

4.21.2024 Sermon

Forgiveness in the Sky of Faith | Hebrews 11:22

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

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Good morning. Today, we are continuing our exploration of Hebrews 11. We've been looking at how faith shines through the lives of different characters from the Old Testament. These are people we recognize as the original lineage of faith, which birthed the Hebrew people. If you know me, you're aware that we've been examining this chapter since the beginning of January. One thing I love to do is take different ideas, bring them together, distill down diverse concepts, and synthesize them into a coherent narrative. As I was praying about this passage, I had a vision of a sky full of stars. Our ancestors, for generations and ages, have looked to the heavens for direction, guidance, and truth. I believe that God is revealing pieces of the grand story of reality that can guide our lives. It's like a tapestry of stars, a constellation of truth that we can use to navigate our life. This is how I see our sermon series.

So, in the beginning, we must start with belief. To believe—wow, that is small, sorry about that. At the fundamental level, if we're going to follow God, we have to believe that God exists. This is just a basic step. If God exists, as James discussed, that is what we hold on to. It only makes sense to listen to what God says about life. If God created all there is and tells us that he's good, then we should listen to him about how to live life, how to organize ourselves, and how to orient the various things we are doing.

So far, I've identified about five different aspects that we've highlighted since January. These are different stars that we can align ourselves with—things that God is saying to us that are fundamentally true. The first one is "walk with me," because that's where life is. Maintaining a pattern, habit, or discipline of interacting with God and aligning yourself with what God says is the heart of faithful living. "Walk with me." We saw this in the example of Enoch, where all we know about him is that he walked with God; nothing else. But that by itself was enough to demonstrate faith. The next idea is "obey." Obey God because when he asks you to do

something, it is for your good. Look at Noah; he had no good reason to build a boat. It was just a silly, ridiculous thing to do. But he had to trust that when God told him to do something, it was for his good.

Another important aspect is "listen." This is something that came to mind as sometimes we can see the Bible and God through a lens of perfection—either we're 100% good and right, and then God does good things for us, or we're any bit less than perfect, and we're out. We look at the Bible and think, "Is God happy with these people? Then they must have been 100% good. I've got to do just like that." The reality, however, is much fuzzier. In many stories, people are both following God and not following God simultaneously.

This is something that Sophia highlighted in the story of Abraham and Isaac. A straightforward reading, which is still very valid, is that God said something, Abraham did it, God spoke again, and that prevented Abraham from sacrificing his son. However, Sophia raised the question, "What if Abraham heard God wrong? What if he misinterpreted? We know that God hates child sacrifice; it's very clear in the Old Testament. That feels wrong, just at face value." But repeatedly, God used this as a distinctive, "Don't be like the false gods, because a false god wants you to kill wantonly." Death is something they desire to show life. That's not how God works. So, what if Abraham missed it? While Abraham was faithful, God was faithful to keep speaking, as Abraham kept listening, even if he got it wrong.

And now, the last piece over the last few verses of chapter 11, we've been following a specific promise made to Abraham, to his son Isaac, to his son Jacob, and to Joseph and his sons Ephraim and Manasseh. The picture I have is like a river. The promise is flowing from generation to generation. What I hear God saying is, "Enter the generational river of blessing and promise, passing on what we've received, because God is the God of all time, for all generations." For Abraham's family, the specific promise was a home and a people, but there's a bigger promise embedded in that. It's a legacy connecting the current state of humanity, which has turned from God, to a future where all will be made right. God is promising that everything will turn out right in the end. In this way, there's a line that connects the promise passed down from generation to generation, through the nation of Israel, through Jesus, all the way to us, to the new creation. We are the recipients of that promise; we are part of that river that has flowed through the ages.

