



The Book of Hebrews 11:21: The Life and Faith of Jacob

October 11, 2026

Holy Text: Hebrews 11:21

Hebrews 11:21 (KJV) *By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.*

An Introduction to Jacob

Like last week when we studied Isaac, to get the most of studying Jacob's faith, we need to know something of his life. And like last week, Jacob's story arc is huge, essentially running all the way from Genesis chapters 25 to 50, some 874 verses! So a summary is in order!

The Life of Jacob: A Summary

- Jacob is Isaac's younger son, the twin who came out of the womb holding Esau's heel¹, the "younger" whom the "older" (Esau) would serve (Gen 25:23-26; Rom 9:11-12).
- He grew up in a divided house. Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah loved Jacob. (Gen 25:28).
- He bought the birthright from his hungry brother for a meal of pottage and lentils, and Esau (Gen 25:29-34). In the Old Testament, the birthright entitled the possessor to a double portion of his father's possessions and leadership of the family/tribe (Ex 4:22; Deut 21:17). The NLT says, **Genesis 25:30 (NLT)** *Esau said to Jacob, "I'm starved! Give me some of that red stew!" (This is how Esau got his other name, Edom, which means "red.")*
- Years later, when Isaac was old and nearly blind, Jacob, coached by his mother Rebekah, came in Esau's clothes and received the covenant blessing that Isaac had meant for the firstborn (Gen 27:1-29).
- Esau planned to kill him, Jacob, but Rebekah sent him away, and Isaac, told only that Jacob must not marry a Canaanite, blessed him again with the blessing of Abraham and sent him to Laban, Rebekah's brother (Gen 27:41-46, 28:1-5).
- At Bethel², with a stone for a pillow, he dreamed of a ladder from earth to heaven with angels ascending and descending on it. The LORD stood above it and gave him the promise made to Abraham and Isaac: the land, the seed, and the pledge, "I will not leave thee" (Gen 28:10-15).
- He had twelve sons. Leah bore the first four, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, and later Issachar and Zebulun. Bilhah, Rachel's maid, bore Dan and Naphtali. Zilpah, Leah's maid, bore Gad and Asher. Rachel bore Joseph and, at last, Benjamin, and died giving him birth (Gen 29:31-35, 30:1-24, 35:16-18).
- At the brook Jabbok, the night before he met Esau again, he wrestled with God until daybreak, was given the name *Israel*,³ and walked away limping (Gen 32:24-31).
- He buried Rachel on the way to Ephrath. He favored his son Joseph. The brothers sold that son, and Jacob mourned him as dead (Gen 35:16-20, 37:3-35).
- Famine drove the family to Egypt, where Joseph was alive and ruling under Pharaoh. God told Jacob not to fear the journey: He would go down with him and bring him up again (Gen 46:1-4).
- Jacob lived seventeen years in Goshen, a sojourner in a rich land, still heir of a promise he did not fully possess (Gen 47:28; Heb 11:9, 13).

¹ Jacob's name means "supplanter" or one who displaces via stratagem. (Webster 1828)

² "House of God"

³ Can be translated as "strives with God," "he will rule as God." (LSBEC, Strong's) Gen 32:28 aligned Israel with "prince."

- At 147, near death, he made Joseph swear to bury him with Abraham and Isaac, not in Egypt, and bowed in worship (Gen 47:29-31; Heb 11:21).⁴
- Then he claimed Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own, crossed his hands, and set the younger above the elder (Gen 48:5, 13-20). He blessed his twelve sons, gathered his feet into the bed, and was gathered to his people (Gen 49:1-33).

This is Jacob: a supplanter (William MacDonald says, "a con man"), a fugitive from his brother, a limping prince, a father of twelve, dying in Egypt with his hope still in Canaan. The author of Hebrews sets him before the church, at the end, by faith.

The Faith of Jacob (See numbers 6-8 for thoughts on our text)

1. Faith is granted by God's sovereign choosing!

- Recall God's Word concerning Jacob:

***Genesis 25:21-23 (KJV)** And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived. **22** And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD. **23** And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.*

- Jacob was God's choice. God therefore ordered his steps, protected him, and revealed Himself to him...

***Genesis 28:13 (KJV)** And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed;*

- **Point of Encouragement: If you are saved, you are God's choice! He has revealed Himself to you too and imparted the faith to believe...so believe!**

2. God chooses and uses sinners!

- From his birth and naming, to some of the wicked events of his life...

