

Jacob's Refined Faith

Hebrews 11:21

Halifax: 15 October 2023

Introduction:

We will continue our sermon series from Hebrews today.

- We are in Hebrews 11 where we have examples of faith to encourage us in our faith.
 - The author is exhorting the Hebrews, who were under pressure to return to the worship of the Old Testament, to continue on with faith in Christ.
 - He is using examples of their forefathers, who trusted in Christ-promised despite many different kinds of opposition and struggles of their own, to help them.
- The examples we have seen include:
 - Abel, who obtained righteousness by faith.
 - Enoch, who was a testimony of pleasing God by faith and of glorification.
 - Noah, who responded to God's warning by faith and obtained salvation.
 - Abraham, who forsook his beautiful homeland by faith to look for God's city.
 - Sarah, who received strength to bring forth a child by faith when she was too old.
- We saw a couple more examples, which I will include in our Scripture reading, concluding with the example of Jacob in Hebrews 11:21 which we will consider today.

Please listen now as I read our text to you, starting in Hebrews 11:13.

- This is the word of God.
- May He add His blessing to the reading and hearing of it.

Hebrews 11:13-21: These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴ For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵ And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly *country*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has

prepared a city for them. ¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only be-gotten *son*, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," ¹⁹ concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. ²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff.

Thus far the reading of God's Word.

God has a wonderful way of refining our faith.

- He works in a much more interesting way than simply zapping us into perfection.

- He *does* transform us within, but He uses all sorts of trials and encouragements and influences both good and bad so that we must be constantly engaged in strivings, wrestlings, fighting, seeking, renewal, prayer, getting help... and so on.
- People sometimes ask why He didn't just make us as we will be when we get to heaven to start with—without ever having to go through all of this.
 - The best answer to that is that because He is God and He did not choose to do it that way. He is not an efficiency expert but an artist.
 - Jesus told us that if we are in Him by faith so that we bear fruit, the Father will prune us so that we will bear more fruit.
- The Bible sometimes speaks of it as a refining process of believers to purify them through trials and temptations. We must go through the refiner's fire.
 - Jacob is a dramatic example of a man who was purified—whose faith was refined.
 - We will look at him as an example of that today.
 - As with all of these examples, our primary reason for looking at them is to strengthen our own faith—it is part of the refining process.
 - So let's look at Jacob's example!

I. Look at Jacob's amazing faith to strengthen your own faith.

A. By faith, this man recognises that he has been marvellously blessed!

- This is demonstrated by this incident when, as he was dying, he blessed Joseph's sons.
 - At first, we might ask, "Why is that the thing that is chosen in Jacob's life to point to his faith?"
 - "What about the time when he wrestled with God, pleading that he would not let our Lord go until He blessed him?"
 - "It was then that his name was changed from Jacob to Israel because he had prevailed like a prince with God."
 - But the author of Hebrews, led by the Holy Spirit, did not choose that to illustrate Jacob's faith.
 - No, he chose his blessing of Joseph's two sons when he was dying.
 - Let me show you what remarkable faith is exhibited here!

1. First, let's look at Jacob's situation.

- a. First, he is old very feeble, having to deal with all the difficulties and indignities that belong with that. Getting around, bathing, looking after himself...
- b. Second, he is now in Egypt, forced to move there to keep his family from starving. He is only there because of his connection with Joseph.
- c. Third, he has very little in this world to leave to his 12 sons—he has the burial plot that Abraham purchased, but no lands to give them.
- d. Forth, though things are better now, his family has never been unified, what with his four wives and their sons with their rivalry and a list of big wrongs that had been done—from the incest of his firstborn son, Reuben, with one of

Jacob's wives to the cruelty of his second and third born, Simeon and Levi, to the incest of Judah with his daughter-in-law, to the cruelty that had been shown to Joseph who was perhaps only restrained from vengeance because he, his dying father, was still alive.

