

(Devotional #17) **Character Studies from Hebrews 11:1-40**

Heroes of the Faith: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph

(Genesis 21:1-7; 25:19-28; 50:20, 26; Malachi 1:1-3; Romans 9:6-13; Hebrews 11:20-22)

Then the LORD said to her (to Isaac's wife, Rebekah):

*Two nations (Jacob and Esau) are in your womb;
And two people will be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And **THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER** – Genesis 25:23*

JACOB I HAVE LOVED, BUT ESAU I HAVE HATED – Malachi 1:2^B-3^A

For though the twins were not yet born and had NOT DONE ANYTHING GOOD OR BAD, So that GOD'S PURPOSE according to HIS CHOICE WOULD STAND, NOT BECAUSE OF WORKS BUT BECAUSE OF HIM WHO CALLS, it was said to Rebekah, "THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER" – Romans 9:11-12

Just as it is written:

JACOB I HAVE LOVED, BUT ESAU I HAVE HATED – Romans 9:13

The stories of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph¹ turn human convention on its heels. Every choice man makes, every decision the mind of man can concoct, **GOD MAY OVERTURN IN ACTS OF DIVINE REVERSAL, for God is in the business of working with opposites.**

When the cultural norm declared that the firstborn son should receive the greater portion, God introduces us to **Abraham's sons (Isaac and Ishmael), Isaac's sons (Jacob and Esau), and Joseph's sons (Ephraim and Manasseh).** He even goes so far as to say, **"THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER."** **This is a Divine Reversal.**

When Joseph's older brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, God exalted him to the position of Vizier, the 2nd highest position in the Egyptian government, second only to Pharaoh himself ... and then God placed the very brothers, who had done this despicable deed, at his mercy because of a famine God had brought upon Canaan. When the brothers discovered their plight and were in fear of their lives, their human natures convinced them Joseph was going to take revenge against them. But Joseph reassured his brothers with these words, **"You meant this thing you did against me for EVIL, but God meant it for GOOD, in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive"** – Genesis 50:20. **This is a Divine Reversal.**

Every instance of Divine Reversal in Scripture is a testimony to the Absolute Sovereignty of God, who controls all of history from beginning to end, and who acts according to His Own Good Pleasure.

With this concept in mind, let's turn briefly to the Old Testament instances of Divine Reversal that pertain to Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

ISAAC – **"By FAITH Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come"** – Hebrews 11:20. Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah 50-years after God's initial promise to Abraham. But more important than the date of his birth were the ages of his parents: Abraham was 100-years old and Sarah was 90 – both far beyond normal childbearing years. So Isaac's birth was a miracle, and it marked the beginning of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

In Genesis 21:1, we read: **"Then Yahweh took note of Sarah as He had said, and Yahweh did for Sarah as He had promised."** In the Hebrew text, the name Yahweh appears twice in the

¹ Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah in 1850 B.C. Jacob was born to Isaac and Rebekah in 1790 B.C., and Joseph was born to Jacob and Rachel in 1699 B.C.

verse, and both times; it is the first word in the two phrases that make up verse one, indicating its importance. ***Yahweh is God's covenant name.*** It is used frequently when the covenant with Abraham is in view. This emphasis on Yahweh means what has happened, *viz.*, Isaac's birth, is a major step forward in the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham.

Notice also in verse one, the use of God's covenant name is in the context of what God had said: "***Yahweh took note of Sarah AS HE HAD SAID,*** and, "***Yahweh did unto Sarah AS HE HAD SPOKEN.***" Then in verse two we read: "***Sarah conceived AT THE APPOINTED TIME of which GOD HAD SPOKEN TO ABRAHAM.***" This time the divine name is ***Elohim***, a name that emphasizes God's power ... ***HIS ABILITY TO DO WHAT HE HAS PROMISED ...*** and it too is linked to the spoken Word of God. So verse one emphasizes the veracity of God's Word in the context of the covenant, while verse two ties together *God's faithfulness to His Word* with *His ability to fulfill what He has promised* – and to do so at the exact (*appointed*) time He chooses to act.

Now Isaac had an older half-brother, Ishmael². Abraham loved Ishmael ... but God had said, "***through Isaac your descendants will be named***".³ Social convention would place Ishmael in the honored position of being the firstborn son of Abraham, and the inheritance would pass through to Ishmael. But God had a different plan, and in an act of ***Divine Reversal***, God decreed: ***THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER***⁴. – ***Genesis 25:23.*** So God placed Isaac above Ishmael by divine decree.