So, God is asking us to believe in Him because this promise will continue on. It will continue because God is faithful. In this way, we see this line, moving all the way from creation to new creation—from the forefathers of faith, through Israel, through the cross, to the coming New Creation. The promise rolls on, and we are its stewards. When we read Hebrews 11, it gives us a mantle to take on—it's not some idealized version that we're never going to live up to. It's our heritage, it's our inheritance, and it's our joy to pass it on to our children, to our

grandchildren, and to the generations to come. This is the constellation of faith that I was seeing: stars in our sky, to guide us, to show us truth, to help us understand how the world works and what God wants from us. And today, we're looking at a new star, which is forgiveness, and how that fits into this pattern, into this understanding of how the world works. Through Joseph, we see how forgiveness is the mechanism that God uses to reconnect us, to draw us forward to the new future. It's the path that guides us to reenter the river of promise, when we're turned aside either by our own brokenness or the hurt caused by others. Let's read the passage for today. It's Hebrews 11:22. By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

I was talking to my mom about this sermon, and I said it was about forgiveness. She was like, "Oh, let me see where that is; you should read it." And she's like, "I don't see anything about forgiveness." It's like, "You'll get it; it's hidden, Mom." And there is a very good sermon here. I mean, James almost preached it himself at prayer this morning. It's a very straightforward look at this verse alone. Joseph had faith, unbelievable faith, because when he was dying, the promise of having a land was fading. It was not something he would reach. But he had faith to see that it would happen—that God would be faithful beyond his life. And instead of saying, "Okay, bury me here," he was saying, "No, put me in a coffin; I'm going home." And it might be tomorrow, it might be in 100 years, it might be in 500 years, but God is faithful. That's a great sermon. Maybe James will preach it someday. It's not the sermon I've got for you today. I wanted to look a bit deeper at the context in this part of Genesis that is being referred to here in Hebrews. So, we're going to look at Genesis 50:15-26. This is the very end of Genesis. This is the end of this opening picture that the Bible gives us of how things start.

So, let's see if we can hear some forgiveness here. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father, Jacob or Israel, had just died, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" That's a reasonable thought. So, they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers, the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly. Now, please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.'" So, this is a very interesting approach, just as a little introduction. These people had some real fear going on. First of all, they didn't go themselves; they sent a messenger. They were not sure how this would go. And then they pulled out the card: "We're not asking you; your dead father is asking you." But you know, just kind of help grease the skids a bit. You know, you love your dad. So, he loves us. So, you know, let's just make it all right. Let's move on, bygones be bygones.

When the message came to Joseph, he wept. Now, they must have been hiding, like behind the wall, peering over. Because then it says these brothers then came and threw themselves

down before him. So, you know, they were the second salvo; they were ready. If things went bad, they were running. They said, "We are your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." So then, "Don't be afraid; I'll provide for you and your children." He reassured them and spoke kindly to them. Joseph stayed in Egypt, along with all his father's family. He lived 110 years and saw the third generation of Ephraim's children, his great-grandchildren. He saw the children of Machir, son of Manasseh, were placed at birth on Joseph's knees. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place." So, Joseph died at the age of 110. And after they embalmed him, they didn't put him in the ground; they placed him in a coffin in Egypt.

So, forgiveness just jumps off the page for me here. There's the obvious reconciliation that happens between Joseph and his brothers. But even beyond that, we could think of a lot of other forgivenesses that are touching this story. The brothers weren't the only ones that wronged Joseph. So, you have Potiphar's wife that got Joseph in jail. You had the cupbearer—Joseph saved his skin, got forgotten for two years. You have Joseph and his father: "You loved me so much, you couldn't protect me from my own brothers." You have the brothers and Joseph: "You know, Joseph was kind of a jerk. He was arrogant, he was haughty. He was kind of lording it over them. Then when they came back, he kind of played with them a bit and was like, 'Oh, who are you?' and then made them hold back their one brother, knowing how hard that would be." I mean, there's a lot of forgiveness. And then there's Joseph and God. How many people would have given up on God by now—being sold into slavery, left for dead, transported to another country, only to have success only to get thrown in jail. Sit there for years. How many people would have given up on God by then? It's easy to gloss over this. Of course, all is forgiven. You know, things are all right. God brought them through, and they're a happy family. But I mean, have you met people? People move their lives in the hurt of these kinds of problems, in the kinds of unforgiveness that are here. Their whole lives can be warped around resentment and anger. So many people we know. That's the reality. And it's so common that it's almost considered acceptable. We understand they've been through a lot. I can understand it.

