

“Abraham’s Faith (Part 1)” – Hebrews 11:8-19

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take a Bible and meet me in Hebrews 11...

We have come to a critical character from the Old Testament that occupies a lot of attention in this famous “Hall of Faith” chapter in the book of Hebrews. That character is Abraham. As with all of the characters we have encountered so far, we will use Hebrews 11 as a springboard to considering their stories in the Old Testament so that we can in turn understand why the author believes they illustrate the faith that we, as Christians, should emulate.

Usually we don’t jump around so much. But the author takes for granted that his readers know these stories very well and can call to mind their details at the mere mention of a name. In East Texas in the year 2019, we cannot assume such knowledge, so we have been using this section of Hebrews as a chance to rehearse key narratives from the Old Testament. We will do that again today. But before we do, let’s look at what the writer of Hebrews has said. The verses I am about to read (along with their Old Testament counterparts) are going to be our focus for about a month. Follow along as I read them in their entirety today, beginning in verse 8. This is God’s Word...

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.¹² Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,¹⁸ of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” (Hebrews 11:8-19)

Before we get to deep into the weeds, let’s recall what we have seen so far in Hebrews 11. The author began with three verses describing faith and then pivots to a list of illustrations drawn from the lives of various Old Testament saints. Abel, the first human to taste death, gets one verse. Enoch, the first human to not taste death, gets one verse. Noah, the father of the human race as we know it, gets one verse. And then we arrive at Abraham and his wife Sarah... Twelve verses! This tells you something of how significant Abraham is for biblical history and how much Abraham’s life was characterized by faith. His was truly a life of faith.

That doesn't mean that he didn't have his ups and downs. That doesn't mean that his faith never doubted and wavered. But if we are wanting to learn about faith from the Old Testament, Abraham is our teacher. He is *the* man of faith. Not surprisingly then, he gets the most attention in the "hall of faith" recorded in Hebrews 11.

Unfortunately, we are not going to have enough time in this series to explore each of the episodes from Abraham's life that the writer of Hebrews mentions. These verses we read in Hebrews 11 allude to events that span from Genesis 11 to 25. That's just too much for us to consider at length in this short series and I fully intend, Lord willing, to circle back to Abraham in a future series of sermons.

Because of this, I want to do something more modest in the next four weeks. Instead of a shallow study of each of these stories of Abraham, I want to dive deeply into one of them that I think best encapsulates the lessons of the others. That story is the final story—the one mentioned in verses 17 to 19—involving the most difficult test of faith I can think of from the Old Testament. There are a lot of lessons embedded in that story and, believe it or not, we will be hard-pressed to get to all of them even in these four weeks. Along the way we will try to connect those lessons to the other stories from Abraham's life that are mentioned in Hebrews 11. That's the plan. To that end, let's turn to Genesis 22...

In many respects the story we will consider today (and in the weeks ahead) is strange and unsettling. It has troubled a great many people over the years because it presents God in a way that doesn't quite fit nice and neat in the box of our imagination. At least not a first glance. For this reason, many have rejected the story altogether, refusing to believe that it accurately portrays what God is actually like.

Perhaps you have heard of an author by the name of C. S. Lewis of *Chronicles of Narnia* fame. Lewis has a lesser-known work entitled, *Letters to Malcolm*, in which he makes the following remark:

"If we are free to delete all inconvenient data we shall certainly have no theological difficulties; but for the same reason no solutions and no progress....The troublesome fact, the apparent absurdity which can't be fitted into any synthesis we have yet made, is precisely the one we must not ignore. Ten to one, it's in that covert the fox is lurking. There is always hope if we keep an unsolved problem fairly in view; there's none if we pretend it's not there."¹

Applied to the Bible, Lewis is saying that when we come across something that doesn't quite meet our expectations or our preferences about God, we should not dismiss that discomfiting piece of revelation. Instead we should wrestle with it. Don't ignore it. Don't deny it. Meditate on it for it is likely here that something important about God and His purposes is to be found. This is certainly true with our text today. And if we can learn to read our Bible as pointing to Christ, we discover that even the most troubling of truths can become a great comfort to us.

Instead of reading the whole story up front, I'd like to take you through it at a slower pace so we can feel the suspense of it a bit more. There is one main lesson that I want us to see this morning and that is this:

God Tests People of Faith

Look at how the very first verse of Genesis 22 begins...

