

The Faith Of Abraham

Hebrews 11:17-19

Introduction

Hebrews 11 lists the heroes of faith. In Hebrews 10:19 the writer invited us; “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh” because of the supremacy of Jesus, believers have a supreme calling—we can live a life of faith. We are called to persevere; in faith and discipline. The list includes 16 specific people. By faith Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice. By faith Enoch pleased God and was spared death. By faith Noah built an ark, entered that ark and preserved both himself and his family. By faith Abraham followed God; believed God’s promise of a son, and offered that son as a sacrifice. In this passage we learn that by faith Abraham believed God could bring the dead back to life (v.19). We are invited to consider Abraham’s faith—sacrificial faith. The worship of faith (Abel); the walk of faith (Enoch); the witness of faith (Noah) and the willingness (sacrifice) of faith (Abraham). Does your faith incorporate worship, walk, witness and willingness? Does God expect—perhaps even demand sacrifice? God made promises. God kept His promises. God calls the believer to both belief and inheritance—a faith that obeys God (without regard to cost). A demanding faith can also be a rewarding faith.

The just shall live by faith (see Habakkuk 2:4).

How would you characterize your faith? Weak? Strong? Tested? Untested?

The Test Of Faith (v.17a)

Hebrews 11:17 (NKJV) 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested,

We are at once struck by the gravity of the test. The Lord understood this; and underlies this! The record of the test is found in Genesis 22:1-18; We will take a brief look at vv.1-3;9-12; 15-18.

“Untested faith may be true faith, but it is sure to be small faith, and it is likely to remain little as long as it is without trials. Faith never prospers so well as when all things are against her: Tempests are her trainers, and bolts of lightning are her illuminators” (CH Spurgeon)

The Lord commanded Abraham “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou loves, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering”.

This is the first mention of love in the Bible. The love of a father for his son. Abraham’s promise was Abraham’s treasure! Abraham is now—about—117 years old—and Sarah about 108. God had promised Abraham progeny—offspring—incalculable.

William Barclay’s comment is important;

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“To some extent this story has fallen into disrepute nowadays. It does not appear in syllabuses of religious education because it is held to teach a view of God that can no longer be accepted. Or failing that, it is held to teach that the point of the story is that it was in this way that Abraham learned that God did not desire human sacrifice. There were days when men considered it a sacred duty to offer up their first-born sons to God, before they they learned that God would never desire a sacrifice like that. No doubt that is true; but if we want to see this story at its greatest, and if we want to see it as the writer to the Hebrews saw it, we must take it at its face value. It was the response of a man who was asked to offer God his own son” (The Letter to the Hebrews p. 171; quoted from *The Preacher’s Outline & Sermon Bible*; p.145).

Wiersbe tells us that Abraham enrolled in the School of Faith at age 75—and was now well over 100 years of age. He writes; “We are never too old to face new challenges, fight new battles, and learn new truths. When we stop learning, we stop growing and when we stop growing, we stop living” (v.86).

The Bible teaches that the believer should expect tests.

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to test you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1 Peter 4:12).

But this is exactly what many believers do! They panic. We all experience trials and testings. For some of us the trial or test or temptation is severe—for some of us—it may seem less severe. Our God has designer trials—tailor-made—for each child of God to fit their unique circumstance. Abraham’s nephew Lot—had a different trial—than his uncle. Some Bible teachers suggest it is a compliment when God sends a fiery trial—because God’s tests are God’s promotions! Warren Wiersbe writes; “Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, and expect what seems impossible. . .” “. . . Joseph in prison, Moses and Israel at the Red Sea, David in the cave, or Jesus at Calvary, the lesson is the same: We live by promises, not by explanations” (see p. 86).

Dr. Bruce Waltke told the story of a man who was attempting to cross the frozen St. Lawrence River in Canada. Unsure of whether the ice would hold him—he tested the ice by laying at first on hand on the ice than another; then he got down on his knees and began to crawl—making his way across the river. When he got to the middle of the frozen river he heard a loud noise from behind—it was a team of horses carrying a wagon loaded with supplies. When it reached the river it roared onto the ice and thundered past the startled man.

We can depend on God’s promise and provision in the test (see Genesis 22:6-14). Sometimes when we are hurt or in need or seem to bear an insufferable burden—we focus on the hurt, or the pain or the burden. We want out of the test. We waste our sufferings and ignore the opportunities to reveal Jesus Christ to others who watch us in the furnace of affliction.

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The Promise Of Faith (vv.17b-18)

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,"

The expression “. . . offered up” deserves close examination. The word appears twice “. . . offered up Isaac” and “offered up his only begotten son”. How interesting. The Greek has different tenses. In the first part of the verse it is the perfect active indicative of *prosphero*—*perfect tense indicates completed action*. But Abraham—did not complete his offering of Isaac (see Genesis 22:1-18). A.T. Robertson offers this in part—“The act was already consummated so far as Abraham was concerned when it was interrupted”.

The second occurrence has the same verb—but this time—in the imperfect tense of action—that continues—Robertson suggests we have “the imperfect of an interrupted action” (ibid). Abraham was in the process of sacrificing his son, but God intervened in time to save the boy”.

Ralph Earle points out; “The distinction between the two tenses is brought out well by changing the second occurrence to “was ready to offer up” (RSV) “was offering up” (NASB), or “was about to sacrifice” (NIV). Incidentally, the verb *prosphero* literally means “bring to.” But it is used many times in the NT (more than a dozen times in Hebrews) for offering up sacrifices. That is the meaning here (NIV).

The word translated ‘seed’ (*sperma*) means offspring or descendants (in this context—different from verse 11—).

