the time. And He is good even when things are not good in our lives. I came across these words of Corrie ten Boom in her book, *The Hiding Place*.

And she writes this, Often I have heard people say how good God is. We prayed that it would not rain for our church picnic and look at the lovely weather. And yes, God is good when He sends good weather.

[22:16] But God was also good when He allowed my sister Betsy to starve to death before my eyes in a German concentration camp. I remember one occasion I was very discouraged.

Everything around us was dark. Darkness in my heart. I remember telling Betsy that I thought God had forgotten us. No, Corrie, said Betsy. He's not forgotten us.

Remember His word. As the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love towards those who fear Him. There is an ocean of God's love available.

There's plenty for everyone. May God grant you never to doubt that victorious love whenever the circumstances. And sometimes that goodness tastes all the sweeter after a time of sadness and sorrow.

Some of you might know the story of the poet, hymn writer William Cooper. Throughout his life he was plagued by persistent, devastating, at times suicidal depression.

[23:24] And he wrote these words. Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings. It is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings.

When comforts are declining He grants the soul again a season of clear shining to cheer it after rain. And friends we all know that sometimes life is full of dark moments.

Those kind of moments when God seems either far away or absolutely absent. When we question things. We wonder if God is hiding from us.

And the truth is we cannot always see the big picture. And that is why the light sometimes surprises us. The shadows of this life can be so dark that when God even for a brief moment chooses to step out of the shadows and to pull back heaven's curtain and let us let a glimpse of glory shine into our dark existence.

We blink our eyes and we strain at it. Like somebody suddenly turning on the light when we're fumbling around in a dark room. Yes it's welcome but at the same time it can be disorientating.

[24:46] And our God delights to surprise us with His goodness and grace. He gives us unexpected gifts. Periods of refreshment and encouragement to lift our spirits.

To generate a deep sense of love and gratitude in our hearts. Here is Jacob the schemer the deceiver the grabber. Spent a lifetime manipulating things to his own advantage.

Usually with disastrous results. grace. And he's humbled and he's bowed down in thankfulness to God for all His goodness and grace to Him.

What wonderful words of blessing he utters. The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked. The God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day.

The angels who redeemed me from all evil bless the boys and in them let my name be carried on. It is a scene full of wonder and gratitude.

[25:46] Jacob's heart is full of faith in God's goodness and grace. His name his family his faith will carry on long after he is gone. He confesses the Lord as his shepherd.

Here is the one who can restore our souls. Lead us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. The one who in the dark valleys of life presences Himself with us and comforts us.

The one who makes our cup to overflow and pursues us with goodness and mercy all our days. The one who will take us to dwell with Him in His house forever.

And that's why Jacob is found worshipping over the head of his staff the end of his life. He's leaning upon the Lord his shepherd. The reference there Genesis 47-31 Israel bowed himself upon the head of his bed.

The slightly different translation of the Hebrew. But the point is the same. At the end of his life Jacob rejoices in God and in all his goodness and grace.

[26:55] May that be true of us also. It's a wonderful thing to see Christian men and women who through grace become more thankful over the years.

Not grumpy but full of gratitude. Not cynical critical negative but full of love and mercy. Not full of themselves but always striving to bless others.

Not full of pride but humility. Not full of worry but worship. Faith in the God of surprising ways. Faith in the God of goodness grace.

And then faith quickly and briefly here in the God of covenant promise. By faith Joseph at the end of his life made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

These are the reference to the closing verses of the book of Genesis. And Joseph said to his brothers I'm about to die but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham Isaac and Jacob.

[28:04] Joseph made the sons of Israel swear God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here. Joseph faced death believing in the promise of God.

When everything else in life was disappearing from view he held on to God's promise. He knew that God would keep his promise. He knew that God would not let his people down.

He knew that nothing could stop the plan and purpose of God. God will surely visit you. You shall carry up my bones from here. Of course at the time none of that looked very likely.

But Joseph refused to be conformed to the pattern of Egypt and this world. He was sure of what he hoped! He was certain of what he could not see.

And to him the promises of God were more real than all the treasures of Egypt. Because Egypt was not his home. His home lay elsewhere in the land of promise.

[29:07] It lay in that better country. And yes, surrounded by the wealth of Egypt, perhaps he could have erected some great monument, a pyramid to rival Pharaohs.

But instead he says to his brothers, take my bones with you. Because his hope lay in God's word. And he knew that God would never abandon his people.

Because when God starts something, he is absolutely guaranteed to carry it through. He's absolutely guaranteed to finish it.

I recall those words David Niven, the actor, about his good friend, Errol Flynn. He said, you can count on Errol Flynn.

He'll always let you down. And that is humanity in a nutshell. But not so with God. He cannot break his word.

[30:05] He's utterly faithful and dependable. And Joseph believed that God would keep his promise. That God would deliver his people from Egypt. Take them to the land he had promised to them.

Joseph in a sense believed that his very bones had a future. He had in a sense a resurrection faith. Long after the pyramids of Egypt had crumbled to dust, he knew his very bones would rise from the soil of the promised land and be welcomed into that city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.

His words are a reminder that this world is not our home. And that we are pilgrims here destined for a better country. I wonder, are you living a life of heavenly hope?

Where is your faith and hope anchored? in the comforts of a passing world or in the promises of God? As Joseph looked beyond the palaces of Egypt to that city with foundations, friends, surely so must we.

Our bank accounts, our pension pot, our careers, our plans, they're all going to turn to dust. Only what God has promised will stand.

[31:27] And that's really all we have to hold on to. Remember Jesus' words, John 14, let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house are many rooms, if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, that where I am, you may be also.

I wonder if we believe that this evening, that God's word is surer than the ground beneath our feet. Do we believe in the one in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen? Do we believe in the surprising way of a crucified Savior, in the transforming goodness and grace of Jesus? Because, of course, it's not Isaac and Jacob and Joseph that are the hero of this text. It's the God in whom they trusted, a God of surprising ways, of goodness and grace, and of sure and certain promise. And he's the only one who can bring us comfort and hope in the face of death. [32:46] The good news for this broken world, enveloped in darkness and death, is that great enemy death has been defeated. And Jesus, now clothed in resurrection power, is reconciling sinners to God.

He is the only one who can bring us eternal comfort. We have only one hope in life and death, Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and coming again.

And he changes everything, even death. The Christian hope rests on the unshakable ground of Christ's resurrection. And yes, we can tremble at death's approach, but the sting is gone.

The venom drained from the serpent's bite. And in Jesus Christ, death is no longer a doorway to judgment, but a portal to glory and everlasting rest.

Richard Baxter writes, let us never look at the grave, except to see the resurrection beyond it. Faith is quick-sighted and can see as far as that.

[33:54] Yes, even as far as eternity. I wonder, does your faith see that far? What is our hope in life and death?

Christ alone, Christ alone. What is our only confidence that our souls to Him belong? Come to Christ and find rest, eternal rest for both body and soul.

Come to Christ and in Him and by faith live a life full of heavenly hope. Let's pray. Lord, we ask that our faith might rest not in ourselves, our confidence not in ourselves, but in you and in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, may you strengthen us by your Holy Spirit. May you grant us faith that trusts your ways even though we don't always understand them, that trusts that you are indeed a God of goodness and grace, and that trusts your promises above all else.

Lord, grant us living faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray these things. Amen.