

Living by Faith

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Date: 07 January 2018

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[0 : 00] Almighty God and loving Father, may the words that I speak now be your words, that is, may they be faithful descriptions and explanations of your word.

And may you graft your word into our hearts and work in us so as to bring forth in us the fruit of good works. We pray this for the honour and praise of your name through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I have in my library an old but relatively well-known Australian Christian book that is well-known in its time. It is called Pages from God's Casebook.

It was published in 1962 and was written by a man called John Herkes. Now, John Herkes was an Australian eye specialist who turned his hand to writing character studies on key biblical people.

Now, I never met John. I didn't know him. But I do know that he was a strongly Christian man. And by, well, a strange set of circumstances, I found myself at his funeral many years ago.

[1 : 04] And the story of his death is one that is etched in my memory. The details of the story are now a bit sketchy, but here's what I remember. John was in his old age.

He lived in Sydney. And on a particular day, he was travelling on the manly ferry. He was sitting on a seat that was out in the open. There was a relatively young woman nearby.

And he had this massive heart attack and began to die on the ferry. And the young woman took him in her arms and looked after him as he died.

Anyway, she was not a Christian. At her funeral, at the funeral, however, it was reported that after watching John Herkes die, she made a comment that if you can die like this, then you need not fear death.

Friends, John Herkes was a man of hope. He could therefore embrace death without fear. His funeral was a triumphant one for John knew Jesus.

[2 : 07] He loved Jesus. And therefore, death was not something that he need fear. Dying was simply for him a gateway into another existence. So there is the first story.

However, let me tell you another one. The other one comes from a famous preacher and Anglican clergyman in England. He had a physician who was not a Christian. And so one day he asked that physician about Christians and dying.

And he asked his physician whether Christians generally died well. And the physician answered that they did not. But the physician said Christians appeared to often fear death and often therefore hung tenaciously to life.

They did not die well. Friends, I have heard atheists and skeptics who have made some the same comments about Christians. I need to tell you, though, that in my five and a half years here, I saw many people from our congregations here die well.

But nevertheless, there are atheists and skeptics who have made comments like this. Here is one of them. It is from Philip Adams, who many of you will know of. In 2015, he published an article in The Weekend Australian.

[3 : 15] And in that article, he noted that Christianity is about happy endings and resurrections. And yet he asserted that many Christians died badly. Now, while I think he overstated his case, I do think there is an element of truth in what he says.

I think that many of us are inconsistent in our faith. I think that some of us have real doubts about what we have believed. And I think that that is often displayed on our deathbeds.

And so today, what I want to do is look at some examples of some Old Testament saints that I think died well. Let's see if we can understand what makes them tick. And let's see if we can learn from them so that we might face our own future, whatever it is, with confidence.

Let's see what we can gain from their experience about what it means to live and die as believers in God. Let's learn, as it were, what it means to be people of hope.

So turn with me in your Bibles to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, and right to the back to Genesis chapter 47. I won't give you a page number because I don't have it and it's easy to find.

[4 : 22] Okay. First book of the Bible, Genesis chapter 47. Now let me give you the background. In Genesis 37, we found Jacob and his family in Canaan.

And the focus of the story from chapter 37 becomes Jacob's favoritism of Joseph, the son of his favorite wife. The other sons see the favoritism expressed by Jacob toward Joseph and they become jealous.

And they therefore determine that they'll rid themselves of their brother, Joseph. The end result is the whole family finally finds themselves in Egypt being cared for by Joseph and under his protection.

Sins were forgiven. Reconciliation came. And in our passage today, we're in the final stages of the drama of this family. Let's take a quick look at the rest of the story and then I'll focus right on the last three chapters.

So in chapter 47 verses 28 to 31, we're told of Jacob's age. He is evidently near the end of his life. And so what he does is he calls in Joseph and extracts an oath from him that he will bury his bones in Canaan or bury him in Canaan.