Toward the end of Isaac's life, God will intervene once more in a way that is unexpected – and it is this unexpected intervention that the author of Hebrews chose as an example of Isaac's faith.

Isaac, like his father Abraham, also had two sons. And just as Abraham had favored Ishmael over Isaac, so Isaac favored his firstborn Esau over Jacob, despite the fact that God had decreed, "***THE OLDER SHALL SERVE THE YOUNGER.***" So, Esau had two things in his favor: (1) ***He was a man's man***, which garnered the favor of his father, and (2) ***Esau was Isaac's firstborn.*** These two things should have guaranteed Esau his place as Isaac's heir and as the recipient of the divine promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. But God had other plans!

The Deception and the Blessing:

When it was time for Isaac to bless his sons, which would have set Esau in the place of promise, God intervened in a very odd way. Rebekah was at odds with Isaac regarding their two boys. She saw what Isaac could not see, namely that ***Jacob (with all his many flaws) was a believer and Esau was not.*** So, she hatched a plan⁵ that involved deception: she dressed Jacob in the garb Isaac would expect Esau to wear, and she made stew of the sort Esau would make, and she placed Jacob in the place of Esau – for Isaac was blind and unable to see the one he blessed.

So, Isaac gave the covenant blessing to Jacob, by-passing his firstborn, Esau. Why would the author of Hebrews use this example as the expression of Isaac's faith? I'm not sure I have the best answer to that question, but I may have an acceptable answer.

The New Testament looks back on this incident as an expression of Isaac's faith – and so should we. There are at least two reasons for this:

- (1) The patriarchal blessing itself was an expression of Isaac's faith in the Abrahamic Covenant. Isaac believed God would do what He had promised to Abraham and his

² Ishmael was born to Abraham and Hagar in 1864 B.C.

³ See Genesis 21:12 – '***NAMED***' through Isaac means, your offspring will be '***TRACED***' through Isaac (cf. the excellent *Holman Christian Standard Bible* translation). Covenant fulfillment rests with Isaac, not Ishmael.

⁴ See Genesis 25:23 and Romans 9:7, 12

⁵ See Genesis 25:27-34, and 27:1-46 for the complete story of Rebekah's and Jacob's deception of Isaac.

descendants – and this faith was expressed through the patriarchal blessing, even though there was deception involved in Jacob’s receipt of the blessing.

But there is another reason we should recognize Isaac’s faith in this event:

- (2) When Isaac discovered his blessing had been co-opted through deception, he accepted what had happened as God’s will. Isaac recognized God’s absolute right to intervene in his life for the purpose of asserting His will. And he was unwilling to go against God’s choice by reversing the blessing (*even if that were possible*). Isaac saw the hand of God at work even when his own human choice was overruled by God’s sovereign choice. The Wisdom Literature teaches us an important truth about the intersection between human volition and divine sovereignty: “*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD*”⁶.

JACOB – “*By FAITH Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on his staff*” – **Hebrews 11:21**. The latter part of this verse should read, “*Then Israel bowed down at the head of his bed*” (see footnote #7 below). Jacob, on his death bed, bowed in an act of submission to God’s Will (*an expression of worship*) after blessing his grandsons. So, what took place that warranted this mention of Jacob in Hebrews 11:21?

Once again, Hebrews turns to a patriarchal blessing as an example of faith. As with Isaac, we are presented here with an act of **Divine Reversal**. The birth order of Joseph’s sons (*Jacob’s grandsons*), was Manasseh, then Ephraim. As with Esau, according to human convention, Manasseh should have been the recipient of the patriarchal blessing, setting him before Ephraim. But we do not speak of Abraham, Ishmael, and Esau, do we? No, we speak of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... and with the inclusion of Joseph’s sons in the patriarchal formula, we must speak of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Ephraim – for God again chose the younger son over the elder son⁸.

The name ‘**Jacob**’ means ‘*deceiver*’⁹. Did you know that? Jacob was a master manipulator, as is evidenced throughout the Book of Genesis. In many ways, he was just like his father – but worse! Nevertheless, at the conclusion of his life, Jacob called for Joseph and his grandsons – Manasseh and Ephraim¹⁰. Jacob rehearsed for them how God had blessed him over the course of his life. But instead of recounting all of his failures – and there were many – Jacob spoke to his grandsons of covenant fulfillment. (*It is all too easy to focus on our failures and regrets – Jacob reminds us to look ahead to a glorious future.*) Then he imparted blessings to Joseph’s sons.

