

Faith that Trusts God's Promise

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading tonight is one passage from the Old Testament and one passage from the New Testament.! We're in a series on Hebrews 11.!

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 he went to the place of which God had told him.

On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes, and he 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.

[1 : 29] And Isaac said to his father Abraham, My father! And he said, Here I am, my son. And 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. Then, when they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand, and he took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham. And he said, Here I am.

And he said, Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked. And behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went, and he took the ram, and he offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

[2 : 36] So Abraham called the name of that place, the Lord will provide. As it is said to this day, On the mountain of the Lord it shall be provided. And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son.

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of the heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.

And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba.

And Abraham lived at Beersheba. And from Hebrews 11, verses 17 to 19. 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, of whom it was said, Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith, Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.

[3 : 58] By faith, Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. This is God's holy word. I feel like Corey's nearly preached this passage in his prayer, but we'll endeavor to talk a little bit more for 20 minutes or so about Hebrews 11, verses 17 to 19.

We've been in Hebrews for a few weeks. And in this letter, the writer is writing to his Hebrew audience, and he's saying that although times are hard, don't turn back. Don't go back to the way

things were before you knew Jesus, because Jesus is better than anything else.

And in chapter 11, the one that we've been looking at specifically for the last few weeks, the writer is saying, Don't turn back, but look back. Look back at these great men and women of faith and how they were blessed by God, not because of the strength of their performance, their moral character, or their sheer determination, but because of their faith.

Abraham gets quite a lot of coverage in this chapter. So we started talking about Abraham back in verse 8. That's unsurprising because Abraham in the Bible is called the man of faith.

Well, tonight we're going to look at one of the tests. Abraham went through several tests, different challenges in his life. Today we're going to look at, I think, the most significant of those.

[5 : 28] And despite going through these tests, Abraham remained faithful to God. Before we dive into it, I just want to say, if this is the first time that you've read this passage, these words are quite difficult to read.

If you've come to church for the first time and you've read about Isaac being put onto a pile of wood, these are difficult things for us to read.

But as we consider it together, I think we'll see that what we actually have here is an example of the extraordinary faithfulness of God. A faithfulness that taught Abraham that he could rely on God with even the most precious things in his life.

And it shows us that our God goes to extraordinary lengths to save his people. And it shows us why we can put our faith in God, holding nothing back, not even our most precious possessions, and come before him certain that he will fulfill the promises he's made to his people.

I've got three points. The unthinkable test, the unbreakable promise, the incomparable provision. So first, the unthinkable test.

[6 : 44] So the test that we've read, that we've referred to, Hebrews 11 verse 17, says that when Abraham was tested.

And in the chapter that Corey read for us, chapter 22 of Genesis, it tells us this is a test that stands above all the other tests because it says God tested Abraham.

That's a pretty big clue. But also when we consider the nature of the test, God spoke to Abraham and he said, Here I am. And God said, Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.

And notice here the preciseness of the language. God says, Take your son, your only son, Isaac, the one that you love.

There's no ambiguity to who God's referring to, what God's commanding. Father Abraham had many sons. We all know that from the song.

[7 : 45] But here he calls Isaac Abraham's only son. Well, we know already from Genesis, if we'd been reading through, that he's got a half-brother called Ishmael.

So Isaac wasn't literally Abraham's only son. But Isaac was the one through whom God promised he would deliver the blessings that were coming to Abraham and through Isaac to the whole world. So we can think of Isaac that only maybe as a unique. Isaac was a unique son. And Abraham takes Isaac, two of his servants, along with the woods and a couple of servants, and they head off for Mount Moriah.

And it takes them three days to get there. And I can't help but put myself in Abraham's sandals in three days thinking about what's going to take place.

Because God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. And I don't want to be overly detailed and gory, but that would involve killing the sacrifice with a knife, letting out its blood, and then burning it.

[9 : 06] This is truly horrific, what he's walking towards. You've maybe seen children's storybook stories of Isaac and Abraham.

And Isaac's a little toddler on his back. But Isaac's old enough to carry the wood up the mountain. So he's at least a teenager.

And Isaac knows something of the plan of what's going to happen. Because he says, you've got the fire, I've got the wood. Where's the animal for the burnt offering?

And Abraham says to Isaac, God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. So they go up the mountain until they arrive at the place.

And Abraham builds the altar. And he ties up Isaac. And he places Isaac onto the woods. Isaac's been strong enough to carry this wood up the mountain.

[10:13] He's not a helpless child. Abraham, when Isaac was born, was 100 years old. So it's not as if Isaac couldn't fight him off. Or at least run away.

