

HEROES – Week 3: PASSING THE PROMISE Hebrews 11:17-22

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

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.

Let's pray.

In a few short years the Olympics are coming back to the United States. That means, I suddenly become an expert in sports I've never watched before. For two weeks every four years, I'm deeply invested in events I couldn't explain the rules to if my life depended on it.

But one event has always fascinated me. The relay race. Because the relay race is different than every other race on the track. In the 100 meters, it's all about one runner. In the marathon, it's all about one runner. But in the relay race, nobody runs the whole race. Nobody wins alone.

Everything comes down to the handoff.

Some of the fastest teams in the world have lost Olympic medals because of a bad handoff. Four world-class athletes can run nearly a perfect race, but if the baton never makes it cleanly into the next runner's hand, everything falls apart.

The race isn't just about running. It's about passing something on. And that's exactly what Hebrews 11 is talking about. Because when most people think about Hebrews 11, they think about individual heroes. But our text today is different. The focus isn't on one hero. It's on four generations. Abraham. Isaac. Jacob. Joseph.

Four generations w/ one promise. One baton.

The heroes of Hebrews 11 were not people who accomplished everything in their lifetime. They were people who trusted God enough to pass the promise to the next generation.

That's a word for us. In a culture obsessed with immediacy and instant results. But Hebrews 11 introduces us to people who spent their lives investing in promises they would never fully see.

Abraham never saw the nation God promised. Jacob never saw Israel become a people. Joseph never saw the Exodus. Yet all of them believed anyway. Why? Because faith believes God's promises are bigger than your lifetime.

Look again at verse 17: *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac..."*

Now let's be honest. This is one of the most difficult stories in all of Scripture. If you're new to church or exploring Christianity, this may be one of those passages that makes you stop and ask questions. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son. Before we move too quickly past that, we need to understand what is happening here. This is not God endorsing child sacrifice. The pagan nations surrounding Israel practiced that, but throughout the Old Testament God consistently condemns it. The issue here is not sacrifice. The issue is trust.

Because think about Abraham's situation. For decades he had waited on God's promise. God promised descendants as numerous as the stars, a great nation, and a future that would extend far beyond Abraham's own lifetime. Then, after years of waiting, Isaac finally arrives. Isaac isn't simply Abraham's son; Isaac is the promise. Every hope for the future seems wrapped up in this one boy.

Then God gives a command that appears to contradict everything He previously promised.

One pastor put it this way: a test comes when God's command appears to contradict God's promise. That's exactly where Abraham finds himself. God's promise says, "Through Isaac." God's command says, "Offer Isaac." The two seem impossible to reconcile.

And maybe that's why this story still resonates. There are seasons when what God has said and what we're experiencing don't seem to line up. Seasons where we're trying to trust God while simultaneously wondering what He's doing. There are moments when faith becomes more than a belief statement; it becomes a decision. A decision to trust God even when you cannot trace what God is doing.

Can you imagine that walk up the mountain? Three days carrying the wood. Three days carrying the question. Three days wondering how God's promise and God's command could possibly fit together. Abraham couldn't see how the story would end, but he trusted God enough to take the next step.

That's why the writer tells us Abraham believed God could even raise Isaac from the dead. His confidence wasn't ultimately in Isaac. His confidence was in God. Faith often feels like a death before it becomes a resurrection, and Abraham trusted that even if he couldn't understand God's plan, he could trust God's character.

I think that's where this passage gets personal. Every one of us has an Isaac. Not because we all have the same circumstances, but because we all have things we can become attached to. And what makes this so difficult is that most Isaacs don't begin as bad things. They begin as good things. A family. A calling. A dream. A ministry. A future we desperately want. Things God Himself may have given us.

But somewhere along the way, the gift can begin to replace the Giver. The blessing can become more precious than the God who blessed us. That's why this story hits so close to home.

Abraham isn't being asked to surrender something evil. He's being asked to surrender something good, something precious, something he loves.

Even something as beautiful as family can become an Isaac.

And I want to be careful here, because we've spent the last year talking about becoming family. Celebrating family. Strengthening family. And we're seeing God move. Families are being restored. Marriages are being strengthened. Parents are being baptized alongside their children. Nearly sixty percent of the people baptized this year have taken that step as a family. That's something worth celebrating.

Because family is God's idea. Family is a gift. Family matters.

But the strength of a family was never meant to become the foundation beneath it. God is!

The goal **isn't** family instead of God. The goal **is** family centered on God.

Because the moment any good thing becomes ultimate, it becomes fragile. When our identity, security, or hope becomes attached to something other than Him, eventually that thing has to carry a weight it was never designed to bear. And when it begins to shake, we shake with it.

That's why faith continually brings us back to the same place: trust the Promise Giver more than the promise. Love the Giver more than the gift. Keep God at the center because every other foundation eventually shakes.

Tim Keller once said: "Either you are connected with God and everything is secure no matter how chaotic your life looks, or you are disconnected from God and nothing is secure no matter how orderly your life appears."

That's Abraham's test. Will he trust the gift? Or will he trust the Giver?

Will he cling to the promise? Or will he trust the One who made it?

His confidence was in God. And because Abraham trusted the Promise Giver more than the promise itself, the baton kept moving.

Abraham trusted God's promise enough to release Isaac. And Isaac trusted God's promise enough to pass it on.

Look at verse 20: *"By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau."*

And I have to admit, I feel a little bad for Isaac here.