Picture what might have happened if Joseph had spent his life harboring anger. Would he have ever gotten out of prison? Instead of sharing the dreams he had, he could have just kept them to himself. What has hoping others ever done for me? He could have given God the cold shoulder and even ignored what he saw and just smoldered in prison with unending anger. Would he have saved the Egyptian people when Pharaoh called him? He could have been too angry to listen, could have cut himself off from what God was speaking to him and to the nations. He could have just railed about how unfair life was. What then? Would his family find food in the midst of famine, without Egypt's providential cornering of the grain market? Who

knows if the line of Jacob would have just withered as another victim to senseless famine. The promise would have had to flow through another life, another lineage. God could do it, but the story of Abraham would sure look different. But that's not what happened. The sort of response that a very understandable human response of anger and resentment and holding on to hurt would have dammed the whole river of God's promise. God would have found a way to move through, but Joseph chose to keep the blessing and the promise flowing through his family. Through flowing through those around him, he accepted the idea and the practice of forgiveness, died in peace with his family, and entrusted them with carrying on the legacy of faith, carrying his remains to the place of fulfilled promises.

And so, while in Hebrews 11:22, nothing is mentioned explicitly about forgiveness, I see it as a necessary component, holding everything together. Joseph wouldn't have trusted his family to bury his bones if he hadn't restored his relationship with them. If he focused on his own needs, his own suffering, he could easily have missed God's love and redemption, and gave up on the promise given to Abraham. But the faith Joseph had was built on the forgiveness he learned from God and offered to others.

So, as I read this passage, what I see is the power of forgiveness and how it enables faith to persevere through the injustice and the hurt present all around us. I believe, as we as a community try to understand faith, we must understand and practice forgiveness. And there's a whole sermon series to be preached here. And I mean, I don't have time, I don't even know if I'm equipped to do that at all. We could talk about what forgiveness is, how we forgive, how we balance forgiveness with boundaries, how we handle forgiveness with the unrepentant, how we live out forgiveness over time, and how we forgive God, and how God forgives us. So, I want you to hear me clearly—this is not a sermon saying, "Whatever your situation, the only way to follow God today is to forgive everyone." Bringing our centered eyes means that we can understand a more nuanced context to the reality.

So, Joseph had a lot of contextual issues that helped him forgive that were part of this equation. He had decades to come to peace with his brothers. They humbled themselves and repented. That's a big part. The power dynamic was completely different here—the powerful one was the one that was wronged, while the people who did the wrong were weak, they were coming with nothing. That's not how it usually is.

And so, all of these parts play into how forgiveness looked like in this specific instance. So, hear me both in what I am saying and what I'm not saying. I'm not saying that if there is any forgiveness that you struggle to offer today that you're sinning. I'm not saying that the only solution to an intractable relationship is to forgive right now. When we look back at the constellation of faith guiding us forward, we need all of the stars. We need to be listening. We need to be walking. We need to be obeying. Yes, when God calls us to, we need to obey. And

he might call us to forgiveness, but we need all of them to guide us. And I'm not saying that forgive and forgive alone is the one thing that you need to do today or else.

What I am saying is that practicing forgiveness is an important part of staying within the river of God's promise. One of the key ways that we get out of that flow, that moves from generation to generation, God speaking and moving in our lives, is by shutting ourselves off to relationships behind a wall of anger and resentment. That's what will get us out, stuck in the underbrush, in the brambles, and stuck in the mud.

So, when I see forgiveness, I think of how much faith it takes. You know, this is a hard thing to handle. It takes faith to believe that there is sin that needs to be forgiven, it takes faith to recognize that all humanity is made in the image of God, that we're all wearing the stains of sin, and we all have dignity. We need faith to believe that there was a man who died 2000 years ago, that through that death and resurrection, the sins are removed from our identity. That takes faith. We need faith to believe that we are then called to act in the same way and that through following the example of Jesus, we will find life. And that, that forgiveness not only applies to us but also is something that needs to apply to even the people we hate.

So, I want us to just think, for a moment, as we close. Do you know what God has spoken over your life? Can you picture the river of promise that you're a part of? If you can, if you don't know, I ask you today to ask God, to speak that over your life. Because there is something, there is a promise he has for you. And the promise that's even bigger than you, that goes from generation to generation. And when you picture that river, look for places where anger, resentment, fear, cynicism, bitterness, have removed you from the flow, from the current. Where might the faith of Joseph, his testimony of forgiveness, speak to your life today? How can the constellation of faith that God has given us, these things to hold on to, guide us back to his promise that He is good, that He is real, and that all will be made well, in the end? Forgiveness is a miracle of faith. God is inviting us today to join in that miracle that he's ready to do over us. Amen.