But he doesn't. Isaac willingly allows himself to be put onto the sacrificial altar. Isaac's been raised to know the God that his father knows.

Isaac goes willingly onto the wood. And then we arrive at the climactic moment. And Abraham's hand is stretching for the knife. He's going to kill his son.

And a voice comes from heaven and says, Abraham, Abraham, don't harm the boy or do anything to him. Because I know that you fear God. Seeing you've not withheld your special, unique son. Your pride and joy. Your most precious thing from me. This is hard to hear. What could have, in our minds at least, have happened.

[11:22] We've got lots of children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews. And friends. And little lives that we love. And just to be clear, God is not going to command any of us to do anything like that.

The culture that Abraham lived in was pagan. He lived in a pagan land among pagan people before God called him.

Sacrificing children to lowercase gods was not an uncommon practice. That's not saying it's okay. That it's okay then and it's not now.

Not at all. It was wrong then. But it existed. And Abraham knew about it. Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah, though, was a very different situation.

Because the real God. The big G God. Abraham's God. The Israelite God. Our God. He intervenes to stop child sacrifice.

[12:24] And this is a massive departure from the peoples around them. And later, the people of ancient Israel. They were defined. They were different among their neighbors.

Because they were not allowed to practice human sacrifice. In fact, when they mixed with people who did. And they defiled their own way of life that God had set for them. They were condemned for that.

God strictly forbids murder. And in the New Testament, Jesus takes that murder commandment and extends it to being angry. God loves children.

And wants them to come in to a saving relationship with him. God loves them. He's never going to ask you to do something like this in a literal sense.

But there is a sense in which what Abraham was asked to do does apply to us, I think. Because what Abraham was asked to do was give over the thing that he loved most to God.

[13:28] God, the son of his old age. And the son through whom Abraham's blessings and the blessing of the whole world was going to come. Abraham being able to hand over his one and only son.

It has to make us stop and think. What are the things that we do, that we love tonight, that we refuse to give up for God? What possessions do you have?

Or I think what's more likely is what habits, what ways of living do we know that God doesn't want for us? And yet we cling to them.

We hold on to them. We let them become between ourselves and our God. And these don't have to be inherently sinful things.

Putting anything before God is idolatry. And often our idols are good things that we make our first things. So hard work's good.

[14:32] But refusing to fight against overworking at the sacrifice of other things that we know God wants us to do. Because we need to prove our worth is not good.

Maybe you refuse to Sabbath, to take rest. Because you think that getting a first in your degree is the thing that is going to prove your worth.

Or maybe you love your children so much that you allow them to dictate their own screen time, home time, bed time, Bible time. Because you're afraid that they're going to resent you for making them do otherwise.

What are the things that you love tonight that you refuse to stop for God? Because we're in a chapter that's all about living by faith.

And Tim Keller says, you've never known true faith until you've given up something that you love. Okay, point number two. The unbreakable promise.

[15:33] So my old job was the kind of job where you'd spend weeks thinking about how you're going to express an idea in like three words. And I know that sounds kind of worthless to lots of people in here.

But it means that I can't help but think about how things are expressed. Especially in writing. And to me, what we have here is such a straightforward, matter-of-fact account.

That there's no discussion of the circumstances, the setting, the mood. And that feels surprising considering the task that Moses is describing here.

And Abraham's actions are kind of like that too. God tells Abraham to go. And Abraham immediately gets up the next morning and heads off. And it takes him three days, as I said, to get where they're going by donkey.

Lots of time to back out. But the narrative doesn't even give us a hint that he's considering it. How can it be that Abraham's experience is recorded here as almost serene despite what he was facing?

[16:42] Well, we know in our relatively comfortable lives that we're full of anxiety and stress and doubt and fear. God's made promises to Abraham.

Promises to bless him with land and offspring. And that through his seed, all the nations of the earth are going to be blessed. And when Abraham asked God for assurance that he could trust those promises, God didn't say, trust me.

He did. But he didn't just say, trust me. He entered into a covenant with Abraham. So Presbyterian seminary students love talking about covenants, but maybe everyone else doesn't love it as much. So I'm going to be brief. But this covenant is a solemn agreement between God and Abraham. You can read about it in Genesis chapter 15. When we were children and we didn't want somebody to tell our mums what we were doing, we would say, cross your heart and hope to die.

And it's kind of like that. In the ancient Near East, two parties, a powerful king and a less powerful king, they would swear on terms of an agreement. And they would also agree on the sanctions, the consequences that would happen if he broke that agreement.