[5 : 30] And Joseph agrees. Then in chapter 48, Jacob calls in Joseph and repeats the promises and formally adopts Joseph's two sons as his own sons and blesses them.

Then he instructs Joseph regarding his imminent death and burial and bequeaths a section of land to him over his brothers. Now, chapter 49, Jacob gathers all his sons this time, not just Joseph, but all.

And he prophesies regarding each one of their futures. In chapter 50, Joseph grieves after Jacob has died and he joins with the brothers and he does what his father had requested.

That is, he takes Jacob's bones to Canaan with great pomp and ceremony and buries him in the family plot. At some time in all of this, the brothers realize that now that dad's dead, we might be in trouble because of what we did to our brother.

And so they approach him tentatively and he assures them, look, don't be worried. It'll be OK. Your concern is unworried. What you did, you meant harm for me, but God made it work for good.

[6 : 41] So everything's OK. And finally, Joseph himself dies at a good old age and leaves instructions about his bones and says they are to be buried in Canaan as well.

Now, I think the overall meaning of the Joseph story is clear. It's spelled out in chapters 47 and in chapter 50. It's about God's sovereignty. That is, God is a God who controls all things, all history.

And his purpose is to bring about his purpose. On the macro level, that purpose is spelled out in Genesis 1 to 12. God's picture, God's purpose in his world is to bring the whole world to know him.

On the micro level, though, his purpose is fulfilled through one part of humanity, one family, the descendants of Abraham. And they are the ones who find themselves in these chapters in Egypt, despite all the sinfulness of the family.

Now, there are particular things, though, to notice about this story. And I want to show them to you. You see, in my view, one of the risks for Joseph comes from the fact that his brothers treated him badly and rejected him.

[7 : 52] And then he did well in Egypt. I think there's a real danger for Joseph. And that danger was that Joseph would go Egyptian. That is, that he'd say, I've had it with that lot.

They mistreated me. There's nothing there in Canaan for me. I am doing well here. And he'd come into a position of great prominence in Egypt.

He'd married the daughter of an Egyptian son-worshipping priest. He'd given his kids names that indicated he wanted to forget his past and even forget his Jewish roots.

And I think there are signs within the story that Jacob, his dad, had noticed and was worried about him. He sees his sons and the great temptations that Egypt poses.

And he knows, though, that the future of Israel is distinct from and divorced from Egypt. Egypt is all about being settled. It's about wealth and prosperity and stability.

[8 : 54] And Jacob knows that the life of promise is not about those things. No, the life of promise is about looking into the future. It's about being a sojourner, a refugee, a temporary resident.

And in my view, that is what is happening in these chapters. This is a father who decides he's going to educate his son about what it means to be a person of God.

And the first thing that he does is stresses to Joseph that his own hope is not in Egypt, but is in Canaan, where God's promises will be fulfilled.

That's what I think he's saying in getting Joseph to bury him in Canaan. He's clearly telling Joseph, my hope is in God and his promise. And that's tied not in Egypt, but somewhere else.

Second, no matter what else is going on in chapter 48, one thing is clear. Jacob is making clear to Joseph that his future is tied up with the people of God.

[9 : 54] Look at what happens in this chapter. Jacob repeats the promises to Joseph. He formally adopts Joseph's sons. He gives a blessing that ties them in with Abraham and Isaac and himself.

And then he tells Joseph that God's intention is to bring the family back to Canaan and that he'll give him leadership over his brothers. And finally, see what he does.

He gives Joseph the right of ownership of the only piece of promised land that he himself had acquired. He makes Joseph a property owner away from Egypt in Canaan.

And then look at chapter 49. The theme of looking forward to the future is continued because here Jacob blesses his sons and tells them what will happen in the days to come.

The three older sons are deprived of their rights of leadership because of sins they've committed. Each of the brothers are told then of their character and given some insights into their future.

[10 : 56] But two of the brothers are singled out. For special mention. They are the two brothers who have featured most in the story of Genesis 37 to 47.