- e. Fifth, he no doubt has many regrets for the way he had lived—taking advantage of his older brother, then deceiving his father to get his father's blessing, then taking multiple wives, then taking advantage of his father-in-law so as to wreck his relationship with him—then living in bitterness for decades because he wrongly thought Joseph was dead, making himself unpleasant and difficult to his other sons...
 - All this to say, he does not look like a very blessed man.
 - But look at what he does!
- 2. By blessing Joseph's sons, Jacob shows that he considers himself to be blessed beyond measure!
 - a. Think about it—what could he give to these boys?
 - Here we have two Egyptian princes.
 - They are wealthy and privileged—their father is second only to Pharaoh, and at a time when the whole surrounding world has sold both their lands and themselves to Egypt as slaves because of the famine.
 - What does Jacob have to give as a blessing to these boys?
 - Like Esau, though with much more warrant, they might say, “What will you give us? We have everything anyone could ask for here in Egypt.”
 - What was the likelihood that these two young men, whose mother was a high-born Egyptian, would be interested in an inheritance in Canaan?
 - And yet, Jacob acts as though he has a blessing for them that would cause all of their posterity to leave Egypt and go there! What for? To be buried there like he soon will? Why?
 - Would they smile condescendingly as their dotty old grandfather supposes that he is giving them something important that they want?
 - b. It is only by faith that Jacob knows that he does indeed have a blessing that far transcends anything these little princes have.
 - It is only by faith that he knows that when the time comes, they will gladly take their place with the families of their grandfather's sons.
 - Understand that the custom in those days was to give a double portion of the inheritance to the eldest son along with the responsibility to lead the family. Joseph had been given that position in the providence of God, so Jacob gladly gave him the two portions by adopting his two oldest sons and so making them tribes of Israel (tribes of Jacob) along with his other eleven sons.
 - The only way he knew this was because God had told Abraham what would happen and Jacob believed the oracle: Gen 15:13-16: **Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers**

in a land *that is not theirs*, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. ¹⁴ And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

- Canaan was a great blessing, for it was the place where God would gather His church, make Himself known to them, and where He would so work in them that they would continue as His people (uniquely chastening them and preserving them), and then bring forth the Messiah through them—the Messiah who would be the Saviour of the world.
 - It is a great blessing to have a place in the church upon the earth, to be numbered with God’s people during our earthly pilgrimage...
- But far greater than what God was going to do in Canaan, Jacob knew that the blessing he had for his sons and for the nations was the blessing of reconciliation with the eternal God.
 - God Almighty said He would bless them and through Jacob’s seed would bless the nations, and Jacob knew that when God blesses people and calls Himself their God, that means that they have forgiveness and eternal life with Him in glory.
 - The treasures of Egypt that these boys knew were but a blip compared to what God had promised to His people; and even though these little princes looked so rich and powerful in comparison to the rest of the inhabitants of the earth (and to Jacob), they were paltry compared to what God had prepared for those who love Him!

B. And now I have a question for you.

1. Like Jacob, are you confident that through faith in Christ, you have a blessing that far surpasses anything that this world has to offer?
 - That even if you were to gain the whole world, you would be far inferior to even the very least disciple in Christ’s kingdom if His kingdom were not yours?
 - Do you know that?
- But I won’t stop with that... for God has appointed me to search you out...
2. Do you also *act* like a person who has been richly blessed?
 - Or are you full of complaining and whining—like I was this past week?
 - I always seem to get tried related to what I am preaching about, and this week was no exception.
 - How much complaining I did! How much repenting I had to do when I put this message together and it began to gel!
 - Do you act like an abused child of God—like He has mistreated you?
 - Are you bitter about your past, unhappy with your circumstances, bleak about the future???
 - What! You are a child of God! There is no place for such an attitude.

- Parents, what about you?
 - Do you see yourself as a parent who has an inheritance for your children that surpasses anything that any parent in this world has?
 - Do you tell your children how priceless their inheritance is, or do you act as if their worldly success is the more important concern?
 - If you do, don't be surprised if they embrace what you have taught them and leave that silly inheritance of Canaan for the riches of Egypt!
 - Is their wealth, their popularity, their health, their success, their achievement, their earthly happiness and comfort more important to you than that they have their name written down in glory?
 - Do you make them disciples of the world, or disciples of Christ?
 - Do you prioritise that they have a Christian education?
3. Those of God's people who know how richly they are blessed in Christ have certain things that stand out to distinguish them from the world.
- They are filled with gratitude—they have a grateful spirit and marvel at how much God has given them.
 - It that the way it is with you?
 - They are not so concerned with what happens in this world—either in the short term or the long term.
 - They do not fret over economic meltdowns or the rise of oppressive regimes because their inheritance is secure in glory.
 - They bear their afflictions with patience, always giving thanks for the unfathomable mercies that God has shown them—that they should be His redeemed people!
 - Do you do that?
 - They act toward others as one who has something that others desperately need—they pity the rich man and the beautiful prosperous woman who are without Christ.
 - Even when their own place in this world is far inferior, they act toward them as someone is far more blessed—like Jacob did toward these little Egyptian princes—and even when he went to see Pharaoh, we are told that *he*, Jacob, blessed Pharaoh!
 - He acted as if he, Jacob, was the one who had the greater blessing to bestow! He acted that way because it was true, and by faith he knew that.
 - Do you act that way, or do you act as one who is embarrassed about your inheritance?