[18:01] So it's a visceral, a really real sign of the solemnity of the agreement that God makes with Abraham. God gets Abraham to gather some animals and to cut them up and put them in two parts, two halves.

And what's interesting about the covenant that God makes with Abraham, as opposed to other covenants that God makes in the Old Testament, is that the covenant God makes with Abraham, it's only God who takes on the consequences.

Abraham's in a deep sleep. God is the all-powerful king here. And yet, it's God, a representation of God that passes between the animals.

God's saying to Abraham, may what's happened to these animals happen to me if I break this covenant. If I don't deliver these promises to you, Abraham, I'm going to be torn in two, just like these animals.

It's only God that says, cross my heart and hope to die. If I don't do what I'm going to say. Now, we know God can't be torn in two.

[19:22] And Abraham knew that God can't be torn in two. So does that mean that God's promise was worthless? Well, no. In fact, it's the exact opposite.

God's saying to Abraham, just like it's absolutely impossible for me to be torn in two, it's impossible for me to break the promises I've made to you.

You see, while this passage might be hard for us to read, there was never any possibility of God not fulfilling the promises that he'd made to bless Abraham through Isaac.

And Abraham was convinced that he and Isaac were both going home again. Look what he said to the young men. Genesis chapter 22, verse 5.

He said to his servants, stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We'll worship and then we will come back to you. So these guys are not Abraham's peers that he has to kind of like pretend that everything's going to be okay and nothing sinister is going to happen.

[20:31] These are his servants. They'll do what he says. And yet he tells them, Isaac and I are going and Isaac and I are coming back. Even as he reached for the knife, Abraham knew that this wasn't the end of Isaac.

Even if, as Hebrews 11, 19 tells us, God was going to raise Isaac from the dead. There's already been a fair bit of life and death talk language in the story of Abraham.

In verse 12 of Hebrews 11, the writer calls Abraham as good as dead. And that refers to the fact that he was nearly 100 years old, way past the age of having children when God came to him and said, your wife's going to have a baby.

And Sarah was 90. She was well past her time of fertility. There was no life left in Sarah's womb. So when Isaac was born, Abraham knew that God had already performed a miracle.

He brought life from a place of death. And that's why when God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham could get up the next morning and go and do it, even although it contradicted what God had promised him.

[21 : 58] Maybe we could say that Abraham could do what God told him because it contradicted what God had promised him. He could contemplate sacrificing Isaac because he knew that that wasn't the end, because he knew that God would not break his promises.

Living in Edinburgh, the 21st century, these things are hard for us to get our heads right. You know, for a long time, our society in general has believed that the material is all there is.

But Abraham lived in a culture when that wasn't the case. For Abraham, there was this life and there was an afterlife.

And Abraham believed that God was the God of both. Abraham's so utterly convinced that if it came to it, God was going to raise Isaac from the dead because he was utterly convinced that God would not fail in delivering the promises, the covenant promises that he'd made.

Puritan Thomas Watson tells us that there's an important lesson for us here as well. He says, God's to be trusted when his providences run contrary to his promises.

[23 : 20] When his providences run contrary to his promises. So when our faith is in Christ, we can trust that God is doing what is ultimately best for us, even when it doesn't feel anything like that at the time to us.

Christian, the circumstances of your life at this moment are not indicative of your eternal life with God in glory. I wonder if you feel today like God's taking his eye off you.

Maybe you're walking with the Lord and you feel like, this is not how my circumstances should be. Maybe you're up against the wall financially.

Maybe you're dealing with a diagnosis that you were not expecting. Maybe the relationship with your family has hit an all-time low. Maybe you've stepped out in faith and you feel like things are just getting harder and harder.

What Abraham's teaching us to keep trusting the Lord. Don't compromise on listening to what he is saying and obeying the things that he says.

[24 : 37] Even when you feel like the way he's shaping your life is not what you expected. Scottish minister Sinclair Ferguson, he wrote that Abraham had faith that looks away from self and rests on the faithfulness of God.

Your circumstances, no matter how difficult, are not a reflection on your faith, as though the more faith you have, the fewer struggles you should have.

The Old Testament book of Job makes that very clear for us. And in the New Testament as well, the Apostle Paul, he says that his faith in Christ resulted in tremendous trials and difficulties.

Yet Paul knew God's promises and he knew that the promises that God made to his people were unbreakable. In Romans he writes, for I'm sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We can have faith in the promises God makes us because nothing can separate God's people from God's love. And it's worth reminding ourselves as well that this is not a blind faith.

[26 : 00] We're not being asked to blindly follow what God says. We're being asked to follow what God says, but not blindly. So Abraham could follow God's command because he'd seen God working throughout his life.