That is Joseph and Judah. And Joseph is told a number of things. He's told that his father's blessing clearly rests upon him. He's also told that the time will come that Judah will be like a sleeping lion for some time.

But eventually the rule will pass from Joseph to Judah. Now, having put that education in place, Jacob places his hope in the future.

And it's a marvelous picture of Jacob dying. He pulls his feet up into bed. That is, I think he goes into the fetal position. He breathes his last.

And he's gathered to his ancestors in death. Can you see what's going on? Jacob has told us his life has been. In fact, I love the way in the Hebrew it goes. It says, life has been full of fewness and badness.

[12 : 00] He said, my life's been short and it's been troublesome. If that's your life, what is left for you? If life has been fewness and badness, what is left for you?

Well, Jacob is clear. If in his life of fewness and badness, he hopes. He has had to wait for everything in life. When you think about Jacob, you can see it, can't you?

He had to wait for his wife. He had to wait for his kid. He had to wait for reconciliation and peace. Life has been for Jacob about waiting. And so it is in death.

He's still waiting even as he dies. And that is what he wants to pass on to his kids. Hope. Jacob dies as he always lived, waiting for what was to come.

And so at the end of chapter 49, we are still in tension. Jacob knows where the future lies in Canaan. He's attempted to educate Joseph in all of this. But what will Joseph do?

[12 : 58] Will he join Jacob? Will he settle or will he settle in Egypt and become and continue to become Egyptian? Will he merely be a temporary resident settled in Egypt for the moment, but not really settled?

Or will he be settled in Egypt and loving it? The tension grows as we watch in this section. Joseph in chapter 50 honors his father with dignity and respect.

He buries him according to his wishes. But even so, this passage tells us that this burial, while essentially Jewish, has all the accoutrements of an Egyptian burial.

Everything Joseph does looks Egyptian. But then finally we see the other side presented. Because can you see what happens right at the end of the book of Genesis?

Then finally we and Joseph are reminded of God and his purposes. Because the brothers come before Joseph. We're reminded of how the story began with a dream.

[14 : 00] A dream where all the sons of Jacob came and bowed down before Joseph. And so again the tensions continued. And we think, what's going to happen here? Will Joseph, what will Joseph choose?

Will he be a sojourner? A man settled but not settled? Will he be a temporary resident? Or will he be a sucked in Egyptian? And the tension ends with the last five verses of Genesis 50.

For then we're told of the future of Jacob. Have a look at it. He did stay in Egypt. He did live a fruitful and rich life. But then he too faced death.

And as he does, he tells us where his hope lies. Sure he may have been an Egyptian on the outside. Sure he may have lived a settled existence in Egypt with all its benefits. But he was only a temporary resident.

His bones were to be buried in Canaan. They were to be buried there because his hope and his future were tied up in Canaan, not in Egypt. And so it is that he urges his brothers to make sure that when God brings about his great purposes in rescuing the Israelites out of Egypt, they are to make sure that his bones are where his hope is in Canaan.

[15 : 15] And Joshua did it. Joshua took his bones. And Joshua made sure that they were buried in Canaan.

Now, what I want to do now is look at these same verses from an even different perspective. I want you in your Bibles to flip back to the beginning of Genesis to chapter 3, verse 15.

You see, these verses tell us the background to Joseph's hope. Now, have a look at Genesis 3, verse 15. This verse is speaking to where has God speaking to the serpent in the garden after he led Adam and Eve astray.

And God says to the serpent, I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.

Now, Jewish and Christian scholars for over 2,000 years have seen this as a verse about God's coming Messiah or King. It is a promise that a particular descendant of Adam and Eve will be victorious over Satan at some time in the future.

[16 : 29] Now, the Hebrew word that lies behind the word offspring is the word in Hebrew seed. And it's that very word that has played a part in the Joseph story and all that leads up to it.

Let me show you. Have your Bibles open and flip through your Bibles as I point out some places where the Hebrew word seed lies behind our English word for descendant or offspring.