***Genesis 25:31-33 (KJV)** And Jacob said, Sell me this day thy birthright. **32** And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me? **33** And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.*

***Genesis 27:19-20 (KJV)** And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy firstborn; I have done according as thou badest me: arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me. **20** And Isaac said unto his son, How is it that thou hast found it so quickly, my son? And he said, Because the LORD thy God brought it to me.*

⁴ Genesis 47:31 says Jacob "bowed himself upon the bed's head." The Hebrew word for "bed" and "staff" are very similar, depending on the vowel construction. The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) says "staff" which is quoted the writer of Hebrews. The point here is that the old "con man" ended his life in worship to God.

- ...Jacob showed himself to be deeply flawed! We must not use his story to excuse our sin! Instead, let us rejoice in the mercy and love of God!

Genesis 28:10-19 (KJV) And Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. **11** And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. **12** And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. **13** And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; **14** And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of. **16** And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. **17** And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven. **18** And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it. **19** And he called the name of that place Bethel: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.

- **Point of Encouragement: God loves you, has saved you, and uses you for His glory too!**

Ephesians 2:1-10 (KJV) And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; **2** Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: **3** Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. **4** But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, **5** Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) **6** And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: **7** That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. **8** For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: **9** Not of works, lest any man should boast. **10** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

3. Faith is often tried during years of adversity!

- Jacob's service to Laban wasn't easy! Laban did not want to let Jacob go! So Jacob, at God direction, fled (Gen 31:1-21). When Laban caught up with him, Jacob said...

Genesis 31:41-42 (KJV) Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times. **42** Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. God hath seen mine affliction and the labour of my hands, and rebuked thee yesternight.

- Laban, having been warned by God to watch his mouth to Jacob (Gen 31:24), still said in return:

Genesis 31:29 (KJV) *It is in the power of my hand to do you hurt: but the God of your father spake unto me yesternight, saying, Take thou heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad.*

Genesis 31:43 (KJV) *And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that thou seest is mine: and what can I do this day unto these my daughters, or unto their children which they have borne?*

- They ended up making a covenant, and Jacob was finally free (Gen 31:44-55).
- **Point of Encouragement: Trust God's timing! Our LORD was with Jacob those 20 years and wove Jacob's adversity into His plan for him, blessing him despite Laban's machinations!**

4. Faith doesn't mean there is no fear!

- Despite meeting a company of angels (Gen 32:1-2), Jacob was terrified of meeting Esau. He just knew his brother would seek revenge and elaborately planned to pacify him. (Gen 32:3-21) After this...

Genesis 32:22-30 (KJV) *And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two women's servants, and his eleven sons, and passed over the ford Jabbok. 23 And he took them, and sent them over the brook, and sent over that he had. 24 And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. 25 And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. 26 And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. 27 And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. 28 And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. 29 And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. 30 And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.*

- His fear drove his sleeplessness and anxiety. Jacob's desperation (for help with the coming Esau meeting) is evident! "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me!"
- God, by His grace, initiated a sovereign and divine encounter!
- **Point of Encouragement: In fearful moments, seek hard after God! Your flesh will pay the price, but the blessing of the LORD is worth it!**

5. Faith follows God, even "out" of the Promised Land!

- Towards the end of Jacob's life, famine ravaged the land. Joseph was alive and ruling under Pharaoh in Egypt. Joseph had sent his brothers back to Jacob with provisions and an invitation to come and be provided for...

Genesis 46:1-5 (KJV) *And Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices unto the God of his father Isaac. 2 And God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here am I. 3*

*And he said, I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation: **4** I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again: and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes. **5** And Jacob rose up from Beersheba: and the sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, and their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent to carry him.*

- **Point of Encouragement: Although Jacob didn't fully possess the promised land, he was still there! But God called him out to accomplish His divine purposes. A move you did not want can still be part of God's plan. Always follow God!**

6. Faith Worships God until the End!

- Jacob lived seventeen years in Egypt, and had possessions therein, and grew, and multiplied exceedingly (Gen 47:27).
- As his life nears its end, he calls Joseph close and makes him swear, hand under thigh, that he will not be buried in Egypt but with his fathers (Gen 47:28-30). Joseph swears. Then Jacob bows.

***Genesis 47:31 (KJV)** And he said, Swear unto me. And he sware unto him. And Israel bowed himself upon the bed's head.*

- Again, *Hebrews* reads that bow as worship, leaning on his staff. Whether the prop is the bed or the staff, the point is he is too weak to stand in his own strength, and he still worships!
- **Point of Encouragement: Keep worshipping God! Even until death! If you cannot stand, you can still bow down!**

7. Faith claims the next generation, regardless of their culture or lineage!

- In Genesis 48, Joseph hears his father is sick and brings his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, born in Egypt to an Egyptian wife.
- Jacob strengthens himself on the bed and adopts them:

***Genesis 48:5 (KJV)** And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee into Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine.*

- They will not be Egyptian princes in the family story; they will be tribes, counted among Israel like Reuben and Simeon.
- **Point of Encouragement: Ask God for the salvation of your children and grandchildren! Believe for them (in prayer and faith) and speak the Words of Life over them (Ps 78:5-8; Prov 22:6; Eph 6:4)!**

8. Faith obeys, even to breach a cultural protocol!

- Like his father Isaac, Jacob too violates the firstborn custom...