TRANS> Let's be honest in our evaluation.

- The truth is, our faith is weak.
 - We very often don't act like those who have the best blessing of all—do we? Do you?
- But let me tell you something.
 - Jacob did not always act like that either.

- The way Jacob was on his deathbed was far better than the way he acted for most of his long life.
- Let's turn now to:

II. Consider how God refined Jacob's faith that you might have hope that He will refine you.

A. First, consider what Jacob was like before we see him here on his deathbed.

1. It was only 17 years before when he was 130 years old that he had said to his sons, "All these things are against me."
 - That is the way he had responded to the famine when his sons had told him that they must return to Egypt for grain and that they must take Benjamin, the only son of Jacob's favourite wife Rachel that he thought was still alive.
 - His family was starving and there was nothing he could do.
 - He regarded himself as a man who had little blessing from God. Though he still held to the promised blessing, his eyes of faith were very weak and dim.
2. In his early years, it was clear that he wanted to have God's blessing that had been promised to his family, but it was equally clear that he did not understand the blessing.
 - He was very right to want God's blessing and to seek God's blessing, but he had two great errors in his understanding of the blessing.
 - First, he thought it was something he had to contend with others to obtain.
 - Second, he thought the blessing was much more about this world than the world to come.
 - These two errors fed off of each other.
 - When you are looking for your blessing from this world, it sets you in competition with others.
 - You have to compete with them and to outfox them.
 - When you understand the blessing that God gives to His people properly, you have a blessing that can be shared with everyone—
 - A blessing that actually gets better for you when you can share it with others.
 - These two errors made Jacob a very difficult person to live with, especially since they were joined to an intense craving to be blessed by the LORD.
 - I already reminded you how he made enemies of most of the people in his life—
 - he rightly cherished the birthright that God had promised to him though he was younger, but he wrongly took advantage of his brother to obtain it and lied to his father.
 - This so infuriated his brother, Esau, that he wanted to kill Jacob—causing Jacob to flee for his life, spending miserable years serving his uncle Laban.

- He wanted a wife from God, but his idolatrous obsession with Rachel caused him to let Laban give require him to take his eldest daughter first.
 - This led to so much striving and unhappiness in his home—with competitions between Rachel and Leah, the unloved wife.
 - God made Rachel barren for many years, and then she gave Jacob her maidservant to have children for her—and Leah did the same to be sure she could keep up.
 - What envy there was among Jacob’s sons when Rachel finally had a son, Joseph, and Jacob singled him out as his favourite—fuelling the envy all the more.
 - This led to such strife that Jacob’s other sons took Joseph and sold him as a slave to Egypt. They deceived Jacob so that he thought Joseph was dead.
 - Finally, Rachel had a second son, but she died giving birth to him.
 - Time would fail me to speak of how Jacob manipulated to transfer the wealth of his father-in-law to himself, creating a bitter relationship with him so that he would have attacked Jacob if God had not stopped him.
 - And then Jacob’s son Joseph, to whom he showed favouritism, was taken from him for years—and then Rachel was taken.
 - And then there was the famine and the requirement to send Benjamin to Egypt to buy grain which caused Jacob to say,
 - “All these things are against me!”
3. How different Jacob is when we see him on his deathbed just 17 years later bestowing this blessing on Joseph’s sons.
- a. It was here that he looked back on his life and instead of saying, “All these things are against me,” he looks back and he says, “The LORD has been with me.”
 - We read about this.
 - When he blessed Joseph’s sons, he looked back and said:
 - Gen 48:15-16: **“God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has fed me all my life long to this day, ¹⁶ 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.”**
 - The Angel he speaks of is, of course Christ who is equal with the Father, being the author of Jacob’s “redemption from all evil.”
 - What a grand statement that is—Jacob now knew that all this time the LORD had been working in him to refine him.
 - b. There is too little time to go into the details, but how God had worked in Jacob!

