

# The Book of Hebrews Year 2 Bible Study Lesson 13

## Hebrews 11:20-21 Notes

### Faith in God's Perfect Plan, Not My Plans

#### Introduction:

*Hebrews 11:20-21 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.*

(MacArthur Paraphrased) Rather cryptic statements, wouldn't you agree? Very abbreviated and somewhat hard to understand if you don't know the full story. But keep in mind that this book was written to Hebrews. It was written to Jews who were familiar with the very detailed saga of Isaac, Jacob and Esau. It is critical for the writer of Hebrews to communicate to the readers that the only way of salvation was by faith. The most important message the world will ever hear; salvation is by faith alone, by grace through faith, not of works. Scripture makes that clear.

The Jews in the New Testament time were living in an apostate form of Judaism in which they had come to conclusion that salvation was something you earned. And so when the gospel comes along and it's preached by the apostles and prophets of the New Testament, there are Jews who think it is a foreign message, that it is not the message of the Old Testament. So the writer of Hebrews gives us this great section to let the Jews know that salvation by faith is nothing new, it has always been that way.

Abraham died without ever receiving the promise that God gave him. Isaac died without ever having received the promise that God gave him and so did Jacob, Joseph and all the rest of the people in this entire chapter. Verse 39, "They all gained approval through their faith, and did not receive what was promised." They all died before the promise came. They all died before the promised Messiah came, before the promised kingdom came, before all the promises that were given originally in the Abrahamic covenant.

God called Abraham. He is going to make of him a great people, namely the Jewish people who will be the people who will receive the Word of God and who will have the responsibility to preserve it and proclaim it to the world. Abraham was told to go forth from his country, from his relatives, his father's house "to the land I will show you; I will make you a great nation, I will bless you, make your name great; so you shall be a blessing, I will bless those who bless you and the ones who curse you I will curse. In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

This is what is known as the Abrahamic covenant, it is a promise of a land and a kingdom and blessing and incorporated in that is even salvation, and

foremost our Savior. The writer wants us to understand, however, that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the four great patriarchs whose story fills the rest of Genesis, all died without having realized that promise. Abraham was promised the possession of a land. He never had a possession in the land. The only piece of land that Abraham owned was a grave.

He was promised a great nation, he never saw it. He was promised to be the source of spiritual blessing to the world. He never saw it. But Abraham believed that it would come. They saw at a distance, in the future the fulfillment of promises not realized in this life. They were looking for a “better country, that is, a heavenly one.” And so “God was not ashamed to be called their God” and he had definitely prepared the city for them (Heb. 11:13-16).

### **Isaac's Story:**

Isaac lived the longest of the four patriarchs. But less is recorded about him than any of the others. Basically, his life is squeezed into Genesis 25-27. Now in summing up Isaac, we can say this, he was not spectacular. He lived a relatively quiet life and was probably best known for his spiritual weakness and his somewhat passive nature. If this man with all his weakness is in the list of the heroes of faith, there is hope for us.

In Genesis 26 “There was a famine in the land,” the land of Israel, the land of Canaan. It’s not yet belonging to Israel, there is no nation yet. They’re not going to come back there till 40 years after the 400 years of exile in Egypt. Isaac goes to Gerar to survive the famine. Gerar was a Philistine city sitting on the border of Egypt. God told Isaac to not go any farther into Egypt because it was not a good place from him to be. God reaffirms Abraham’s covenant with Isaac that He is faithful to do what He promises.

Isaac obeys God by not going to Egypt, but he lies to the locals about beautiful Rebekah being his sister instead of his wife, just like his father Abraham did twice. But God in His mercy and grace protects them. Even though Isaac is not in the location that God desired of him, God still blessed him incredibly in farming and livestock. He became so great and prosperous that Abimelech told him to leave their area. But Isaac didn’t move far enough away from the Philistines, which caused them to fight over all the water wells Isaac tried to reclaim from his father Abraham. He finally settled in Beersheba.

Here the Lord God appears to Isaac saying, “I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you, multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.” Here is the repeat of the Abrahamic covenant given to him. And here’s where, for the first time really clearly, we see the demonstration that Isaac is a man of faith. “So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there,” --- he took up his place in the very location where the Lord had come to him and

given him the promise and the covenant --- *“and there Isaac’s servants dug a well.”* They also made peace with the people of Gerar.

