

Abraham's Mature Faith

Hebrews 11:17-19

Halifax: 17 September 2023

Introduction:

Today we are continuing our sermon series in the book of Hebrews.

- We continue in chapter 11.
 - I wanted to slow down with this chapter—it is so helpful for us to see examples of what faith does when we have it.
 - With Abel, we saw that it procures righteousness—we look to God to make us righteous, that is, acceptable and pleasing to Him though we are sinners.
 - With Enoch, we saw that faith leads to immortality in glory with God. By faith we walk with God now and trust Him that we shall walk with Him in glory.
 - With Noah, we saw how faith responds to warnings, believing them and acting accordingly so that we avoid judgment.
 - With Abraham, we saw that faith brought obedience so that believing God, he left his homeland to look for the city whose builder and maker is God. It is willing to sacrifice now to have blessing later.
 - With Sarah, we saw how faith gives us strength to do what God has promised and what would otherwise be impossible for us—
 - With all believers, we see how faith causes them to see what God has promised in the future and live in response to it now.
 - And today, we return to Abraham again, only now we see how he has matured in his faith—so that by faith, he is willing to offer his son, believing that God can raise him from the dead if necessary.
- Listen now to God's Word: Hebrews 11:17-19.

Hebrews 11:17-19: By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” ¹⁹ concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Thanks be to God for His precious Word.

I. “By faith Abraham, when he was tested...”

- A. It is so helpful for us to have good models of those who have gone before.
 - 1. Our Lord has highlighted Abraham as an example to us all.
 - He is mentioned again and again, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.
 - We need more than just precepts. We need examples to follow so we can see how the things we believe work out in our lives.

- Before, Abraham was seen at the beginning of his call from God. Here, he is seen under testing after his faith has matured, and he passes his test with flying colours—all this is attributed to his faith.
2. We have many examples to benefit from.
- a. Biblical models are the best of all.
 - There are many of them, given to us by God in the inspired testimony of God's holy scriptures.
 - That means that there is no exaggeration—and it means the material that is given to us for our benefit is selected by our Lord.
 - If you are not well acquainted with Biblical examples, begin there. Read and understand the models, good and bad, in the Old Testament.
 - But don't just learn about them as information, learn about them for imitation—and see how they trusted God and how God worked in them.
 - b. Perhaps the second best place to look for models is among the living.
 - Here we see how people respond to the problems and challenges we face in our day.
 - Hebrews will later tell us to learn from the example of the elders in the church. Paul speaks about the powerful example of the Thessalonians who received the gospel under affliction, and he presents himself as an example.
 - One of the good things about living examples is that they can directly challenge you.
 - You can ignore the things that ought to really challenge and correct you in examples from the past, but you can't do that with living examples that are right before you.
 - c. Another important place to find examples is from church history.
 - Of course, I am not talking about the vain traditions that grew up in the church just as they did in the Old Testament.
 - Jesus confronted this problem that was going on in His day and warned us about it.
 - Nevertheless, some churches have gone so far as to introduce ancestor worship, a long-held pagan practice, and bring that into the church, bowing to images of saints and even looking to them in prayer for help!
 - There is not a trace of such practices in the worship of the early church that was established by the apostles—not of Mary, not of Stephen, not of James... none of that. It is rather condemned.
 - But we must not overreact to these abuses so as to not benefit from the example and writings of those who have gone before!
 - If we only look at examples in our day, there are many things we don't get challenged about that we need to be challenged about, and we can come up with things that are altogether novel and wrong.

- The reformers were very careful, when they were cleaning up the corruption and the empty traditions that had grown up in the church, to also make sure that they did not teach some new thing that had not been held by those who had gone before.
- Sometimes modern reformed people miss this, but just look an index of citations in Calvin's institutes and you will find pages and pages of citations from those who went before.

B. Abraham's example reminds you that your faith will be tested!

1. The scripture makes this plain.

- a. We are told again and again to expect the testing of our faith.
 - Our Lord tells us that testing will be so severe that even the elect would deny the Lord if the testing were not shortened.
 - James says to count it all joy when we are tested.
- b. It is interesting that when we read the account about the test of Abraham's faith mentioned in our text back in Genesis 22, it says that **God** tested Abraham.
 - This needs to be clarified because in James 1:13, James says:
 - **Jas 1:13: Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.**
 - The word *tempt* in the original is the same as the word *test* that is used here in Hebrews 11:17, but the translators are right to use a different word in English because the word is clearly used in a different way.
 - James is saying that God does not test us by enticing us to sin.
 - He tests us by exposing us to Satan who does that, and by giving us things to do that require much faith and devotion to see what we will do—as He did with Abraham.
 - When God uses Satan in this way, Satan is testing us to lead us into to sin to condemn us and to destroy our relationship with God. God, on the other hand, is testing us at the same time, to bring about good in our lives—which He always does if we are His people.

