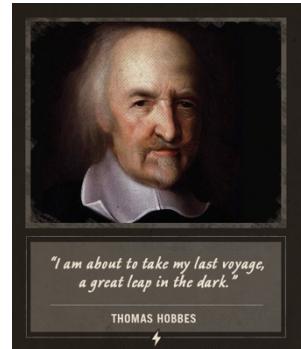


BLESSINGS AND DYING WORDS
HEBREWS 11:20-22

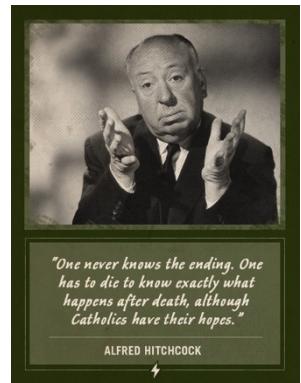
The legacy of people's final words is fascinating. What were the final words and thoughts on people's minds as they departed this life for eternal life (or eternal death)? These words are significant because death is the ultimate enemy of all men. There are more harsh and less harsh ways to die, but mankind was made to live and not die; death came as a result of the fall of man into sin and is a curse against us. What do men say when they face this final enemy?

- Hugo Chavez: "I don't want to die. Please don't let me die."
- **Thomas Hobbs:** "I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark."
- Mr. (Fred) Rogers: "Am I a sheep [of Jesus]?"
- Joe DiMaggio: "I finally get to see Marilyn."
- Jack Daniel: "One last drink, please."
- **Alfred Hitchcock:** "One never knows the ending. One has to die to know exactly what happens after death, although Catholics have their hopes."



In addition to these, we also have the final words of some of God's people recorded for us in Scripture:

- The apostle Paul writes to his protégé Timothy: "**The Lord will rescue me** from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim. 4:18).
- Stephen as he was being stoned: "They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' Having said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:59–60).
- And of course we have the seven final sayings of Jesus from the cross, including the final declaration: "**Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.** Having said this, He breathed His last" (Lk. 23:46).



In the passage before us this morning, we have some of the final words of some of God's faithful men. This is what faith looks like at the end of life. The temptation when facing death, of course, is to suppose that God has failed and that we cannot be confident in and trust Him. How did these evaluate God after their disappointments?

Last week we noted in the life of Abraham that "Spiritual tests are inevitable (and planned by God). When tested, continue to respond obediently to God's direction for you." In the account of the remaining patriarchs, the writer to the Hebrews expands the idea of spiritual testing, taking it to its final and ultimate earthly end: death.

While Abraham was tested with the potential death of his son, the faith of the other patriarchs of Israel were revealed as they approached *their own deaths*. From Hebrews 11:20-22, we will learn that *death does not compromise God's plan* —

WHEN FACING DEATH, BE CONFIDENT THAT GOD WILL STILL ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES.

From the examples of the patriarchs, **we learn how to face our ultimate test, death**. We need to learn not only how to live well (to God's glory), but also how to die well, so that God is exalted in our dying. Some of us see what seems to be the imminence of death and for others of us, death seems so distant that we do not even think of it. But all of us are moving towards it unrelentingly, day-by-day. How will we face it by faith?

1. When **ISAAC** Faced Death... (v. 20)
2. When **JACOB** Faced Death... (v. 21)
3. When **JOSEPH** Faced Death... (v. 22)
4. When **WE** Face Death

