

Heb. 11:17-19 The Faith of Abraham Displayed in the Test with Isaac

Today we come to another example in the life of Abraham highlighting his faith; faith in God and his promises. And the reason for this example in this letter to the Hebrews is that those Christians in that day may see what Abraham did in the midst of insurmountable difficulties and not fall away, but instead continue to love and trust and worship the living God. We need the same. Therefore, this story is also for us as we live in this world, as Satan shoots his arrows at us, as we struggle with our own sin, as we make decisions in our families, in our workplaces, in our schools, etc. With this in mind, I want to present this text in 2 parts: 1) The Story of Abraham's offering with applications throughout; 2) The Picture of the Gospel.

1. Story of the Offering of Isaac. In speaking of Abraham's faith our author recalls the story found in Gen. 22:1-15. Let's read that to begin. And then, I want to retell parts of the story to help us apply principles of "faith" that will help us today. **"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together."**

Out of all the examples the life of Abraham gives us, none are more noteworthy than the offering up of his son. In fact, we do not see any example like it in the Bible, except the offering of Jesus himself as Is. 53:10 says, **"It pleased the father to crush the Son."** We will get to this picture later. But, the emphasis is the FAITH of Abraham and how he obeyed and persevered in the midst of all life's trials, temptations, persecutions and hardships. Before we apply this story to our lives, let me begin by addressing an obvious difficulty. How could Abraham "offer up" his son by faith, seeing that it was against both the law of nature and the law of God for man to slay his own son? And in this regard, one might say that God is "tempting" Abraham to do something that is evil. Have you ever thought this? So how do we answer?

I would say first that as creatures, we are bound by God's laws. However, God himself is bound by none of his laws. He is holy and cannot act outside of his nature to tempt man to do evil. We know this to be true as James says, **"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one"** (James 1:13). God is the author of life. He can give and take as He desires. God has every right to give or to take life, and in the case of Abraham to command him to take the life of Isaac. He is the absolute Sovereign and can do as He pleases. Now, I do not believe we will ever see such a command again; it was only with Abraham in this case. But God can do as He pleases, and even, as John Owen says, *"change the nature of the act, and make it lawful, even a duty."* Abraham knew God

had spoken and to NOT follow this command would have been disobedience. God is the supreme Lord of life and death. And even this truth can only be accepted by faith. This example with Isaac ranks as one of the most glorious truths in the Bible that has far reaching implications and applications for his church.

Also, we might ask, “*Since God does not allow Abraham to carry through with the offering, how can Hebrews say ‘by faith, when he was tested, Abraham offered up Isaac?’*” I think it is pretty simple. This means that by faith Abraham completely accepted God’s command. And in his heart, he was fully dedicated. He did not hesitate and was wholly committed with his heart, soul, mind, and strength, to obey God in this most difficult task. This is faith! Let me say quickly, none of us can wholly obey God. We are sinful by nature. But, like Abraham, this is our desire as Christians. And we know someone else, namely Jesus Christ, did completely obey his father in all things. And in Him, by faith, we have his righteousness. Let’s continue through the story.

Notice when this “test” or “trial” (which is a good translation) took place. In Gen. 22:1, it was “*after these things.*” What things? Generally speaking, we see all the great acts of obedience in the life Abraham that are very difficult with many tests of faith. He left Ur and moved his family to Canaan. Lived in tents as a foreigner. Many years of waiting for the son of promise. Many travels and tests with Kings, rulers, etc. Family squabbles with Lot. And now, we see the greatest test of all. The application for us is that God grows us in grace little by little. And usually, the more we grow in our faith in trusting God and in obedience to the commands of Christ, the deeper and harder the tests become. If you’ve been a Christian for twenty years or thirty years, or fifty years etc. and as your faith in God has increased, maybe your hardest tests in life are yet to come (the test of aging is hard enough). God will prove you, as he did Abraham! And your faith will shine! (What do you think of that?) I don’t think we ever say, “*God bring on the tests.*” But at the same time, by faith we say, “*Your will be done.*”