"After these things God tested Abraham..." (Genesis 22:1a)

So the first thing we learn is that God is testing Abraham. Perhaps that sounds a bit funny to your ears. Does God really test His people? Yes! The Bible makes this clear here and in a number of other places (e.g., Exodus 20:20; Deuteronomy 13:3; Psalm 66:10). Why would God do such a thing? I'm glad you asked.

God's purpose in testing a person is quite different from Satan's. God means to strengthen and refine the faith of His people or reveal to them something of the condition of their heart that they have not seen. He knows the condition of the heart. He's not searching for information. He's bringing to the surface those realities so that we can see them and grow. Therefore, if we are enrolled in the "School of Faith" we need occasional tests so that we can assess where we are spiritually.²

Satan's intentions, on the other hand, are vastly different. He tests to corrupt and weaken our faith. He tests are temptations to sin. The Scriptures teach us that God is never the source of our temptation (James 1:13-15). But these same Scriptures teach us just as clearly that He does test His people and, when He does, it's for their good (cf. Rom. 8:28). Indeed, James, the New Testament writer, tells us to...

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-3; NIV)

Do you want a faith that perseveres? Do you want to grow up in the faith? Do you want to experience a sense of completeness? Do you want to lack nothing of true value? If you are a Christian, you do. And this is why the testing of our faith is so valuable, even if it's never comfortable.

Faith is like a spiritual muscle that God grows through its exercise. If you want to see it grow, then it has to be put under the weight. Fortunately for us, God is the one that sets the weight and He's a reliable spotter. His testing is tailor made for each of His children, which is why our circumstances vary so widely and our trials have a certain uniqueness to them. He sets the weight on the bar. And there are definitely times where He will give you much more than you can bear on your own. But if you'll trust Him, He won't let the bar crush you and He will not leave you hanging. He will one day rack the weight and wipe away every tear from the eyes of His people. He knows what He's doing. He's an experienced trainer. And He always gets the results He wants in the end.

So think about what you are facing right now? Is God testing your faith in some way? If so, have you considered that He means you well and, if you trust Him through it, He will bring out the best in you? If God has sent the test, He means to promote you in the "School of Faith." And that is precisely why James says we should consider it joy. Do not be discouraged, brothers and sisters. Growth in faith always involves testing.

The previous chapter finds Abraham, a hundred year old man married to a ninety-year-old woman, naming his newborn child, "Isaac." The parents rejoiced at the miraculous birth of this promised child, whose name fittingly meant "laughter." Abraham's whole story has been building to this point. So Genesis 22 hits us like a brick to the face. It's absolutely shocking and disorienting. Look again at the way the chapter begins...

"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.'² He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'" (Genesis 22:1-2)

Can you imagine hearing those words from God?

The narrator has done us a favor by tilting God's hand. We know this a test. Like an alert on the television sometimes, verse 1 tells us, "This is a test. This is only a test." There's no cause for alarm. Isaac is not going to be killed. God is doing something. Things are not as bad as they may appear at first sight. This is only a test. But Abraham doesn't know what we know. For him the whole thing is a terrifying reality.³

How does one even begin to process this command of God? And the way the instructions are given sharpen the blow. It's not just "Take your son and go and offer him up." It's "Take your son, you know, your only son left,

the one you love so much...” Why all the extra descriptions? Is God rubbing it in? Abraham knows God is talking about Isaac. The command is piercing enough, but the piling on of descriptions must have felt like the knife in his heart was being twisted.

There are some parallels between this test and first test in Abraham’s story. Genesis chapter 12 begins,

“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’” (Genesis 12:1)

Just like in our text today, there is a threefold progression that moves from least personal—“*your country*”—to most personal—“*your father’s house*”. Here it goes from least personal—“*your son*”—to most personal—“*whom you love*”.⁴ In both chapters he is told to go to a location that God would reveal only in the future. There’s a balance to the beginning and end of Abraham’s story. It begins with the call for Abraham to trust God and make a decisive break with his past (12:1ff). Now it’s wrapping up with a call to trust God with his future (22:1ff).⁵

Why do I put it that way? Why is the call to offer up Isaac a call to trust God with his future? Because Isaac is not just any son. He is the son of promise. “Many people miss the significance of this event because they never ask themselves ‘Who is Isaac?’”⁶

Maybe you have heard of the covenant that God made with Abraham. When God called Abraham in Genesis 12 it was with these words:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

This series of promises is usually referred to as the “Abrahamic Covenant” and it is reiterated at several points and in several ways throughout his story. It’s impossible to overstate the importance of this covenant. From that point on, all the events of biblical history—Old and New Testaments—are unfolding according to these promises made to Abraham. In fact, Christopher Wright, one of my favorite scholars, states, “Looking at the Bible, we could say that Genesis 12-Revelation 22 is God’s long answer to the question set in Genesis 1-11: What can God do about the brokenness of humanity, the earth, and the nations?”⁷ The Abrahamic Covenant is key to that solution.