1. When ISAAC Faced Death... (v. 20)

- Isaac was introduced in this passage in v. 17, as the “recipient” of Abraham’s faith. Abraham trusted God with the life of his son, believing that despite the command to sacrifice him (Gen. 22:1ff), God would still fulfill His promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) through Isaac.
- While there was also implied faith by Isaac in the events of Genesis 22, the writer of Hebrews points to a different event in Isaac’s life as a definitive act of faith in God.
- Isaac appears throughout Genesis 21-35, though the majority of his story is told in Gen. 25-27. As we come to this verse, we should note that while all the individuals in this chapter are flawed, Isaac appears to be particularly flawed (and Jacob also, to a lesser degree):
 - ✓ Isaac played favorites between Jacob and Esau, loving Esau, while Rachel loved Jacob (25:28).
 - ✓ Like Abraham, Isaac was fearful and lied to the Philistines about his marriage to Rachel (26:6ff) — and that came immediately after God’s promise to bless him and fulfill the Promise (26:3ff).
 - ✓ He sought to bless Esau (27:2-4) despite Esau’s rebellion against God (26:34-35). And he attempted to bless Esau despite God’s proclamation that Esau would serve Jacob (25:23).
 - ✓ So one writer has said about Isaac, “Isaac was easily the least spectacular and the most ordinary of the four [patriarchs]. He was less dynamic and colorful, being generally quiet and passive. And, overall, he probably had the weakest faith. We know more of his failures than of his successes.... [And] This story is of no credit to Isaac, Esau, or Jacob....The entire family acted shamefully. Father and son tried to do the wrong thing in the wrong way, and mother and son tried to accomplish the right thing but in the wrong way.” [MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 339-41.]
 - ✓ Yet, here Isaac is affirmed for his faith. That is a reminder to us of the grace of God and that He uses weak vessels to accomplish His purposes (which is hopeful for all of us).
 - ✓ What did Isaac do that constituted faith in God?
- Isaac reminded his sons of the promises of God: **Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau** —
 - ✓ The basic sense of the word **bless** is to speak well of something, or to extol, or praise.
 - ✓ In Scripture, particularly in the OT, blessings between individuals (like here) serve as petitions (prayer requests) for the recipient, and God is seen as the source of those blessings (1 Sam. 2:20). And with the blessing, it may also include the giving of a gift (Dt. 28:2).
 - ✓ The Puritan John Owen said that these OT blessings “were partly prayers and partly prophetic predictions....They did not pray for, they could not foretell, anything other than what God had promised.” So they aren’t predictive, but they express desires and serve as reminders.
 - ✓ In his blessings, Isaac was reminding Jacob and Esau of the promises of God.

- ✓ Isaac blesses Jacob in **Gen. 27:27-29** and reminds him that the gifts he desires to give come from God (v. 28) — Isaac is powerless to fulfill the promises, but God isn't. And v. 29b has a suggestion of the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (12:3).
- ✓ We also know that Jacob deceived Isaac to get the blessing, but the writer of Hebrews isn't concerned with that fact — he simply wants to point to Isaac's faith in God to fulfill His promises — the continuance of the Abrahamic line and promises. (It is also worth observing that Isaac gives a similar blessing to Jacob when he *isn't* deceived, **28:3-4**).
- ✓ Despite his failures, at the end of life, Isaac not only clung to the promises of God himself, but he pointed his sons to the promises of God (even when it appeared to be to Esau's detriment).
- ✓ J. I. Packer said, "It has become conventional to think as if we are all going to live in this world forever and to view every case of bereavement as a reason for doubting the goodness of God." Say what you will about Isaac, but when he came to the end of life, he pointed his sons to God's faithfulness.

- **Isaac reminded himself (and his sons) of the future of God: *even regarding things to come*.**
 - ✓ This is the dominant phrase in this verse — what the writer wants us to be attentive to: "by faith — even concerning the things to come — Isaac blessed..."
 - ✓ The writer wants us to see that Isaac was reminding himself and his sons that his death would not mean that God's promises failed; the promises were simply being carried out in future generations. "There is more to come than what we have already."
 - ✓ This is what tells us how Isaac's life was one of faith: twice after the blessing, he affirmed that Jacob received the blessing (gift and desire for blessing from God; **28:3-4; 27:33**).
 - ✓ He was speaking with a firm conviction that God's purposes for Isaac's family and for the nation of Israel could not fail. Even though the fulfillment will be in the distant future, God could be trusted to fulfill the promises; and that was the exhortation of the writer of Hebrews (**10:36**).
 - ✓ Every decade predictions are made about what the next 10 years will be like. They invariably are significantly off-target (as are the annual predictions on Jan. 1). Here is Isaac's prediction: "I don't know how or when, but in the future, God will fulfill His promises and accomplish His purposes."