Another application from “after these things” is that often trials come at times of great peace. With Abraham, the idea of Ishmael becoming the son of promise came to an end. Yes, he was sent away. But God promised to protect him and make him into a nation. The son of promise, Isaac, was born in his old age. It seems that the cup of Abraham’s joy is full. Now, all he must do is wait and live out his life, waiting for Isaac to grow up, get married, have more kids, and see his posterity grow. And then, SUDDENLY God comes to him as commands him to offer Isaac up as an offering. This principle is also found with us. Often our tests from God are at the height of health, of stability, of peace, of joy. And at those times, as a thunder cloud comes out of nowhere, so comes a great test from God, a trial to test your faith. When Job was declared the most righteous by God, he was delivered into the hands of Satan (Job 1:8, 12). When Paul was taken to the third heaven and received great revelations, there was given him a “**thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to harass him**” (2 Cor. 12:7).

Now, none of us have been put to the same test as Abraham. However, for our good and for his glory, God does send them our way. When do they come and what do they look like? They are all different and they are all relative to each of us in their own way. This subject is so large. But, the Puritan Thomas Manton gives a threefold answer as to when they come and what they look like: 1) Tests come when we need to submit to the providence of God particularly in the things we love. When God sees you are putting another treasure above him, he sends a trial that we

might love him more, that we might not focus on his gifts, but on Him. Isaac was the greatest gift. Yet, God says, “offer him up.” What do you treasure more than God? What are your idols? Are you treasuring something more than God? If so, and if you are his child, you can expect a trial. And it will be for your good. God ALONE will be worshipped. This is the process of sanctification.

2) Tests come in the case of self-denial. Jesus says, “**If any man come after me, let him deny himself . . .**” Brothers and sisters, self-denial is essential to faith! When God requires that we should forsake father and mother, we must not object! (Luke 14:26) We must say with the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:24 as he considered his upcoming trip to Jerusalem, “***But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.***” Is this your desire as a Christian, a person of faith?

3) Tests come in the case of mortifying our “bosom lust.” In other words, what do we love most in this life? Where do you spend your time? What do you listen to in your car? What do you watch when you are alone? What do you do in the majority of your time when you have freedom to do what you want? The answers to these questions are so important! God may send a test requiring you to, as Jesus says, “***cut off your right hand***” or “***pluck out your eye,***” so that your soul will obtain eternal life (Matt. 5).

Let me say that these tests are GOOD. And I am glad God chooses our tests. He knows exactly what we need. He is our father. He disciplines as he sees fit. And you know what? We need one another in this life of faith. We go through these things together!

Application. We must expect and seek in advance to be prepared for severe trials. 1 Pet. 4:-13 says, “**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.**”

Application. We must “count our trials as joy.” James 1:2-4: “**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.**”

Application: Trials vary in severity. But they are trials, nonetheless. Our current example is the MOST severe! Think about it. Abraham was commanded to slay, not a bull or a goat, but his only son, and not just any son, but the son of promise. He wasn’t commanded to send him away (as with Ishmael), but to kill him, but “*cut him off from the land of the living.*” He was commanded to do something beyond reason. He was commanded to do something that was repugnant and vile to natural feeling. And not only would he lose his son, he himself would be the executioner! And, as far as we know, Isaac is displayed as the MOST humble, obedient, compliant, loving son. He wasn’t rebellious or prodigal son. Throughout the text, there is no hint of mistrust from son to father. Put yourself into that situation! Was ever such a demand upon a mere human creature in the history of the world?

And it gets worse! We must not forget that Abraham KNEW that Isaac was the promised child in whom all the world would be blessed! From his perspective, the very covenant that God made with him was in danger (humanly speaking). Through ISAAC, the land of Canaan would be populated. It was through ISAAC that ALL the nations would be blessed. It was through ISAAC that the promised “seed” from Gen. 3:15 would come to the world as its savior! Can you imagine the “wiles,” the “arrows” of Satan coming to this man during this trial? We look back and just say, “*Yes, he obeyed.*” But, we cannot imagine the mind and the heart and the soul of Abraham in this test! He had a choice. Obey God or not! Thomas Manton says this: “**Herin lay the spiritual acuteness of the trial: would he not in slaying Isaac be faithless to his trust? Would he not by his own act place the gravestone on all hope for fulfillment of such promises?**” (cited from A.W. Pink). The accomplishment of God’s promises DEPENDED on the life of ISAAC! Matthew Henry says, In this offering, “*he seemed to be called to destroy and cut off his own family, to cancel the promises of God, to prevent the coming of Christ, to destroy the whole truth, to sacrifice his own soul and his hope of salvation, to cut off the church of God at one blow; a most terrible trial!*” If ISAAC were lost, then ALL seemed to be lost. Yet, “by faith” Abraham went forward to sacrifice his son.

