

Looking Beyond Death Hebrews 11:17-22

Introduction

Hebrews 11:13

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.

“These all died.”

Most of us avoid thinking about death until we are forced to do so. But there’s not a human being on earth untouched by it. Even before we pass through the experience ourselves, the death of those we love leaves us wounded or confused or both. The aging process itself, along with illnesses and injuries along the way, tells us everyday that we are a dying race. Neither wisdom nor strength nor a healthful lifestyle can make us immune. Even before the worldwide flood, when lifespans often stretched beyond 900 years, the end was the same: “and he died.”

We know from Genesis that it was not always this way. When God created the universe including human beings, all was very good. Nothing to mar the paradise God made for man. It was not until Adam and Eve chose to sin against God to gain what the serpent declared would be a better life that death passed upon us all. That all who descended

from Adam die underscores the relentless reality of God's judgment on our sin.

So what does the grim certainty of death have to do with living by faith? Unbelievers die. Believers die. What's the difference? The difference is this: those whose faith is in God look beyond the grave to what God has promised them.

Hebrews 11:13-14, 16

13 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 the earth. **14** For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Our text this morning in Hebrews 11:17-22, recalls how the patriarchs who believed God coped with death through faith.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, **18** of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." **19** He considered that God was able even to raise

him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

All of these men whose faith was in God faced death and its impact. Abraham was called not only to give up his son of promise, Isaac, but to be the one responsible for his death. It was a test full of confusing pain. Isaac and Jacob, facing the prospect of their own death, passed blessing on to the coming generations in accord with God's will not man's. Joseph, about to die in Egypt where he started as a slave at 17, gave directions to take his bones back to the Promised Land when the children of Israel finally returned. He spent the greater part of his life in Egypt where he rose to great power and wealth to the benefit of all Israel, but his heart was still in the homeland God had promised.

All these men of faith had their particular challenges connected to death, but their faith in God transformed how they processed the pain and mystery death brings. Critical to our perseverance is looking beyond death to something better in faith.

1. Faith in the God Who Raises the Dead (17-19)
2. Faith in the God Who Blesses Whom He Will (20-21)
3. Faith in the God Who Keeps His Promises (22)

1. Faith in the God Who Raises the Dead (17-19)

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Genesis 22:1-5

¹ After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take 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." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from

afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."

Suffering the death of a young son or daughter is one of the most painful of experiences. In part because it seems so unnatural. We expect our children to bury us, not the other way around. Even when we enter marriage, our vows acknowledge that at some point death will part us from our beloved. But Abraham's test was greater yet. Not only did God call him to give up Isaac, but to be the one sacrificed him. Further, God had explicitly told Abraham that Isaac was the one through whom the Lord would bring descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore—and that through his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The promised Messiah himself, whom God would send to save the human race from the curse of sin and death, was to come from Isaac. The death of Isaac at his young age would seem the death of all God promised.

So this test of Abraham's faith was excruciatingly painful and made no sense. But Abraham obeyed anyway. How? Why?

Hebrews 11:19 explains that it was his faith in the God who raises the dead.

He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham believed in a God who has power over death. God had prepared him for this. You see it hinted at in Hebrews 11:12

Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

From a natural standpoint, Isaac never should have been conceived in the first place. It was too late. So if God could raise up a descendant from a couple too old to have children—they were as good as dead—then certainly God could raise their son of promise from the dead. Abraham's words to his attendants the day he and Isaac headed to Mount Moriah for the sacrifice reflected his resurrection faith:

Genesis 22:5

Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."

So Abraham demonstrates one of the main reasons we look with confidence beyond death: the resurrection. Abraham reasoned

that it would take a resurrection for God to make good on His promises. The same is true for us with the inheritance God has promised to His people. *For us to experience the future God has promised us, there must be a resurrection.*

The ultimate proof of this would not be God's supply of a ram to take Isaac's place, so that figuratively speaking, Abraham received his son back alive, but God's gift of His Son Jesus Christ, who took our place, actually died for our sin, and actually rose again bodily from the tomb the third day, guaranteeing that everyone who puts faith in Him would also rise from the dead.

As our dearest loved ones die, and as we inevitably come to the day of our own death, our faith in God's promises takes us past death to a far better life.

Looking beyond death requires faith in the God who raises the dead. Nothing in life or in death can separate us from His love (Romans 8).

Dear grieving one, dear dying one—look beyond death to a Savior who has conquered death for you.

2. Faith in the God Who Blesses Whom He Will (20-21)

Isaac

20 By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

A very few words, but behind them is a painful story of deception and family discord.

Genesis 27:1-4

1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." **2** He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. **3** Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, **4** and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die."

You remember that Rebekah came up with a scheme for Jacob to deceive his blind father into thinking he was Esau so that Jacob would receive the blessing in Esau's place. The plan worked, but just as Jacob left his father's presence Esau showed up with wild game he had killed and prepared in order to receive the blessing. Isaac trembled violently with the realization he had conferred his blessing on Jacob instead of Esau, but he would not go back on it. He personally favored Esau over

Jacob, and Jacob had deceived him, but the blessing stood.

Despite all the deception and conflict, this outcome is what the Lord had revealed at the birth of the twins:

Genesis 25:23

And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger."

Esau vowed to kill Jacob when his father Isaac was dead, so Jacob fled. But before he left, his father Isaac blessed him again. Listen to his words from Genesis 28:1-4

¹ Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him and directed him, "You must not take a wife from the Canaanite women. ² Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father, and take as your wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother. ³ God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. ⁴ May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your offspring with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings that God gave to Abraham!"

The Lord blessed Jacob in his years away from home, granting him twelve sons. But it

was not till many years later, as he was returning to face Esau again, that the God of his father Isaac became his own God. It was after a wrestling match with the angel of the Lord at the river Peniel. Up to that point he always refers to the Lord as the God of his father, not his own. It was there at Peniel that God changed his name from Jacob, the deceiver, to Israel, prince with God.

So what do we learn from all this gritty tale, given Hebrews' reference to Isaac's blessing as an act of faith?

The curse of sin infects even families who know the Lord, but His purpose will stand. He will make good on His promises in keeping with His will. Even when things seem twisted and backwards, contrary to custom, different from what you desire or expect, with people cheating one another and threatening one another. Even as one generation passes off the scene and another stands in its place, God's purposes will prevail.

Isaac's second blessing on Jacob shows his submission by faith to the providential will of God. Isaac's faith remained in the God who had made promises to his father Abraham. His confidence that God would fulfill those promises continued despite all the family turmoil. He himself was the God's chosen son of promise, although he was younger than

Ismael, whom Abraham had fathered through Sarah's handmaiden Hagar.

Jacob

21 By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

When it came time for Jacob to die, and he blessed his sons, he continued the pattern of God's blessing on the unexpected. Notice that Hebrews refers to his blessing of Joseph's sons. Just as God had chosen the younger son of Isaac over the elder son, Jacob blessed Ephraim over Manasseh.

Genesis 48:14-19

14 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). **15** 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, **16** 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."

17 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

to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. **18** And Joseph said to his father, "Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." **19** 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."

Are you perplexed and disappointed with how God is carrying out His providence?

Do you worry about the future for your children, your grandchildren, your church, your people, your country?

Put your trust in the God whose will prevails generation after generation. God does things in unexpected ways, but God does all things well. He will fulfill His promises.

3. Faith in the God Who Keeps His Promises (22)

Joseph

22 By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Joseph knew how God brings blessing from what looks like the end.

You remember that his brothers hated him not only because Jacob, his father, favored him as the first son of Rachel, the wife he first

loved, but also because of the dreams God sent to him that he would one day rule over his brothers.

When he was 17, they thought to kill him, but instead sold him to slave traders on their way to Egypt. There Joseph was sold as a slave, but eventually ended up second in command to Pharaoh himself, despite false accusations and time in prison. Repeatedly the text tells us that the Lord was with him, and in time his position in Egypt meant the survival of the children of Israel through famine. During the four centuries that followed, the children of Israel grew into a great nation, just as God had predicted to Abram way back in Genesis 15 right after he rescued Lot and his family and met Melchizedek.

What looked like the end for Joseph God turned to blessing not only for him but for all Israel, through whom the promised Messiah would come.

Joseph put it best when he said in Genesis 50:20
As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

The question became, however, now that the Israelites were in Egypt because of Joseph's

provision for them there, what hope would they have of ever returning to the Promised Land after Joseph was gone and Egypt made them slaves?

Their hope was in the same God that had provided for them through every threat so far.

Genesis ends with these words:

Genesis 50:22-26

²² So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. ²³ And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. ²⁴ And 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.

Joseph lived out his days in power and great wealth in the land of Egypt. But his heart was still in Canaan, the land God had promised His people.

However you may prosper here on earth, through the trials of false accusation, imprisonment, danger, or death itself—or through the providential blessings of wealth, power, and influence—*never let what happens in this land of your sojourn steal your heart away from the forever home God has promised His people. And don't lose your confidence that God will bring you safely home.*

Rather than our returning to the Promised Land, Christ has promised to return for us. We may, like Joseph, be buried in a coffin in this foreign land, but Christ will not forget about us. “The dead in Christ shall rise first, then those who are alive and remain shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. And so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4).

Conclusion

The deaths of so many brothers and sisters young and old this year has been hard on us as a congregation. Those who have lost close family members feel the brunt of it. If ever there was a time for us to look by faith beyond death, this is it. Faith in Christ overcomes the scourge of death, because Christ has overcome death. He guarantees our future. He has paid for our inheritance.

After the night comes the dawn of a new day
when death is gone forever.

1. Faith in the God Who Raises the Dead
2. Faith in the God Who Blesses Whom He Will
3. Faith in the God Who Keeps His Promises

Shadows of the Dawn

*A world away and still not far
Like fabric woven into ours
The dawn, it shot out through the night
And day is coming soon*

*The kingdom of the morning star
Can pierce a cold and stony heart
Its grace went through me like a sword
And came out like a song*

*It's veiled and stands behind the shroud
The final day when trumpets sound
Sometimes I glimpse into the fog
And listen for the song*

*Now I'm just waiting for the day
In the shadows of the dawn
But I won't wait, resting my bones
I'll take these foolishness roads of grace
And run toward the dawn
And when I rise and dawn turns to day
I'll shine as bright as the sun
And these roads that I've run, will be wise*

Gray Havens

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Discussion Questions

1. What are some reasons it's hard for us to look beyond death?
2. Why is it so important to our journey of faith that we do look beyond death, and what is our solid reason for doing so?
3. How was Abraham able to obey a command from God that was painful and confusing?
4. In what ways could Abraham's example help you practice obedient faith in the painful and confusing experiences of your own life?
5. How does the faith of Isaac and Jacob help you keep trusting God to do good even when He carries out His promises in ways you didn't expect and in some cases didn't desire?
6. What did God do in Joseph's life to build his faith that God would in time take the children of Israel back to the Promised Land?
7. Why do you think Joseph wanted them to carry his bones back to Canaan when they returned—despite his long and successful time in Egypt?