2. When **JACOB** Faced Death... (v. 21)

- **Jacob** is alive for almost half the book of Genesis (chs. 25-49), though his story is told primarily in chs. 27-36. Like his father, his life was stained by inconsistencies — deception, manipulation, despondency, and even making a vow in an attempt to strike a deal with God (**28:20-21**). Yet it is notable that his greatest sin — his act of deception — is not mentioned in either verse 20 or 21 of Hebrews 11.
- The definitive act of faith in Jacob's life came at the very end of his life — **as he was dying**. The sense is he was "on his deathbed," though when he gave the blessing he was still able to sit up in bed (**Gen. 48:1f**).

- Jacob reminded his sons about the gracious promises of God — **blessed each of the sons of Joseph**
 - ✓ Jacob **blessed** all his sons (made predictions and sought divine gifts for them) in Genesis 49.
 - ✓ But before that blessing, he gave a double blessing to Joseph by blessing both his sons (Gen. 48).
 - Notice that the writer emphasizes that he blessed **each of the sons**. Joseph was concerned that Jacob reversed the order of blessing (the younger get the first blessing), but the writer ignores that detail, instead focusing on the fact of double blessing — God has been gracious.
 - And God has been gracious in another way as well — the blessing is given to *Joseph's* sons; do you remember who his wife was? She was Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest (41:50-52). It is safe to assume she converted and the boys were raised as part of God's covenant people, but they were Gentile converts. This is God's grace to undeserving people.
 - ✓ Then notice the blessing and reminder that Jacob gives:
 - He appeals to and requests for the God of Abraham to protect and guide the boys (48:15-16)
 - He appeals to God to make them prominent among the tribes of Israel (v. 20).
 - He reminds them of the faithfulness of God to be with His people (v. 21).
 - ✓ Unlike his early years, Jacob contentedly trusts God and faithfully points his sons to God's goodness.
- Jacob remembered the priority of worship — **leaning on the top of his staff**
 - ✓ At the beginning of his life, Jacob is “grasping” (Gen. 25:26) — he was a man who manipulated circumstances to his benefit.
 - ✓ But at the end of his life he isn't manipulating but he **worshipped** — expressing gratitude, dependence, and submission to God as his authority.
 - ✓ The reference to **leaning on his staff** is from Gen. 47:31. That is at the end of his life, but apparently earlier than the blessing of the two sons of Joseph; Moses would have us understand that the blessing of the boys was flowing out of a heart of worship and trust in God.
 - ✓ Much discussion has been made of whether the word is “staff” (Heb 11) or “bed” (Gen. 47); the word is essentially the same (same consonants with different vowels; original text only had consonants and the vowels were supplied by editors later). The point is that as Jacob was dying, he was not embittered by what he hadn't received or experienced, but he was worshipping.
 - At the end of his life he still worshipped the Lord and entrusted all things to Him. Though he acted as a deceiver in several significant events of his life, at the end he was one who worshipped the Lord and entrusted himself to Him.
 - While physically weak, he was still strong in faith (giving an example of 2 Cor. 4:16-18).
 - “The infirmity of age had not dulled his devotion.” [Westcott, 371.] In fact, it seems that as he aged, he grew stronger in faith (and what a joy that is to see in others; cf. 2 Tim. 4:6-8).
 - ✓ There is something worse than dying young — it is dying as an old man and not having grown in faith toward God:

What will it profit a man to live long as Methuselah (Genesis 5:27) and still die as foolish as at 40?

I always liked Jimmy Durante's rendition of "Young at Heart" (1954) with the line "And if you should survive to a hundred and five, look at all you'll derive out of being alive." But I happened to interview a local woman who was 105, and she had not "derived" much; I left disappointed. In 1973 in the Swiss Alps I met an old bent man with a staff who had never been down the mountain, from whom I hoped to pry secrets as ancient as the hills. He turned out to be a lecher. [Andrée Seu Peterson, "Living the Good Life."]

- ✓ Those are people who wasted their lives: they came into the world not worshipping God and they left in the same way. Conversely, Isaac started poorly, he finished well — as a worshipper. That's the goal for every believer — and it is possible for the follower of God (OT) and Christ (NT). It is notable that in these three verses, the writer picks essentially the last events of each of these men's lives to evaluate them. And at the last test (death), they were faithful. They learned and changed.