This makes our trials seem small . . . Now, every trial is a difficult one. When someone asks me which language is the most difficult to learn, I say “*the one you are learning now.*” It is the same with trials. Yes, they are different in difficulty from one perspective. But, God gives them according to our faith. And in reference to sin, 1 Cor. 10:13 still applies: “**No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.**” Today, brother or sister, NO “TRIAL” has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful. He sends them. And since He sends them, we are told to “count it all joy.” We are also told that “**Blessed is the man whom remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him**” (James 1:12).

Before we move on, I ran across a telling quote by John Owen on faith and trials. He says, “*Trials are the only touchstone of faith.*” Have you ever heard the word “touchstone.” What is it? Well, it goes back to a process where one takes a particular kind of stone (containing silica) and scratches across gold or silver or another precious metal to test it and see how pure it is. In the same kind of way . . . trials/tests show if our faith is real. And Owen says, “*trials are the ONLY touchstone of faith.*” In other words, trials are the only things that show if your faith is real. Does this mean we welcome trials? From one perspective no! But, God gives them for our good and for the good of those around us. And faith shines in trials! As we see with Abraham, trials show where our heart lies. What do you think this truth says about the “*health, wealth, and prosperity*” movement of our day? . . . After these words of truth about trials, what do you think? If you have no trials, how do you know there is faith at all? Now, let me finish with our last part.

2. The Gospel Pictured: two theological truths.

i. In this story we have a beautiful picture of our heavenly father sending the Son to die on the cross. Abraham offered up his son, the promised son, the miracle son, the one given to him and Sarah in their old age, the son of promise (though he did not have to carry it through). Abraham would have carried out the sacrifice. He would have killed his son on that altar. God did the same

in sending the Son into this sinful world to lay down his life as a sacrifice. But notice some differences. Abraham's son was only a man. Jesus was the divine Son of God. Abraham offered Isaac from a divine command. But God was under no constraint; He gave Christ freely.

Abraham's son did not suffer. But, Is. 53:10 says **“It was the will of the Father to crush the son.”** And Christ suffered beyond what we can describe. He took ALL of the wrath and punishment that our sins deserved. I cannot imagine. Listen to some words from Is. 53: **“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all . . . Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities”** (vv. 5-6, 11).

ii. In this story we see the resurrection. Look again at v. 19: **“He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”** Abraham knew God would not give him another son. And if he were to slay him, and not just kill him, but in obedience burn him up as God commanded, his body would have been destroyed. But Abraham believed God would raise him from the dead. He believed in the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body. He had to! Otherwise there would be no relief from the curse as God told Adam in Gen. 3:15: **“for you are dust and to dust you shall return.”** What a beautiful picture of the doctrine of the resurrection in the Bible.

First, it pictures the resurrection of Jesus. After three days in the grave, Jesus rose again. He was given a new resurrection body, one that was different than before, but still the same as the disciples recognized him and they ate and drank with him. Today, Jesus is alive. He has conquered the grave. And his resurrection is the first of many to come.

Second, The Bible says that those who have faith have also been made alive by the Spirit. Rom. 6:1-13 says we have **“died with Christ.”** This is in reference to sin. All our sin was laid on Christ. And when we come to him, we are **“crucified with Christ. However, we live (Gal. 2:20).** And now, by the Spirit, we are a new creation. We are raised with him. This is why Paul prays for the Ephesians that they might know **“what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places . . .”** (Eph. 1:19–20).

Finally, this story pictures a final resurrection of the body on the last day. John 6:39-40 says, **“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”**

Brothers and sisters, our faith looks to all these promises being fulfilled in Christ. What a beautiful story to help us through this life as we face the trials of God and a story to picture the beauty of Christ, particularly his cross and resurrection!