2. What are some of the ways that God brings good through testing?

- a. He enables us to bring glory to Him.
 - Abraham showed how much he loved and trusted God by his willingness to do what God had asked him to do.
 - You are able to show how much you love God when you are tested and yet continue in faith and obedience. You show that God is worthy.
- b. Testing is also good when we fail because it exposes our weakness that needs to be corrected.
 - God exposes us so that we will repent and turn back to Him.

- We need to be humble and confess our sin and turn to the Lord for forgiveness and renewal.
- c. Testing is also beneficial because it strengthens our obedience of faith.
 - Say that your brother is coming to visit for a week, and you have just started having family worship in your home.
 - You are tempted to forego it because you don't think your brother would like it.
 - But after wrestling with it, you decide to go ahead and do it anyway because it is pleasing to the Lord. You just strengthened your obedience.
 - You took a step forward in your walk with God.
- d. Another benefit of testing is that we learn to trust God more.
 - Suppose the testing is that we got sick right at the time when we had a big family event coming up—say a wedding—and you are too sick to go.
 - You have to learn, in that case, to trust the whole matter with God.
 - The test is about whether you will accept what He has sent without becoming bitter... that you will know that God sent it.
 - When you reach the place of full joyful acceptance, the test has been used to strengthen your faith—to bring you to greater maturity.

II. Abraham's example of obedience is very challenging.

- **Abraham... offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called."**

A. He actually offered up Isaac.

1. As we saw in Genesis 22, the LORD tested Abraham by commanding him to go to Mount Moriah and offer Isaac as a burnt offering.
 - A burnt offering was an offering in which the sacrifice was utterly consumed.
 - It was also called a dedication or dedicatory offering because it represented the fact that our lives are to be completely given up to God. The sacrifice was completely given up in our place.
 - It was also an offering for sin because that is what all such offering were for.
2. The test for Abraham ultimately came down to two things.
 - "Is God's salvation an important enough matter that you are will to offer the one who is most precious to you in order that this salvation might occur?"
 - And the second thing, "Do you truly accept that salvation is not something you can orchestrate, but something you must leave entirely in the hands of the Lord who has promised it?"
3. Our text speaks of it as something that Abraham actually did—because he did actually offer his son to God.
 - God stopped him because He had another sacrifice—ultimately Christ, but Abraham offered his son, being stopped mid-stream.

- B. The difficulty of this test is emphasised in our text.
- It is, of course, obvious in itself, but it is emphasised.
1. First, it says that Abraham was the one who received the promises.
 - God had said, “I will bless you and give you a son,” but his wife was barren and they had grown too old to have a child.
 - Abraham had prayed and waited and waited—then miraculously, God had fulfilled His promise, as we saw, when Abraham was as good as dead.
 - Now God says, “Sacrifice him as a burnt offering.”
 - Abraham might have said, “Why did you give him to me at all if I can’t keep him?” But he did not.
 2. Second, Isaac is referred to as Abraham’s only begotten son.
 - The difficulty of taking him off to sacrifice him is unimaginable.
 - Abraham dearly loved this son—he was his only true son—his other son was the son of a concubine that God directed Abraham to send away when she was tormenting Abraham’s wife Sarah.
 - He had been removed from the house, but now he must sacrifice his only true son???
 - This was very hard.
 3. Third, Abraham was commanded to offer the son in whom all his hope of salvation rested.
 - As we are told, God had said of this son, “**In Isaac your seed shall be called.**”
 - He had told Abraham that a nation would spring from Isaac that would be blessed by God with the Saviour of the world—a people called out to belong to God—to be His people and to have Him as their God.
 - Now God says, “Sacrifice him as a burnt offering.”
 - “How could he then bring forth this great nation with a Saviour?”
 - “If he is offered for sin, how can your promise be fulfilled?”
 - Those would be the questions that would naturally haunt Abraham.
- C. What do you do when you find out that God wants you to do something that is very difficult and that might even harm His kingdom?
1. Maybe you realise that you need to confess sin that you have been hiding—and it seems like it will ruin your testimony and example before the world.
 2. Or perhaps you are reluctant to speak God’s truth about something like same sex relationships—because you know that it will turn people away from the Lord.
 3. Or maybe you have to tell your family that you cannot go to a church that is compromised and no longer preaches the gospel.
 - You know that you will be called arrogant, judgmental, a pharisee...
 - Maybe you will destroy your relationship with your own spouse or your mother and father.

4. Maybe you are an elder, and there are people who need to be disciplined, but you know that some people won't like it and will leave the church...
 - People will think it is stupid and cruel.
 - To obey God would seem to be the means of destroying His kingdom.
5. Perhaps meeting for church would lead to arrests and executions under a government that opposes the gospel.
 - Does God really want His sheep to be slaughtered?
 - The whole thing is difficult.

III. We need to see how it was that Abraham obeyed God when He was tested.

A. By faith he offered up Isaac.

- That's how you obey when God asks you do something that seems like it will destroy His very kingdom! And something that is very distasteful to do.
- It is not complicated.
 - You simply do what God tells you to do and leave it to Him to figure out how He is going to keep His promises.
- Yes, God had commanded Abraham to do something that seemed to go completely against what He had promised.
 - But you see, Abraham recognised that it was not up to him to figure out how God would keep His promise if he offered up Isaac as a sacrifice... it was up to God to figure that out. Abraham knew he could leave that with God.