3. When JOSEPH Faced Death... (v. 22)

- Unlike Isaac and Jacob, Joseph did not confer a formal blessing on his sons or the Israelites, but he still looked forward and past his death in faith.
- As with Jacob in v. 21, the writer emphasizes that the hallmark of Joseph's faithful life came ***when he was dying*** — at the very end of his life. That is remarkable because Joseph is one of the few people in Scripture where the Bible does not overtly reveal a sin in their lives. Beyond that, Joseph had a remarkable life of faith:
 - ✓ Faith to speak truthfully to his father about his brothers (Gen. 37:2)
 - ✓ Faith to tell his brothers and father his dreams (Gen. 37:5ff)
 - ✓ Faith not to be anxious about his brothers selling him into slavery (Gen. 37:18ff)
 - ✓ Faith to conduct himself with integrity in Potiphar's household — with all his goods (Gen. 39:1-6)
 - ✓ Faith not to respond to the advances of Potiphar's wife (Gen. 39:7ff)
 - ✓ Faith to live righteously while falsely jailed (Gen. 39:19-23)
 - ✓ Faith to speak the truth about the interpretation of the two dreams (Gen. 40:1ff)
 - ✓ Faith to persist while imprisoned two more years after the cupbearer forgot about him (40:20-23)
 - ✓ Faith to interpret Pharaoh's dream correctly and devise a plan (41:1ff)
 - ✓ Faith to cultivate a plan for Egypt that provided for the people and respected the authority of the Pharaoh (41:38ff; e.g., note v. 55)
 - ✓ Faith to provide graciously for his brothers and not exact retribution (42:18ff)
 - ✓ Faith to wait for the return of the brothers with Benjamin (43:1ff)
 - ✓ Faith to provide for the brothers on the second trip (43:16ff)
 - ✓ Faith to reveal himself to his brothers and provide for them and Jacob in Egypt (45:1ff; 47:12ff)
 - ✓ Faith to talk to Pharaoh about his brothers coming (45:16ff)

- ✓ Faith to take “less valuable” land for the brothers, believing God would provide (46:28 – 47:6)
- ✓ Faith to procure all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh (47:20ff)
- ✓ Joseph particularly and repetitively demonstrated faith toward God. But the writer of Hebrews selects what appears to be an obscure example to illustrate his faithfulness to God.
- **Joseph reminded his brothers of the promises of God — *made mention of the exodus*.**
 - ✓ The reference to the **exodus** is an abbreviation for **Gen. 50:24** — a reminder to his brothers of the Abrahamic covenant. Joseph was so confident in God’s promise to Abraham that he inferred that there would have to be an exodus to return the family back to the land. He didn’t know when it would be or under what circumstances; but he was absolutely confident it would happen.
 - ✓ Remember that Joseph spent his entire adult life in Egypt. He spent approx. 17 years in the Promised Land (without owning anything); all his adult life was in Egypt (90+ yrs). The only time he went back was to bury Jacob (Gen. 50:7). He was faithful while never receiving the promises.
 - ✓ He did not receive the promises, but he was unwavering in his confidence that God would keep the promises — even as death approached and he was aware he wouldn’t see the fulfillment.
 - ✓ Just because Joseph didn’t see the promises fulfilled didn’t mean that God failed. He still believed.
- **Joseph planned for the future he would not see — *he gave orders concerning his bones*.**
 - ✓ Despite not seeing how or when things would end, Joseph prepared for them.
 - ✓ Don’t read this as “Joseph made funeral arrangements — he bought a pre-arrangement plan.”
 - ✓ That is not what is going on here — what is going on is that Joseph is so confident of the return of Israel to its land that he acted on that confident expectation (again, affirming what faith is, v. 1).
 - ✓ While he spent his life in Egypt, Egypt was not his home; he was looking to the land God promised — and ultimately he wasn’t just looking for the land of Israel, either (**vv. 13-14, 16**).
 - ✓ And God fulfilled his desire, as Moses took the bones from Egypt (Ex. 13:19) and Joshua took them into the Promised Land (Josh. 24:32). His “bones” are a reminder of the final resting place that God has provided for all His people (**Heb. 12:22-24**). We can trust Him to take us there.
 - ✓ He planned in faith, and God provided in grace.

