

The Faith of Jacob

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[0:00] Lord Jesus, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in! O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

! We are followers of Jesus. It is a life of discipleship. You could say the Christian life is a life of cross-carrying. I'm sure there are more we could add to that as well. But there is certainly another way that we could describe the Christian life, and that is that we are people of faith. People of faith. Now, what is faith? Hebrews 11.1 tells us. Now, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. And so, faith is not some vague notion or kind of feeling in our tummies that things will kind of maybe work out in the end. But no, as Christians, as people of faith, it is the sure expectation and conviction that God is working in this world to do all that he said he would do. In other words, if I can put it this way, there is a future orientation to the Christian life, isn't there? It's one of waiting, anticipating, longing for horizon that we know that will come, but we might not see before death. And as we sit here this evening, you and I,

I think this past week, these past months, we've felt something of that tension, have we not? Much of what we've struggled with this week has been the tension of living for Jesus now while waiting for much of what he's promised. For example, we know Jesus has promised the meek will inherit the earth, but we've kind of struggled to be meek because, well, being meek now doesn't look like very much.

We know that Jesus has promised that the pure in heart will see God, but we've struggled to be pure in heart. Why? Because we don't see God standing right in front of our faces now. We forget or we lose sight that part of what God has promised us is future, it's coming. It's written in our diaries, but it's not quite there yet. But we are to live as people of faith.

Our passage this evening, Genesis 48 and 49, friends, is all about that. A long reading, but I think we could sum it up in one word. Faith, life of faith. It is about Jacob's assurance of things hoped for, about his conviction of things not seen. Well, you have every right to ask, Ben, how did you get there? Because as we read it, it seemed to be all about blessings, blessings.

[3:06] That is the action of the narrative. It's quite a straightforward narrative. There's lots going on, but Genesis 48, or the end of 47 into 48, Jacob is about to die. He's on his deathbed. He calls Joseph.

He blesses Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. He adopts them. And then in Genesis 49, he blesses the rest of his sons. The narrative is summed up with the last verse that we read there, Genesis 49, 28. All these are the 12 tribes of Israel. This is what their father said to them, is he blessed them, blessing each with a blessing suitable to them. So yes, quite a straightforward, simple narrative. He gets the family together and he blesses them. But it is a blessing resting upon, rooted in, founded upon faith, of his assurance of future realities that God has promised, his conviction that what God said he would do for his people, he would do. Now, how do I get that? Where do I get that?

Well, wonderfully, one of the most helpful things as we go through passages in the Bible is to see what other passages in the Bible say about the passages of the Bible we're in. What does Scripture say about other parts of Scripture? And we get that in Hebrews 11, 21. The New Testament gives us a commentary on Genesis 48. Hebrews 11, 21. By faith, Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. This blessing on Ephraim and Manasseh is an act of faith.

Faith and a future orientation. And that actually carries into Genesis 49, I think, as well. Genesis 49, 1. He's blessing them. But actually, what does he say? Jacob calls his sons and says, gather yourselves together that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come.

And not just to them, but to their children and their children's children, as God establishes a people. And so I just want to ask two questions of this passage this evening that get to our two points. What gives Jacob such confidence and assurance that as he lies dying, this 147-year-old patriarch of God's people, what gives him confidence of things to come? In other words, how can he hand out these blessings? And the second question is, well, what is the content of these blessings, of these promises that God gives to his people through Jacob here at the end? So, first question, what gives Jacob such confidence and assurance as he blesses his son's answer?

[5:50] Simply, it's God. He remembers who God is. And that's our first point this evening. He remembers who God is. He knows God. He remembers the God of his faith, of our faith.

Let me just draw out two things. There's so much in these passages. We're not going to be able to touch on everything. But let me just draw out two things that Jacob knows about God. Firstly, he knows that God is a covenant keeper. God has made a covenant, a promise. He's bound himself to this family line. And he knows God will keep his covenant. God is a God of covenant, of promise to his people. And so Jacob can look to the future with assurance. Although he is breathing his very last, and he has hope for his children and all his descendants, because he knows God will not leave his people. Genesis 48, verse 3. Jacob said to Joseph, God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you. And I will make of you a company of peoples, and I will give you this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession. Friends, this is covenant promise, promissory language. If you hear the words fruitful and multiply, a company of people, a land I'm going to give you to your offspring, it should make our kind of covenant antenna go up. It's a little bit like if someone says now, Scott McTominay, overhead kick, Hampden Park. It had to be mentioned, really, didn't it?