B. By this time, Abraham had enough experience with God that he knew that God would find a way to keep His promise.

1. He had trusted all along (from the day he was called to leave Ur) that He would give him an inheritance, a city built by God, even though he did not receive it in this life.
2. He had seen how God kept His promise to give him a child when he and his wife were not only barren, but also too old to be physically capable of having a child.
3. Now he concluded that if God asked him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, God would do whatever needed to be done so that Isaac would still bring forth the nation with the Saviour who was the Saviour of the world.
 - Abraham would leave that to God.
 - He knew that God would keep His promise.
 - He knew that God was faithful and full of love.
 - He trusted Him.
 - He knew that God was a God who put Himself in impossible situations to show His people that nothing is impossible with Him.
 - They needed to see that so that they might believe that He really could save them and bring them into His glorious house forever.
 - Abraham knew that, if necessary, God could raise Isaac from the dead.

- As it says in verse 19, Abraham concluded that **“God was able to raise him [Isaac] up, even from the dead.”**

C. Now I would ask you.

1. Do you trust God—or do you second-guess Him?
 - Do you follow Him faithfully and fully and leave it to Him to figure how to keep His promise to bless you—
 - or do you hold back your sacrificial service for fear that if you fully follow Him, it will spoil things?
2. Abraham would not have been able to offer Isaac if God had given Isaac to him right after he had been called.
 - Abraham had learned to trust God over many years as he saw His faithfulness again and again.
 - He had grown to the place in his relationship with God that he was now able to offer his son—he was sure that the LORD would make it good.
 - That gives us hope that if God is a work in us, we will grow to trust Him more and more.
3. At the same time, you ought to trust God more than you do.
 - Don’t just say, “Well, I will wait because I will grow.”
 - You have much that Abraham did not have.
 - You have seen God’s plan to bring His Son, our Saviour, into the world unfold. You have seen how God gave His only begotten Son to die on the cross because to Him, our salvation was that important!
 - If you would embrace His great love and faithfulness to us as His bride—and to you as His redeemed son and bride,
 - You would find it easy to surrender yourself entirely to do His will, even when it seems like you were destroying yourself.
 - You would do the following and the trusting and the obeying, and leave it to Him to do the blessing and the saving.
 - That is what mature faith does.
 - That is what we are growing into.
 - We have every reason to trust Him.

IV. What a grand reward comes when we do trust Him!

A. At the end, verse 19 tells us that Abraham received Isaac in a figurative sense.

1. The words here are hard to translate, but I think the best way to understand them is that when God provided the ram in place of Isaac for the sacrifice,
 - It was for Abraham as if Isaac had been brought back to life.
 - And of course that ram was a figure or a type of Jesus Christ.
 - The word translated *figurative sense* is *par-a-bo-lay*, the word that is used of the parables that Jesus told.

- It is only used one other time in Hebrews, and that is to refer to the sacrifices of the Old Testament that were para-bo-lay or figures of what we now have in Christ.
2. The promise was given with the ram that God would provide the sacrifice (Gen 22:14) and bring the promised blessing of salvation (Gen 22:15-18).
 - **Gen 22:14: And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, “In the mount of The LORD it shall be provided.”**
 - **Gen 22:15-18: Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, ¹⁶ and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only *son* — ¹⁷ blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”**
 - That whole promise was brought back to Abraham in that ram—Isaac was brought back and so was the whole blessing of a nation with a Saviour that would save the world.
- That was the reward of Abraham’s faith—that he received Christ in a figurative sense—as Israel also did.
- B. But if you believe, you will receive the living Christ Himself!
1. Yes, we still have in a figurative sense in one way—testified by promises and represented by bread and wine at the table and as washing us with His Spirit in the waters of baptism...
 - But we have Him in the actual sense as the Saviour who has been revealed in the world and who has been crucified and raised again.
 - And who now reigns in glory as our priest to rule us and intercede for us, and who will come again bodily to take us to His Father’s house forever.
 - At the Supper, He is the Saviour who was given that is represented, and we have gospels, good news, about what He has done.
 2. What a grand reward this is for our believing!
 - Because we trust God to save us, we have this Saviour.
 - Let fully trust our God when we are tested—whether with sickness, broken relationships, weariness, persecution, sacrifices He calls us to make for Him—
 - Whatever it is—let us trust Him.
 - See His love and you will trust Him and give yourself to Him knowing that in losing your life you will find it, that in forsaking your homeland you will come home, that in leaving father and mother, you will find your father and mother.
 - Christ is our reward when we believe.
 - He was Abraham’s in a figurative since, and ours as a crucified, risen, reigning, returning saviour.
 - Give your precious Isaac to Him and He will give you a hundred times as much in return.