4. When WE Face Death

- **Remember the promises of God** — by reminding the readers of the things that God will do in the future, he is reminding them of God’s promises; he is explicit with those promises in chs. 11-13 —
 - ✓ When there is suffering, God has something better ahead (11:40).
 - ✓ Jesus is the perfecter of our faith and He has secured His place on the throne which equips Him to be our perfecter (12:2).

- ✓ Even when we are disciplined, a godly response will produce the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” (12:11); that is, God will produce righteousness in us through our faithful response to suffering.
- ✓ The Kingdom in which we participate cannot be shaken or overthrown (12:22, 28). God is and always will be King and He will bring us into that Kingdom.
- ✓ God will never forsake those who are His (no matter how it appears, 13:5b-6, 14).
- ✓ The writer also reminded the readers of their own earlier actions of faithfulness — they endured suffering and difficulty “knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one” (10:34; cf. also v. 36). When God promises to take His people to His heavenly kingdom, redeem them, free them from the bondage of sin, and loose them from the shackles of these weak and fleshly bodies, we can be fully confident that is exactly what God will do. He must fulfill His promises because of His nature.
- ✓ When in the shadowy mountains of darkness and despair, we must purposefully remember God and His faithfulness to His promises. He cannot deny Himself; He must be faithful to do as He said.
- **Don't live in regret at the end of life.** (Do repent as it is needed, but don't stay in regret and bitterness.) Jacob's act of deception and the blessing still going through him is a reminder that God uses all things — including sin — to accomplish His purposes.
 - ✓ Further, Jacob's sinful act “is a reminder again that God sometimes works through the unlikeliest of people. Some seem as if they would believe and yet do not, and some seem as if they would never believe, and yet, by God's grace, they do.” [Kruger] He uses even you and me — as flawed as we are.
 - ✓ Sin against you hasn't thwarted God's purposes (or ruined your life). And your sins against others haven't thwarted God's purposes (or “ruined” your life). Every sin can be redeemed and used by God. His sovereign grace is accomplishing His purposes even through sinful men.
- **Be grateful for faith — even weak faith.** What matters is not the strength of your faith, but the strength of the One in whom you believe. God uses even the weak faith of His people to fulfill His promises (like Isaac). Weak faith in the right object (Christ) still saves, because salvation is always of grace. So be grateful. And pray for more grace to grow your confidence in God.
- **Cultivate contentment in your trial and approaching death.**
 - ✓ For the believer, death does not destroy the plan of God. It completes it. Death is the final act of redemption; death is the final demonstration of Christ's victory over Satan and sin. Satan would use death as our final destruction while God uses death as the means to bring us home (**1 Cor. 15:42ff; 2 Cor. 4:6, 8; Phil. 1:20-24; 1 Pt. 1:20-21**).
 - ✓ As we experience trials and even as we approach death, we can be content and confident in God — as all these in Hebrews 11 who did not receive in this life what was promised, but kept trusting.

CONCLUSION: In February of 1546, Martin Luther [Nichols tells us] made one last trip to his birth city, Eisleben. There was a church dispute in the city and Luther was committed to attempting to help resolve it despite telling a friend a few weeks earlier, “I, [am] old, weary, lazy, worn-out, chilly, and, over and above, [a] one-eyed man...half-dead as I am, I might be left in peace.” Yet back to Eisleben he went, traveling through freezing rain, ice, and bitter winds. He grew ill and his wife Katie was anxious about his condition so he wrote her on February 7 saying, “I have a caretaker who is better than you and all the angels; he lies in a manger and nurses at his mother’s breast, yet he sits at the right hand of God, the Almighty Father.”

Eleven days later he would be dead. But just before he died, he preached one last sermon from his deathbed; the short message came from two texts:

- ✓ Psalm 68:19, “Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation.”
- ✓ John 3:16, saying “Our God is indeed a God of salvation, and that salvation comes through the work of His Son.”

Like the Patriarchs in Hebrews 11, Luther was faithful to the end because he kept looking backward to the promises of God and forward to the fulfillment of those promises.

We will likewise live lives of faith as we approach the hardest trials of life, including (especially) death, with confidence that God will complete His plan and His salvation in our lives.

BENEDICTION: Hebrews 13:20-21