

Glasses

*By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons,
and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.*

*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.*

Hebrews 11:21-22

I remember being a first or second grader, and realizing that I couldn't see what the teacher was writing on the board. I couldn't read things unless they weren't right in front of my face. And so, my parents signed me up at the eye doctor's office, and I got glasses. I thought they were pretty cool at first. I thought they made me look pretty smart.

Then I started swimming in middle school, and realized that when I put on my goggles, I couldn't see anymore. Fortunately, someone came up with the idea of prescription goggles that fixed that problem. When I started wearing contacts, life got a lot better. I was no longer the nerd with glasses, but I could still see, which was great for both my social life and my grades. I wish there was a pair of glasses that I could put on that would show me why things happen the way they do. Or what's coming next. Or maybe even what comes after this life – what God has in store for us.

Jacob and Joseph didn't have glasses like that, but their faith allowed them to look beyond the temporary, beyond the here and now, and beyond even death. As we come to these two heroes in Hebrews 11, I invite you to read their stories slowly, not rushing through the texts that you may have read before.

Jacob

We just read some of Jacob's story last week, but it doesn't stop there. Let's pick up his story after he leaves at his father's command to not marry a Canaanite woman. Jacob travels to Paddan Aram with the intention of finding a wife that his parents approve of. Well, he ends up finding two. But we'll get there. When he stops to sleep for the night at Bethel, Jacob has a dream.

Read Genesis 28:10-22

What did the Lord promise Jacob?

When Jacob finally arrives in Paddan Aram, he finds Laban, his uncle. After staying with Laban for a month, Jacob agrees to work for Laban for seven years in return for his daughter, Rachel, with whom he was in love. Seven years pass, but on the wedding night, Laban gives his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob. Laban's explanation for his deception is that it is the custom for the older daughter to be married first, making it impossible to give Rachel to Jacob. Jacob agrees to work for Laban for another seven years to gain Rachel as his wife as well. "Jacob lay with Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah." (Genesis 29:30, NIV)

Leah bears Jacob four sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel, though more loved by Jacob, was barren, and jealous of her sister. She gives Jacob her maidservant, Bilhah, who bears Jacob two sons, Dan and Naphtali. Leah also gives Jacob her maidservant, Zilpah, who bears Jacob two sons, Gad and Asher. Leah bears Jacob two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. "Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22, NIV), and she bears a son, Joseph.

After the birth of all of these children, Jacob asks Laban if he can go back to his hometown with payment for his time of service. Ever the schemer, Jacob asks Laban for every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb, and every spotted or speckled goat in Laban's flocks as his wages.

Read Genesis 30:33-43

"At mating time Jacob put bicoloured branches in front of the stronger animals and by this means led them to bear bicoloured lambs and kids. Scientifically this is inexplicable, unless we suppose that the stronger animals owed their strength to being hybrids and this was the reason

they produced bicoloured offspring. But such an explanation is beyond the horizon of Genesis. It sees Jacob's success as proof of his cunning and that God was with him. The episode demonstrates God intervening to help Jacob, so that he became exceedingly prosperous."¹ Jacob then receives word from the Lord to go back to his father's land, and so he takes his wives, children, livestock, and all he had accumulated in Paddan Aram. Laban eventually catches up to Jacob, but God's providence prevents a war, and Laban lets Jacob go on his way. On his way home, Jacob sends his family and flocks across the ford of Jabbok, and is left alone, wrestling with a man until daybreak.

Read Genesis 32:25-30

This whole story is a mystery. And yet it defines Jacob's existence: that God brought him to these crisis situations (formerly with Laban, and next with Esau) and God had and would bring him through victorious. God does indeed bring Jacob through his confrontation with Esau in the next chapter, bringing not only victory, but reconciliation between the brothers. Eventually, Jacob and his family and flocks return to Bethel (the place of his dream), and Rachel dies while bearing him a final son, Benjamin.

Good grief! Jacob has quite the story, doesn't he? And we're not even done! The rest of Jacob's story is so intertwined with Joseph's that we don't get to see why Jacob is in the Hall of Faith until much later.

Joseph

Joseph, at the age of 17, was a tattle-tale. He was also Jacob's favorite son, which made his other brothers jealous. To add fuel to the fire, Joseph had two dreams that reveal his brothers, the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him. Let's just say that Joseph wasn't exactly the most popular brother on the block.

Eventually, his brothers get sick of him and try to take his life. Reuben convinces the rest of the brothers just to throw him in a cistern in the desert. Judah then convinces them to sell Joseph for 20 shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who take him to Egypt.

The Lord was with Joseph in Egypt, blessing the house of his master while he served in it. Joseph gets thrown into jail because of a lie told by his master's wife, but the Lord is with him even there. While in prison, Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of the cupbearer and the baker. The cupbearer returns to the service of Pharaoh, and when Pharaoh's dreams are unable to be interpreted by all the magicians and wise men of Egypt, he remembers Joseph. God gives Joseph the interpretations of Pharaoh's dreams, as well as advice that Pharaoh receives.

Read Genesis 41:41-57

The famine stretches all the way back to Joseph's family, causing his brothers to have to travel to Egypt to get food. Although Joseph recognizes his brothers, they do not recognize him. After much testing, Joseph finally reveals himself to his brothers.

Read Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph's whole family comes to live near Egypt, in Goshen. Even his father Jacob makes the journey, along the way, receiving a vision from God, assuring him that he will be with him in Egypt and surely bring him back again. And now, we finally get to see why Jacob is commended for his faith in Hebrews 11.

Read Genesis 47:28—48:22

Interesting, isn't it? That Jacob isn't commended for his faith that God would work everything out between himself and Esau, or his faith in leaving his home to find a non-Canaanite wife. That he is commended for blessing Joseph's sons as his own, again raising the younger above the older.

Similarly, Joseph is commended in Hebrews for, not his works or his faith during his time in Potiphar's house, in jail, or in Pharaoh's service, but in the words he spoke to his brothers before his death.

Read Genesis 50:22-26

Joseph's prophecy of that God will bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into the land he had promised Abraham shows Joseph's faith. "God will surely do all that he has promised, even though you may not be able to see it right now," he tells his brothers. Joseph hadn't forgotten the promises of God, and had faith that he would carry them to completion.

What I love about the three stories we've looked at last week and this week (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) is that they looked beyond what *they* could see. They looked past *their own deaths* to what God had promised *to his people*.² Their faith was passed on to the next generations because they were able to look beyond the temporary and fix their eyes on what the Eternal had promised.

There isn't a pair of glasses to see the future, or to even see why God has allowed certain things to happen in our lives. But there is faith. Faith that allows us to look beyond what is happening now, and see that there is something better planned for us that we have been promised, and to live in that faith today.

¹ New Bible Commentary; edited by GJ Wenham, JA Motyer, DA Carson, and RT France. IVP Academic, 2010. Page 81.

² New Bible Commentary; edited by GJ Wenham, JA Motyer, DA Carson, and RT France. IVP Academic, 2010.