It had to be mentioned. Mention those three things. Everyone's thinking Scotland are going to the World Cup, right? Fruitful people, offspring, land. That is all language that has been given to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to make us think covenant promise. And actually, we get it explicitly in verse 15, don't we, as he blesses Joseph and his sons. Verse 15, he blessed Joseph and said, The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, and on he goes a little bit, bless the boys, and in them let my name be carried on in the name of my fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth. God has promised to bless this people, and so in faith he blesses his grandchildren. Now, let's just pause and really dig in. Why is this such an act of faith? Why here, as he breathes his last, is this such an act of faith? Because think about it, in terms of what Jacob is seeing, although he sees dimly now, very little, some, but very little of these promises are visible to him in the present.

Imagine him sitting there, and imagine him in this room with Joseph and Ephraim and Manasseh, and pause and just think about this scene. Think about Ephraim and Manasseh there, and what life is like for them as he blesses them. Now, if you want me to explain the maths to you, you can come and speak to me afterwards, and I can show you all the dates, but Ephraim and Manasseh here are likely in their early 20s. They're in their early 20s. They're not that young, but think about what their life has been like. Their dad is the second most powerful man in Egypt, and in some ways we could probably say the second most powerful man on the face of the earth at this point. Whatever he says will happen, happens.

They'll likely live in a palace right next to Pharaoh for many of their years. If you like, they're at number 10. The king is just up the road. Ephraim and Manasseh have an Egyptian mum. They have other Egyptian names. They're surrounded by power and wealth and success. Today, people speak of Nepo babies, don't they? I don't think it's that, right? But they have a charmed life. Visibly, everything is stacked in favour of Egypt here. Literally, Egypt is the bread basket of the world. Power, wealth, success is all around these boys, all around them. And what's in front of them here in Genesis 48?

[10:10] This dying old man, almost blind, a stranger in their land. They met him only about 17 years before.

Jacob here has probably very little money now. No power, really, no influence. A shepherd people disdained by the Egyptians. Jacob came down with 70. Maybe there's a few more. So picture the scene.

Picture the scene. And where does Jacob say the action really is? Where does he say it actually is? It's with God. He trusts in the covenant promises of God, that God will take his people from this foreign land, from this place of powerlessness, this place away from home. He will take them home and he will bless them. He will bless them. And what do you think it was like for these boys here is they actually see their own dad, Joseph bow down and honor his father. He says, yes, all that God has for his people is infinitely greater than all Egypt has to offer. And so he's saying live by faith, take hold of that. God has promised a people and he'll do it. He's gone from one, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, 70, now maybe a few hundred.

He's promised a land. He's promised a land. He'll do it. He's promised to be a God to your children. And here it is all beginning to happen. So dear friends, remember the character of God. Remember the God of our faith. He is a God of covenant promise. He will bless his church. He will multiply his people across the earth. And most importantly, he will always be our God and we will always be his people no matter what circumstances look like. The church will often look weak. In these days before the Lord Jesus comes, we're living as strangers and exiles and aliens here. But God's covenant promise to his people will never fail. It will never fail. And that is why Jacob here is living by faith right at his last because he knows God will take his people and take them home. And it's such a gracious covenant, isn't it? God bringing people in. We see the swapping of hands here again, the blessing of the younger over the older, like Jacob and Esau had also with Cain and Abel back in Genesis 4. But it reminds us what?

That God will bless who he will bless. He's utterly sovereign in salvation. He's made a covenant with his people, undeserved grace. And so to live by faith, we need to remember the faithfulness of God, the faithfulness of God to keep his covenant, his promise to his people. Second, the other thing we see here, there's lots, but let's just look at one more. Jacob knows God is a covenant keeper. Second, that he is a shepherd, that he is a shepherd. Verse 15, God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. God is his shepherd. As I said earlier, that's the first time that we have God called a shepherd in the Bible. The second is in Genesis 49 as he blesses Joseph. The language comes up again.

[13:34] But it is surely one of the most beautiful and poetic and meaningful description of God's relationship to his people. Now, I know that shepherding is neither beautiful nor poetic. It's hard work, right? Hard graft. But it is a glorious truth. God was Jacob's shepherd and the Lord indeed is our shepherds. And so what do shepherds do? Well, they do lots of things, don't they? But mainly shepherds feed the sheep, defend the sheep, lead the sheep. And Jacob here, right at the end, knows that God has done that for him. He has literally made sure he's had food and saving him from a famine and bringing him to Egypt. He's defended him, thinking all that happened with Esau earlier on and his worries about his relationship with him. And he's led him. He's led him. He's led him here and been with him as they've come down to Egypt. But most importantly, he's brought him to himself.

Dear friends, I pray that we can all take that line of Jacob's and make it our own. God, who's been my shepherd all my life long to this day. We may have times of wandering, but he's brought us back. Times under spiritual attack, but he's fended off wolves and lions.