Because Isaac has one of the most dramatic stories in all of Genesis. He's the promised son. The miracle child. He's standing on Mount Moriah while his father is preparing to offer him as a sacrifice. If anybody deserves a chapter in Hebrews 11, you'd think it would be Isaac.

Instead, he gets one verse. That's it. After everything Isaac lived through, Hebrews essentially says, "By faith Isaac blessed his sons," and then moves on. No dramatic speech. No heroic moment. No highlight reel. Just one sentence and on to the next guy.

But maybe that's the point. We tend to think faith is measured by dramatic moments, big victories, and unforgettable stories. Yet when the writer of Hebrews looks back on Isaac's life, the thing he highlights isn't the mountain, the miracle, or even Isaac's survival. It's the handoff.

Isaac received the promise from Abraham, and then he passed that promise to the next generation. And maybe that's more heroic than we realize.

Because some of the most important moments of faith don't happen on mountaintops. They happen around dinner tables. In ordinary conversations. In quiet prayers. In the consistent decision to pass on what God has done in your life to someone else.

Then we come to Jacob. Verse 21 says: *"By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff."*

Think about that image for a moment. Jacob is at the end of his life. The journey is almost over. The man who spent decades wrestling with God is now leaning on his staff, looking back over a lifetime marked by God's faithfulness. The deceiver who became Israel has finally reached the finish line.

And what does he do with those final moments? He blesses the next generation.

He's not building something new. He's not launching another chapter. He's not trying to squeeze one more accomplishment into his résumé. He's making sure the baton keeps moving. I think that's significant because our culture spends so much energy asking, "What am I building?" "What am I achieving?" "What am I accomplishing?" "What am I accumulating?"

But faith often asks a different question. What am I passing on?

Because eventually every one of us will hand something to the next generation. The question isn't whether we're passing something. The question is what. Parents are passing something on. Grandparents are passing something on. Mentors are passing something on. Churches are passing something on. Every single one of us is handing something to someone else. The question is whether we're passing along faith, trust, obedience, and the goodness of God—or something else entirely.

And then we come to Joseph. Verse 22 says: "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."

At first glance, that seems like a strange detail.

Of all the things Joseph accomplished, Hebrews talks about his bones. Not the dreams. Not the pit. Not Potiphar's house. Not the prison. Not standing before Pharaoh. Not becoming second in command over Egypt. Not saving nations from famine.

His bones. Which means the writer wants us to see something deeper.

Joseph is standing at the end of his life. He has seen God's faithfulness. He has experienced God's provision. He has watched God take what others intended for evil and use it for good. But there is one promise Joseph will never personally see fulfilled.

The Exodus. The people are still in Egypt. The Promised Land remains a distant hope. Moses hasn't even been born yet. Nothing in Joseph's circumstances suggests that deliverance is close, and yet Joseph speaks about it as though it is already certain.

He says, "When God brings you out of this place, take my bones with you." I love that.

Joseph isn't asking for a bigger tomb. He isn't asking for a monument. He isn't trying to secure his legacy. He's making plans for an event that won't happen for another four hundred years.

Think about that for a moment. America isn't even four hundred years old. Entire nations rise and fall in four hundred years. Governments change. Languages change. Generations come and go. And Joseph is so convinced that God will keep His promise that he is arranging his burial around a future he knows he will never personally see.

Honestly, what kind of confidence in God allows a man to die that way? What kind of faith allows someone to make plans around a promise that's four centuries away? Joseph's circumstances said Egypt. God's promise said Canaan.

Joseph looked at God's promise and believed it more than his circumstances. That's faith. And honestly, I think Joseph leaves us with a question. What promises of God are shaping the way you live?

Not what outcomes you're hoping for. Not what circumstances you're trusting. What promises are so real to you that they shape your decisions, your priorities, and the direction of your life? Because faith doesn't merely believe God can do something.

Faith lives as though God will.

Joseph didn't just believe in the Exodus. He prepared for it. He arranged his life around it. He made decisions based on it. And some of the most important things God does through your life may happen beyond your lifetime.

Some prayers are answered in the next generation. Some seeds bear fruit decades after they're planted. Some acts of faith become blessings for people you may never even meet. That's why Joseph matters.

And that's why the baton matters. Joseph understood that he wasn't the destination. He was part of the story God was telling. His job wasn't to finish everything. His job was to carry the promise faithfully and hand it to the next generation.

And I think that's the question sitting underneath this entire text. What are you doing with the baton you've been given? Because somebody handed it to you. For some of you it was a parent. For others it was a grandparent. Maybe it was a pastor, a mentor, a small-group leader, or a friend who refused to give up on you.

Somebody carried the promise long enough to place it into your hands. Somebody prayed for you. Somebody taught you. Somebody invested in you. Somebody believed God's promises were bigger than their own lifetime. And because they were faithful, you're here.

Now the baton is in your hands. And one day somebody else will stand where you stand. Your children. Your grandchildren. The next generation. The people God has entrusted to your influence. The question isn't whether you'll leave something behind. You will. The question is what. Will you pass along comfort? Success? Achievement?

Or will you pass along a faith that trusts God even when His promises seem distant? A faith that believes God keeps His word. A faith that lives for something bigger than itself. Because that's what Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph did.

They didn't all see the outcome. But they trusted God anyway. And because they did, the promise kept moving. Generation after generation. All the way to Bethlehem. All the way to Jesus.

And now, by God's grace, the baton has reached us. So what are we going to do with it?