***Genesis 48:8-16 (KJV)** And Israel beheld Joseph's sons, and said, Who are these? **9** And Joseph said unto his father, They are my sons, whom God hath given me in this place. And he said, Bring them, I pray thee, unto me, and I will bless them. **10** Now the eyes of Israel were dim for age, so that he could not see. And he brought them near unto him; and he kissed them, and embraced them. **11** And Israel said unto Joseph, I had not*

thought to see thy face: and, lo, God hath shewed me also thy seed. **12** And Joseph brought them out from between his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. **13** And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near unto him. **14** And Israel stretched out his right hand, and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who *was* the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands wittingly: for Manasseh *was* the firstborn. **15** And he blessed Joseph, and said, God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed me all my life long unto this day, **16** The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

- Joseph's response makes cultural sense...

Genesis 48:17-18 (KJV) And when Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand upon the head of Ephraim, it displeased him: and he held up his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head unto Manasseh's head. **18** And Joseph said unto his father, Not so, my father: for this *is* the firstborn; put thy right hand upon his head.

- But Jacob, like Isaac, had heard God...

Genesis 48:19-20 (KJV) And his father refused, and said, I know it, my son, I know it: he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great: but truly his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his seed shall become a multitude of nations. **20** And he blessed them that day, saying, In thee shall Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh: and he set Ephraim before Manasseh.

- **Point of Encouragement: Men always have a way of doing things. And some traditions are good! But God can override man's traditions. Obey Him rather than men (Matt 15:1-9; Acts 5:29)!**

9. Faith dies looking for a better country!

- The blessing is spoken in Egypt, but the hope is not Egypt!

Genesis 48:21 (KJV) And Israel said unto Joseph, Behold, I die: but God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers.

- Jacob saw beyond his family's time (and slavery) in Egypt, past the time of Moses, and into the time of Joshua! This reminds us of what the writer of Hebrews said a few verses earlier:

Hebrews 11:13-16 (KJV) These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. **14** For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. **15** And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. **16** But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

- **Point of Encouragement: Look beyond what you can see with earthly eyes! Gaze, in faith, upon the sure promises of God in Christ! Eternal Life! A place prepared for you (John 3:15-16, 10:28, 14:1-3)!**

10. Faith always points to Christ!

- There are two points here worth considering:
 1. First, when Jacob wrestled with God, he did so for a blessing. He also then received a covenant name, *Israel*. We too are Abraham's seed and Israel!

***Galatians 3:29 (KJV)** And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

***Galatians 6:15-16 (KJV)** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. **16** And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.*

2. Second, let us consider the Mercy of God!
 - Abraham told Sarah in Egypt, and again in Gerar, "Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister," and a king took her (Gen 12:11-19, 20:2). Isaac did the same with Rebekah: "She is my sister," because he was afraid (Gen 26:7). Jacob bought the birthright from a fainting brother, then stood before a blind father and said, "I am Esau thy firstborn," and blamed the speed of the meal on the Lord (Gen 25:29-33, 27:19-20).
 - God still kept His covenant, still revealed Himself to them, and still carried the Promise of the Seed through Abraham's house!
- **Points of Encouragement: The mercy that did not cast off lying patriarchs is the same mercy fulfilled toward sinners in Christ, who died for the ungodly and in whom the promises of God are fulfilled (Rom 5:6-8; 2 Cor 1:20)! Through Jacob, just like through his fathers (and just like through us), God continued to form and call forth a people!**

Prayer

Father, Thank You for choosing us. We are unworthy, but You have made us worthy by the holy blood of Thy Son Jesus. Oh LORD, we sin daily. And it is amazing to us that You still condescend to use us for Thy glory, like You used Jacob.

We therefore determine to trust You, even when we must endure great periods of adversity. We determine to keep trusting You when we are fearful and lack courage. We desire to live out a life of worship, bowing before Thee and giving Thee honor. We will work to disciple our children and trust You for their salvation.

Our heart is to obey You even when such obedience flies in the face of societal norms. And we will do these things because we love and seek Thee! We seek a better country, even one with eternal foundations!

And merciful Father, we pray our words and actions point unto Thy Son. Oh LORD Christ, may our lives gleam with the shining truth of Thy holy sacrifice for our sins.

In Jesus' Mighty Name, Amen.