Turn to Genesis 13, verse 14 as an example. What happens here is Abraham is being told to look around the land of Canaan. And he's told that this land will be given to his seed, his offspring forever.

He's then told that his seed, his offspring will be like the dust of the earth. Then if you flip to chapter 15, verse 6, God tells Abraham to look up to the sky and to count the stars.

And he then says, so shall your seed be. In Genesis 17, God tells Abraham about his descendants. And in verse 6 of 17, he says that he'll make kings out of Abraham.

[17 : 38] In Genesis 17, verse 16, he says that kings of people will come from Sarah. Then in Genesis 38, we see how Tamar is more righteous than Jacob because she worked hard on producing seed for God's promised line.

And today in chapter 49, we're told that the scepter will not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from between his feet. In other words, we're being told again that rulers and kings will come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah.

I wonder if you can see what I'm saying. You see, Genesis 49 plays a very important part in God's long-term plan. God's long-term plan is to have a person who will defeat Satan.

That plan is put into effect through Abraham and his seed. It reaches its fulfillment, not in the seed of Joseph, but the one who will succeed Joseph, Judah.

Now, we, of course, know where that fulfillment comes from, don't we? For one of Judah's descendants was King David. And he did indeed rule over the people of God, just as Jacob had prophesied.

[18 : 53] And he was indeed a king from the loins of Abraham. He did indeed defeat many of the enemies of the people of God. But let me tell you, he did not defeat that great enemy of the people of God, Satan.

Why, even in his last days, David himself was tempted by Satan and defeated by Satan to take a census of Israel. And he buckled as Adam had done before him.

And his descendants didn't do any better. They too sinned. And eventually, God did away with kingship in Israel. And it's as though the line drew an end.

And so at the end of the Old Testament, the prophecies of Genesis were still waiting to be fulfilled. And then, Jesus, from the line of Judah, was born. He was of the line of David, of Judah, of Jacob, of Isaac, and of Abraham.

And of Adam. But in his ministry, he did battle with the spiritual enemies of the people of God. And he bound them. And he allowed them to bind him to some extent.

[20 : 09] He allowed them to work with the physical enemies of the people of God to place him on a cross. And there on the cross, he defeated Satan and made a public display of him in victory.

He conquered Satan once and for all. God's long-term goal of Genesis 3.15 had come about. And all that remained was to wrap things up.

And that is what is going on right at the moment. It may not appear that way. It may seem, particularly with the events of the last year, that those of the evil one have gained the upper hand.

But let me tell you what is going on behind the scenes this very day. You see, we have a king, a second Adam, who has already conquered Satan and crushed him under his feet.

And we are just engaged in the final mopping up as we proclaim this Jesus to the world. As we live as God's people. As we resist the evil one.

[21 : 14] But the day will come when the mopping up will be completed. When the number of all of God's people will be completed. And when God will consummate his victory.

And he will throw Satan into the judgment reserved for him from the beginning of time. And when he'll re-establish Edom without Satan and his cohorts.

And we will have a clear, unfettered and untainted relationship and access to God. And we'll do that together. That is where God has been heading since Genesis 1.

And it's well on track despite what we might think. With that bit of background, I want to just wrap up today's exploration from the Bible. And given that it's the first Sunday of a new year, I thought it would be good to talk to us, to you, about hope.

As you can see, I think that hope is a ringing thread throughout the story of Genesis. And throughout the story of Jacob and Joseph. But more than that, Jacob and Joseph are in some senses model Christians for us.

[22 : 21] They represent two ways to live. Let me explain what I mean. Think about it for a moment. I want you to think about Jacob. Jacob's on one side of the coin.

His life has been that of a continual traveller, a sojourner. His life has been one of discomfort and difficulty at every level of his life. And as such, it's been easy for him to hope because things can only get better.

He's had to hope for a wife. He's had to hope for kids. He's had to hope for an end of strife in his family. He's had to hope for his family's final deliverance.