- How He had changed him!
- At Bethel, when Jacob as a young man was forced to run from Esau, God had met him and promised to bless him and bring him back and Jacob had made a vow if God did, God would be his God and he would give him a tenth of all in worship.
 - God was showing Jacob that he needed to look to Him to keep him.
- There were many other lessons, but one outstanding event was at Peniel when he returned home and was terrified of Esau—we see a change in him.
 - He is distressed and the Angel of the LORD, Christ, comes to wrestle with him—a mysterious match ensues in which Jacob refuses to let go until the LORD blesses him—and the LORD does.
 - Jacob has finally come to see that it is not from his own striving, but from God that blessing comes, and he refuses to go on without it.
 - Yet, God does not do as he might wish—as has already been described—but why?
 - Because Jacob still needed to be weaned from this world. He was still looking for the blessing too much in this world.
 - So the Angel of the LORD kept working to redeem Jacob from all evil... and now, here he is, blessing these little princes with a blessing that is not of this world!
 - Christ, the Angel of the LORD, has refined Jacob's faith so that now it is an outstanding example.

B. But this example's greatness is not just in how strong Jacob's faith is... it is an example of how God works in a man with to refine his faith.

1. Christian, take heart!

- God is at work in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.
- He is at work in you to redeem you from all evil.
- He will refine the faith of all who come to Him to be saved.
 - Salvation is His and He knows what needs to be done to us even when we don't know at all—and if we ask Him to save us, He will.
 - The whole point of our faith is that we look to Christ to do the saving.
 - That is what Jacob finally learned and that is what our LORD is teaching us now as He refines our faith.

2. Christian, wait upon the LORD.

- You must go through much tribulation to enter the kingdom of God.
- You need patience, that like Jacob, though you trust in the flesh, you continue to come back to your Lord...
 - And when you do, more and more you are able to see that He must bless you.

- You are able to say like Jacob did, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”
- Do not think you are a lost cause.
 - God is glorified in saving the most desperate sinner.
 - Cast yourself upon Him and do not give up until His work is complete
 - Prov 4:18 assures you with these words: **But the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day.**
 - See what God did for Jacob!

III. See how Jacob is stirred up to worship God... see in order that you might also be stirred up to worship Him.

A. What a beautiful picture we have of dying Jacob here, worshipping the LORD.

- **“By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning on the top of his staff.*”**

1. He is too feeble to get out of his bed, but having recounted God’s mercy to him and the blessing that God has given to him and his heirs,

- he must show homage to his Maker—
- He must bow down in worship, but in his weakness, which he can only do by leaning on his staff—
 - That staff that he carried through all those days when the LORD was with him and the Angel was redeeming him from all evil.
 - Often, staffs had carvings on them to mark out special days in a person’s life.
- And here is Jacob, recounting God’s faithfulness and filled with praise and thanksgiving to Him, leaning on his staff.
 - He must bow down, he must worship.

2. Here is true worship.

- A body bowed before God, a heart brimming with joy and adoration, thanksgiving and praise, because of his God.
- He is weaker in his body than ever, but his worship is stronger than ever.
 - He loves God and he loves God’s Son.
 - He understands the height and breadth and depth of His love.

B. See that you worship God too.

1. You may not know the depth of God’s glory to the extent that Jacob knew Him when he was on his deathbed, but remember, he was not always like that.

- Are you unable to worship God as He deserves?
- Of course, that is true—but worship Him as much as you are able, knowing that He is at work in you.

2. Yes, you have good reason to be stirred to worship Him when you see how Jacob was stirred to do so.

- He is worthy of all praise, adoration, and glory.
- He is a God to learn of and to learn from.

- He is a God to be prayed to and trusted in.
- He is a God to revere and pay homage to.
- He is a God to lean upon for salvation.
 - Let the nations be glad and sing for joy!

Conclusion:

How helpful Jacob's example is—

- To see that you really are richly blessed in Christ...
- To see that God will purify your faith...
- To stir your heart to worship Him.