He'd had evidence of God's faithfulness. When Abraham left the land of his fathers and he went out, he didn't know where he was going and yet God was gracious to him.

When Abraham was with his nephew Lot and they were deciding which land to pick for their people, Abraham gave Lot first choice and Lot chose the good land and yet God blessed Abraham in the land that wasn't meant to be as good.

And when Abraham pretended that Sarah, his wife, wasn't his wife to save his own skin, twice, God was gracious to him. R.C. Spurl said, faith isn't blind.

Faith is trusting in what you have good reason to believe. Abraham believed God because, was faithful because Abraham had seen God's faithfulness. In what ways are we seeing God's faithfulness in our lives today?

[27 : 23] Have you failed to see God's faithfulness? If you're investigating Christianity and you've come here tonight, how did you even end up here?

What was it that brought you here? Did you think it was pure coincidence? Or do you think something, someone, was coordinating events to bring you here so you would hear about Jesus? God doesn't need to speak to you audibly like he did to Abraham to show you that he's at work. God's orchestrating everything that happens at all times in the whole world and in your life. One way we see God at work every day is when we see people who were unbelievers that are now believers.

How he changed people who once loved the things that God disapproves of and now long to listen to and obey the commands that God gives. And the church itself across the world for all the imperfections of its people is evidence that God keeps his promises.

The Bible promises that the church is going to exist until Christ comes back. And from 12 disciples 2,000 years ago we've now got 2.26 billion people who say that they follow the Lord.

[28 : 52] Our promise-keeping God keeps keeping his promises. Finally and briefly the incomparable provision.

When God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac it wasn't just an end to the sacrifice. It didn't just become abandoned. Abraham looked up and he saw ram caught in some bushes and Abraham sacrificed the ram in place of his son.

God substituted one life for another. And this transforms this story of a test into a revelation of the gospel. The 18th century preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards said, this command was a great trial of Abraham's obedience and faith and also a type of what God the Father was afterwards to do in his son.

God provided a ram as a replacement for Isaac. But Abraham told Isaac in verse 8 that God will provide the lamb. Abraham sacrificed a ram but a lamb was coming.

The first readers of this story, the Israelites who wandered in the desert with Moses, they experienced the saving power through a lamb.

[30 : 22] When they were in Egypt and they were leaving, they were in slavery, God sent plagues on Egypt and he said to the Israelite people, kill a lamb and daub the blood on the frame of your door and I will pass over your houses.

Those people knew that God, through a lamb, saved the life of their firstborn. And in subsequent generations, they would bring lamb to the temple, not far, the temple was built not far from where this whole incident took place.

And those lambs were killed as payment for the sins of the people. But all those sacrifices, all those lambs, were mere pictures of the one who was going to be the ultimate lamb.

Jesus, God's only unique son, who like Isaac, himself carried the wood up the hill where he was going to be sacrificed.

Who like Isaac, went willingly to the altar to give his life. But unlike Isaac on Mount Moriah, there was no angelic voice calling halt on Mount Calvary.

[31 : 43] Jesus died for our sin. He was the substitute for us. There could be no substitute for the ultimate substitute. Jesus, the one that John the Baptist called the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, died on that cross.

And when he died, even his best friends were crestfallen. The dreams that they had that this was the promised Messiah, the long prophesied Savior, had been dashed in the most terrible way.

And while the disciples didn't get it yet, generations before, Abraham knew that death wasn't the end. He had faith that death had no power to stop God.

And he was right. On the third day, Jesus rose again, showing that God provided his son as a true and a complete atonement for our sin.

He took on our sin. We, through faith, put on his righteousness. The lesson of the trial of Abraham is not, like Abraham, you can do anything you put your mind to.

[33 : 00] It's not, no matter how bad things you get, you can overcome. It's not, climb that mountain, claim that reward. The real lesson is Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide.

God the Father provided dearly, expensively, for our forgiveness by bringing the metaphorical knife across the throat of his pure, innocent, only begotten son.

Paul writes in Romans 8, God didn't spare his only son to fulfill the promises that he made to Abraham that through his seed the whole world would be blessed.

God's love what could you possibly love that you let stop you coming wholly and completely to this God?

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for your holy word. We thank you for the promises that it contains.

[34 : 22] we thank you that you do not call us to a blind faith, but to have faith in the things that we have faithfully recorded for us in the Bible, that our God did not spare his only son, but gave him up for us.

Help us put to death in our own lives any hard-heartedness or habits that are keeping us from putting all our faith in your promises.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.