Among other things, God told Abraham that he was going to make him a great nation with too many descendants to count. God promised to bless Abraham and through his offspring to bless all the nations of the earth. You are here today—in this room—because of that covenant. Why? Because Jesus, the Savior is the descendant of Abraham and Isaac. He is the hope for the nations. So this covenant is a big deal. It shapes the story of the entire Bible and leads ultimately to Christ.

God already made it clear to Abraham that the fulfillment of these promises would flow through the line of Isaac (17:19). “Now God says that Isaac is to be sacrificed, and for the first time in all Abraham’s experience with God he is confronted with the conflict between God’s command and God’s promise.”⁸ By human calculations, obedience to the command of God would seem to bring the divine plan to a screeching halt. What God said He would do *through* Isaac didn’t match at all what God said must be done *to* Isaac.⁹

So when God tells Abraham to surrender his son Isaac, Abraham is being asked to surrender everything—absolutely everything—that God has promised him. It would have been hard enough to give up his son. But this man is being asked to lay his entire future on the altar before God. Ladies and gentlemen, two verses in to Genesis 22 and we are in the deep end of the pool. But let’s tread water for a second...

Is there something in your life that you are holding on to? The answer for most of us is probably yes. What is that thing that you are struggling to let go of? What is that thing you are terrified that God might take from you? What is that thing that you desire most and can't imagine life without? Is it a possession? Your prestige and popularity? Your power and position? Is it a person? If God asked you to lay it on the altar, what is that thing that you would have the most trouble sacrificing? Maybe it's a relationship? Some of you are single adults. Many of you probably long for a spouse. What if God said "No, lay the prospect on the altar"? What if He touched you, like He touched Abraham, right where it hurts (your pockets, your pride, your future plans and hopes)?

There's a famous book by A. W. Tozer called *The Pursuit of God*. In it, he writes:

"There is within the human heart a tough fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It wants 'things' with a deep and fierce passion. The pronouns *my* and *mine* look innocent enough in print, but their constant and universal use is significant. They are verbal symptoms of our deep disease. The roots of our hearts have grown down into 'things,' and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die. 'Things' have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended. God's gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution."¹⁰

That's some deep stuff, so let's break it down. In our sinfulness, we all have a deep desire to possess stuff. And if we are honest, then we might admit that we are afraid that God might take certain things from us. We worry that if we don't have those things, then we won't have what we need. So we grasp for power, prestige, people, possession, position, and whatever else we dream about, because we have convinced ourselves that in them we will find satisfaction and security.¹¹ So we fear most of all that we won't attain them or we won't retain them. They are our "Isaacs." The thing we really love. Our emotional center.

And there is a biblical word for that—idolatry.

In idolatry very often, we love the gift more than the Giver. That could have been a real temptation for Abraham—to cherish Isaac more than the One who gave him.¹² As Tozer writes, "sin has introduced complications and has made those very gifts of God a potential source of ruin for the soul."¹³ They become your identity. Your source of worth and significance. Your source of hope. Your idol.

Maybe you're not a Christian and you think, "I will come to Jesus if He gives me this" or "if He doesn't take away this pattern of behavior from my life." If so, then you don't want Jesus. You don't want the true God. You're just after His benefits. You're after another god. And the sooner you figure that out the better. Why? Because until you do, you'll never turn to the God who saves.

Maybe you consider yourself a Christian. That doesn't make you invulnerable to idolatry. Finish this thought: "I'll never be happy without _____." Or what about this one: "I'll never have what I need until I have _____." If what you find in the blank is not God Himself, then you've found your functional idol. It may be a good thing. But whenever it became an ultimate thing—a non-negotiable thing—in your life, it began to do you spiritual harm. Are you willing to lay it down today? To say, "I value this Lord, but You are the only One I cannot do without." Is God the only non-negotiable in your life? Or is it some other dream, with God merely as a means to that end? That's idolatry. Even when it's a good dream.