Times of famine, but he's led us again to streams of living water in his word, where we are now drinking deeply again. Dear friends, if you don't know God this evening as your shepherd, turn to him. He wants to show you that the Lord Jesus, the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep. The closeness of a shepherd in the Lord Jesus who would die for his people.

Yes, may that be the testimony of all of us, by God's grace, that we can say, even right to the very end, God has been my shepherd all my life long to this day. And perhaps one other thing shepherds do as well. They don't leave their sheep to chance, do they? They're there with them. Look down at verse 21, Genesis 48. Jacob says to Joseph that God will be with you. Even as I die, God will be with you.

So how can we live individually and as a church by faith? How can we have assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen? Because God is our shepherd. Because God is our shepherd, he will lead us and guide us and take us safely home. He'll take us safely home.

[16:12] So to be a people of faith, to live by faith, to walk by faith, we must know God for who he truly is. He is a covenant keeper, a promise keeper who will never break or abandon one of his promises to his people. And he is a shepherd who will guard, defend, lead and feed us all the way to glory. Knowing who God is then, the one we can trust with his promises, the one who has come to us. Let us then look at our second point and see what are these promises of God that Jacob gives to his children as he blesses them. So we need to remember the God of our faith and remember the promises of God. So what are the promises of God we see here in the rest of these verses? The first one, the first one, he promises to his children. God promises through Jacob to his children that they will have a land, that they will be taken home to the place that he has for them. Now the language of the promise to return to Canaan, to the promised land, is all over this passage. The end of chapter 47, Jacob makes Joseph promise to be buried out of Egypt and back with his fathers. Verse 21, he tells Joseph God will bring him to the land of his fathers.

Verse 22, did you see that? Jacob promises Joseph a mountain back in Canaan. That's a bit odd, isn't it? He's about to die and he's kind of handing out pieces of real estate. Why is he doing that? Well, because of the certainty that Joseph and his descendants will go back there. He promises that his people will make it home. We had some interesting journeys in the snow this week. I'm not sure how it was for you getting about. I think for us, we moved this last week and it's getting used to life out in the shire.

Just that little bit more snow, just a little bit more deep, just a little bit more cold, just a little bit more longer for it to melt away. So when I say we had interesting journeys, we also had some interesting non-journeys. We got in the car on Friday and I said to the kids, this might be a very, very short journey to school. And sure it was, three seconds later, maybe one meter backwards, we were stuck in the car. That was it. And the next hour or so was trying to dig the car out.

And we didn't really want to get back in the car unless we knew we would make it safely upon our next journey. We'd actually get out over the hill and back out onto the road. And so, dear friends, what gives us confidence to keep going, to be people of faith, to trust God when the going is tough, when it's hard, when there are spiritual storms, spiritual snowstorms around us? We feel stuck, we feel snowed in in the Christian life. What's going to help us to keep going? It is to know that God has promised his people that they will take them safely to the promised land. And what is that for us?

Well, it is the new heavens and the new earth, a world, a land where all is as it should be, made new by the Lord Jesus. So, dear friends, if you feel like giving up this evening, you're in the midst of a spiritual snowstorm, not wanting to push ahead. The challenges seem too big, too hard, too discouraging. It seems not worth following Jesus for all the hassle, for all the sidelining, for all the pain. Keep going. God, our shepherd, will see us safely home to the land of promise. It just comes up here again and again and again. You will make it out of Egypt. You will get home. The land is promised. Dear friend, God will see you safely home. And so, keep going and know he can see you safely there. Second, the other sort of promise or blessing we see of God working through to his people here to help us live as people by faith is that God has promised the Lion King of Judah. He's promised a ruler, the Lion King of Judah. In chapter 49, we get these blessings or almost prophecies to Jacob's 12 sons. We can't look at all of them. So, let's just look at two, and we'll look at the two longest. The first one is to Judah in verses 8 to 12. Now, there's so much to draw out here, and we can't say it all, but it is a remarkable blessing. And notice, even just at the start of what he says to

[20:34] Judah, how what's happened to Joseph now comes to Judah and his tribe going forward. Judah, your brother shall praise you, Joseph says, as he blesses him. Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies. And listen for this, your father's son shall bow down before you. Well, hang on. Let's reverse a little.

Wasn't that what all the dreams were about? Brothers bowing down? Brothers bowing down to Joseph? Well, yes, and we've seen that. All those dreams came true. The brothers did bow down to Joseph. But now we're going to see for God's people going forward that Judah will have prominence and preeminence among the brothers.