Isaac is called “only begotten”. He is the exclusive son of promise. The descendants God speak of are descendants of Isaac. How can this be if Isaac is dead? How could the promise ever be fulfilled? Scholars speculate that Isaac may have been as young as 17 (possibly older).

The Preciousness Of Faith (v.19)

19 concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

John Phillips speaks of the magnitude of His trial (vv.17-18) and the magnificence of His trust (*Exploring Hebrews; p.142*). I like that.

If ever two people suffered in the Bible it was Abraham and Isaac on that day. But what a picture of our salvation! A Father and a Son acting together. The Son had to die. The Son bearing the burden of sin. A Son raised from the dead.

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The writer of Hebrews sees this “figurative sense”. Did Isaac really die? No. But in Abraham’s mind—the moment God said “do this” in Abraham’s mind Isaac was dead—and in order for God’s promises to come true—God must raise Isaac from the dead—and restore Abraham’s son to his father. The word translated figurative sense (parabole)—occurs some 50 times in the NT; it is translated “parable” 46 times (KJV)—but in Hebrews 9:9; 11:19—it is translated “figure”.

What did Abraham really believe? If God did not stay Abraham’s hand—God must raise Abraham’s son back to life.

But no one had ever come back to life (at least there is no Biblical record of someone coming back from the dead). God made a promise. In order to keep His promise God must bring Abraham’s son back to life! **It seems that Abraham is the first person to ever think—long and hard—about the concept of resurrection! Where did Abraham get that idea?** Abraham’s faith—drove him—to the inescapable conclusion—that God has the ability to bring people back to life.

William MacDonald writes; “He had committed himself to the fact that Isaac must be slain. God credited him with this act. But, as Grant put it so poignantly, the Lord “spared Abraham’s heart a pang He would not spare His own.” He provided a ram to take Isaac’s place, and the only begotten son was returned to his father’s heart and home” (pp.2197-2198).

Jesus really did die. Jesus was raised. It is interesting in Genesis 22:19—Abraham returns to his two servants but nothing is said of Isaac. Isaac is not mentioned again until he is seen marrying his bride in Genesis 24:62 (what a beautiful picture of our Lord and His Church). We are fairly certain that Isaac did in fact return home with his father—but the Bible type reminds us that the next event on the prophetic calendar is the return of Jesus to claim His bride.

What is the purpose of the trial? How are we to think about the suffering? We draw close to our Heavenly Father! We seek to glorify the Lord.

Martin Luther wrote; “Our suffering is not worthy (of) the name of suffering. When I consider my crosses, tribulations, and temptations, I shame myself almost to death, thinking what they are in comparison of the sufferings of my blessed Savior Christ Jesus”.

Trials have a beginning—but they also have an end. Hebrews 12:11; “Now, no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

1 Peter 5:10; “But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little while, perfect, establish, strengthen and settle you”.

You are kidding right? No. We can look forward to God’s reward.

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Abraham was 75 years old when God first promised him a son. He waited 25 years for Isaac to be born. Isaac was perhaps about 17 when he was marched up to Mount Moriah—the future settlement we call Jerusalem—in perhaps the location of the present day Temple Mount. Isaac was 40 when he married. Another 20 years would go by before the twins Esau and Jacob were born. Abraham died at age 175. At that time—his descendants were one son—two grandchildren (15 years old).

In Romans Paul tells us that Abraham did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform” (Rom.4:20-21).

A weak faith lacks endurance. A weak faith stumbles and falls. But weak faith can become strong faith—with God’s help! We can cultivate an attitude of trust and confidence in Christ. Faith is a gift from God (Eph.2:8-9). Effective faith, confident faith—depends on God. Effective faith, confident faith rests—on what Christ has done; “So now, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith in his promises, we can have real peace with him because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us” (Rom.5:1 TLB).

Strong faith grows stronger under pressure—through endurance—in hopeful anticipation. Do you remember when you were young—and you loved your birthday—because you knew that was the day—of special treats and gifts! But there might be some surprises! In the real world we might experience disappointment. But Biblical faith always anticipates at least two things—that which is sure—and that which is certain. This is why Biblical faith—has a secure beginning and ending. We believe in God’s character—he is who he says he is. We believe in God’s promises—he will do what he says. When we believe that God will fulfill His promises even though we can’t see how that promise must come to pass—we demonstrate faith.

Conclusion

No wonder Abraham is called the father of faith. His journey begins with what seems like an impossible call (vv.8-10). It continues with an immense step of faith—“he went out, not knowing whither he went” (8b). God taught Abraham to live by faith. To live as a pilgrim. Then God tests Abraham. Take away Isaac and you take away the future. How could God do such a thing? And yet Abraham goes through with it. Abraham was willing to believe that God could bring his son back to life. In a very real sense—the Bible asks you to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. But something else. God can bring you back to life. Can God do that which seems on the surface impossible?

Remember the context of our book of Hebrews. Seeking Hebrews—doubting Hebrews—grief stricken—and persecuted—Hebrews—tempted—tested—to return to Judaism. Asked to believe—that God’s Messiah died and came back to life. This is the central fact of Christianity—Jesus died and came back to life in Jerusalem. Abraham was asked to believe—that his son—his only begotten son—sacrificed can and must be brought back to life. It was common knowledge. It

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was a historical fact. Abraham believed—absent evidence—no one had ever come back to life. How could they not believe—with so much evidence—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead?

By faith Abel offered an acceptable sacrifice.

By faith Enoch pleased God and taken to him, bypassing death.

By faith Noah built an ark and was spared from God's judgment.

By faith Abraham followed God, believed God's promise of a son, and offered that son as a sacrifice.

Jesus is the acceptable sacrifice.

Jesus is our walk and world and hope of bypassing death.

Jesus is our ark that spares us from God's judgment.

Jesus allows us to follow God, Jesus is the promised Son offered by God for us.