Rebekah, Isaac’s wife, was also barren like Sarah and had gone approximately twenty years without having any children. Isaac at this time prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, the Lord answered, and Rebekah conceived twins. The children struggled together within her; and she said, *“If it is so, why then am I this way?”* So Rebekah inquired to the Lord, indicating again that they trusted and worshipped the true and living God. *‘The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb; two peoples will be separated from your body.” Through Jacob would come the Jewish people; through Esau would come the Edomites, the Arabic nations, “two great peoples will be separated from your body; one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger.”’* The older was Esau, the younger was Jacob but they were reversed when it came to the birthright. The boys grew up, Esau a skilled hunter, a man of the field. Jacob was a peaceful man living in tents. There is a great distinction between the two. *“Isaac loved Esau. But Rebekah loved Jacob.”*

We learn that Esau at age forty marries two Hittite pagan women. It doesn’t take us long to establish the character of Esau. That is why Hebrews 12:16 calls him a profane man. The Greek word “profane” means “outside the threshold.” He was a very common, earthy man. And so in the case of Esau, things went bad at the birth, it got worse through the whole story of Jacob and Esau. He even gave up his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. He had no respect and despised his family heritage, with no view of the future at all.

In Genesis 27 Isaac was 137 years old and “his eyes were too dim to see. He called his older son, Esau, and said to him, “My son,” and Esau answered, ‘Here I am.’ Isaac said, “Behold now I am old and I do not know the day of my death.” (He lived another 43 years after this statement). Isaac knows about the sale of Esau’s birthright to Jacob, but he still favors Esau. So Isaac planned to give Esau the blessing after he got back from hunting. But Rebekah intervened by deceiving Isaac into believing he was blessing Esau, but instead she had disguised Jacob to be like his brother Esau.

Isaac and Rebekah were taking all the matters into their own wicked hands. Isaac was being led by his love toward Esau instead of listening to God and his promises. Rebekah kept on setting up Jacob to lie and deceive his brother and father because of her love for Jacob. Oh, how our wicked hearts get in the way of God’s providential plan.

“Then his father Isaac said to Jacob, ‘Come close and kiss me, my son’. So he came close and kissed him; and when he smelled the smell of his garments, he blessed him and said, “See, the smell of my son Esau is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed; now may God give you of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and an abundance of grain and new wine; may peoples serve

you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you, and blessed be those who bless you.'"

In effect, as he passes on this blessing, he is investing the promise of the Abrahamic covenant in this man Jacob, thinking he is Esau. Just as Jacob leaves, here comes Esau ready to prepare his hunt to serve to his Isaac. Both of them realize immediately the deception that had taken place.

Here is one of the real spiritual indications in Isaac's life. "He trembled violently!" This is conviction. He knew what he had done, but he didn't cave to the one he favored most. Esau was very angry and plotted to kill Jacob after their father's death.

Here is a guy named Isaac who is in the list of heroes of faith. How did he get there with this kind of life? There was a time when he prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife and indicated his confident faith in the Lord, there was a time and that is so very important, it's the most important little piece of the story. "The Lord appears to Isaac, 'I am the God of your father Abraham; do not fear, I am with you. I will bless you, multiply your descendants, for the sake of My servant Abraham.' So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there." He took up his residence in the place where God had appeared. He built an altar to the lord and called upon the name of the Lord. That is a statement for really expressing your faith in the Lord. You might even conclude that that was the point of a real true conversion.

This is the essence of faith. When he faced the end of his life and hadn't received the promise; the land, the nation, the blessing to the world, he nonetheless passed it to the next generation knowing it was yet to come. He tried to do things his own way, but as soon as he perceived the providential hand of God crossing his natural will and his natural affection, instead of murmuring and rebelling, he yielded, he submitted to the Lord, He didn't reverse the blessing and this is evidence of his faith. He finally succumbed to what was right.

In Genesis 28:28 Isaac sets the blessing straight on God's providential plan of the Abrahamic Covenant and also by directing Jacob to marry a woman not from the local pagan people, but from their relatives from Rebekah's homeland. So in the end, Isaac rolled over, accepted God's providential purpose through all the sinful manipulating of that bizarre set of circumstances and he dies in faith that the promise would be fulfilled and that his son, Jacob, was the next link.

### **Jacob's Story:**

"By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff." Life of faith, for Jacob was like his father Isaac. It was not the shining of the sun on a calm and clear day. Oh no, his life was murky and muddy and cloudy and dark and foggy and all of those things. But he walked by faith, like Isaac. He encountered many struggles, many

challenges, victories came very, very hard for him. The fog in his life was thick, sin was heavy, but his faith never waned.

In Genesis 28, “Jacob departed from Beersheba, went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and spent the night there, because the sun had set; and he took one of the stones of the place and put it under his head, and lay down in that place. He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. The Lord stood above it and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants.’” Here’s a reiteration of the Abrahamic covenant to the next in the genetic flow, the genetic line, the descendants. “Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, you will spread out to the west, the east, the north, the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” Almost exactly, the Abrahamic promise! “Behold, I am with you, I will keep you wherever you go, I will bring you back to this land; I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.” Wow!

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I didn’t know it.’ And he was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’” So Jacob rose early in the morning, took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar, poured oil on its top. He turned it into an altar, a place commemorating the encounter with God. He called the name of it “Bethel,” that’s house of God previously the name of the city had been Luz.

“Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me on this journey that I take, and give me food to eat and garments to wear, I return to my father’s house in safety, then the Lord will be my God. This stone, which I have set up as a pillar, will be God’s house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” Here is indication of Jacob’s faith. He wants the Lord to be his God. He wants to give generously. He is dependent on the Lord, and we see that all the way into Genesis 32.

Jacob is terrified of his brother, Esau. “O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, ‘Return to your country and your relatives, and I’ll prosper you.’ Jacob said, “I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and all the faithfulness which you have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, that he will come and attack me and the mothers with the children. For You said, ‘I will surely prosper you and make you descendants as the sand of the sea, which is too great to be numbered.’” We’re not going to be able to do that if Esau shows up and massacres us all.

So when we look at the life of Jacob, we see a lot of problems in his life. Obviously, all the duplicity, all the lies, all the deception, yet he is anxious for the Lord to be his God. He is anxious to give to the Lord. He seeks the Lord in his hour of desperation. And he trusts the Lord to be the source of his life and the source of his protection. The time came for Jacob to pass away and he passes on the birthright on to Joseph.

In Genesis 48 Joseph is told, "Behold your father's sick." So he took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim with him." Joseph had two sons. We talk about the twelve tribes of Israel, and when they came into the land, the twelve tribes were allotted land, there actually were 13 tribes of Israel because one of the tribes was Joseph, but his portion was split into two parts, Ephraim and Manasseh. And the tribe of Levi had no land because they were the priestly tribe.

So Joseph appears with his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. They will be critical to the purposes of God. This is why the prophets refer to Israel as Ephraim. So they come in, "Your son Joseph has come, Israel." Jacob, referred to as Israel now. "He collects his strength and sat up on the bed. Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz," back at Bethel, "in the land of Canaan and blessed me." He said to me, "Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and make you a company of peoples, give you this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession." Jacob did not see any of the promises come to pass, but he died believing the promise was true.

To paraphrase, Jacob blessed Ephraim and Manasseh but he passed the firstborn right to Ephraim the younger son over Manasseh, while blessing Joseph, "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day," and here's another indication of Jacob's faith, "The angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and may my name live on in them, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth." Joseph was displeased with Jacob switching the boys, but Jacob responded, "I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people, he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations." Jacob says to Joseph, "I am about to die, but God will be with you, and bring you back to the land of your fathers."

There is Jacob's faith. He had heard from God, he couldn't change his mind, you couldn't change his hands on the two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. He died in faith never having seen the results.

## **Conclusion:**

These are people of faith. Their whole lives were built around this promise that had been given to Abraham and passed on to these three other patriarchs. And everything in their lives focused on the confidence they had that God would

do what He said He would do because God could be trusted. They never saw it. This is faith at its highest level, is it not?

These aren't people who chose to live at a low level. Sinful? Absolutely. Misleading, deceitful? Absolutely. Weak, vacillating, sometimes immoral? Absolutely. Living in a primitive time without the full revelation or the full riches of the Holy Spirit that we know today. They struggled perhaps in ways that we don't today. But what may be true about that part of their lives doesn't cancel out what's true about the commitment they made to trust God. They could not be deterred from giving the blessing to whom the blessing belonged.

Abraham would not give it to Ishmael, his firstborn, it went to Isaac. Isaac would not give it to Esau, it went to Jacob. Jacob would not give it to Manasseh, it went to Ephraim, who is not even his own son. They all died never having seen the promises. They died as strangers, wanderers, nomads, a couple of them in foreign lands. That was the evidence of their faith. They believed God for what they couldn't see, all the way to death. This is how we have faith and believe, too. Because the heaven that holds us to Christ is a heaven we have never seen. That's what it means to live by faith.

We can conclude from the words of our Lord that though the Holy Spirit was with them, the Holy Spirit was not in them. And that distinction is a distinction in the degree to which the Spirit of God empowers believers today on this side of the day of Pentecost. But they did demonstrate a God-given, a God-sustained faith, sufficient to enable them to face death and to face death triumphantly. Psalm 37:37 says, "Mark the perfect man and behold the upright." And how is he distinguished? "The end of that man is peace."

When a mature godly person, when an upright man comes to the end of his life, what marks him is peace. So it is, in a sense, with these men. And we would have to say that Isaac and Jacob were far from perfect, for sure. Their lives were murky, muddy, and cloudy and sometimes downright dark. There was always a flicker of the sunlight of faith and certainly it showed up at the end.

Matthew Henry wrote many years ago, "Though the grace of faith is of universal use throughout all our lives, it is especially so when we come to die. Faith has its great work to do at the last to help believers to finish well, to die in the Lord as to honor Him by patience, hope and joy, so as to leave a witness behind them of the truth of God's Word and the excellencies of His ways."

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