And not only just among all the brothers and the nations as they bow down. Verse 10, someone is going to come from Judah who will have obedience of all the peoples, of all peoples shall come before him. So envisions here isn't just God's people, but something of a global scope. How else is he described as a lion, powerful, strong, someone who people dare not rise? We also see there, don't we, in those verses, that the scepter shall not depart from Judah. He's royal.

We were playing Guess Who in our house this week. I don't know if you've ever played Guess Who or you remember it. It's the person wearing glasses. Do they wear a hat? Do they have a beard? Whatever it is. And you narrow it down and, oh, the answer can only be one person. Well, who do you think is being spoken about here as Judah is blessed? Who's promised? Who's a lion? Who will have all the nations come and bow before him? Who is descendant of Judah? Who is a king? Guess who? The Lord Jesus. Revelation 5.5.

This is what the apostle John writes. Then one of the elders said to me, do not weep. See, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed and he is able to open the scroll.

[22:46] And so what is the promise of God that we are to remember as we live this life of faith? That he will send the lion king of Judah to rule and reign and, verse 11, to destroy his enemies.

Now, this side of the cross, we can look back and praise God that he has done this. He has sent the lion of the tribe of Judah. Jesus has come to rule and reign. And if he has promised to send him the first time, then the promises that we have that the Lord Jesus will return, he will surely do it. He will surely do it. And we will see Christ again coming from the skies and we will see him face to face as Joseph and Jacob and Judah and Jacob are seeing each other face to face right here.

It is a glorious thing to help us living this life of faith to remember that we will see Christ, that he is coming again. Friends, remember, though, what it says here, though. What does it say of the lion?

It says, who dare rouse the lion? Dear friends, let that be an encouragement to you this evening, that the Lord Jesus is a lion who will defend his people. He is also a lamb who gave his life for his people, but he is a lion. He will defend us. But if you're not a Christian here this evening, do not think of Jesus as someone to trifle with or someone who is a bit of a pushover.

He is the lion of Judah. Bow to him or be defeated by him. Third and final then, our final promise that we see here is that God promises a prospering people, the fruitful tree of Joseph. We see the bow of Joseph. This is the longest blessing that we get. And it's Joseph's kind of second blessing as he's blessed in 48, 15 with his sons as well. Now, you have to wonder, given all we've seen of Jacob all the way through, is there a hint of favoritism here? Perhaps. Joseph also gets the mountainside, and no one else does. But whether it's favoritism or not, it is a remarkable blessing.

[25 : 05] Now, it's quite long, the blessing to Joseph. We won't read it all. But to sum it up, it is a blessing all about being fruitful and prospering. Verse 22, even as he suffered, verse 23, he was unmoved. And now he has the blessing of heaven and God of the deep. And when it speaks of breasts and the womb, it means descendants and children. And in some ways, as Jacob goes through it, he's kind of running out of words of how many blessings Joseph can be showered with. But in short, it is the spiritual equivalent of going into kind of the biggest apartment store and getting all that you can get. He just pours everything out to Joseph and says, you will be a prosperous and fruitful tree. Well, that blessing comes to us today in the church, really as this, that the kingdom of God will grow and prosper. Not materially, is that promise? Not in terms of taking physical land, but spiritually. People being saved and added to our number, and people also growing in the fruit of the Spirit. Verse 22, I don't know what you thought of as you read it, but it made me think of Psalm 1, a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit, a righteous oak growing in godliness before God. Friends, to give us eyes of faith, remember the promise of God that in Christ and in Christ alone, he will make us a fruitful people to grow more like

God and bring more people to know and worship him. So friends, may that give us confidence in our spiritual lives that we can change. Sanctification is real. And may that give us confidence that as we wait for that unseen horizon of Jesus' return, that Jesus is building his church, sinners are being saved, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Yes, God has promised us a place, a ruler, and to be a prospering people across the earth. We may not see it all now, but it has started and he will finish it. And so here is Jacob with his last breath blessing his sons, full of faith, with a sure hope and certain expectation of the future. A child of the promise who ran the race by faith and not by sight.

And so dear friends, may it also be so of us. And to do that, may we remember who God is and remember all his promises to us in Christ. But this grand opening, this first book of the Bible, a book of beginnings, a book of blessings is almost done, but not quite done. With Jacob breathing his last, what will happen to the brothers? What will happen to God's people? Well, we need to come back next week to find out. Let's pray.

Our great God and heavenly Father, help us to live by faith and not by sight. God, to remember who you are and all that you have promised to us. Grow our faith. Give us a greater assurance of things yet unseen that will make all the difference in our lives today as we seek to follow you until we meet and see the good shepherd, the Lord Jesus, face to face in glory and feast at his table and dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen.