

Isaac's Mature Faith

Hebrews 11:20

Halifax: 1 October 2023

Introduction:

Today, we are continuing our sermon series in the book of Hebrews.

- We are slowly working our way through the excellent examples of saving faith from the Old Testament saints that are presented to us here.
 - Don't get the wrong idea when I say "saint."
 - The word literally means "a holy one."
 - That is, one who is set apart to God as one of His people.
 - It is someone who is part of the great assembly, the church; those who are part of the house and family of God by profession along with their children.
 - In the Old Testament, the sign was circumcision of the males of the household, and in the NT, the sign is baptism.
 - 1 Cor 7 tells us that a family with one believer is holy, and that the children of that family, even if one parent is an unbeliever, are holy.
- So the list of OT saints in Hebrews 11 gives us examples of the saving faith that some of the well known saints of the Old Testament had.
 - The Jews, to whom Hebrews was written, were all quite familiar with these people and knew well the stories of their faith and its effects.
 - Now that Jesus the Messiah had come, they were among those who had professed faith in Jesus as the Saviour that had been promised to their people.
 - But because so many of the Jews had rejected Him, including their official leaders, those who followed Him were also rejected.
 - It put lots of pressure on those who believed—believing in Jesus in such a hostile climate might mean that they lost their jobs, that they were rejected by their families, even that they might be imprisoned or executed!
 - The mention of these persons from the Old Testament who clung to God and His promises in faith are given to encourage these Hebrew believers.
 - They continued on in faith despite all kinds of trouble and opposition.
 - Their faith enabled them to believe that God is all that He is said to be, and to receive the yet future blessings that He has promised to His people.

Today we come to verse 20, where we have the example of Isaac, who, as an old man, demonstrates how he, because he believed, was able to bestow blessing on his sons.

- Without faith, he could never have done such a wonderful thing.
- It was only through faith that he even had a blessing from God to give them because, ultimately, God is the only one who can either bless or curse.
 - As John Brown said:
 - "Faith enabled Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph to do what they could not have done without it—pronounce blessings that were fulfilled on their posterity."

- In this way, our text encouraged the Hebrews to continue in their faith, and, it encourages us who read this today to continue in our faith!

So let's consider Isaac's example today for our encouragement.

- Our text is Hebrews 11:20, just one verse, but I will read from Hebrews 11:13 to give us some context.
- Please give attention to God's holy word: Hebrews 11:13-20.

Hebrews 11:13-20: 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.

May the LORD add His blessing to His word.

We read the account about Isaac and his family that this refers to earlier in our worship service. It is in Genesis 25:19-34, and then Genesis 27:1-40.

- As some of you may not be familiar with the story, I will summarise the main points with a bit of explanation.

In Genesis 25:19-21, we have Isaac and his wife Rebekah, knowing that God has promised to bring forth from their offspring a great nation that will bring forth the Saviour of the world, praying that they would be able to conceive a child, for they were barren.

- God answered their prayer by giving them twins.
- The twins were striving in Rebekah's womb in such an extraordinary way that she asked the Lord, "Why am I like this?"
- He responded with a prophetic oracle in Gen 25:23:
 - **"Two nations *are* in your womb, two peoples shall be separated from your body; *one* people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger."**
- When they were born, we are told that the first was called Esau because he was covered with red hair, and the second was called Jacob because he had hold of his brother's heel, grabbing at him as he came out. The name Jacob means supplanter.
 - He was destined to take his brother's place, who, as the firstborn, would normally have two portions of the inheritance and the responsibility to lead the family and to be their priest.
- We are told (Gen 25:24-28) that Isaac and Rebekah showed favouritism—Isaac favoured Esau and Rebekah favoured Jacob.

- Even as young men, Esau was famished after a hunting expedition and asked for some red soup that Jacob had made, but Jacob made him purchase it by swearing to give his birthright to him (25:29-34).

Years went by and the day came that Isaac (see Gen 27), who was old and blind, called Esau to come to him and asked him to go hunting and prepare venison for him, and that after eating it, he would bestow the blessing of the firstborn on him.

- This was especially significant in the case of this family because they, in distinction from all other families, had been promised that they would bring forth a great nation that would bring for the Messiah who would bring God's blessing of salvation to them and to all the world.
 - God's oracle had said that Jacob, even though the second born, would be the one who would have that great blessing.
 - Surely Isaac knew about this oracle—certainly he knew that his second son was named Jacob because he was to supplant his brother—but he proceeds to bestow the blessing on Esau.
 - That he proposes to bestow this blessing in secret, without calling the family around and without telling anyone, suggests that he is doing something he knows might meet with opposition.
- Rebekah hears the proposal of Isaac to Esau and immediately hatches a devious plan to secure the blessing for Jacob, her favoured son (Gen 27:5-17).
 - Since Isaac is blind, she disguises Jacob with regard to three of the other four senses—how he feels by covering him with hairy skins, how he smells by using Esau's clothes, how the food tastes by making it taste like venison and preparing it with the spices she had probably taught Esau to use— the voice of brothers is often similar so that takes care of the sense of hearing—well enough.
 - Isaac is suspicious about the voice, but since his other active senses are satisfied (sight not being possible), he blesses Jacob, supposing him to be Esau.
- When Esau shows up from the hunt (27:30-37), his father realises that he has been deceived.
 - He trembles violently and declares to Esau that he cannot alter the blessing—he knew that he spoke as a prophet of God—that it was an oracle from God.
 - Esau pled and wept, but all Isaac could do was give him a blessing of becoming a great nation, but not the nation that would bring forth the Messiah.
 - And so the oracle of blessing to Esau promises that, but also that he will grow restless and rebel against his brother and will at last be brought under him—a reference to the day of judgment.
- Though it is not in the portion we read, I want to let you know that although Esau has murderous intent toward Jacob for taking his birthright and blessing—so much so that Jacob has to flee for safety—
 - years later, Esau is fine with it because he ends up with significantly more wealth and power in this world than Jacob ever has.
 - Like many people today, he did not understand that the blessing of salvation is not something that we fully experience in this world, but in the world to come.

- Esau did not have true faith—he believed in God, but he did not care as long as God made him successful in this world, and God did.
- He had his portion in this life.

That is the story that is referred to in Hebrews 11:20.

- The simple words, again are these:
 - **Heb 11:20: “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.”**
 - Esau got a blessing in this world, and Jacob got a blessing in this world and that which is to come.
 - Esau, having prosperity in this world, saw no need for salvation—he was quite satisfied, but Jacob, like Abraham and Isaac, looked for the city whose builder and maker is God, an eternal city in heaven with God where righteousness dwells.

Now that we have the background, let’s consider what we might learn from the faith of Isaac, blessing Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

I. Here is the most wonderful blessing of all.

A. Isaac and his family had been promised this blessing.

1. God had told Isaac’s father Abraham that He would be God to him and to his seed.
 - He had told him that He would bless him and make his name great, that He would make him into a great nation that would be blessed, and that He would give to him a child who would bring this blessing to all the nations of the earth.
2. Isaac and his family wanted this blessing.
 - In fact, they wanted it very badly—as can be seen by the way they clamoured for it.
 - Of course it was not right for them to do all the clamouring and the deception over the blessing, but it was very right for them to want this blessing.
 - They recognised that it was a thing greatly to be desired—more than anything else.
 - They realised that without God’s blessing, there can be no happiness.
 - Isaac should have taught them to rejoice in the blessing, and since Jacob was the one who through whom the promised nation was to come,
 - to support him and bless him and rejoice that through his seed, blessing would come for them all—the promised Son, the seed, who would bless all the families of the earth.
 - By rather setting his sons in competition for the blessing, he brought much sorrow to his household.
 - But still, he was correct in teaching them that nothing mattered so much as this blessing.

B. What is it that makes this blessing so wonderful?

1. It is that God promises to be your God.
 - For God to be your God means that you are blessed by Him.

- To be blessed by God Almighty is everything!
2. What does God's blessing include?
 - It surely includes full forgiveness of sin—no one can be blessed at last who is not forgiven, for sin against God—spoiling His image in which we were made by sin and ugly living—calls for eternity in hell.
 - His blessing must also include deliverance from sin—that is, transformation from sin and corruption to beautiful holy living where we have a true heart of devotion to God and love for one another.
 - His blessing also must include communion with Him—intimate communion because we were made for that—we were made to behold His glory and to worship Him in spirit and in truth.
 - When God blesses a people, He also restores them to paradise—where sickness and death and sorrows are no more.
 3. You can see how remarkable all this is if you will admit what God has revealed to us all: His eternal power and divine nature, our sin, and His displeasure with our sin.
 - What a thing it is to be blessed by Him when we are so unworthy!
 - You can see that it is a most remarkable thing when you understand that we are sinners who do not deserve God's blessing and fellowship but His curse.
- C. If you are part of the church, you are among those who have the promise of this blessing.
1. The church is made up of those who profess their faith along with their children.
 - Not all who are in the visible church will obtain this blessing.
 - The only ones who receive it are the ones who believe...
 - Who accept that they are sinners, that salvation is through the Son that God sent to His people—His only begotten Son who came to redeem us by dying on the cross where He was punished for our sins.
 - They are the ones who come to Christ, relying on Him to obtain this blessing that restores them to have God as their God.
 - Some in the church only profess, but do not believe.
 - They will have a measure of blessing with the people of God in this life, but they will be cut off on the day of judgment because they never trusted in Jesus.
 2. Jesus Himself is the one who actually received this blessing for all the rest of us.
 - He saw that we were cut off from Him and His Father by our sin, and He came to be one of us that He might be punished in our place and that He might raise us up to obedience—He obeyed for us.
 - He met the standard of absolute purity and ardent love for God that is required, He bore our punishment, and He gives us the Holy Spirit who begins now and at last completes the work of restoring us from a sinful heart and life to a holy heart and holy life of love and devotion.
 - Jesus did all of this because He knew how wonderful it is to be blessed by His Father.

- He counted it worthwhile to come here and to suffer for our sins because of the tremendous blessing it would bring to us.
 - He also did this because His Father wanted it and sent Him to do it.
 - The Son loves us from before the foundation of the world, and so does His Father and the Holy Spirit also.
3. Jesus Himself, now being not only God the Son but also fully human, delights in this blessing. He knows how wonderful it is and wants it for Himself as well as for us.

II. “How’s that blessing you told me that God promised you working out?”

A. Let’s imagine for a moment that one of the other great families of Ur, where Abraham was called from, comes to visit Isaac.

1. In case you don’t remember, Isaac’s father Abraham was of a wealthy family that lived in Ur, a truly great city of the ancient world that had the finest luxuries.
 - God called Abraham to leave Ur and to another land so that he might obtain God’s blessing there.
2. Of course the people at Ur would be curious about this great family that left, so now one of the sons of another great family comes to see how Isaac is doing.
 - He is a little surprised when he finds him, not living in a house with beautiful furnishings, plumbing, and spaciousness, but in tents.
 - So he says to Isaac, “So how’s that blessing you guys were promised working out for you?”

B. And Isaac says, “Well, frankly, it’s been rather difficult.

1. “Some of the people seem to be lawless here and we are a little afraid of them.
 - “Some of them kept filling up the wells my father dug because they did not want us to compete for the grasslands for our flocks and herds.
 - “My wife was barren until I was sixty and then God gave us these twin boys, but they were contending with each other before they were even born and now Rebekah and I are not really getting along very well.
 - “She thinks the world of Jacob, but he’s too soft for me—he’s a whiner and a cheat and I don’t get along with him... but Esau is a great guy—he is strong and an avid hunter. You’ll have to meet him.
 - “Rebekah has no use for him, so she hangs out with Jacob and I hang with Esau. He is making some bad choices.
 - “We have had to deal with some famines too—had to relocate a couple of times. It makes me a little uneasy to go to some of the neighbouring nations.
2. “But the great thing about it all is that we have God’s promise of blessing.”
 - Isaac’s friend looks at him with dismay. “But you just told me that things aren’t going that well.”
 - “It doesn’t sound to me like you got what you came for.”
 - And Isaac says, “You don’t understand. The blessing is not for now—it is that God is going to make us into a great nation that will bring forth the Son God promised to Adam and Eve who will reconcile us to God.

- “We are not looking for a city here and now, in this world, but the eternal city of God.
- “He has been faithful to protect us, and He has answered our prayers to give us sons, even though our wives were barren, and He promises that He will bless us and be God to us and our descendants.”

C. So like Isaac’s friend, let me ask you, Christian: How is the blessing from God thing working out for you?

1. There are often many frustrations, aren’t there?

- You want to do good, but like Paul says in Romans 7, you find that evil is still present with you—the one who wants to do good.
- You want to draw near to God, but you find that you are often cold and far away.
- You are tired of being disrespected because of your faith, and it is making you less inclined to tell others about your hope.
- And not only that, but perhaps you are having problems with your health, or your finances.
 - Maybe you are unhappy with your work or can’t see how you could ever provide for your family.
 - You are concerned about the direction of our nation.
 - Maybe your marriage is not going well.

2. Perhaps we could have asked Jesus while He was here how it was going—this one who was called “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief,” even though He was the Lord of all.

- It was He who said that perhaps He had laboured in vain.
 - With sadness, He saw 5000 who wanted to make Him king walk away when He preached the gospel of salvation from sin by faith in Him to them—and turned to His disciples to say, “Will you go away also?”
- There He is, with them confessing that He is the Christ and then opposing the very idea of His dying on the cross.
 - And there again, saying, you know not what spirit you are of... and again, “How long will I be with you—O slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”
 - And there He is weeping in the garden with such agony that He begins to sweat blood—all while His disciples sleep.
 - There He is arrested, spit upon, forsaken by His disciples, pummelled, given the Roman scourge, mocked, and at last upon on the cross, with heaven closed above and earth jeering below—crying out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
 - How is that blessing thing God promised working out?

TRANS> Yes, from Isaac, we learn about the wonderful blessing and we learn about the frustration that comes to those who follow.

- This is where faith shines.

III. There are several ways that Isaac's is a shining example for us.

A. Isaac's faith is an example of believing what is not seen but only promised.

1. As our text says, by faith he blesses Jacob and Esau concerning the things to come.
 - Faith lays hold of the blessing (or the curse) that God has spoken of concerning the future.
 - It is the evidence of things not seen—it is based not on what we see, but on what God says.
2. That's how it is that faith can go on rejoicing in God's promise when the friend comes and says "How's that promised blessing thing working for you?"
 - We can speak about how wonderfully gracious God has been to us when we are scorned and rejected because we are not judging with our senses, but we are believing what God has spoken.
 - He believes what he cannot see because God has said it.
 - Do you do that?
 - You will go wrong if you expect to receive God's blessing in this world.

B. Second, Isaac's faith is an example of recognising that it is up to God to decide who will do what in His kingdom.

1. Isaac did not have such faith before the ordeal caused by his efforts to bless Esau.
 - He foolishly took matters into his own hands because he trusted Esau with the special blessing that God had given his family—and Esau was the firstborn.
 - He did not stop to consider the oracle that God had spoken when the twins were born—that the older would serve the younger.
 - We might suppose that he avoided looking at that too closely because he was clever enough to know that it might not be what he wanted.
 - Be honest—have you ever done that?
2. Isaac is an example to us because through the ordeal that resulted in Isaac inadvertently blessing Jacob, Isaac's faith was brought to a far greater maturity.
 - He came to see, in this rather embarrassing way, that it is up to God to decide who will be saved.
 - It is right for us to do what God has given us to do—testify of our hope, plead with people to repent and believe and be reconciled to God, pray earnestly for God to save them, bring them to hear the word preached...
 - We are to do all that, but we must not go beyond what the Lord has given us, no matter how effective it might seem to be at the time.
 - Do you want some examples?
 - We must not try to manipulate the kingdom as so many have done—by changing the truth about God in an effort to attract more people...
 - in denying hell because it is not popular,
 - in manipulating what the Bible says about homosexuality (that it is an abomination),
 - in following the traditions of man even though Jesus tells us not to,

- in bringing in celebrities to testify so people will believe,
 - in using special music or other techniques to manipulate people into the kingdom.
- Isaac was a poor example of this at first, but by God’s grace, he was taught the truth.
- We can be thankful that if we have indeed come to Christ to be saved and reconciled to God forever, He will lead us from our error—but our error can cause a lot of grief to us and our families.
 - It certainly did for Isaac’s family.
 - How much better it would have been if from the beginning, Isaac had accepted the oracle that Esau would be under Jacob and had brought his family to rejoice that God had given it to Jacob to be the father of the great nation that was to bring the Saviour to the world.
 - If he had taught Esau and Rebekah what a privilege it was to have this blessing in their family, and if he had taught them to pray for Jacob and had himself sought to prepare him to be the priest and head of the family.
 - But he tried instead to take matters into his own hands until God graciously slapped him down.
- C. Third, in Isaac’s example, we see how this man of faith has tremendous respect for the oracle of God that he pronounced.
1. When Esau pleads for Isaac to bless him also, Isaac says of Jacob, “I have blessed him, and indeed, he shall be blessed.” (Gen 27:33).
 - He knows that what he spoke was not his own wishes—it was divine prophecy. He could not overturn it.
 - He is absolutely confident in God’s word which he has spoken—knowing that it will come to pass.
 2. I wonder, do you have this confidence in the oracles of God?
 - God’s word is remarkable. What He has spoken, He will do.
 - It is for us to live with this in mind.
 - When it looks like God’s kingdom is failing, it is then that faith must arise and say, “No, this is what God has spoken. This is what will be.”
 - Take time to listen carefully and understand what God has spoken—then live in the reality of it as what shall be.
 - For example, when God says that the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire to be tormented forever, don’t deny it... it is an oracle from God.
- D. Fourth, in Isaac’s example, learn to tremble before God.
1. When Isaac realised that he had sought to go against God in trying to bless Esau instead of Jacob, we are told he trembled exceedingly.
 - The very thought of going against God ought to horrify us—it ought to make us tremble.
 2. God is a holy God. He is not to be lightly esteemed.
 - When you see that you have not honoured Him, it ought to make you tremble.

Conclusion: So what is the condition of your faith?

- Is it like Esau's, who only wanted blessing in this life?
- or is it like Jacob's and Rebekah's, who thought they could channel the blessing where it was supposed to go by deception? Though it worked, it was not right.
 - They should have used honest means and entrusted the matter to God to work out. Their scheming caused them to be separated for many years, and Jacob did not grow out of it for years and had a very hard life as a result.
- Or is your faith like Isaac's, a faith that is growing to maturity as God works in you?