It's been a tough life for him. That's why he says at the end of his life, my life's been full of fewness and badness. It's been a rough road. But Joseph, he represents another side.

You see, his life has been difficult at times. Particularly in his youth. But he's coped with hardship and difficulty and loneliness. Nevertheless, in this latter part of his life, things have been pretty good.

[23 : 26] Since being dragged out of prison, life has been comfortable for Joseph. He's been reunited with his family. Everything's worked out. He's been married to a wife who's born children without any of the trouble that his grandmother, his grandmother, his great-grandmother had.

He's experienced wealth and security. He's been settled. Let me tell you, for such people, hope's difficult. Hope's not easy if things have been good.

It's not easy to hope when material things are plentiful and life is comfortable. And yet the book of Genesis and the book of Hebrews tells us that Joseph was like his dad.

That is, he too was a man of faith and of hope. He too died looking forward to the exodus in hope. Now, with that bit of background, I want to go on to say that the Bible tells us that we too are to be just like them.

We're to be like Jacob and Joseph and Abraham before them. We're to be people of hope. Our hope is not in physical descendants and in land. It's a hope for a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells.

[24 : 39] For a place where our physical bodies will be done away with in all their weakness, to be replaced with new bodies that will not decay. Where we will be like Jesus, for we will see him as he is.

Where sin, the flesh and the devil will be things of the past and not of the present. Where tears and pain and suffering and aches and illness and pain will be done away with for all time.

We are people who hope for the future. We are therefore people who of necessity are sojourners and temporary residents on earth. Some of us here, I know, have lived difficult lives.

And some of us will live difficult lives that are psychologically and physically disjointed. And we might get to the end of our lives and say it's been full of fewness and badness.

I know there are some people in this congregation will feel that at the end of life. Others will have lived settled and successful lives full of good and full of good days.

[25 : 45] But all of us who are God's people do not belong to this world. We are citizens of a different country.

We are temporary residents. We live in hope. Living in hope. And let me remind you that living in hope can be difficult. Living in hope means an end to pinning your hopes for meaning and satisfaction in the here and now.

Living in hope means an end to covetousness. An end to materialism. An end to acquisitiveness. An end to grasping hold of the things of this life. It means a conscious turning to the future for meaning.

It means putting our hope in God's future grace. It means putting our hope in God's future grace that has been formed by an event in the past. On a cross. God's past act of grace in his son.

So what I want to do is close today's sermon by urging you to be like your spiritual ancestors. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. Whether things are difficult for you.

[26 : 55] Or they're good for you. Be people of hope. Choose to look for the future for significance and value. Choose to look to Jesus for value.

Let him and God's purposes shape our lives and our reality. Let's fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

Let's put aside everything else that hinders us. And on this first Sunday of a new year, it's good to remind ourselves that that's how we are to live. In the words of Hebrews chapter 11, verse 1 to chapter 12, verse 3.

Let's be people of faith. Let's be people of faith. Let's be people of faith. And let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Let's not grow weary or lose heart.

We have a sure and certain hope. So let's live as people of hope. And let's reflect that in the way we live every day.

[28 : 00] And let's reflect it in the way that we die. For we Christians ought to live well. But we Christians above all people in this world can die well.

For we who have believed in Christ are people of hope. And that hope is guaranteed in Jesus who is our hope. So let's pray. Father, we thank you for this example in Genesis of our predecessors of the faith who died in hope.

And Father, we pray that having watched their example, you might help us to run with and having them as witnesses, as it were, help us to run with endurance the race set before us.

Help us not to grow weary or lose heart, knowing that we have a sure and certain hope. Father, please help us to reflect this in the way that we live this year.

And Father, no matter when death comes, help us to reflect this in the way that we die. For we have believed in your son, Jesus Christ, and we are people of hope.

[29 : 17] And we thank you that that hope is guaranteed in Jesus who is our hope. And we pray this in his name. Amen.