⁶ See Proverbs 16:33

⁷ The phrase in Hebrews 11:21 – “*leaning on his staff*” – reflects an ancient Greek translation of Genesis 47:31. The Hebrew text of Genesis 47:31 reads, “*Then Israel bowed down at the head of his bed.*” The textual problem is due to the fact that the original Hebrew text did not include written vowels. In the original text, the disputed word looked like this: מַטֵּה (MTH). But between 600 and 1000 A.D. (many years AFTER the aforementioned Greek translation was completed), Jewish scribes devised a way to insert written vowels (made up of dots and dashes) into the existing consonants of the original Hebrew scrolls. According to these scribes, the original Hebrew text read מִטָּה (mittah = ‘bed’), while the Greek translation reads ῥάβδου (rabdou, ‘staff’) – incorrectly assuming the Hebrew word was pronounced מַטֵּה (matteh = staff).

⁸ For the complete story of Jacob’s patriarchal Blessing, see Genesis 48:1-22.

⁹ In Genesis 25:26, Jacob’s name is associated with his holding onto the heel of his twin brother, Esau, who was born just moments before Jacob – and so it is presumed that ‘Jacob’ means ‘heal.’ But often, Hebrew names are ‘explained’ in the Bible by terms that ‘sound like’ the name ... but these ‘explanations’ are for convention only. The name ‘Jacob’ actually means, ‘one who assails insidiously’ or ‘one who overreaches – a deceiver.’

¹⁰ For the story of Jacob’s blessing, see 48:1-22.

I'll not belabor the point, but it is clear that God chose Ephraim over Manasseh. As with His choice of Jacob over Esau, this is a picture of the absolute sovereignty of God's choice in election. God is greater than human convention, and His plan for each of us transcends what we may envision for ourselves. But because God is both sovereign and benevolent, we can trust Him irrespective of what we may see happening around us.

JOSEPH – *“By FAITH Joseph, at the end of his life, mentioned the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave instructions about his burial”* – **Hebrews 11:22**. Every Easter season, our family watches the movie, ***THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*** on television. And every year I wait for the scene, where the Israelites carry the embalmed bones of Joseph out of Egypt. It's a brief scene, but it always catches my eye ... and it makes me smile!

With Joseph, the story turns from its focus on patriarchal blessings to a different act of faith, *viz.*, Joseph's confidence that Yahweh will act on behalf of Israel, to give the Land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants as He had promised. Joseph believed this literally. He did not envision some metaphorical fulfillment of the covenant promises; he believed in an actual Exodus – and because of this, he gave instructions regarding his burial (**Genesis 50:24-26; Exodus 13:19**).

All of Joseph's adult life was spent in Egypt, at times as a highly respected official, but also as a prisoner in an Egyptian jail cell. He was not in Egypt by choice, but because his brothers hated him. They had sold him into slavery, not for the money but to get rid of him. He could have become bitter. He could have rejected God for letting this terrible injustice happen to him. He could have taken revenge on his brothers – but he did none of these things. Despite his circumstances, Joseph remained a man of faith. When he knew his life was at an end, and the promises of God were still unfulfilled – there remained an expectation of fulfillment that was as fresh as when the divine promises were first expressed to Abraham years before in a distant land. This faith is evidenced in his instructions regarding his burial: *“Take my bones to Israel! When God delivers you from this place, bury me in the Promised Land of Canaan”!*

According to Genesis 50:26, Joseph was embalmed in the tradition of the Egyptians. This means his body was mummified. I have stood in the Cairo Museum, in what is called, ***“THE MUMMY ROOM”¹¹***. There you can look into the faces of such famous figures as Amenhotep I, Rameses II and Thutmose III ... and I am intrigued by the thought that somewhere in Canaan, the mummy of Joseph may still exist. Would it not be amazing to be able to look into the face of Joseph, resting in the Land of Promise, knowing his faith in God's Word led him to instruct the Jews – many years before the Exodus – to take his body out of Egypt to be buried in the Land of Israel?

These men of faith, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, endured hardships ... and at times they failed to live consistently with their faith. But God sustained them in times of success and in times of failure ... and He does also with us. And though the words spoken by Joseph were expressed in the context of his own hardships, they very well could sum up the lives of all three men: *“You meant this thing you did against me for EVIL, but God meant it for GOOD, in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive”* – **Genesis 50:20**.

¹¹ Among the mummies displayed there are many Egyptian Kings, e.g., Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, II & III, Rameses II & IV, et al.