Does God want to take that good thing out of your life or keep it from coming into your life? I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. He's not a mean God. The Bible says every good gift comes from Him. Jesus said He doesn't give stones when His children ask for bread. But again and again God says in Scripture, just like He said to Abraham, "Follow me and I will tell you where we are going later." I don't know what God's plan is for your life down the road. What I do know is that He wants your "Yes" on the table now. He wants your life to be

like a blank check, completely at His disposal to spend on whatever purpose He wills. He wants your life to be about His glory and not your own. That's why you were created.

You see, the surface question in Genesis 22 is "Will Abraham surrender his son?" The deeper question below the surface is "Will Abraham still trust the promises of God?" The question for you, as you consider this story, is "If you could only have Jesus, would He be enough? If all the promises were gone, would God suffice? Do you want the Giver or just His gifts?"

The answer to that question—asked in these various ways—is about to be answered in Abraham's life. If you know much of the man's story, you might expect him to start trying to negotiate with God. "If Isaac died, nothing that had happened for decades would make any sense."¹⁴ It would be natural, many conclude, for Abraham to protest in some way. In fact, there was an old Bob Dylan song to that effect.¹⁵ But that's not what we find. And that brings us to some lessons about faith, which we will have to explore next week...

But while your circumstances will differ a great deal from Abraham's, you too will be called to trust God in times of testing. We tend to look at those times as exclusively negative and, as a result, miss the beautiful opportunity they afford us to make much of the Lord. Whenever we are called to some act of sacrifice, we have an opportunity to make much of the Lord in a way we previously could not. How we handle that test is going to communicate something of how valuable God is to the world. We can say, "I know this looks like sacrifice, but Jesus is better! God is more valuable! He is worth it!" And in this way we are afforded an opportunity to bring pleasure to God, which is a beautiful thing.

Abraham had that opportunity set before him in this story and in our own little way we too may find an opportunity set before us this week. And each act of resisting temptation is a chance to say the pleasure of sin is not greater than God and what He has in store. Each time God removes something that we really like, we are given a chance to show that He is more valuable to us than the things of this world. How will you say—through the tests in your life this week—Jesus is worth it? How will you show through your responses that Jesus is better? You want to glorify God? You want to show His worth before the watching world? Then stop looking at your challenges as obstacles and start looking at them as opportunities to say—"God you are worth more to me than this. If I can have you, then I have enough." Start looking at them as opportunities to say, with Paul:

"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:18-19, 31-35, 37-39)

We need that perspective so that when God calls us to the altar we can say "Yes Lord" and make much of Him... God help us!

Let's pray...

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, accessed online April 17, 2019, at the following webpage: <https://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/lewiscs-letterstomalcolm/lewiscs-letterstomalcolm-00-h.html>.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Obedient* (BCS; Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 108.

³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 135.

⁴ John Black, “The Lord Will Provide,” preached on March 17, 2017, and accessed at the following website: <http://firstfreewichita.org/sermons/sermon/2013-03-17/the-lord-will-provide>.

⁵ Thabiti Anyabwile makes a similar point in a sermon called, “Genesis 22,” which can be accessed at the following website: <https://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/genesis-22>.

⁶ Glen Scrivener, *Reading Between the Lines: Old Testament Daily Readings*, volume 1 (Great Britain: 10Publishing, 2018), 106.

⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences: A Small Introduction to a Vast Topic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019), 34-35.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 685.

⁹ Alistair Begg, “Faith Put to the Test, Part One,” accessed at <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/faith-put-to-the-test-pt-1/>.

¹⁰ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1982), 22.

¹¹ Black, “The Lord Will Provide.”

¹² “Had Isaac grown perhaps too dear to Abraham? Had he begun to take God’s place in the patriarch’s thinking? We cannot be sure of this, but if it was the case, this should remind us of many things that become too precious for us. The Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee wrote that Isaac ‘represents many gifts of God’s grace. Before God gives them our hands are empty. Afterwards they are full. Sometimes God reaches out his hand to take ours in fellowship. Then we need an empty hand to put into his. But when we have received his gifts and are nursing them to ourselves, our hands are full, and when God puts out his hand we have no empty hand for him.’ When that happens, we need to let go of the gift and take hold of God himself. Nee adds, ‘Isaac can be done without, but God is eternal.’” Boice, 684-685, drawing on Watchman Nee, *Changed into His Likeness* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1967), 62.

¹³ Tozer, 21.

¹⁴ Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), May 26

¹⁵ It’s called, *Highway 61 Revisited*:

“Oh God said to Abraham, ‘Kill me a son’
Abe says, ‘Man, you must be puttin’ me on’
God says ‘No’. Abe say, ‘What?’ ...”